

QUEERING *FINAL FANTASY XIV ONLINE* AVATARS ON INSTAGRAM

by

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ABSTRACT

Gaymers are a group of players characterised by an adoption of a queer sensibility in their gaming habits. This study aims to understand the complex dynamics of online identity formation by examining how gaymers use virtual images of their avatars on social media platforms to construct identities collaboratively. The analysis focuses on the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game *Final Fantasy XIV Online* and the social media platform Instagram as the site of research. This study employs a three-part research methodology. First, a comprehensive multidisciplinary literature review draws from gender studies, new media studies, visual culture, and virtual ethnography to establish a theoretical framework for analysing identified case studies taken from Instagram. Second, I compare interviews with gaymers and avatar portraits posted on Instagram to explore the themes identified in the literature review. Finally, a visual virtual ethnographic approach is adopted to conduct field research within the game world. The findings of this study validate the hypothesis that identity negotiation is an emergent process resulting from a combination of real-time social interaction within a role-play environment, asynchronous exploration of identity through textual and visual content generation on Instagram, and utilisation of in-game avatar design features for constructing and visually exploring identities through avatar customisation.

Key terms

Avatar studies, *Final Fantasy XIV Online*, gaymers, Instagram, queer game studies, queer identity construction, virtual ethnography, virtual photography, virtual worlds

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PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

Student Number: 22539574

I hereby declare that “Queering *Final Fantasy XIV* Online Avatars on Instagram” is my own work and that all sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



Carel Jacobus van Heerden

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>FFXIV:</i>	<i>Final Fantasy XIV</i>
MMORPG:	Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game
MUD:	Multi-User Dungeon
RPG:	Role-Playing Game
UI:	User Interface
<i>WoW:</i>	<i>World of Warcraft</i>

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Gpose

Gpose originates from the in-game text command “/gpose”, which initiates a dedicated screenshot mode within *FFXIV Online* (Square Enix 2022a). The *Gpose* mode removes the game’s UI, allows pose and lighting control, allows the ability to apply aesthetic filters to the image, and allows the ability to overlay additional graphic elements called *stickers*.

Job system

Unlike other games of the genre, *FFXIV Online* encourages the creation of a single character through the Job System (Square Enix 2022d). In a typical MMORPG, characters are assigned a role (generally known as a class) upon creation. Classes define particular actions a character can perform and other factors, such as appearance, animations, and character attributes (Square Enix 2022d). In contrast, *FFXIV Online*’s Job System allows players to select a starting class but soon acquire all other classes, or *jobs* in the game’s vernacular, by equipping different job-specific weapons (Square Enix 2022d). In contrast, other MMORPGs, such as *EverQuest* and *WoW*, require new characters to be created to change classes.

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

A term derived from Myron Krueger’s development of the first virtual world, *Videoplace* (Boellstorff 2008, 45). Massively multiplayer virtual worlds constitute a “third place” (Krueger 1991, 37) wherein communications between two individuals happen simultaneously within a virtual space. MMORPGs build on the work of previous virtual worlds by being “the first persistent (twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week) [virtual] worlds, and the first instance of individualised mediated experiences within a mass audience” (Wolf and Perron 2003, 11).

Multi-User Dungeon

Sometimes referred to as “multi-user domains” (Turkle 1995, 11), MUDs are early versions of MMORPGs that usually consist of text-based games controlled through a command prompt (11).

Role-Playing Game

The term originates from the popular tabletop game *Dungeons & Dragons* (Bartle 2003, 91). Richard Bartle describes *Dungeons & Dragons* as a form of “acting” and “a fusion of traditional tabletop wargames and interactive storytelling” (91). Role-playing games are centred around the

player's decisions, with either another player or a set of rules acting as a moderator. Computer games adopt the importance of agency in the player's activity and function as "computerised referees" (91).

Social Networking Site (SNS)

Referred to more commonly as "social media" (Craig et al. 2021, 1), these online platforms facilitate communication between groups of individuals who exchange multimedia-based communication in text, audio, video, images, and graphics. SNSs facilitate sharing user-made content to "maintain connections with other users" (1).

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aim and background of the study

The purpose of this study is to employ queer methods of analysis to expose the identity dynamics at work in gaymer communities that play massively-multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs). The research site for this study is *Final Fantasy XIV Online* (Square Enix 2010) and gaymer avatars, posted on the social networking site¹ Instagram. Anthropologists and game studies scholars Tom Boellstorff, Bonnie Nardi, Celia Pearce, and T.L. Taylor describe the characteristics of virtual worlds as (1) being “object-rich environments” with a sense of place; (2) featuring multiple players interacting with each other in the same time; (3) existing on a remote server that continues to operate independently of any one individual player allowing players to “embody themselves, usually as avatars” (2012, 7). These characteristics intersect to co-construct the individual player’s online sense of self within the virtual world. The players and avatars of *Final Fantasy XIV Online* (*FFXIV Online*) were selected as the study’s focus because the game’s characteristics lend themselves to complex social interaction and cultural production.

Furthermore, the social media platform Instagram is explored to critically engage with depictions of player avatars and subsequent identity formation in a meta-context beyond the virtual world of *FFXIV Online*. This study is interested in how players express gendered avatar identities using Instagram’s visual, social, and textual dimensions. The relevance and significance of this study are evidenced through unpacking and exploring this previously scarcely documented phenomenon.

Of particular interest to this study is Adrienne Shaw’s use of the term “gaymer” (2012). As Shaw notes, the term, and consequently the wider queer gaming community, is often perceived as a more “marketable” (81) homogenous group of white gay men. However, gaymer is not a moniker associated along the lines of sexuality but is instead representative of a “queer sensibility” (69). In other words, individuals may identify as gaymers whether they are homosexual, pansexual, transexual, or heterosexual (73). Reframing the term as a perspective on identity in games, rather than a subcategorisation of sexual identity, is vital to understanding the players identified for this study.

¹ Hereafter referred to as social media.

1.1.1 A Brief Contextualisation of Virtual Worlds

The term ‘virtual worlds’ is borrowed from Bartle in his 2003 book *Designing Virtual Worlds*. In the introduction, Bartle explains that virtual worlds are “that which isn’t [real], having the form or effect that which is” (18). He elaborates that a virtual world is a place “its inhabitants regard as being self-contained” (18) while mimicking certain aspects of physical spaces. Bartle explains that virtual worlds “began as computer games” (19). Although other kinds of virtual worlds exist, this study is primarily concerned with computer games as virtual worlds. In her book *Life on the Screen* (1995), Sherry Turkle explored the advent of virtual worlds and their implications on identity formation. One of the earliest examples of players engaging in online interaction via a virtual world is the Multi-User Domain or Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) (Turkle 1995, 11). Turkle argues, “as players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction” (12).² MUDs and computer software, therefore, reflect our internal thought processes, serving as a powerful “projective medium” (20). In this lies a danger. In using popular online games or “off-the-shelf simulations” (13), instead of authoring one’s own, the user conforms to a manner of thinking in line with the designers of the software system. Turkle argues that individual thinking is lost by not understanding the simulation’s inner workings and not having designed one’s own (13). However, what is gained from playing in a widely used predesigned simulation is the formation of online communities, which is particularly helpful for sexual minorities (Gross 2001, 227).

The majority of academic work on virtual worlds as a site of social interaction is on three MMORPGs: *EverQuest* (Daybreak Game Company et al. 1999), *World of Warcraft (WoW)* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), and *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003). Game designer and scholar Pearce places MMORPGs on a spectrum between *ludus* and *paidia* (2009, 28)³. Games such as *EverQuest* and *WoW* are described as ludic in their design. In contrast, *Second Life* adopts a paidiaic approach by “[providing] players with a range of activities and options for social interaction” (28). These two concepts are not mutually exclusive, and often, MMORPGs incorporate both approaches to varying degrees (28). While significant ethnographic work has

² Kafai et al. disagree with Turkle, arguing instead that “players are not in search of the second self, but are experimenting with second selves” (2010, 25, emphasis added). I aim to further unpack this notion of exploring possible, fragmented, selves.

³ Roger Caillois describes two forms of play occupying the ends of a spectrum. *Ludus* is a term Caillois refers to as a “game” (2001, 13), i.e., a structured play activity with an overarching goal and a set of rules. On the other end is *paidia*: a more open-ended style of exploration and free play (13).

been undertaken to study paidiaic “sandboxes” (Boellstorff 2008, 99) such as *Second Life*, this study shifts attention towards *FFXIV Online* as a game that favours the ludic-oriented systems originated by *WoW* and *EverQuest*.

EverQuest codifies many conventions typical of MMORPGs inherited from tabletop predecessors such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (Taylor 2006, 21). *EverQuest* is a fantasy-themed MMORPG notable for being one of the genre's earliest and most popular games to take place entirely within a three-dimensional computer-generated environment (21). Non-player characters assign players quests, construct an avatar from various options, customise their appearance, define their avatar's abilities from an available pool of attributes, and engage in group-based activities (21). These conventions establish a framework of play for individuals to partake in and encourage players to engage in other activities common among tabletop games, such as role-playing and character construction. *EverQuest* popularised the genre of fantasy-themed MMORPGs, but during the early 2000s, academic interest shifted towards the cultural phenomenon of *WoW*.

In direct correlation with its cultural impact, few MMORPGs other than *WoW* have been as thoroughly researched to warrant the publication of a reader dedicated entirely to them (Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008). *WoW* was released in 2004, several years after *EverQuest*, successfully capitalising on the growing interest in MMORPGs. Much like the games that came before it, *WoW* uses a fantasy-like setting and three-dimensional environments to create a simulated play space where the main goal for the player is to “develop a character, enabling it to perform more and more difficult challenges” (Nardi 2010, 13).

Ethnographer Bonnie A. Nardi (2010, 14–17) illustrates that although a consistent feature of MMORPGs like *WoW* is to confront and defeat enemies—usually through violence—players spend significant time on social activities in the game. *WoW* features several systems designed primarily for social activities: player groups called *guilds*; private messages between players; a *friends list* curated by the player of other individuals they wish to socialise with; large-scale group activities known as *raids*; a variety of text-based chat channels for communicating with guild, party, or raid members; dedicated servers for players interested purely in role-playing and other non-combat activities (Nardi 2010, 14–16). Through her research, Nardi highlights that socially orientated activities, the paidiaic elements, often supersede the explicitly stated ludic goals of the game. Likewise, *FFXIV Online* mirrors many of the social features outlined in *WoW* above. Additionally, like players in *WoW*, the *FFXIV Online* player community expands the scope and

complexity of the social activities facilitated by the game by utilising online communication platforms such as Reddit, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram.

What motivates this study to select *FFXIV Online* as the focus of research activity is the combination of characteristics in the game that overlap with and distinguish it from its predecessors, *WoW* and *EverQuest*. While the overlapping characteristics between *FFXIV Online* and other MMORPGs were established earlier, the novel characteristics of interest are (1) The unique development cycle of *FFXIV Online*; (2) The distinctions in game design that influences participation in group activities; (3) The lack of non-playable character sexualities and queer themes in general; (4) The nature of the interaction between the developers of *FFXIV Online* and their community of players; (5) The widespread use by players of third-party software in the creation of artistic works; (6) The popularity of social media platforms in the dissemination of online personas; (7) The cultural context of the developers and intended audience that shape the *Final Fantasy* series as a whole. I do not argue that any of these characteristics are unique to *FFXIV Online*, but rather that their unique combination has delineated the boundaries of a phenomenon worthy of in-depth analysis.

From the description provided on the game's homepage, *FFXIV Online* is an MMORPG set in the fictional world of *Hydaelyn* (Square Enix 2022g). The promotional pages for the game heavily feature character creation, customisation, and a community of over 20,000,000 individuals as prominent features. The game's story, mechanics, and dialogue encourage players to think of themselves and their avatars as the same individual. Players are encouraged explicitly and implicitly to think of themselves as becoming the "Warrior of Light" (Square Enix 2022g). In Chapters 6 and 7, I explore how gamers destabilise this link between themselves and their avatars to facilitate identity experimentation through queer methods of play.

Development for *FFXIV Online* began in 2005 (Gantayat 2009). The game made use of Crystal Tools, in-house middleware the developers adapted from other *Final Fantasy* games. Difficulties in using the middleware resulted in a protracted and difficult development period, lasting five years (Karmali 2015). *FFXIV Online* released on September 30, 2010, to overwhelmingly negative reception (Orry 2010). The game had multiple bugs, ran poorly, and many of the features did not work. These issues with the game required significant downtime and reworking, leading to the team's unusual decision to relaunch the game under a new major version and title: *Final Fantasy XIV Online: A Realm Reborn* (Karmali 2015). This version would be labelled as "version 2.0" signifying a major revision to the existing game's systems. In truth, much

of the MMO's systems were significantly overhauled and many of the visual assets of the game had to be recreated. The team decided to integrate the relaunch of the game into the world of the story, creating an in-game world ending event dubbed the "Seventh Umbral Calamity". This event precipitated the shutdown of the 1.0 servers at the end of 2012, with *A Realm Reborn* releasing on August 27, 2013 (Karmali 2013). The dramatic events of the in-game event, followed by the relaunch, culminated in a far more positive reception for the new version. The game has increased its subscriber count every year since, and released five expansions, *Heavensward*, *Stormblood*, *Shadowbringers*, *Endwalker*, and *Dawntrail*.

The quest design of *FFXIV Online* adopts a conventional RPG structure. There is a "Main Scenario Quest"—known in the community by the initials, MSQ—and various secondary and tertiary content. The MSQ progresses the main narrative, while side quests provide additional information on the characters, cultures, and events in the world of the MMORPG. Players are cast in the role of the "Warrior of Light" and begin by creating their own character from a range of available races and options. The player character is called upon by Hydaelyn—a being that is simultaneously a figure from the ancient past, a god, and the planet itself—to save the world from an encroaching threat. Over the course of the MSQ, including the subsequent expansions, players learn more about the geopolitics of the world, the origins and cultures of various groups, the history of the planet, and a secret that the world has been splintered into thirteen "reflections." The player character learns they originate from "the source," the original version of the world, and over the course of later expansions the player encounters alternate versions of themselves from the reflections. Throughout the story, the player character has minimal dialogue options. Indeed, most reactions from the player character are non-verbal; instead, expressing their emotions in the moment through exaggerated body language, facial expressions, or the often parodied 'decisive nod.' *FFXIV Online* is a "theme park" MMORPG, meaning that it has a fixed narrative with pre-determined outcomes. Although players are allowed some choices in content not relating to the main story, the events of the main quest do not alter based on the actions of players.

FFXIV Online features several gameplay systems, player-versus-enemy (PvE) combat, player-versus-player (PvP) combat, crafting, housing, minigames, time-limited events, character customisation, and a photomode, Gpose. While the combat systems in the MMORPG fall outside the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting that armour and weapon rewards are common to many of the combat challenges. In some cases these items are exclusive to the encounter and cannot be acquired otherwise. The crafting, housing, and other non-combat systems are popular

activities in *FFXIV Online*, with many players engaging in the in-game economy through item trade. Housing, in particular, is a contentious topic in the community, as available homes are in extremely limited supply. Owning a house allows groups of players to converge, customise a space for themselves, and host events. Many popular role-play venues and events occur with the homes of large player organisations.

The avatar creation system adheres to the convention of other MMORPGs of the time. Players create their avatar by selecting numerous options relating to gender, race, and appearance, from predetermined options. For each race, players may choose from one of two sub-races with distinct appearances. While there are differences in the starting attributes between races, these are incredibly minor and have no real consequence on gameplay. Character customisation is divided into several categories: height, muscle tone, skin colour, hairstyle, hair colour, face, jaw, eye shape, iris size, eye colour, eyebrows, nose, mouth, lip colour, facial features, tattoos, tattoo colour, face paint, face paint colour, and voice. Some options, such as height and muscle tone use sliders, others, such as skin and hair colour, offer predefined swatches for players to select from, and finally, options such as voice, eyebrows, and face offer several options that players may select from. Furthermore, clothing is not editable at this stage, as all players are given an initial appearance based on their chosen race. Once defined, players may later alter their character's appearance in one of two ways. The first allows for limited changes of hair, makeup, and tattoos. This process is unrestricted and is performed via an in-game option. The second option requires an item, called *fantasia*, that must be purchased using 'real-world' money. The item allows the player to alter any character attribute, including gender, race, and facial features. Once confirmed, the item expires, and must be repurchased for subsequent changes.

The glamour system describes the various mechanisms through which players may customise their appearance in the game. Players may choose to change the appearance of their armour to that of any other in the game, without altering its attributes. However, to do so, the armour piece used to 'glamour' must fulfil several conditions: the item must be owned by the player, the item must be placed in either the "glamour chest" or "armoire" storage containers—this action requires the use of the *glamour prism* item—the player must be using a class compatible with the item, the item must be of a lower level than the equipped armour piece, and the item must be of the same category. In other words, a White Mage chest piece of level 58 can be used to alter the appearance of another White Mage chest piece, provided it is level 59 or

higher. Some items are also restricted to specific genders and races, though recent patches have ‘unlocked’ these items for other genders and races. Some items, specifically collectibles given away during special events, are level 1 and made wearable by all classes, making these desirable pieces for glamour enthusiasts. Lastly, only certain items allow for their colours to be altered using the game’s dye system, which is indicated by an icon on the item’s info card.

Gpose originates from the in-game text command “/gpose”, which initiates a dedicated screenshot mode within *FFXIV Online* (Square Enix 2022a). The Gpose mode removes the game’s UI, while allowing pose and lighting control, the application of image filters, and to overlay additional graphic elements called *stickers*. Players may initiate the Gpose mode alone or as a group. Posing as a group allows the player to determine poses and expressions for all subjects. When posing, players may select from a range of expressions and short animations—known as *emotes*. Players may also pause all animations, including the simulation of day, night, and weather effects. Players are also free to determine what is visible in their image. The options to include or exclude are: the player avatar, the player’s pet, other player characters in the party, the player’s mount, any pets in the party, any non player characters, or enemies. Players can also filter non-party player characters, their mounts, and pets. Resulting images are saved to the computer’s hard drive.

FFXIV Online features several social functions that facilitate interaction and engagement with others. The game features a party system, where players are free to invite any other players, up to seven. Parties are the main organisational tool for groups in the game. Players must be in the same party to engage in most of the game’s activities together. The game features a friends list, where players can save the name of others and are notified when they log on to the game servers. Players may also join groups, known in other games as “guilds” but as “Free Companies” in *FFXIV Online*. Free Companies can range from small groups of half a dozen players up to a maximum of 512 members. Players may only be part of one Free Company at a time, rendering it an important decision for many. The game also features “Link Shells”, similar to chat groups or message forums. These informal groupings do not require significant commitment for membership, and are usually centred around specific in-game activities.

The job system used by *FFXIV Online* encourages gamers to play a single character by not restricting them in their choices of roles. This way of engaging the gamer in *FFXIV Online* is effective; they carefully choose names, select glammers, and post screenshots of their avatars to social media. Gamers often choose depictions of their Warriors of Light above their self-portraits

for online profiles, associating their constructed selves with their “actions, messages, chats, status updates, and posts” (Moore 2014, 147). In these ways, *FFXIV Online* frames the gaymer’s chosen avatar as an extension of their personality and character.

Images of avatars, therefore, serve more than a documentative purpose. Players such as Nami Aurum (2020) offer their services as a ‘photographer’ who receives commissions from other players to capture their avatars in ways that express a particular persona. Similarly, gaymers engage in artmaking, publishing ‘self-portraits’ of their avatars on social media platforms such as Instagram. The practice of ‘photographing’ avatars is so prominent in the *FFXIV Online* community that people who do so regularly are referred to as “Gposers”. A *Gposers* (2022) website publishes a monthly magazine on various themes and topics about imaging in-game avatars. Gaymers also post images of their avatars on Reddit forums and Discord⁴ channels and create dedicated Instagram accounts for their avatars. The Instagram accounts created for gaymer avatars offer an opportunity to critically engage with the visual identity construction at work in *FFXIV Online* communities.

1.1.2 Online Virtual Communities

Queer communities centred around *FFXIV Online* exist on several platforms. Free Companies are particularly popular options for finding players with similar goals and interests. Others, such as the *Rainbow Materia* group on the community platform Discord, facilitate discussion between gaymers outside *FFXIV Online*. However, it is on platforms such as Instagram where gaymers participate in a multimedia community of text, image, video, and sound. Gaymers affirm a constructed identity through the public interchange of visual and textual media, participating in cultural production that affects their online and offline identities. As outlined earlier, gaymer communities are predominantly comprised of LGBTQ+ members, although this is not a prerequisite. Instead, gaymers are more concerned with representations of identities in games and ways of making and playing games that move beyond appeals to the assumed heterosexual male demographic.

Instagram’s central purpose as a social media platform is to share images and videos. Instagram is freely available and requires little technical understanding to operate. Users upload images and videos to the platform along with captions that may or may not include additional

⁴ Discord is a computer application that offers private messaging, community communication platforms, and “link and media sharing” (Morris 2020, 14). Discord was marketed specifically towards online gaming communities since the launch of the company (15).

hashtags. Hashtags group posts and allow other users to find them using Instagram's search function.⁵ Instagram was chosen as the research site for this study as it "helps [youth] feel more connected to their friends, diversify their interactions with others, and experience more emotional support and acceptance" (Thomas et al. 2020, 3). There is strong evidence that Instagram, more so than other social media platforms, is a source of community engagement and emotional well-being for queer individuals due to better privacy settings and how the platform promotes engagement with other members of the community (Craig et al. 2021, 2).

Instagram crystallises the identities formed by gaymers through association with their in-game avatars. Some gaymers have Instagram accounts in the name of their in-game personas, often signalling their association with the game by including the initialism "ffxiv" in their account names. Networks of linked ffxiv Instagram accounts increase their visibility to others on the platform, allowing gaymers to identify inclusive communities (Acosta et al. 2017, 82). In the case of specific individuals, these accounts form a means of expressing a sexual identity.

In conducting preliminary research for this study, distinct patterns of behaviour around notions of sexuality have emerged from seventeen selected ffxiv-linked Instagram accounts.⁶ These commonalities include the type of avatar used, specific hashtags, the content and theme of posts, and the relationship between the avatar and the gaymer. While acknowledging that these selected accounts bear individual characteristics and traits, it is through focusing on these correlations that I aim to achieve meaningful insight into how individuals use their avatars on Instagram as a tool of identity production.

⁵ Some notable hashtags that were identified during this study include "#gaymiqote", "#gayffxiv", and "#gayorzea".

⁶ Although there are concerns around focussing on sexuality as the primary, or only, identifier in academic research (A. Shaw 2012, 69; Hilton-Morrow and Battles 2015, 6; Acosta et al. 2017, 75) the identified users on Instagram tend to not display or disclose any other kinds of identity markers, hampering any observations around intersectional issues such as race, socioeconomic status, or nationality.



Figure 1.1. fffelixv, “Beach evening”, 2021, screenshot by author of an Instagram post. (F’elix Vhicri (@fffelixv) 2021a).

The most common elements shared among the selected accounts are that individuals identify as male in their profile, range in age between 18 and 30, and self-identify as gay through their profile description or hashtags used on posts. The term “gay” was used in many hashtags such as “#gay”, “#gayffxiv”, “#gayorzea”, “#gaymiqote”, and “#instagay” by individuals categorising their images. Sixty-four per cent, or twelve, of the accounts surveyed contain posts similar to figure 1.1. Of these twelve accounts, sixty-three per cent do not list their offline gender, but all of them chose the in-game male *Miqo’te* race⁷ as their avatar.

⁷ As of writing, there are eight playable races for players to choose from during character creation: *Hyr*, *Miqo’te*, *Elezen*, *Roegadyn*, *Lalafell*, *Au Ra*, *Hrothgar*, and *Viera* (Square Enix 2022b; 2022c; 2022h).

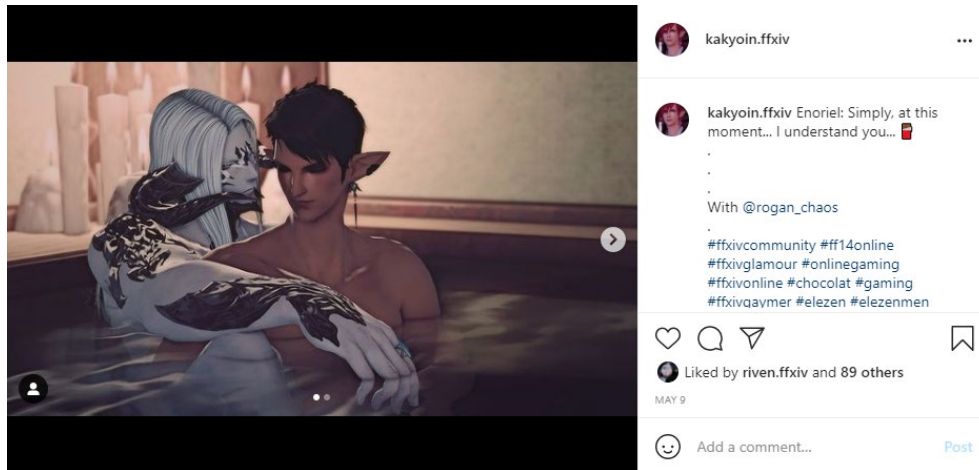


Figure 1.2. kakyoin.ffxiv, “Simply at this moment”, 2021, screenshot by author of an Instagram post. (Kaky (@kakyoin.ffxiv) 2021b).

Role-players cover a smaller spectrum of accounts, comprising seventeen per cent of the total data gathered so far, which echoes other research into role-players (Williams, Kennedy, and Moore 2011, 180). Common traits included in this group are users who manage multiple character accounts, prefer creating narratives through text and image, and participate in collaborative storytelling with other persons—usually in an erotic setting. These accounts are incredibly rich in visual and textual detail, including narratives, images, and extensive character biographies hosted on external sites. The term ‘erotic role-player’ is often used to self-identify by these accounts. Role-players (erotic or otherwise) construct various identities for play-acting in different scenarios with others (191). For example, the user kakyoin.ffxiv (fig. 1.2) features over a dozen characters with personalities, preferences, character traits, and sexualities. Role-players tend to exhibit interesting patterns during their online identity formation. Role-players are less likely to interact with other types of players (174), are more welcoming of minorities (182), are more likely to live with physical and psychological difficulties (186) and spend less time overall playing online (184).



Figure 1.3. jaydenrikku, “Hugs you tightly”, 2021, screenshot by author of an Instagram post. (Jayden Rikku (@jaydenrikku) 2021a).

A final grouping of individuals on Instagram identifies as a particular gender but plays as characters of a different gender. In some cases, these individuals identify or engage in activities of a particular sexual orientation that differs from their character or may not explicitly identify as members of the queer community. The most relevant to this research project are accounts such as those of Jayden or @jaydenrikku on Instagram (fig 1.3). Players such as Jayden, either knowingly or not, challenge the norms of gender and sexual identity through the content they post on Instagram. Jayden, for example, is a heterosexual man involved in a relationship with a heterosexual woman. However, in *FFXIV Online*, both individuals play female *Miqo'te*, and their virtually lesbian relationship flourishes on *Hydaelyn*. The implications of these non-conforming or boundary-challenging interactions can be established or assessed only through further in-depth research. For instance, it may be a concern that these users engage in a kind of “identity tourism” (Fox and Ahn 2013, 261; Nakamura 2002, 13), according to which players ‘try on’ different identities that may perpetuate harmful stereotypes. While these users may not be conscious of the fact, they are questioning the relationship between the physical and virtual body, adopting a “queer sensibility” (A. Shaw 2012, 69) in their approach to gameplay. The universal commonality among all the accounts in this study is their use of modified in-game images, text captions, and Instagram hashtags to document and explore their virtual identities.

The question of what to call the images created by gamers and posted on social media is disputed among game and media scholars. Cindy Poremba (2007) and Sebastian Möring and Marco de Mutiis refer to them as “screenshots” (2019), a common term used to describe still images from games. Christopher Moore refers to them as “virtual photographs” (2014), while Lisa Patti prefers “digital portraits” (2017). This study will use the term *virtual photograph* to acknowledge the practice’s technical (virtual) and cultural (photographic) modes of production (Poremba 2007, 50). Poremba claims that virtual photographs serve to “co-opt the visual language of the photograph” (53) and to appropriate creative control in an otherwise predetermined game space (52). Virtual photographs are used to affirm past experiences (Moore 2014, 146) and memorable events (Poremba 2007, 50), to create narratives (Möring and de Mutiis 2019, 71), or to memorialise social connections (Moore 2014, 145). Möring and de Mutiis (2019, 84) echo these sentiments, explaining that virtual photographs can be less about documenting the play experience and more about using the game as an expressive medium.

In essence, virtual photographs are the connective tissue that evidences the interaction between the virtual world and the gamer (Moore 2014, 145). Therefore, the study of virtual photographs is a study of the remediation of photography in a digital space. It is a critical investigation into how gamers visually represent aspects of their identity in a virtual environment (Patti 2017, 180). Möring and de Mutiis also express the need for further academic research, as virtual photographs have “barely received any scholarly attention so far” (2019, 70). Moore made a similar claim earlier, noting that “critical analysis of screenshots” has “rarely been attempted in media studies” (2014, 141).

1.2 Research Problem

The problem this study aims to address is how the remediation of virtual photography on social media acts to queer gamer avatars through role-play and sharing practices. Several research questions are presented to guide and delimit the study.

1. How do gamers negotiate their online and offline identities in *FFXIV Online* and Instagram?
2. How does role-play queer the construction of gamer identities, both online and offline?
3. How does posting virtual photographs of avatars on Instagram queer gamer identity expression? How do virtual photographs queer the experiences of gamers in *FFXIV Online*?

4. How is virtual photography remediated by the textual practices of role-play, tagging, sharing, and commenting?

1.3 Aims and objective

This study seeks to critically investigate the construction of online identities by gamers in *FFXIV Online* and their use of social media to remediate the self through virtual photography. This aim will be achieved through the completion of the following objectives:

1. Unpack relevant academic literature in the fields of queer theory, gender and sexuality studies, online identity theory, virtual community studies, virtual photographic theory, avatar studies, and game studies.
2. Provide context on *FFXIV Online* and how this virtual environment impacts gamer identities.
3. Discuss how the social media platform Instagram codes and frames gamer identities expressed in posts, comments, captions, and hashtags.
4. An analysis of case studies drawn from a selection of Instagram accounts using a relevant theoretical framework. The accounts are selected using “snowball sampling” (Turner, McCracken, and Bizzocchi 2010, 473) to utilise “friendship networks” as an opportunity to find additional samples.
5. Research conducted in the form of semi-structured interviews with identified participants.

This study also seeks to introduce a form of self-reflection through visual ethnographic practice.

This aim will be achieved through the completion of the following objectives:

1. A critical analysis using visual ethnographic work as a form of exploration and self-examination to reach a deeper understanding of the phenomena as a queer person, artist, and member of the *FFXIV Online* community.
2. A self-reflective phenomenologically based analysis of the work conducted, incorporating data from interviews and academic literature.

1.4 Literature Review

Past virtual world research has focused on identity construction, gender, race, embodiment, and social interaction (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 26). Furthermore, sexuality in virtual worlds has been studied in the context of desire and attraction (Adams-Santos 2020), the performance of gender and sexuality (Brookey and Cannon 2009), the influence of technology on the embodied queer

identity (Chang 2012), the representation of sexuality in the narratives and world of virtual environments (Malkowski and Russworm 2017), the virtual avatar as a form of drag performance (Matviyenko 2010), the social interactions of openly queer players (Sundén and Sveningsson 2012), and a queer reading of game mechanics and systems (Ruberg 2019). Studies on virtual photography are scarce but include research into the practice's remediation of photography (Moore 2014; Poremba 2007), its capacity to disrupt assumptions around representation (Švelch 2021), and its affordances for self-representation (Patti 2017).

The literature reviewed for this thesis covers several broad themes: the co-construction of queer identity through negotiation between physical and virtual bodies, the mediation of identity through online video game avatars, and virtual photography. The first theme is approached through unpacking relevant theories relating to identity construction in virtual spaces, queer readings of online spaces, and the exploration of the impact of social media on sexual identity. The second theme is addressed by exploring the virtualisation of the body and the relationship between video game avatars and identity. The last theme unpacks the role of virtual photography in the materialisation of online identity.

1.4.1 *Online Queer Identity Formation*

In addressing the first theme, I begin with research by Turkle, focusing on her books *Life on Screen* (1995) and *The Second Self* (2005). *The Second Self*, initially published in 1984, explores the relationship between computer programs and the individual user's identity. Turkle's subsequent work, *Life on Screen*, further explores the virtualisation of the self in the context of the internet and the rise of online multiplayer games. Turkle's seminal works lay the foundation of contemporary theories on identity on the Internet and afford a critical insight into the relationship between video games, gaymer, sexual identity, and sense of self.

In exploring the impact of social media sites on sexual identity, I consult the research of Rob Cover, specifically his scholarly work in the 2016 publication *Digital Identities* and his 2019 publication *Emergent Identities*. Cover's (2016) work offers an additional perspective on the arguments outlined by Turkle (1995; 2005). Cover (2016) discusses the construction of online identity through a queer reading of social media and online forums. In his later work, Cover extends his argument by deconstructing the "new taxonomies of identity labels" (2019, 9) that arise through online collaborative efforts in queer spaces. Cover's work outlines a phenomenon of online queer spaces that attempt to forge new means of identity expression. Cover's research

and arguments introduce the deconstructive practices users use on social media to critique socially dominant gender binaries.

Through the work of seminal queer theorist and scholar Judith Butler (2004; 2006; 2011), I consider gender to be a performance, specifically the genders performed online by gamers of *FFXIV Online*. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler (2004, 1) establishes the foundation of her argument: gender is a quality internalised and ritualistically performed by individuals daily. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler seeks to “expose the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a specific formation of power” (2006, 34). In other words, Butler rejects an essentialist notion of gender and moves towards gender as a symptom of culture and ideology. Lastly, in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*, Butler highlights problematic notions of gender projected onto the “natural” (2011, XIV) sex of the body as an active/passive false dichotomy. Instead, Butler argues that sex is “a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface” (XVIII). In other words, Butler introduces the active role sexed bodies play in the naturalisation of gender and sex identity.

To consider the impact of online community social dynamics on the queer community, I consult Shelley Craig, Andrew Eaton, Lauren McInroy, Vivian Leung, and Sreedevi Krishnan (2021); Leanor Acosta, Sebastian Molinillo, Esperanza Moreno, and Beatriz Gomez-Ortiz (2017); and Shaw (2012; 2014). Craig et al. (2021, 3) conducted a rigorous survey of over 6,000 queer-identifying youths aged 14-29 to identify the potential consequences of social media use. Acosta et al. (2017) focus on the benefits of social media use on early adults in Spain through an online survey. Shaw (2012) conducted a qualitative-focussed approach to unpack the complex inter-relationships between gamers in an online community setting. Overall, the papers point to a social and educational benefit for queer youth (Craig et al. 2021, 2) and that queer youth use social media as safe spaces for identity exploration, identifying other queer individuals, and avoiding instances of harassment or hate speech (Acosta et al. 2017; A. Shaw 2012). Craig et al. (2021, 1–2) note that Instagram, in particular, has a markedly improved effect on the emotional wellbeing of queer individuals while simultaneously offering more privacy settings to avoid harassment. Shaw’s (2014) later work, which focuses on representation and identification via games, provides further insights into the relationship between gamer, avatar, game, and a broader cultural context.

1.4.2 *Virtual Worlds and Communities*

Four prominent virtual ethnographers were identified in a literature survey on identity construction in virtual worlds: Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor. These four individuals co-published a handbook, *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* (2012), and produced dozens of independent works. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds* provides an invaluable aid in conducting primary ethnographic research on several topics related to online communities, of which identity construction is one (Boellstorff et al. 2012). Boellstorff's (2008) *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* explores identity formation and various forms of expressing sexuality and sexual identity within a virtual space. Nardi's (2010) *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* directly addresses the central themes of this thesis: identity construction, social interaction, gender, and sexuality in virtual MMORPG environments. Pearce and Artemesia's (2009) *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds* provides meaningful insight into virtual worlds as sites of social production. Finally, Taylor's (2006) account in *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* provides additional perspective on all the themes previously discussed.

Furthermore, the work of Adrienne Massanari (2015) correlates participatory culture and online gaming communities. Massanari explores the notion of "publicly articulated" (6) social connections through social media platforms such as Instagram. She also considers the link between "online" and "offline" (6) identity, which is a significant interest for this study.

In addressing the emergence of identity through gaymer-avatar interaction, I consult the work of Jeremy Turner, Janet McCracken, and Jim Bizzocchi (2010), Jesse Fox and Sun Joo-Grace Ahn (2013), Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca (2009), Dmitri Williams, Tracy Kennedy and Robert Moore (2011), and Susannah Wood and Antonia Szymanski (2020). Through a discussion of these sources, I aim to unpack the link between avatar appearance and offline influences, the impact on identification in the customisation of avatars and fashion, the role of avatar identification in the formation of social or group-based identities, the expression of new forms of identity through avatar use, the use of avatars as a safe space for sexual, religious, and racial minorities to experiment with identity, the effect of avatar identification on offline selves, and the importance of role-play in the formation of possible selves.

1.4.3 *Final Fantasy XIV Online*

While not comparable to the likes of *WoW*, some research on *FFXIV Online* has been conducted since the game's release. The majority of research focuses on the player experience, while others chose to focus on the narrative or world-building aspects of the game. In an early exploration, Appignani, Kruzan, and Neill (2015) liken the avatars in *FFXIV Online* to ghosts, claiming players "possess" their avatars to inhabit and manipulate the virtual environment. Korkeila and Hamari (2020) conducted a substantial survey of 905 players in *FFXIV Online* to investigate the link between player psychology and avatar success in various domains. The researchers' findings indicate that, overall, immersion and engaging in the social aspects of the game result in the accrual of economic, social, and symbolic capital. Meanwhile, Kaufmann and Diez-Morel (2022) investigated the link between player personality, psychological flow, and their motivation to play. The researchers claim that certain groups of players, namely escapist, extroverted, and conscientious players, are more likely to be motivated to play. Finally, Zhou and Sharma (2025) investigated the phenomenon of partner-seeking posts made by *FFXIV Online* players on social media. They discovered that player seek intimacy with others, but struggle to maintain privacy and clear separation between various social media platforms.

Moving on to the broader narratives within *FFXIV Online*, Wong (2025) analyses a particular area of the game world, the instanced dungeon "Tam-Tara Deepcroft," as the only true horror-inspired narrative within the game. Furthermore, the author argues that the dungeon serves as a guide for new players on appropriate social norms. Huber (2022) investigates *FFXIV Online* to discover allegorical possibilities within the MMORPG. He claims that from the mechanics, allegories emerge relating to experiences within and outside the game. Lastly, Vichot (2024) explores how localisation in *FFXIV Online* facilitates in forming connections between players and the virtual world. The English localisation, in particular, is well regarded as critical in establishing the virtual world's popularity with players.

1.4.4 *Virtual Photography*

In considering the role of the virtual photograph in the mediation of identity, I touch on three main themes: the remediation of photographic techniques in the context of virtual worlds, the interrelationship between gamer, identity, and virtual photography, and the role of the virtual photograph in constructing and maintaining a networked identity. In exploring the remediation of photographic principles, I draw from Poremba's (2007) and Moore's (2014) work. Poremba's

seminal work in virtual photography also supports my investigation into the relationship between gamers and virtual photography, along with the research conducted by Patti (2017). Finally, in considering the function of virtual photography as an element of online identity, I consult Moore again in combination with the writings of Möring and de Mutiis (2019).

1.5 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study interweaves several philosophical paradigms through which to analyse and interpret the data gathered. The critical fields from which this study draws are game studies, virtual ethnography, avatar studies, and queer theory. These theoretical sources provide a foundation to better understand and explore the dynamics of identity construction by posting in-game virtual avatars on Instagram. More precisely, scholarly work from these disciplines will be deployed to analyse the case studies, interviews, and virtual ethnographic work conducted for this study. This study aims to address the research problem of understanding the identity dynamics between gamers, avatars, and Instagram through queer methods of analysis. While the entire theoretical argument is developed throughout Chapters 2 and 3, a brief introduction is provided below.

Theories of identity construction that focus on the interrelationship between the self, other, and the internet further deepen the understanding of the cultural processes by which individuals co-construct their identities online. Queer theorists such as Craig et al. (2021), Acosta et al. (2017), Shaw (2012), Butler (2004; 2006; 2011), and Cover (2016; 2019) serve to delimit the scope of the theoretical framework to the topics of gender identity, gender performance, and questioning heteronormativity in online discourse. The research by Turner, McCracken and Bizzocchi (2010) offers insight into the relationship between avatar design and gamer identification. The work by Fox and Ahn (2013) and Wood and Szymanski (2020) further explores identification with avatars by examining the interrelationship in forming identity between offline and online selves. Using a different approach, Klastrup and Tosca (2009) examine the importance of character fashion in forming an online self. In order to better understand the emergent category of *erotic role-players*, the research conducted by Williams, Kennedy, and Moore (2011) on the importance of role-play to minority groups is examined in the context of exploring new identities.

The intersection between online identity performance, gender and sexuality, and virtual photography is discussed in three themes from the literature on virtual photography. First, the practice of virtual photography as a form of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's remediation

(1999) is unpacked in virtual worlds. In their appropriation of the game space, gamers in virtual worlds sublimate the video game origin of the virtual photograph by incorporating analogue photography techniques, such as compositional rules (Poremba 2007, 51) and visual artefacts (Moore 2014, 148). Second, how gamers utilise virtual photography in order to explore “possible selves” (S. M. Wood and Szymanski 2020, 126) through the representational possibilities afforded to them through virtual world avatars (Poremba 2007, 49–50). Lastly, the virtual photograph is considered an element in a multimedia assemblage of text, tags, comments, and photos in a constructed “networked identity” (Moore 2014, 144).

1.6 Research Methods

To begin this section, I aim to clarify what is meant by queer studies, addressing common criticisms from within queer scholarship. Boellstorff questions assumptions around queer studies as being exclusively “the study of ‘queer persons’, or as the study of texts and other cultural artefacts produced by and about ‘queer persons’” (2010, 215). Here Boellstorff implores queer scholars to broaden their understanding beyond exclusively queer subject matter. Similarly, scholars Kath Browne and Catherine Nash also remark that “many scholars who use queer theorisations can use undefined notions of what they mean by ‘queer research’ and rarely undertake a sustained consideration of how queer approaches might sit with (particularly social scientific) methodological choices” (2010, 1). The authors also elaborate that queer theorists tend to “sweep under the carpet” (1) the methods by which they conduct their research. Queer studies certainly include queer individuals and queer culture, but as these scholars argue, queer studies must also include queer *methods*. To better explore the queer subjects and theory in my study, what follows is an unpacking of what queer methods⁸ and methodologies⁹ might mean.

By reevaluating more conventional methods used in social sciences, queer methodologies seek to uncover alternative narratives and perspectives. Notably, Patrick Grzanka argues that queer methods are not in radical opposition to the “positivist origins of contemporary social science.” (2019, 98). Instead, queer scholars seek to critically reexamine the methods used in the social sciences and investigate the “histories and potential futures of those methods” (98). Furthermore, queer methods need not only be applied to studies regarding gender and sexuality. As Browne

⁸ That is to say the “techniques of collecting data (interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, photographs, videos, observation, *inter alia*)” (Browne and Nash 2010, 10).

⁹ Distinct from methods, methodologies refer to “those sets of rules and procedures that guide the design of research to investigate” (Browne and Nash 2010, 10).

and Nash argue, “‘Queer research’ can be any form of research positioned within conceptual frameworks that highlight the instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations.” (2010, 4). Concerning games media, Shaw agrees, arguing that scholars can “use queer theory to change the kinds of conversations we have about games” (2015, 66), and queer theory can be deployed “even when the text, designer, or player is *not* queer” (66). Although participants and case studies examined in this study are queer, that alone is not sufficient to warrant labelling this thesis a queer investigation. Instead, my research explores how the taken-for-granted ‘real-world’ understandings of sex and gender are problematised in virtual environments.

Regarding (virtual) ethnographic research, the application of queer theory provides a critical perspective on the ingrained assumptions of standard data collection methods. Queer methods have the potential to “curve the established orientation of ethnography in its method, ethics and reflexive philosophical principles” (Rooke 2010, 25) to present fresh insight and question “the assumed stability and coherence of the ethnographic self and outlining how this self is performed in writing and doing research” (25). In other words, queer ethnography seeks to destabilise notions of the ‘outsider’ researcher and ‘insider’ participants. Such approaches in virtual ethnography have been deployed before¹⁰, notably in the example of Pearce and Artemesia’s approach as player/researcher/avatar in *There.com* (2009). In these examples, queer methods were attempted whether the participants or researcher were queer or not. This evidences that there is no universal consensus around the term queer research or what it means in the context of the social sciences (Browne and Nash 2010, 7). Instead, the question becomes, “how can we gather ‘data’ from those tenuous and fleeting subjects using the standard methods of data collection such as interviews or questionnaires?” (1).

The question of what constitutes queer research is further problematised by scholars who highlight essential methodological considerations. Browne and Nash explore how queer methods “simultaneously constitute and destabilise conventional research considerations” (2010, 12) by asking how queer theory prompts the researcher to question whether “data collection techniques or methodologies” (12) can become queered. Furthermore, the researchers question whether it is sufficient to say one is doing queer research by the identity of the researcher or participants or

¹⁰ In *EverQuest* (Taylor 2006), *Second Life* (Boellstorff 2008), *WoW* (Nardi 2010; Sundén 2012a; Sveningsson 2012b), and on Hornet, an application design to facilitate sex between gay and bisexual men (Atuk 2020).

does queer research signify an adaption in the methods employed (12). Boellstorff observes in response that queer methods are often relegated to “little more than literature theory rather belatedly coming to social science” (2010, 216). Even what can be meant by ‘queer’ in theory is hotly debated. Browne and Nash experienced pressure and “boundary-keeping and authenticity claims” (2010, 8) from calls to “define [queer] in a particular way” (8), highlighting the contestations between queer theorists’ calls for fluidity and flexibility in the term and “specific rules of rigour, clarity, and truthfulness” (8) normalised in the social sciences.

One possible approach for queer theorists to address methodological concerns is to reframe what constitutes ‘the field’ and ‘home’ in research. Boellstorff introduces the concept of emic theory as “emerging from both ‘within’ and ‘without’” (2010, 218). Boellstorff also notes a contradiction in how “many research methods distinguish between data, assumed to be emic, and theory, assumed to be etic.” (2010, 218), meaning that researchers often approach the realities of the fieldsite differently in what Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson refer to as a “hierarchy of purity” (1997, 13). As the authors explain, researchers “construct the difference between ‘the field’ and ‘the home’” (13), idealising the field as some other place more suitable for research. Alison Rooke notes how theorists are similar in this regard with several criticisms of queer theory, such as the “tendency towards philosophical abstraction and textual criticism, its employment of an under-developed concept of the social, and its lack of engagement with the material relations of inequality” (2010, 26). She advocates for a rethinking of “doing one’s fieldwork close to home” (30), observing that doing fieldwork within the domain “of comfort and belonging” (30) reframes the researcher’s understanding of what it means to be ‘out in the field’. Queer research does not occur ‘out there’; it occurs in the homes and shared spaces of individuals, including the researcher.

However, caution must be taken if researchers attempt to valorise individuals’ everyday spaces. A salient issue is highlighted by Nash, observing how queer spaces are “not necessarily the liberating and all-inclusive locations they are generally understood to be” (2011, 204). Nash illustrates that queer spaces offer their form of “oft-maligned homonormativity” (205) that orients the individuals that occupy them. Boellstorff notes the significance of acknowledging the normalisation at work in queer spaces, remarking that “too often contemporary queer studies scholarship... presumes a kind of robustly self-aware, intentional subject” (2010, 218). As Boellstorff notes, the role of the researcher in this context is to convey the “ostensibly authentic, unmediated voices” (218) of their participants. As Browne and Nash (2010, 6) illustrate in their

example of trans participants, researchers run the risk of projecting arguments onto participants that do not reflect their lived experiences.

From this brief overview, two concerns emerge from the literature on queer methods. First, a concern that researchers otherise, or perhaps fetishise, ‘the field’ as some mystical place from which the researcher returns to produce their subjects through the act of “writing up” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 13). Second, researchers are tempted to consider queer spaces and those that inhabit them as deliberately—and constantly—engaging in transgressive practices as a kind of rebel culture.

It becomes apparent that to do queer research involves more than the choice of participants, theory, or the identity of the researcher. Furthermore, a researcher must be cognisant of the subjectivity of the field and seek to articulate the insights of their participants sincerely. In other words, to do queer research, the methods by which the researcher conducts their work should be engaged with queerly. However, what it means to do research in this way is contested, fluid, debated, and, at times, entirely sidestepped. This thesis does not seek to address the problem of what is meant—or at least what will generally be accepted—by the term ‘queer methods’; instead, I aim to construct an *in situ* framework of understanding that leverages the understanding of other queer scholars to critically evaluate the methods of data collection outlined in Chapter 4. It follows that to approach an understanding of how I aim to adopt a queer approach, I invoke Grzanka by “starting at the level of methodology” (2019, 85).

A queer approach necessitates an evaluation of what Boellstorff dubs the “data-theory-method triangle” (2010, 216). Boellstorff (216) outlines the relationship between these factors,

What counts as ‘data’ depends upon the methods used to gather it and the theories used to explicate it; what counts as ‘theory’ depends on the data used to substantiate it and the methods used to support it; what counts as ‘method’ depends on the data it is to obtain and the theories it is to inform.

Thus, understandings of data, theory, and method are informed by each other. To put this idea into practice, I outline how the methods used in this study, specifically the interviews and virtual ethnography, are informed by the approaches of queer scholars. Boellstorff argues that a queer approach to theory is to “surf binarisms”, explaining that “a queer method could recognize the emic social efficacy and heuristic power of binarisms without thereby ontologizing them into ahistoric, omnipresent Prime Movers of the social.” (223). Boellstorff supposes that theory can transition across the field's boundaries and emerge from either side. He also recounts how

understanding the behaviour of his research participants in this way afforded new insight into their virtual and physical lives (222).

The first methodological approach discussed is the ethnographic work conducted for this study. Michael Connors Jackman notes that ethnography is helpful in “critiquing ethnocentric and universalising tendencies in theoretical frameworks which presume pan-cultural sexual identities and practices” (2010, 116). In other words, ethnographic methods can assist in reframing theoretical insights within the specific contexts of the case studies. However, Jackman is also careful to note that the introduction of ethnographic methods introduces the notion of “the field” (116), which, as discussed earlier, is often otherised and idealised by researchers. To counter this issue, Boellstorff argues that one aim of queer studies is “understanding culture as lived experience and sociopolitical dynamic” (2010, 217), which necessitates the incorporation of ethnographic research methods that are not exclusively “interviews, surveys and focus groups” (217) or other research methods such as “analysing cultural products like texts, art or law” (217).

Boellstorff proposes that queer methods “might thus involve a commitment to developing theory as well as data from a vulnerable engagement with one’s interlocutors in a fieldsite” (2010, 221). Rooke responds with a call for a “queer sociological ethnographic perspective” where she explores the day-to-day lives of her participants “in a deliberate attempt to counter the tendency towards high abstraction and a reliance on theory that had characterised queer” (2010, 26). Boellstorff agrees, preferring the term “participant observation” (2010, 217) to describe his process of immersing himself in the day-to-day lives of his participants. Browne and Nash propose that “queer autoethnography allows for journeys of self-understanding” (2010, 21).

The importance of self-reflection in queer ethnography is vital, as Rooke asks, “we might consider the extent to which we ourselves are willing to be ‘pulled apart’ or undone?” (2010, 34). Andrew Gorman-Murray, Lynda Johnston, and Gordon Waitt (2010, 99) concur, stating that

being aware of your own subject position, your positionality in relation to each participant’s subject position, and how these might interact, is a useful way to start interrogating how the process of communication – entwined with networks of social power – affects the research project and its outcomes.

Likewise, the practice of interviews is queered by scholars, as Jamie Heckert views interviews as “potentially a gift to the interviewee as well as to the interviewer” (2010, 52). Interviews are essential research methods wherein the researcher and the participant are co-producers in “the intimacy of gathering stories, of crafting new ones” (53). Gorman-Murray et al. also consider the

importance of interviews but question “the researcher within the dualism of either ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’” (2010, 100). Instead, the researchers propose that a queer approach necessitates the awareness of “how narratives are always told *in situ*, to a particular audience.” (100).

In summary, this study seeks to recognise the criticisms and concerns raised by queer scholars regarding methods used in their name. Doing queer research signifies more than simply selecting queer subjects for study or making use of queer theory. Queer research seeks to destabilise assumed notions of ‘the field’ and ‘home’, of the subjectivities at play between researcher and interviewee, and the importance of considering theoretical arguments within the context of the lived experiences of participants.

1.7 Outline of Chapters

In this first chapter, the context and background information on the topics of virtual worlds, online sexuality, and online identity construction are provided. The chapter also motivates the overall aims and goals of the study. Lastly, the first chapter summarises the critical literature reviewed and the research methodology. The first chapter emphasises scholarly concerns about what is meant by queer studies and concludes with the establishment of queer methodologies that incorporates several queer academic perspectives.

Chapters 2 and 3 establish the theoretical argument for the study. The literature covers two broad themes, *queer identity online* and *the virtual selfie*. The first theme, addressed in Chapter 2, addresses theories on online identity, online queer practices and culture, and the impact of social media on the formation of identity and the relationship with the physical self. The second theme, discussed in Chapter 3, considers the importance of the virtual body, its relationship with the physical body, and the role video games play in forming online identities. The final point addressed in the second theme covers theory that explores integrating techniques and methods used in film photography in an online context. Then, the chapter considers virtual photography's effect on the individual's notion of self, drawing parallels from photographic and new media critical theory. These chapters establish the theoretical framework for subsequent data interpretation and comparison.

Chapter 4 details all the methods and methodologies employed for research data gathered from the field. The methods include multimedia analysis, ethnographic work, and virtual ethnographic practice. Image and text collection will primarily occur on Instagram, collecting images, captions, and public comments—additionally, further insight will be collected for this study

in the form of informant interviews. Lastly, the chapter closes by discussing the research methodology employed in my virtual ethnographic work.

Chapter 5 presents the research findings from all three data collection techniques: interviews, case study analysis, and virtual ethnographic practice. The chapter organises the data into themes: *gender and sexuality*, *relationships and communities*, *character creation*, *social media*, *role-play*, and *virtual photography*. The data from various methods are interweaved to illustrate better the similarities and differences made visible through the study's multimodal research method. The various methods employed by this study take advantage of each data collection strategy's strengths while minimising their weaknesses. Interviews provide detailed yet narrow perspectives. Instagram case studies afford insight into gamers' articulations of self in their own words but are not representative of the population as a whole. Meanwhile, the virtual ethnographic work provides a broader overview of the general player population on a specific game server.

Chapters 6 and 7 conduct an in-depth analysis and discussion of all the data collected in the context of the theoretical framework established in Chapters 2 and 3. The chapters compare the theoretical model's themes and central arguments against the research material. The findings of the analysis have been subdivided into four primary areas of inquiry across the two chapters: sexual identity formation in *FFXIV Online*; gamer communities in *FFXIV Online*; gamer identity expression in *FFXIV Online* and Instagram; virtual photography and identity co-construction. These four areas address the various research questions outlined at the onset of this thesis. Each line of inquiry interweaves interviews, case study analyses, and ethnography in a discussion that contextualises the contribution of my research project.

Chapter 8, the conclusion, summarises each preceding chapter and explores how the research addresses each research question. The chapter emphasises the emergent knowledge in four domains: sexual identity formation in online spaces, gamer online communities, gamer self-expression in MMORPGs, and the role of virtual photography in online identity constructions. The chapter discusses potential avenues of new research: research on micropublic online platforms such as Discord and Reddit, implications for studying other MMORPGs, and intersectional themes such as race, economic status, or cultural background on the formation of online identity. The thesis concludes with a self-reflection on the research process.

CHAPTER 2: THE ONLINE QUEER AVATAR

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is divided into two main themes, identity representation in virtual environments and online queer sexual identity construction. The first theme addresses how gamers in virtual worlds choose to represent themselves through virtual avatars. Virtual self-representation is becoming an increasingly relevant topic as more people, particularly queer youth, turn to virtual worlds for social connection since the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 (Mordor Intelligence 2024). The first section of this chapter unpacks the academic discourse around online identity formation, avatar studies, and theories of self-representation. Regarding online identity formation, this research considers the process of identity co-construction as explored in Shaw's (2014) and Cover's (2016) work.

Furthermore, Acosta et al.'s (2017) research on the codification of identity categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and social class is also discussed. Another vital insight Fox and Ahn (2013) provided is the importance of social interactions in shaping online identity, particularly within the MMORPG environment. Meanwhile, Wood and Szymanski (2020) outline how identity construction is habitual, testifying to gamers' commitment to regulating and maintaining their online personas. From this research, as Cover (2016) exemplified, identity co-construction is a dynamic process shaped by the gamer's offline identity and online interactions with others.

Fox and Ahn's (2013) research is unpacked to explore the avatar's role in identity construction in the MMORPG environment. Katherine Bessière, Seay Fleming, and Sara Kiesler (2007) offer insight into the dual nature of gamer identification as avatars: psychological and aesthetic identification. The research indicates that gamers identify with their avatars based on demonstrated characteristics and physical appearance. The potential of avatars as safer alternatives for identity experimentation is also explored through the research of Turner et al. (2010) and Williams et al. (2011). This section also discusses the work of Acosta et al. (2017), Mary Robertson (2019), and Cover (2019) in the context of how gamers are adopting new notions of gender and sexual identity in both online and offline contexts. The research of these scholars leads to a consideration of the need for gamers to maintain several, and often wholly distinct, online identities.

The literature reviewed for this chapter includes writing by Shaw (2014) and Patti (2017) on the need gaymers have for the representation of marginalised identities in the worlds they inhabit and how this impacts their self-perception in online contexts. Further research by Shaw (2012) and Tereza Krobová, Ondřej Moravec, and Jaroslav Švelch (2015) also demonstrate the challenges faced by gaymers in finding safe avenues of expressing their queerness online. Finally, my research includes the work of Cover (2016) and Lev Manovich (2001), who consider how the dynamics and unique affordances of online environments shape self-representation in virtual worlds and social media.

The second theme of this chapter addresses the specifics of online sexuality and how it is co-constructed in the virtual environment. While sexuality online has been well-researched, the dynamics of online sexuality in the context of MMORPGs is an emerging field. In particular, the unique affordances and cultural context of *FFXIV Online* and its effect on the collective self-representation of its player base have yet to be broached in an academic setting. Of particular interest to this study is the practice of remediating screenshots of avatars from *FFXIV Online* in the context of carefully curated Instagram accounts created by gaymers for their characters. This phenomenon has not been researched from a scholarly standpoint yet provides valuable insights into how gaymers co-construct gender and sexuality through play, virtual photography, tagging, commenting, and sharing.

This chapter relies on the findings of Sara Ahmed (2006), Fox and Ahn (2013), Shashikant Penumarthy and Katy Börner (2006), and Taylor (2006; 2002) in outlining the particulars of exploring and expressing gender identities in virtual environments. Furthermore, the second theme considers gender from Butler's (2004; 2006; 2011) perspective of performativity to critically examine how gaymers imitate Western gender norms in regulating avatar gender. This theme also considers Hanne Blank's (2012) and Shannon Dea's (2016) arguments around gender identity as primarily social versus sex identity as an embodied experience and the implications this may have on virtual bodies. Drawing from the work of these scholars, I address the fluidity in gender and sexuality online, thereby adopting a constructionist perspective on the nature of online gender identity. The chapter also incorporates theories on how the avatar body/gender/sex influences the gaymer, a process termed the "Proteus Effect" by Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson (2007).

I do not investigate but acknowledge that gender and sexual orientation are smaller components in the broader intersection of other identity categories such as race, economic status,

ethnicity, and religion. The interplay between these factors is mainly outside the scope of the research but is addressed where appropriate. This chapter unpacks how gaymers make sense of gender in online environments, principally in MMORPGs. This research is augmented by considering how avatar gender is co-constructed, expressed, and remediated in the context of social media imagery. In summary, this literature review outlines a novel site of research by exploring the dynamics of cross-platform online identity work performed by gaymers between *FFXIV Online* and Instagram.

2.2 Identity and representation in virtual environments

2.2.1 Identity

Identification, particularly online, is a fragmented process governed by a complex relationship between self and representation. Shaw (2014, 7) notes that identification is the initial entry point into investigating how representations of the self inform or impact an individual's sense of who they are. Thus, one aspect of identification is the relationship between one's identity and representations of the self. Cover (2016, XI) introduces the idea that different categories of identity form a kind of 'landscape' of coordinates that determine our self-concept. Acosta et al. specify the coordinates as "the categories of sex, gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, social class, nationality, race, and ethnic group" (2017, 75). These authors argue that an individual's sense of self is not a static concept but a dialectical process between various identity categories and self-representation. Discussions around identity must, therefore, seek to consider the various facets that encapsulate the individual sense of self. While online, many of these factors that influence the identity of individuals remain hidden; they nonetheless impact the visible personality of the avatar on display. Consequently, fully understanding the complex offline context of an individual gaymer remains a challenge in virtual ethnographic study.

Furthermore, the dynamics within a social group inform and reshape identities in a continual feedback loop of reward or punishment. Acosta et al. (2017, 78) outline social identity theory in their chapter on sexual minorities and virtual communities. The authors argue that in an online community, members form their identities not through individual action but rather in response to their emotional "connection with other people" (78). This idea of identity as a reactionary process to external stimuli, based majorly on the social influences of groups online, is something that is correlated with the research conducted by Fox and Ahn, who note that

individuals explore identities in a virtual space and modify their behaviours following the “social feedback associated with it” (2013, 260).

Identity formation is constituted by exploring possible identities and the individual’s commitment to those expressions of self. Wood and Szymanski (2020, 126) argue that there is a correlation between an individual’s willingness to explore different forms of identity expression and their commitment to exploring their identity. In other words, the exploration of identity is not something that individuals occasionally do out of idle curiosity but something they do consistently and regularly (126). As the authors note, “exploration can come in many forms such as personal experiences, witnessing the experiences of others, or doing research” (126). Thus, individuals form a sense of themselves online through observation, emulation, and eventual adoption.

As the above research outlines, identity is a process shaped and continuously reformed through social and cultural interaction, i.e., the process is fluid, ongoing, and habitual. Cover points out that the individual never reaches a “fixed sense of selfhood” (2016, XII); the self is somewhat reformed as new experiences shape an understanding of the self. Cover also introduces the idea of “constructionist” (XI) theories regarding identity. The constructionist idea around gender identity develops because of “cultural and social forces” (XI) dominant in the individual’s life. These forces are present through social feedback from peer groups (Rheingold 1993, 241) or cultural elements such as visual representations (Kollock and Smith 2004, 8–9). Cultural forces change from generation to generation or during the life of one individual. As such, an individual can go through multiple stages of formation. Cover positions this idea in contrast to what he refers to as “nurtured way[s] of being” (XI). In other words, Cover positions a constructionist approach as opposed to a view where identity is formed during the early stages of childhood and does not significantly change throughout one’s life (XI).

Increasingly, identity formation and experimentation for young people occurs online. Cover highlights that identity was “performed, engaged with, or represented differently online from offline” (2016, X) when comparing the internet’s early development to more contemporary contexts. Cover clarifies that there is a change in how people conceive of their online identities from the advent of the internet in the 90s to the widespread adoption of social media two decades later (2016, X). In Turkle’s earlier work, for example, she perceives online identities as an additional layer of self alongside the offline person as a “new self” (1995, 12). Cover, in contrast, points out that the individual’s primary identity is online (2016, X). Later, Turkle (2011, 192–93) revises her argument, aligning more closely with Cover’s. Turkle argues that the availability of

social media through mobile devices has dramatically shifted the balance of “working on identity” (195) from the physical world to the virtual.

In MMORPGs, identification occurs through the graphical avatar—the gaymer persona in the virtual world. Identification in this context is, as Fox and Ahn note, “the extent to which an individual relates to a model and feels that [they] are similar to the model” (2013, 257). Therefore, how a gaymer’s avatar is visually represented and constructed is important (Bessière, Seay, and Kiesler 2007). Mia Consalvo and Jason Begy (2015, 16) and Shaw (2012, 9) concur that identification plays some role in the relationship between avatar and gaymer. Fox and Ahn (2013, 257) highlight that although avatars may be based on a gaymer’s physical appearance, they are not required to do so. In virtual worlds such as *FFXIV Online*, gaymers can create avatars that explore “desired or potential characteristics” (257) that are not available to them in the physical world. Psychologists Bessière et al. (2007, 533) concur that a vital aspect of avatar identification is psychological and aesthetic. Their research indicates that the gaymer-avatar relationship is one in which gaymers craft “idealized characters as virtual, alternative selves” (533). In other words, gaymers may craft their avatars as themselves with more desirable physical and psychological traits. Scholar James Newman even argues that the affordances a character offers are of primary concern, stating that “the character—is not contingent upon representation. On-Line, ‘character’ is conceived as capacity—as a set of characteristics” (2002, 8). Avatar creation is a practice deeply entangled with a gaymer’s sense of self, both current and hypothetical. The research above shows that gaymers see avatars as an extension of themselves to enhance, explore, or edit aspects of their identities.

MMORPGs also facilitate identity exploration by allowing individuals a safe means of experimenting with different forms of identity expression. Turner, McCracken, and Bizzocchi outline that gaymers may utilise their avatars to experiment with different forms of “social positioning” (2010, 470). The authors imply that gaymers can ‘try on’ identities in ways different to themselves in a relatively safe environment. Fox and Ahn echo this sentiment in their research by pointing out that MMORPGs “provide the closest approximation to physical interactions (yet mostly without consequences in the physical world)” (2013, 260).

Being able to try on different identities is an essential tool in the development of an individual’s sense of self. Williams et al. (2011, 176) use Erik Erikson’s research on identity development in young people to explore this notion. In their research, Williams et al. consider Erikson’s concept of “role diffusion” (176), or the process by which young people attempt to solidify

their sense of self by “trying on a range of roles or masks to see which fits best” (176). Gaymers do much the same in managing their online and offline selves. Gaymers develop a particular notion of who they are and can have several personas relating to their identities (173). For example, a gaymer in *FFXIV Online* takes on the identity of their Warrior of Light when they are in the world of Hydaelyn.

However, they may take on various roles in combat, exploration, and role-play within that context. Enmeshed within the game's mechanics, gaymers may take on a supportive role and heal the party, lead a raid, or choose a class focusing on defeating enemies. Socially, they may engage in a role-play activity, talk with their friends, or strategize with other raid members. These gameplay and social aspects deserve research and are at the core of this research study. Shaw (2014, 10) echoes this sentiment in a call for an approach to game studies research wherein the question of identity is unpacked not only through the representative possibilities within video games. Instead, Shaw argues that investigating how “contexts of play” (10) affect identity formation must also be considered in studying online identity. Gaymers thus explore different possible selves through a dynamic interrelationship between their social interaction in the game and engaging with gameplay systems and confines.

Furthermore, the layer of anonymity offered by MMORPGs provides a safe space for identity exploration. Williams, Kennedy, and Moore (2011, 176) indicate in their research that MMORPGs allow people, particularly members of a sexual minority, to explore and try out new identities that they could not necessarily do safely in their offline lives. Individuals are free to explore aspects of themselves and can mitigate risks to their social standing or offline lives (176). Craig et al. (2021, 2) echo this finding in their research on online communities. As will be explored in more detail below, their research indicates the factors that constitute a safe environment for queer individuals online. Of consequence to this discussion is that these factors are also present in contemporary MMORPGs such as *FFXIV Online*. MMORPGs offer anonymity that members of sexual minority groups utilise as a means of expression because their family life, religious, or social circumstances put them at risk otherwise.

In particular, the *Final Fantasy* series interweaves notions of gameplay with identity through the lens of gender norms. Throughout the series, *Final Fantasy* encourages a relationship between the gaymer and identity formation by providing both characters to identify *with* and *as*. Most games in the *Final Fantasy* series require identifying *with* the main cast of characters, predefined individuals with their personalities, dialogue, and narrative arcs. Mark Filipowich (2018,

125) comments on the construction of gender roles in the *Final Fantasy* series by noting that, for the most part, the identity of the gaymer avatar is fixed, at least in the single-player iterations of the franchise. However, in the case of *FFXIV Online*, gaymers are encouraged to identify as the Warrior of Light—a character of their own making—therefore, they determine the avatar's identity in *FFXIV Online*, a key concern for this study. *FFXIV Online* shares this feature with only one other mainline *Final Fantasy* game, *Final Fantasy XI Online*. However, *FFXI Online* was not chosen as a case study for this research, owing to the more active and developed role-play and virtual photography community of *FFXIV Online*.

A standard convention in most *Final Fantasy* games, including *FFXIV Online*, is the “silent protagonist” (Filipowich 2018, 121), a gameplay device used to allow for self-projection on the gaymer's part. However, the notion of a mute character being a more accessible point from which a gaymer can insert themselves into the narrative is based on the presumption that the main barrier to identifying with a character is their ability to speak. The problem is that the relationship between identification and avatar is complex, relying on more visually apparent factors such as gender, race, and other non-verbal or subtextual cues. Nardi (2010, 169) recounts the importance of visual cues and gendered norms in clothing for players to identify as their characters in *WoW*. Filipowich supports this sentiment by pointing to the concept of gendered dress codes for specific jobs in the *Final Fantasy* series. Jobs that focus on supporting and healing other players, such as the *White Mage* or *Astrologian*, are coded as female through their “long flowing robe[s]” and “softer lines” (2018, 121). While *FFXIV Online* also offers more flexible options for gaymers to customise their avatar to identify as them, gendered codes of dress, weapon choices, and other nonverbal cues within the game indicate that *FFXIV Online* does not move far beyond the bounds of conventional gender norms.

Queer identity

Concepts of queer identity are increasingly iterated upon, both in online and offline contexts. In particular, the notion of what constitutes a queer identity is called into question by younger generations of people, specifically those in their late twenties. Robertson (2019, 15) calls on previous work by queer theorist Ritch Savin-Williams (2006) to point out that newer generations of queer youth do not conceptualise sexuality and gender as previous generations do. Savin-Williams (7) describes the trend towards detaching same-sex attraction and identity best in his 2006 book, *The New Gay Teenager*.

Most young people see little need to link their sexuality to their personal identity, attitudes, values, politics, religion, or life philosophy. Some even see no need to link their sexuality to their sexual behavior and romantic lives. Most young same-sex-attracted young people engage in sexual activities with both sexes.

The teenagers Savin-Williams discussed in 2006 are now matured, and their relation to sexual orientation and gender identity has consequently developed. Cover adds context to this phenomenon by discussing the spread of late-90s queer theory on the internet. Disseminated among the forums of the internet, queer theory influenced the development of young peoples' sense of gender identity, being able to produce new taxonomies "collaboratively within a framework of co-pedagogy" (Cover 2019, 9). During this time, the categories that constitute queer identities continue to blur. Cover (2019) outlines this process through his book *Emergent Identities*, which explores new identity labels developed by young people on social media. Cover (1-8) challenges the long-held notions of identity categories and argues that the entire purpose of labelling identities is problematic to youth online. Cover argues that young people are deconstructing concepts of gender, sexuality, and identity rapidly through the proliferation of social media.

As one example, gay men frequently have multiple online identities. In their work on online gay communities in Spain, Acosta et al. (2017, 82) argue that it has become a necessity for gay men to curate different kinds of online identities. These men do so not purely out of a sense of privacy but because of safety concerns around having their sexual identity disclosed to friends or family (83). It is not uncommon for gay men to choose to keep their sexuality a secret from members of their offline lives for fear of retaliation. As a result, these online identities are the only places where gay men can explore aspects of their sexuality that may not be acceptable elsewhere.

Moving on to social media, they offer a means of safe identity exploration as well, particularly for queer individuals. Craig et al. have shown that queer people use social media as a means of accessing educational information regarding their sexuality and also as a means to "control and rehearse their social interactions" (2021, 2). Social media allows queer individuals to control how much information regarding their identity they share with others and to gauge the reactions of other people. Craig et al. (2021, 2) underscore the importance of the privacy features made available on social media platforms. Meaning the selective anonymity afforded by social media offers a safe means of initial identity expression for queer youth. Being able to control who views personal information, pictures, profile descriptions, and posts protects queer youth from

hostile or harmful interactions that can translate to harm outside of the network. Social media also provide the ability for queer youth to prevent unwanted interactions by ‘blocking’ specific individuals from contacting them or accessing profile information (3). These features allow queer youth to experiment with their identity development in a mostly safe and supportive environment with access to peer groups and educational resources. Queer people are thus engaged in an intricate process of curating various online spaces that carefully reveal different aspects of their identities to specific groups. However, this study focuses on the identity expression on social media that are birthed within virtual worlds, especially MMORPGs, and a particular kind of identity found in virtual gaming communities is that of the gaymer.

Gaymers

Gaymer identity is not a moniker used to describe a player’s sexual orientation but instead describes their cultural and social orientation relating to dominant patriarchal, heteronormative cultures in MMORPGs. The concept moves beyond notions of sexual attraction to arrive at an understanding of queerness as a way of interacting with the virtual world. Shaw notes that such an approach builds on a “gay sensibility” (2012, 69), as outlined by Michael Bronski (1984) in *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility*. In the book, Bronski describes gay sensibility as an “expression of powerless people” (1984, 41), in other words, a means to express their identity in a culture that sought to erase or deny alternate ways of being. An essential characteristic of gay sensibility is “the re-imagining of the material world into ways and forms which transform and comment upon the original” (42). As Shaw (2012) comments, gaymer communities likewise reimagine ways of being so as to resist, comment, or transform the largely heteronormative MMORPG space.

However, under its increasing usage and popularity, Shaw warns that the gaymer moniker has been “narrowed down” (82) in its scope. Shaw points to the now-defunct website *Gaygamer.net* and its narrow description of a site that is “for boys who like boys who like joysticks” (82). This description excludes many other queer individuals who may identify as gaymers: lesbian, aromantic, asexual, bisexual, or transexual persons. Contrastingly, the most popular platform for the ‘gayming’ community, the subreddit *r/gaymers*, describes itself as “Gaymers is a community for LGBT+ally redditors. We regularly play multi-player [sic] games together, talk about how totally rugged David Hayter is, how sexy Samus is in her zero suit, talk about how we love big Switch sessions, and playing with an XBone all night long” (2022).

The 247,000-member community further describes itself as not “solely dedicated to discussing gay themes in gaming” (2022). While most of the content does relate to gay themes and romance, the community guidelines make it clear that it is a queer approach, rather than a queer sexuality, that binds the subreddit together. Gayming communities are, therefore, not relegated solely to individuals enjoying a queer sexuality. Shaw (2012, 73) acknowledges this sentiment by pointing to the fact that there are heterosexual members, both male and female, within gayming communities. In an interview with a heterosexual male, he reveals that the gayming community “reflected his own interests and social network” (73) as his motivations for joining the community, in contrast to being reflective of his sexual identity. From the configuration and interactions of its members, the gayming community is formed from a heterogenous group of individuals with different orientations, desires, and goals. What unites them into a community is a resistance towards a predominantly heteronormative gaming culture that primarily caters towards a heterosexual male demographic. As will be explored in the following section, this resistance can manifest itself through queer representations of avatars.

Remediating identities

The representation of virtual identities outside the primary play experience tends to be organised around visual media such as screenshots and videos. A function of screenshots is to remediate identity through “tagging, sharing, embedding, and liking practices” (Moore 2014, 146). In the context of the gaymer persona, Moore (146) argues that screenshots and social network tags are the vehicle through which remixing play occurs. By revisiting the play experience through screenshots, a kind of remediation occurs; the screenshot ‘re-presents’ the game experience to the gaymer and facilitates sharing that experience with others. Thus, Moore argues that it is by sharing the game experience with other players that a “gamer persona” (146) develops.

Cover concurs the need for individuals to “self-articulate” through the sharing of digital “selfie[s]” (2016, XVI). Cover points out that this need for visual self-expression interpellates individuals within “identity positions and categories” (XVI). Cover uses the examples of a man using sports equipment to demonstrate a certain level of athleticism, either natural or constructed (XVI). In this context, screenshots, the gaming equivalent of ‘selfies’, become more than just a means to share play experiences, as Moore claims. Screenshots are the tools that gaymers can use to construct a virtual persona online. However, individuals who construct these personas online do not simply base their identities on how their virtual avatars appear. Instead, gaymers

may resort to the interpretation and performance of identities to convey their intended persona (Krobová, Moravec, and Švelch 2015, 4). Shaw (2014, 9) argues that individuals do not always identify with characters based on racial, sexual, gender, or other categorical similarities. Shaw goes so far as to warn that making such an assumption “trivializes the ways and reasons people identify with media characters” (9). For example, individuals may identify with characters based on mannerisms, how they walk, or the way in which they speak (5).

Patti (2017, 186) provides a different perspective to Shaw’s (2014, 5) point. If gamers who create their online personas can look beyond their physical forms for inspiration, those who interact with them may not do so. In describing the *13 Most Beautiful Avatars* exhibition, Patti quotes Coleman saying that “avatar images, as well as gestures and voice, translate cultural information that we believe in: if we see a black avatar, we comprehend this as a black person and treat that avatar accordingly” (2017, 186). Thus, when individuals meet an online persona, they rely on prior cultural knowledge to establish a frame of reference. The work by Patti examines people’s responses to the avatars of *Second Life*, who resemble realistic humans by design. In *FFXIV Online*, few offline analogies exist, barring the *Hyr*—a race of humans. However, other racial options include elf-like *Elezen*, the tiny child-like *Lalafell*, and the anthropomorphised feline and leporine *Hrothgar* and *Viera*. These fantastical characters offer new means of self-expression and challenge individuals by not conforming to offline identity categories for easy reference.

2.2.2 Avatar

The term ‘avatar’ refers to a broad range of virtual representations. Fox and Ahn note that the term avatar can encapsulate many possibilities, such as “names, online profiles, and dolls [3D avatars]” (2013, 255). Their research calls attention to the fact that elements of an individual’s online presence beyond their visual representation determine their online identity (255). In *FFXIV Online*, examples of these non-visual elements include the gamer’s username and their in-game profile. Meanwhile, “avatar customisation” refers to altering the avatar’s appearance regarding race, gender, and physical features (Vasalou and Joinson 2009, 511). Wood and Szymanski (2020, 125) note that not all video games allow gamers to customise their avatar’s appearance, except in the case of MMORPGs, where customisation is the norm. Customisation may also refer to a form of personalisation post-character creation in the form of clothing or accessories that the avatar can wear (Fron et al. 2007, 9). While customising an avatar’s clothing is more transient

and often easy to change, the avatar's body is often permanent, complicated, or requires payment to change.

Username, online profiles, and avatar appearance all contribute to the gaymer's online representation in the virtual world of *FFXIV Online*. Some elements are easy to change, while others imply a financial cost. In *FFXIV Online*, the clothing worn by avatars, glimmers, is easy to change from moment to moment. However, the only means of changing the majority of a character's physical features after character creation is with an item, called *fantasia*, purchased with United States Dollars, Euros, or other currencies. Through this association with economic value, the gaymer's perception of which identity categories are more important than others is formed. Although functionally as easy to change as clothes, the avatar's body matters more to gaymers because of the cost of altering its appearance.

Avatars are the primary point of reference for gaymers within a virtual world. Fox and Ahn (2013, 256) observe that avatars represent gaymers within a virtual space, allowing them to perceive and interact. The authors' observation has two implications. Firstly, gaymers can orient themselves within the world and make sense of their environment. Second, due to the social aspect of the virtual world, avatars allow gaymers to be seen within the virtual space. Gaymers can locate, identify, or recognise each other through their avatars, making the avatar a reference point for the gaymer and other community members.

Not all virtual worlds conceptualise avatars in the same way. In *FFXIV Online*, a single player-operated avatar is the primary means to affect the world, a convention used in other MMORPGs such as *EverQuest*, *WoW*, and *Guild Wars 2*. However, in their research on a more atypical virtual world, Consalvo and Begy present an MMORPG where players use multiple avatars to interact with the world and others (2015, 16). In their work on *Faunasphere* (Big Fish Games 2009), the authors point out that players do not interact with the world directly (Consalvo and Begy 2015, 16). Instead, *Faunasphere* offers the player multiple avenues of agency within the game through managing pets, participating in activities, and socialising with other players through text chat. *Faunasphere* is, therefore, less concerned with constructing a virtual self for the player than offering a plurality of interactions. The example of *Faunasphere* demonstrates that avatars are not a required component in virtual worlds but that the role avatars play depends on the needs and interests of the player.

However, avatars are the active agents through which gaymers can affect the virtual environment in *FFXIV Online* and are thus the characters most identify as. Scholars warn that

gaymers identifying as avatars carry some risk. For example, Fox and Ahn observe a tentative “link between identification with violent game characters and aggression” (257). In other words, there is the possibility that the violent behaviours avatars exhibit may be normalised for gaymers in offline spaces. In their study, Fox and Ahn (2013, 257) emphasise the potential harm of identifying with the violence committed by the avatar as an extension of the self. Fox and Ahn’s argument contrasts with other studies focussing on video game violence (Borchard 2015; Gunter 2016), where scholars tend to concentrate more on the violence perpetrated on-screen or explore a game’s violent themes as potential catalysts for normalising violent behaviour.

In some games, the customisation of the avatar has a bearing on the gameplay experience (S. M. Wood and Szymanski 2020, 125). One example of this is the MMORPG *WoW*. During character creation, players may choose from various races, each with a unique trait inaccessible to others. Orcs, for instance, gain more attack power, while Gnomes gain resistance to particular forms of damage (Wowpedia 2022). Unique traits are present in a limited fashion in *FFXIV Online*. Different races have different starting attributes; however, these initial changes are so minor that they have a negligible impact on the player’s experience and are of little concern. Players in *WoW* are encouraged to choose a race for gameplay reasons, whereas, in *FFXIV Online*, the choice of race is primarily based on aesthetic preference.

Consequently, a gaymer’s customisation of their avatar’s appearance is the first step in identifying with that character. Fox and Ahn note that it is a combination of two factors that results in gaymers “[developing] a strong affinity for an avatar” (2013, 256). The first factor is how much gaymers spend customising their avatars’ appearance. Gaymers become emotionally invested in their avatars by investing time in character creation. The second factor is the degree to which gaymers can customise their avatars. Games that facilitate avatar customisation by providing many options both during and after character creation benefit from gaymers becoming more invested in their characters.

Customising the avatar’s appearance is one way individuals experiment with gender conventions. Klastrup and Tosca argue that utilising fashion is a meaningful way “players interact with virtual worlds” (2009, 6). By appropriating offline gender norms, gaymers utilise fashion to convey a gendered identity through visual shorthand. Utilising gender-coded clothing can sharpen or blur the gender boundaries of a gaymer’s avatar and frame their interaction with others in the virtual space. Thus, avatar customisation is an ongoing process of negotiation between the gaymer’s inner self, desired self, and social self. By re-presenting their physical selves in a virtual

space, gamers use avatars to contextualise their interactions with others. However, this freedom is not unlimited and is always bound to the context of the virtual world.

Some games intentionally limit players' freedom when customising their avatars. Wood and Szymanski (2020, 125) point to the game *Mass Effect*, a science fiction RPG that allows the player to customise limited features of the main character, Commander Shepard. For example, players can determine race, gender, eye colour, or hair colour. However, given the number of fantastical races the game features, players are limited to only a human for their character. Players are also limited to choosing between binary sex options (125). These limitations are not without purpose; *Mass Effect* is a story-driven game, and the developers limit the scope of character creation for the sake of narrative cohesion. As scholars Krobová, Moravec, and Švelch (2015) note in their study of *Mass Effect*, this limitation included the sexual orientation of the player character. It was not until the third instalment of the series that players were able to engage in same-sex romantic and sexual relationships with both male and female characters in the game. However, in the first two games, players had already engaged in queer methods of play by employing lenses of “interpretation and performance” (Krobová, Moravec, and Švelch 2015) in their role as Commander Shepard. Thus, players are adept at negotiating the limits imposed upon them by the game's design to imagine and perform a broader range of identities than the developers may originally intend. Perhaps cognizant of this behaviour, the developers of *FFXIV Online* have chosen not to make the main character's identity a defining element of the story, unlike *Mass Effect*, thereby allowing the gamer more freedom in customising their avatar. Similarly, *FFXIV Online* developers have opted not to include romantic or sexual interactions between the gamer and other characters in the narrative. The developers possibly decided not to impose a particular sexual or romantic orientation on the gamer's character.

Avatars facilitate self-expression in the virtual space, so some choose to create an avatar that resembles their physical selves in some way. Asimina Vasalou and Adam Joinson's (2009, 510) study on avatar depiction outlines that gamers will spend significant time customising their avatar's appearance in most contexts. However, the researchers found that gamers will engage in “constant negotiation... where context challenged the appropriateness of the avatar's appearance” (517). Gamers may begin with their physical selves as a reference for their avatars but will seek to adapt them to suit their needs in a virtual world. Overall, characters are designed to fit appropriately into the game's aesthetics, while those designed for romance become more attractive (516).

However, Patti (2017, 190) argues that the dynamics of identification between the gaymer and avatar vary greatly. Different individuals customise their avatars for different reasons, and the same individual may have different goals when playing different games (190). The research conducted by Yasmin Kafai, Deborah Fields, and Melissa Cook shows how young people utilise their avatars as a means of exploring identity by way of an “identity playground” (2010, 38). The researchers point out that this contrasts with Turkle’s early conceptualisation of online identity formation as a purposeful and deliberate action by gaymers. Instead, the research by Kafai et al. points to identity expression via the avatar as fluid and experimental; in other words, avatars allow gaymers to explore new possibilities of identity instead of expressing a predefined identity in virtual space.

Avatars are a form of experimentation regarding an individual’s sense of self, allowing gaymers to explore new aspects of identity expression. Fox and Ahn (2013, 256) highlight the fluidity of representation afforded to gaymers in virtual worlds. Gaymers are free to alter the race, sex, gender, or even species of their avatar quickly and easily. This freedom is impossible with the gaymer’s physical body, where their sense of self is tied to near-permanent physical traits. The transient nature of the avatar body opens new ways of conceptualising identity as something that can be tailored to specific instances. Wood and Szymanski (2020, 125) echo this argument. The researchers note that avatars do not have to be “closely aligned with” (125) the gaymer. Such a gap between the avatar and gaymer is the space that allows for identity experimentation. Fox and Ahn refer to virtual worlds as the “optimal testing ground” (2013, 260) for gaymers to try out new and different identities without the same consequences they would face outside of the virtual environment.

Virtual worlds are suitable for this kind of experimentation in that they provide an opportunity to test forms of identity through social feedback. Fox and Ahn note that to “fulfil a particular aspect of identity, we must perform behaviours consistent with that identity and experience the social feedback with it” (2013, 260). Wood and Szymanski further explore such a social feedback loop by arguing that virtual avatars serve as prototype “possible selves” that relate to a person’s “future identity... or who they might become” (2020, 126). In other words, gaymers utilise virtual worlds to test out possible versions of themselves and preview the social feedback without facing serious or harmful offline consequences. As the interviews conducted by David Shaw (2002, 137) corroborate, online spaces allow queer, individuals in particular to explore their sexuality without fear of physical harm.

Turner et al. describe the motivation to experiment with identity as a form of testing the “ontological boundaries of identity and social positioning associated with ‘Real Life’ (RL)” (2010, 470). In other words, some gamers may be motivated to use virtual worlds to experiment not with personality traits but with physical characteristics such as race, gender, or cultural background. However, by choosing to design their avatars in the fashion of a race or gender, not their own, there is the risk of gamers triggering stereotypes. Fox and Ahn summarise Lisa Nakamura’s (2002) point on stereotypes as a kind of identity tourism, “users try out different virtual representations to ‘travel’ in these avatars, exploring new realms and investigating how they will be perceived socially” (Fox and Ahn 2013, 261). This behaviour may become problematic when gamers engage in racial or gender stereotypes, acting “as they think the representation’s apparent group would or should” (261). Gamers appropriating other identity markers for their avatars may run the risk of perpetuating harmful ideas regarding certain identity groups.

However, stereotypes also serve a functional purpose for gamers. They distinguish their characters from each other by deploying archetypes of silhouette, pose, and colour palette. From a gameplay perspective, these designs visually differentiate various avatars from each other, making it easier to identify them in the compressed space of the game world represented on screen. As Wood and Szymanski (2020, 125) attest, the avatar is a vehicle through which gamers project their identity into the virtual world. Consequently, the visual design of the avatar also conveys information about the identity the gamers wish to project. Gamers are aware of the link between aesthetics and personality traits, and their avatars tend to exhibit chosen traits through stereotypical designs: the solid and muscular characters embody courage, while the demure and restrained do the same for purity and honesty.

Owing to the significance of avatar design, it is not uncommon for gamers to have multiple avatars, as Kafai et al. (2010, 35) and Wood and Szymanski (2020, 125) both note. Kafai et al. (2010, 35) highlight from their interviews that gamers create avatars with distinctly different identity forms. Some gamers select genders or appearances that do not align with their own (35). Wood and Szymanski (2020, 125) observe that avatars are created for different purposes. Gamers may want to adapt their avatar to suit a particular context, such as role-playing, that may be at odds with how they usually interact with others. The research into avatar use indicates that avatars facilitate various functions for gamers. Avatars are of great importance to them, both as a vessel to be looked through and looked at.

The relationship between avatar and gamer is two-sided; as gamers test affordances through avatars, they, in turn, impact a gamer's sense of self. Avatar design correlates with the gamer in what Yee and Bailenson (2007) describe as the "Proteus Effect". The Proteus effect is a phenomenon where gamers in virtual worlds reflect changes in their personality that correlate with the traits they have assigned to their avatar (274). For example, gamers who have constructed an avatar design embodying courageous or adventurous attributes may express more confidence in their social interaction (274). Turkle (1995, 12) noted the same in her initial exploration of online identity. In Turkle's interviews with players, there is evident tension between the online and physical selves. As one respondent noted, "you are the character and you are not the character, both at the same time" (12). Testimony such as this points to the fact that gamers are aware of the effect such duality has on one's sense of self, or instead, "you are who you pretend to be" (12).

Avatars' effect on gamers depends on how strongly they identify with their characters. Fox and Ahn note that gamers who identify strongly with their avatars report a more significant change in their "attitudes and offline behaviours" (2013, 257). In other words, the affective power of avatar design rests not within the avatar itself. Instead, gamers form an emotional connection with their character and incorporate traits into their everyday sense of self, whether consciously or not. Such emotional connections are formed based on similarity to the avatar (257).

In summary, as gamers design their avatars with desirable traits, they bond with their virtual representatives. In some cases, this bond may result in gamers adopting some of the traits of their avatars. This reciprocal link between avatar and gamer affects some more than others, depending on how strongly they identify with their avatar.

2.2.3 Representation

One goal of representation in video games is to offer affordances for identity performance. Cover views identity as always contextualised within "representations [and] self-representation" (2016, XI). In other words, representation frames the individual's concepts of identity regarding what is possible in the game; specifically, representation allows gamers to imagine themselves as the character. Patti notes that gamers can still identify with characters that inhabit "different types of bodies" (2017, 180); however, diversity in representing a variety of bodies "[shapes] what types of worlds we can imagine" (180). Shaw echoes Patti's observations, stating that in her interviews with MMORPG gamers, "media representation matters" (2014, 4). Therefore, avatar design

should seek to enable various gamers to explore new facets of their identity by offering a range of possibilities in representation.

Representations of sexuality in games, meanwhile, must be careful to avoid stereotyping characters. In an earlier article, Shaw argues for a kind of representation that is “not exceptional” (2012, 80) but instead features various kinds of sexual identities in ways that are meaningful to the characters and story. Shaw observes that gamers do not want minority sexualities to be represented if it tokenizes or stereotypes the characters, nor do they want representation of queer characters as a form of “placation” (78). Krobová et al. (2015, 9) find this sentiment echoed in their interviews. It is preferable to gamers that diverse sexual identities should be included in games in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

Representation in games media is essential for opening spaces of possibility in which gamers can imagine themselves (Krobová, Moravec, and Švelch 2015, 8). Although gamers can relate to or identify with characters regardless of the bodies they inhabit, the affective potential of games on identity is well documented¹. Consalvo notes in her early study of sexuality in video games that *The Sims* (Maxis and The Sims Studio 2014) “provides little to no heterosexually biased content” (2003b, 5) in its representation of the avatar. Almost a decade later, Shaw concurred that WoW significantly represents minority sexualities (2012, 80). However, Shaw (77) also notes the suspicion with which gamers view queer representation in games media. There is simultaneously a concern from them that having a more diverse representation of identities, racial, gender, sexual, or otherwise, comes at the cost of the narrative, characters, or other aspects of the game.

While this thesis explores the importance of self-representation and identity formation, what is essential to gamers is “that [they] did not want to be placated with token characters; they wanted good games” (A. Shaw 2012, 77). Shaw (77) also notes that in some interviews, gamers expressed suspicion that diverse identities were only included to increase sales. Scholar Jack Halberstam, for example, advocates, “rather than just hunting for LGBT characters in the worlds of gaming, we want to seek out queer forms, queer beings, queer modes of play” (2017, 188). As this desire remains unfulfilled, gamers express ambivalence towards the need for diverse representation in games media. Instead, they emphasise “the importance of play experience over game representation” (A. Shaw 2012, 69).

¹ See work by Yee (Yee and Bailenson 2007; Yee, Bailenson, and Ducheneaut 2009) and Bessière (2007).

In the past, other scholars have criticised the goal of achieving diversity or equality through representation in games. For example, Edmond Chang raises concerns that games represent a “rather limited binary of hetero or homo, gay or straight, and, perhaps problematically, the conservative belief that sexuality is merely a choice” (2017, 228). Jordan Wood provides further insight, noting that “[scholars] have not adequately explored the form itself to understand how principles of queer theory might be organically inscribed within the video game” (2017, 213). Shaw notes that diverse representation is a goal in service of “social progress” (2012, 79). Shaw argues that social progress is achieved in a capitalist system when there is “equality in the marketplace” (79). In other words, Shaw argues that progressive values are lauded only in service of increasing media consumption.

However, media diversity alone is not enough to curtail acts of hate speech and harassment of minority groups. Shaw observes a disconnect between broader “calls for LGBTQ representation in games” (2012, 70) and social work aimed towards minimising online harassment of sexual minority groups. In the research she conducted, it becomes evident that the community of individuals around games do not share the same ideological goals as the games’ developers. Therefore, additional measures such as community engagement, policy enforcement, and forum moderation are required. Lastly, Shaw (81) points towards a particular trend of isolating sexuality, gender, and race when including diverse identities in media. Through what Shaw calls the “violence of a myopic... approach to representation” (81), individual identities are subdivided into categories. Discussions around ‘gaymer’ identity, for example, place great emphasis on “gay male gaming communities” (81) at the expense of other members of the queer and gaming communities.

The aim of diversity in representation also assumes that gaymers require a one-to-one match with characters to empathise with them. In a later work, Shaw (2014, 3) clarifies that diverse representation is not always required to derive enjoyment from games media. Gaymers often encounter or play as characters that do not match their identity and enjoy the experience. From Ellie in *The Last of Us* (2013) to Kratos in *God of War* (2005), games media includes various gender and sexual identities. Shaw (2012, 78) points out that in her interviews, gaymers expressed no dissatisfaction with playing as or interacting with characters from various sexual and gender identities.

Instead, there is a fear from gaymers that the inclusion of queer or minority identities could harm the narrative in some way or reduce characters to stereotypes. Gaymers view diversity in

games media often with suspicion, viewing the practice as forcibly assigning a laundry list of sexual and gender identities primarily for commercial appeal rather than as an honest attempt to engage with the complexities of the identity in question (Krobová, Moravec, and Švelch 2015, 7). This cynical outlook is not without justification, as games media has often retroactively assigned queer identities to characters in what appeared to be attempts at drawing in broader audiences. From the interviews Shaw (2012) conducted, it becomes evident that gamers view their needs from the perspective of a player first and foremost.

In advocating for an increase in queer representation in media, there is an underlying assumption regarding what kind of queer communities to represent (A. Shaw 2012, 70). From television media, video games have drawn archetypal queer characters that fit into easily consumable labels of ‘gay white man’, ‘confrontational lesbian’, and on a few occasions, ‘female-to-male man’. While these archetypes are not without some basis, scholars such as Shaw (70) underscore that these archetypes are not indicative of the wide range of identities, bodies, and personalities that constitute the queer community. Faced with a dilemma, media producers may resort to tokenism, including a variety of character tropes for the sake of ‘ticking boxes’ rather than exploring the exciting and diverse narratives found in queer communities. Furthermore, media producers struggle to represent queer spaces and narratives around trauma, conflict, and bigotry (Krobová, Moravec, and Švelch 2015; Chang 2017).

An issue noted with queer representation is that of representing queer spaces beyond the associated problems queer individuals face in their daily lives (A. Shaw 2012, 78). Shaw notes that gamers often desire to separate the problems in their daily lives from the fantasy worlds they experience in video games. For gamers, a primary concern is that queer individuals are included in games “just there for controversy” (78) rather than as integrated aspects of their stories and personalities. In essence, they desire apolitical queer representation. However, as Shaw (78) notes, this desire detaches queer personalities and characters from the very elements that have shaped the queer community. The desire gamers experience to have depoliticised representation in video games is, in part, a desire to express their chosen identities without the concern that their character will be appropriated for political purposes. The above research indicates a disconnect between game developers, gamer audiences, and media critics. The intense desire for gamers to experience ‘good games’ that may or may not include queer individuals speaks to an underlying awareness of the problems facing queer representation in

games media. Moreso, particular queer identities are privileged above others for capitalistic gains, thereby narrowing the scope of what is considered acceptably queer.

It is crucial to approach online queer communities with an awareness of the dangers of erasure while ensuring that no one group is privileged above another. In the writing of this thesis, it became evident that a large portion of Instagram profiles identified for potential study comprised the 'gaymer male' demographic. The goal of diversity in games media is often lauded as an indicator of social progress. However, as Shaw (2012) points out, social progress is only deployed as a vehicle of financial success in the marketplace. Diversity as a goal is limited in its capacity to affect the daily experiences of gaymers in online communities. It may even erase the experiences of certain members of queer communities.

New media and representation

New media technologies have become a dominant force in shaping contemporary identities, particularly those of queer individuals, through visual forms of mediation. According to Cover (2016, XII), identity construction in young people occurs primarily through mass-mediated communication facilitated by new media. Cover rejects essentialist views of identity and the biological self, instead highlighting the role of cultural interactions and socialization in identity formation. In the current cultural context studied by Cover, where visual culture is mainly digital and controlled by large corporations (XIII), identities are largely co-constructed online with content generated by peers.

Despite the potential for new media to offer alternate possibilities for identity expression, the representations produced by these technologies are inevitably biased (Manovich 2001, 40). Manovich argues that, like all cultural representations, new media representations are not neutral and privilege certain reality features over others. While new media technologies have allowed individuals to express their identities in novel ways, such expressions are also constrained by the limited communicative capacity of visual representations, i.e., images and video. The limits on expression are particularly problematic given the dominance of new media representations as a form of visual communication on a global scale; as Cover (2016) notes, individual expressions of the self online are as limited as previous forms of representation.

Avatars, as a form of representation, allow gaymers to explore novel forms of identity. Avatars allow gaymers to represent themselves in different visual ways (S. M. Wood and Szymanski 2020, 124). Fox and Ahn note that gaymers may choose avatars to benefit them in

social interactions; for example, “a man may select a provocative female avatar hoping to become a more desirable guild member” (2013, 261). However, virtual bodies are not divorced from the social and cultural attitudes attached to identity categories such as race and gender. Gaymers who choose to represent themselves in new ways may inadvertently become “recipient[s] of sexual harassment and solicitation” (261).

Furthermore, Patti notes that studying avatar design as “digital portraits of players” (2017, 180) ties in with other scholarly work in game studies, such as Shaw’s (2014) study on identification among gaymers. Despite the potential social costs, avatars afford gaymers a relatively safe way to experiment with alternate identities. Furthermore, role-play in virtual worlds is how gaymers explore their identities. Williams et al. (2011, 172) investigate role-play as the intersection of three fields of inquiry: self-representation, human development, and the magic circle theory of play. According to Williams et al.’s research, role-play drives identity formation in virtual spaces. Role-play engages gaymers in constructing a new or idealised representation of self through play. Avatars do more than facilitate a gaymer’s interaction with the virtual environment. Gaymers design and choose their avatars to represent themselves either as they are or as whom they want to become and proceed to enact these new selves in a fictive setting.

Avatar representation can, in effect, be used to control social interactions. Taylor’s research (2006, 12) shows that gaymers are conscious of this fact and use avatar design to control others’ perceptions of their character. Klastrup and Tosca demonstrate that gaymers will purposefully equip items that make them appear “like a new player” (2009, 13) to others. In some cases, gaymers would use their avatar appearance to elicit more favourable trade interactions with others. Although MMORPGs have safety tools, players, and by extension gaymers, rely on avatar appearance to form an initial impression of others (Fox and Ahn 2013, 256). In the case of *FFXIV Online*, gaymers can view more detailed information on others by ‘inspecting’ their profile. Regardless, the choices made by gaymers in how they represent their avatar, from their initial design, attire, and how they communicate, all significantly impact how others will choose to interact with them. They choose their avatar designs for various reasons: in some cases, gaymers choose to mislead others by adopting a non-threatening, or ‘low-level’, appearance. In other instances, gaymers alter their avatar’s appearance for role-play (Klastrup and Tosca 2009, 10). Gaymers understand the importance of controlling how others perceive their avatar and how this will affect their interactions in the game. Furthermore, they know that their behaviour is affected by the interactions between others and their avatars (Taylor 2006, 12).

Fox and Ahn note that gamers evaluate the avatar of others in the same way “we are first judged upon in offline settings” (2013, 256). Their observation means that gamers use the avatar's visual appearance, including gender, race, and clothing, to make assumptions about others. It is reasonable to assume that gamers consider what assumptions others may make about their avatars when designing their characters. Avatar design extends beyond visual considerations into a complex network of interacting social and psychological factors. Gamers' motivations when designing avatars originate from both internal attitudes, opinions, beliefs, broader social associations, or attitudes, as well as an awareness of how others may perceive their avatars.

2.3 Online queer sexual identity construction

2.3.1 Gender

The gender identity of gamers is multidimensional, impacted by space, social relations, and self-image. Ahmed notes that gender is oriented “through different sites, spaces, and temporalities” (2006, 1). In other words, gender identity is formed through the interaction between the self and the space which the body occupies. Ahmed's argument applies to both physical and virtual environments. Fox and Ahn support this in their research by saying that the avatar serves “as points of reference in the virtual space” (2013, 256). Scholars Penumarthy and Börner also describe the orientation process in virtual spaces as “an extension of consciousness” (2006, 39).

Meanwhile, Taylor explains that virtual presence is “grounded in the *practice* of the body, and thus in the world” (2002, 42). Therefore, avatars orient gamers within a virtual environment and contextualise the space around them. Simultaneously, avatars orient their sense of self within the virtual environment, affirming and projecting a gendered identity.

Blank argues that gender identity is distinct from sex identity, expressed in forms such as “mannerisms, conventions of dress and grooming, social roles, [and] speech patterns” (2012, 16). Dea affirms this notion by stating, “sex’ refers to a biological category involving chromosomes, hormones, anatomical features, etc.” (2016, 18). Meanwhile, gender is “for socio-cultural-psychological matters” (18). Consequently, when gamers select the gender identity of their avatar, they become bound to reenact and perform a series of social and cultural rituals. Butler describes this as a compulsion to align with the “regulatory apparatus of heterosexuality” (2011, XXI) or adhere to dominant gender conventions in a society governed by heterosexual norms.

Butler (2011, XXI) makes the argument that gender is performative. In essence, gender performance is a “reiteration of a norm or set of norms” (XXI) that seeks to maintain the appearance of a natural state of being. In line with her argument, gaymers engage in gendered performances to reinforce their identity while adhering to “regulatory norms” (XXIV). As Blank (2012, 16) illustrates, gender is not essential to a particular sexual identity. There is no ‘maleness’ that is inherent in the bodies of individuals born with a penis. Dea notes that bodies are culturally constructed in that ideas of appropriate ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ change “in response to cultural demands all the time” (2016, 169). Scholar Susan Speer concurs, arguing that gender identities are “rhetorically constructed” (2005, 113), dependent on the dominant ideologies of the time. Gender identity can also be constructed online from the virtual environment’s social and cultural interactions between the gaymer and others. Through the ritualised performances of gender scripts, gaymers engage in a gendered construction that may or may not align with the chosen sex of their avatar. While this also occurs in the offline world, perhaps because of the ephemeral nature of online identity, the performativity of gendered identities in avatars appears to be more readily accepted.

Gender, whether online or in a physical environment, is continuously (re)constructed through ritualised performance. These gender performances must be maintained and reinforced through constant cultural and social acts. As Cover notes, identity construction is “work” (2016, XV); in other words, it is an act of labour that requires time and constant attention. Singular acts of gendered performances do not construct an identity. Instead, they are “one element in the complex chain of performances... required of subjects to produce a coherent, ongoing linear pattern” (XV). Butler introduced this concept in her discussion of gender by claiming that gender “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual” (2006, 21).

Gender constructions online also influence the individual’s interactions in the physical world. Cover (2016, XIV) continues that the distinction between the ‘digital self’ and the ‘real self’ is becoming increasingly obfuscated. Instead, identities constructed online significantly influence the individual’s sense of self in the physical world. As outlined earlier, Yee and Bailenson refer to this phenomenon as the “Proteus Effect” (2007). Rabindra Ratan and Young June Sah’s (2015, 372) findings also demonstrate that the effect on gaymers adopting stereotypical behaviours from their avatars is so strong that it can persist long after returning to their daily lives. Therefore, gender identities articulated in online environments can inform an individual’s understanding of their identity in the physical world.

Gaymers' representations of gendered identities in virtual worlds become a part of their self-exploration online. Gaymers use their gendered performances in two ways: first, to explore aspects of themselves and, second, to determine how they are seen by others (Blank 2012, 17). Gender performances are, therefore, not individual acts; they are relational. Butler notes that constructing gender is not done in isolation but is performed "with or for another" (2004, 1). Gaymers in MMORPGs perform gender socially through interactions by adopting dress codes and being 'seen' as their chosen gender. They may also adopt particular modes of speech to emulate preconceived notions of gendered identity (Nakamura 2002, 15). Virtual photography extends this performance outside the bounds of regular gameplay. Moore illustrates that images posted by gaymers on social media applications use tags to connect virtual photographs "with terms related to the body... and tags associated with gender performance" (2014, 148). Scholars Lili Cheng, Shelly Farnham, and Linda Stone (2002, 100) found that the primary motivation for users to use virtual representations of their avatars was to indicate aspects of their identity, notably gender. As will be explored in the next chapter, this notion of virtual photography as a means of affirming a virtual body's connection with a particular gender also extends to delineating the avatar's sexual orientation. Gaymers use representations of gender as a means of self-exploration in developing their online selves. More so, these gendered identities are critiqued or validated through their interactions with others (Acosta et al. 2017, 79).

Gendered identity is transient, as individuals change their gender expressions over time. However, the notion of being able to 'choose' one's gender or sexuality has the potential to cause harm to queer individuals. As Cover mentions in his discussion on "the articulation of choice" (2019, 97), discussions around the fluidity of gender often tend to revolve around the idea of non-conforming individuals 'choosing' to present themselves in a manner different from 'normal' individuals (100). As Cover points out, the political advocacy "born that way" (100) movement sought to legitimise queer lives through legal and civil rights campaigns. However, Cover (102) continues that more recent discussions around the fluidity of gender and choice have garnered increased acceptance in cultural discourse. Cover's arguments bear a similarity to the constructionist arguments in queer theory. Speer summarises the argument of constructionist scholars such as Butler by noting that "both sex and gender are treated [by constructionists] as fluid accomplishments" (2005, 13). Gender is, therefore, not a quality to be 'found' within an individual, i.e., the essentialist view, but rather the individual continuously navigates between concepts of gender. The essentialist view is that "there was some 'essence' associated with being

biologically female that generated characteristics we call femininity” (16). However, as Blank notes, this model of gender has been “largely disproven” (16) by scholars.

Final Fantasy games approach issues around gender from a variety of different perspectives by frequently playing with norms and expectations. This approach is in part because the nature of *Final Fantasy* as a product of globalisation necessitates a more open-ended approach to the gender norms of its characters. Filipowich argues that the series must “negotiate within the norms of very different cultures” (2018, 116). Therefore, the characters portrayed within *Final Fantasy* may often occupy differently gendered roles, depending on the social context of the player. For example, Filipowich (125) mentions the androgynous appearance of many of the protagonists in the single-player iterations of *Final Fantasy*, which calls on established genres of Japanese fiction to problematise the Western masculine hero.

Therefore, the *Final Fantasy* games are a space that sometimes challenges conventional Western gender norms. Filipowich (2018) continues by saying that *Final Fantasy* draws from the cultural gender norms of its Japanese developers. Consequently, non-Japanese gamers “explore alternative gender scripts and restructure those of their domestic culture” (118). In other words, the cultural context of the characters in *Final Fantasy* opens a space for gamers to encounter new and challenging gender norms. However, *Final Fantasy* games are not made explicitly for queering gender. By their nature as a culturally hybrid product, the games experience a cultural reframing from the gamer’s perspective.

Final Fantasy’s reframing of gender may result from Japanese culture’s less stringent media censorship. Filipowich (2018, 117) notes that Japanese media markets products along gendered boundaries in the same way as much of the world. However, the author points out that media content “is not as strictly policed... as in Western cultures” (117). Therefore, in *Final Fantasy*, while characters are designed according to conventional gender norms, how gamers interpret them is not as explicitly defined. Such a design ethos enables a queer reading of gender in the series. While queer content is “eschewed or diminished for European and American audiences” (125), the *Final Fantasy* series maintains a latent potential for queer expressions of gender. The *Final Fantasy* series, *FFXIV Online* in particular, subverts and, in some cases, deconstructs Western gender conventions popularly used in MMORPGs.

The above argument does not imply that gamers are unwittingly subjected to the gender play present in *FFXIV Online*. In general, gamers in MMORPGs acknowledge that gender norms are constructed to some degree and may participate in constructing their own gendered identities

online. Shaw notes that they are “[attentive] to the artifice of gender and sexual norms” (2012, 69). More so, gaymers acknowledge the potential for parody and satire of existing gendered norms through subversion, deconstruction, and recontextualization (69). Gaymers in *FFXIV Online* are exposed to different gender norms, which opens new possibilities in terms of their own identity. Filipowich (2018, 118) argues that the *Final Fantasy* series functions as a kind of otherised space in which alternative gender norms are made accessible to gaymers. The series affects their notions of what is possible regarding gendered identity as they encounter gender norms different from everyday life. Exposure to alternative gender norms is essential, as this “creates an understanding of [the player’s] identity” (118).

However, within the broader context of the MMORPG genre, typical gender conventions are still predominant. Specifically, specific game mechanics are divided along gendered lines. Consalvo and Begy note in their research that “older adult women have traditionally been associated with playing casual games and social games” (2015, 17). Their research aligns with the perception that violence, team-based competition, and aggressive forms of content are designed for consumption by male players. More creative means of expression: character customisation and environment design become female-coded genres of games. Shaw warns that games created specifically for female players resulted in a “ghettoizing” (2012, 79) or demarcation of particular forms of gameplay as ‘for girls’. Shaw’s observation highlights the perceived gendered nature of certain forms of gameplay. However, the scholars’ research underscores that this perception is poorly founded.

In the *Final Fantasy* series, female characters are often positioned within the same roles as male characters. Within the series’ long history, female characters have seen multiple incarnations as protective figures, such as *Final Fantasy X*’s Lulu, or as the more aggressive ‘knight’ archetype, such as Paine in *Final Fantasy X-2*. However, Filipowich highlights that many female characters in *Final Fantasy* games often appear as the “maiden” (2018, 121) trope. These vulnerable and fragile characters are deployed to contrast with the (usually male) protagonist’s “stoicism, aggression, [and] bravery” (121). *FFXIV Online*’s approach to gendering the player character is unique compared to other games in the series. In *FFXIV Online*, the player character largely lacks a strictly codified gender script. As the avatar can be female or male, the game’s non-playable characters (NPCs) are not positioned in relation to the player through gender norms as in other games in the series.

Instead, the ‘Warrior of Light’ occupies a liminal space regarding gender, never acknowledged yet constantly framed by the broader context of the gendered roles occupied by other characters in the game. In particular, the gaymer’s companions, the Scions, offer reference points for how genders function within *FFXIV Online*. Rather than defining the gaymer’s character within a particular gender archetype, the game offers them examples to emulate. From stoic Estinien and wise Y’shtola to sensitive Urianger and naïve Lys, gaymers understand how gender is meant to operate on Hydaelyn. It is then left up to the individual to determine how their character will fit within this context.



Figure 2.1. Eorzea Collection, “Comparison between *Academic’s* and *Theophany* sets on male and female characters”, 2022, screenshots compiled by author (Eorzea Collection 2022a; 2022b).

In many *Final Fantasy* games, there is a link between perceptions of power and gender expression. Filipowich notes that characters share a “similar gendered range in their outfits” (2018, 127) that match typical gender conventions. However, in *FFXIV Online*, gender expressions are repurposed to convey job and role conventions as visual shorthand. Compare the dress codes depicted in figure 2.1: the *Scholar* (left) and *White Mage* (right) gear sets designed for healer jobs. Both gear sets adopt sartorial gender conventions but do not distinguish the gender of the gaymer’s character. Instead, the outfits create a job identity that is readily identifiable to others in the world. *Scholars* use male-coded military attire to denote their job origins as tacticians and military officers (Square Enix 2022e).

In contrast, White Mages fall into a far more supportive role, described as “healers without peer” (Square Enix 2022f). The design for the gear is adapted only slightly between genders, privileging the visual identity of the job over adhering to Western gender norms. While it is unlikely that the designers of *FFXIV Online* are deliberately seeking to critique gender conventions through dress codes, one consequence of their design choices is that *FFXIV Online* characters are less concerned with adhering to rigid conventions regarding gender expression. Although still operating within the confines of the gendered practices of its world, *FFXIV Online* gamers can express their gendered identity in ways unavailable to them in other iterations of the series.

Furthermore, the *Final Fantasy* series introduces concepts around gender that fall outside conventional norms. The series is conscious of its tenuous relationship to gender norms, often making it a point of contention for the hero. For example, the “androgynous masculinity” (Filipowich 2018, 125) of some main characters becomes a catalyst for personal growth. Often, the point-of-view character is androgynous in appearance, dress, or behaviour. However, this failure to adhere to conventionally defined notions of masculinity is not framed as a problem to be overcome. Instead, the games often critique how other characters in the story perceive notions of strength or courage. Filipowich (125) argues that by embracing non-conventional gender traits, the *Final Fantasy* series opposes conventional associations with masculinity and power.

Although the *Final Fantasy* games may engage in queering gender conventions, they do so only occasionally. Filipowich observes that many *Final Fantasy* games “expose the performativity of gender and empower subjects outside traditional gender norms” (116). However, in most instances, the traditional view of gender roles and sexuality is upheld. For instance, in *FFXIV Online*, this is most evident in the absence of an approach to the gender identity of the gamer’s character. The limited references to gendered roles or sexuality in the game are made within the context of a predominantly heterosexual world. For example, husbands refer to wives, and children refer to their mothers and fathers. Non-heteronormative family structures, gender roles, and minority sexualities are only referred to in optional content, conversations with minor characters, or inferences. Consequently, the norms that characters in the series are based on are more conventional notions of gender and sexuality (Filipowich 2018, 118).

FFXIV Online is a product to be consumed, and the commercial success of the MMORPG is of primary concern to Square Enix. As such, they ensure that the narrative, world, and characters appeal to as many potential players as possible. Filipowich notes that achieving such broad appeal is done by providing players with “a recognizable gender script” (116). However,

this is not to argue that adhering to conventional gender norms precludes all other forms of gender expression. Varying types of gender expression can coexist. *Final Fantasy*, specifically *FFXIV Online*, does not go so far as to endorse or celebrate alternative gender and sexual expressions visibly. The series critiques Western players' assumptions regarding heroism and notions of acceptable masculinity. At the same time, developers attempt these critiques while achieving broad commercial appeal.

While this study focuses primarily on gender as an identity marker, gender affects and is affected by other socio-economic and historical factors. Therefore, focusing on gender without considering other aspects of identity can disregard additional factors that influence identity formation. Shaw points out that focusing purely on gender can “[presume] a mutual exclusivity of gender and sexuality” (2012, 79), meaning that studies on gender issues risk disregarding the important influence sexuality has on the development of gender identity. Furthermore, studies on gender identity may begin with the assumption that there is an “internal consistency among those who identify as with a particular gender or sexual identity label” (79). Studies on sexuality and gender are also limited in their conceptual framework. Wendy Hilton-Morrow and Kathleen Battles argue that conventional frameworks of sexual identity are based on the “sex-gender of sexual partners” (2015, 6). The authors point to new “organising principles” that may be based on “desires and/or behaviours” (6), facilitating new conceptual possibilities for exploring sexual identity. Thus, academic research revolving around sexuality and gender faces two problems; the first is considering intersectional issues such as race, class, ethnicity, and cultural and religious backgrounds when approaching gender and sexuality. The second is the framework upon which gender and sexuality are defined concerning the sexual partner and not the internal motivations of the individual. This study acknowledges and attempts to grapple with the first problem; however, the second problem is the focus of Chapters 6 and 7.

2.3.2 *Sexuality*

Sexual identity categories such as heterosexual and homosexual are predicated on the idea of a binary arrangement of sexes. As Blank (2012, 6) and Dea (2016, 4) note, categorisation along sex identity raises problems when considering individuals that do not align neatly with previously established categories. Sexuality as an identity category is constantly being challenged and redefined. Sexuality is primarily understood through physical, cultural, and social traits. Rebecca

Plante (2015, XVII) quotes from the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) that

human sexuality encompasses the sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors of individuals. Its various dimensions involve the anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry of the sexual response system; identity, orientation, roles, and personality; and thoughts, feelings, and relationships. Sexuality is influenced by ethical, spiritual, cultural, and moral concerns.

Sexual orientation is, therefore, not defined solely by the attraction a person may feel for a particular gender or sex. Instead, sexuality is a multidimensional practice, interweaving social norms and values, religious and cultural ideologies, and physical traits. Of note is how sexuality is impacted by intersectional factors such as class, ethnicity, and cultural background. Hilton-Morrow and Battles (2015, 21) note that the identity of individuals varies along the lines of race, class, and cultural background. In the authors' (21) example, a Latina transgender woman is more likely to be a victim of violence than a white male college professor, regardless of their sexuality. Shaw echoes this concern by noting that in video game narratives, sexuality is "treated as distinct from gender, race, class and nationality" (2012, 82). The research of Hilton-Morrow, Battles, and Shaw indicates that intersectional factors are essential as the material and embodied conditions of our lives affect our online identity. Furthermore, sexuality is also not a constant, stable, or internally coherent category. As Robertson's interviews with members of the queer community indicate, individuals within that community are more "fluid" (2019, 12) in their views on gender and sexual expressions.

Sexuality is not something an individual may even be able to claim for themselves. Butler (2004, 16) argues that sexual identity is not something one can possess, but rather, it is a marker by which a person becomes dispossessed. Sexual orientation, according to Butler, is something that is "invested and animated from elsewhere" (16), alluding to the cultural conventions and norms that constrain and dominate sexual identities. Therefore, if sexual orientations are formed elsewhere, Butler questions whether an individual can claim to "have a sexuality" (16). Instead, it appears that sexual orientations can lay claim to people, contextualising their lives within a particular set of cultural and social expectations.

Furthermore, sexual orientations are not as stable as the simple hetero/homosexual binary. Instead, a person's sexuality is an act that is constantly being challenged, projected, constructed, and recontextualised. A person's sexuality is informed by a wider influence of identity markers (race, class, etc.) and is shaped by cultural and social norms. As Cover (2019) notes,

queer individuals appear to—albeit perhaps not consciously—understand the social role of sexuality and attempt to resist the hegemony of sexuality categories with a more fluid approach.

Studying sexuality in the context of MMORPGs and games is a relatively new field. Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson (2012, 3) note several authors of interest concerning sexuality in video games: Consalvo (2003a; 2003b), Zek Valkyrie (2011), and Shaw (2009). However, the authors note that scholarly work on sexuality and video games, especially MMORPGs, is “still something in the making” (3). On a related topic, a more recent study by Brad McKenna and Hameed Chughtai notes that “gender minorities are virtually absent in the literature” (2020, 7), leading to a common perception that video games are primarily made for heterosexual white males. Bo Ruberg notes in their research on the queerness of video game design that “AAA development studios have long catered primarily to imagined white, straight, cisgender male audiences” (2019, 3). In other words, video game developers imagine a predominantly heterosexual male audience and produce content for the said group under what Ruberg describes as a “hegemony of play” (2020, 6). Contrastingly, Eileen Trauth notes in her work on gender studies in Information Systems research that much of the academic literature assumes ‘gender’ “to mean middle class, heterosexual, white women” (2013, 288) and calls for a wider inclusion of identities in gender studies research. The importance of understanding the relationship between sexual identity development and video games is underscored by Ruberg’s observation that all persons, regardless of gender or sexuality, are interpellated into a style of play designed for a particular group of people. While simultaneously, Trauth’s work indicates that from an academic perspective, many minority identities are excluded from the literature.

However, there is still space within video games where there are different opportunities for gamers to explore their sexuality. For example, many video games have same-sex romance options. Ruberg (2019, 4–5) and Krobová et al. (2015, 4) note that games such as *The Sims*, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare 2014), and *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare and Straight Right 2012) have provided options for gamers to explore queer sexualities in video games, albeit in minimal ways. Within the confines of more defined characters in single-player games, gamers have less opportunity to craft a narrative for their character within the game.

Within the context of MMORPGs such as *FFXIV Online*, the narrative and writing are deliberately more open-ended as gamers are encouraged to construct novel personas for their avatars. While this observation is not intended to excuse single-player games for their lack of diversity or representation of queer identities, it does explain, to some extent, the gap between

games such as *Mass Effect 3* and *FFXIV Online*. The main character of the *Mass Effect* series, Commander Shephard, is a well-defined persona that allows certain degrees of malleability to customise the player experience. In contrast, *FFXIV Online*'s Warrior of Light is the proverbial *tabula rasa*, a blank slate that allows gamers to create their persona from scratch.

One way gamers can express their identities is through role-play. Williams, Kennedy and Moore confirm that players who engage in regular role-play are more likely to belong to "racial minorities, non-heterosexuals and non-mainstream religious groups" (2011, 194). It becomes apparent that the appeal of MMORPGs for some gamers is the potential for role-play and self-expression regarding their sexual or gender identity. Older gamers engage in this behaviour as a means of "escapism" (194) rather than experimenting with new forms of identity expression. In some cases, gamers engage in this form of role-playing as a means of critiquing dominant forms of heteronormativity entrenched in video game worlds.

Heteronormativity

Hilton-Morrow and Battles describe heteronormativity as the process of creating a "charmed circle" (2015, 14) of socially acceptable behaviour. The 'rules' of acceptable social practices, therefore, always remain within the purview of the heterosexual majority. Excluded from the said circle are sexual practices that are perceived as a threat to the heteronormative ideal, "homosexuality... fetishism, pornography, sadomasochism, masturbation, prostitution, pedophilia, and polygamy" (Hilton-Morrow and Battles 2015, 14). Hilton-Morrow and Battles (2015, 14) argue that the rules of heteronormativity are based on socially constructed norms and values.

Furthermore, the rules of heteronormativity are not constant and are subject to historical and cultural pressures. Blank describes heterosexuality as a socially constructed synonym for "sexually normal" (2012, 12). As Blank argues, normality is a way to describe "conformity with expectations" (12). Heterosexuality becomes a mechanism by which cultures and groups label a state of being that aligns with dominant ideological forces. Hilton-Morrow and Battles add another insight when they describe heteronormativity as a field of "contested terrain" (2015, 15), a concept that is continually challenged and reinforced. Thus, heteronormativity is a set of cultural and social practices that regulate sex and sexuality into predetermined concepts. These concepts outline mechanisms of regulation and control; in other words, heteronormativity follows the rules in much the same way as many games do. However, in the game of heteronormativity, gamers participate unwittingly and sometimes against their will.

It is more beneficial to consider heterosexuality as a term that describes a socially acceptable set of sexual behaviours rather than as a 'natural' human state. For instance, historian Jonathan Katz notes that 'heterosexual' was first used in the nineteenth century to refer to those who were embracing the "moral innovation that placed eroticism at the core of modern personality" (1995, 85). In other words, a social shift in norms and practices around sexual gratification was occurring towards the beginning of the twentieth century. Heterosexual and its proposed antonym, homosexual, were used to label these individuals in academic discourse. Heterosexuality was a term that served an ideological purpose rather than a descriptor of sexual proclivities. Blank notes that heterosexuality offered a "firm place for authority to stand" (2012, 10) during a time when a rise in secular sources of epistemological authorities began to threaten traditionally religious establishments. As Blank puts it, "'heterosexual' offered a way to dress old religious priorities in immaculate white coats that looked just like the ones worn among the new power hierarchy of scientists" (10). It follows that heterosexuality refers not only to a sexual preference but to a series of ideologies. These ideologies are upheld to privilege certain groups while eschewing another 'undesirable' group as the Other.

As heterosexuality is considered the norm, it is the assumed default state of players. As Robertson puts it, "maintaining straightness does not... require an explanation" (2019, 21). People who identify as heterosexual do not need to justify or defend their identities to others. Robertson argues that only those who reject the hegemony of heteronormativity are required to defend their 'decision'. In positioning queer identities as an active rejection of a normal mode of being, the implication is made that an individual chooses to be queer.

On the other hand, heterosexuality is framed not as a choice in the same way that queer identity is, i.e., the choice of rejecting heteronormativity. Conversely, as Blank (2012) outlines in her own experiences, the individual need not overtly reject heterosexuality to be deemed queer. Queerness can be projected onto an individual by others if they are seen to violate the contract of heteronormative behaviour. In this way, heteronormativity and what is deemed acceptable heterosexual behaviour is maintained and enforced.

For instance, Blank recounts moments when she and her male partner were "referred to as 'ladies'" (2012, 7), mistaking her heterosexual relationship for a same-sex pairing. Blank (8) attributes this mislabelling to the fact that they lived in a predominantly queer neighbourhood and that her partner does not present as typically male. In terms of the example above, Blank's relationship violates the heteronormative code on two fronts: associating with queer individuals

and communities and rejecting conventional gender norms. In virtual worlds, the default of heteronormativity is further compounded by the assumption that the player is born male, heterosexual, and Caucasian (Ruberg 2019, 3). Therefore, regardless of the choices in the avatar made by the player, their default state is always-already determined. Therefore, it is gaymers, female, and non-Caucasian players that must justify their existence within the virtual space.

However, representation of different kinds of sexuality can allow new understandings for gaymers of what sexualities are possible. Mainly, virtual worlds afford them new possibilities for expressing sexual or non-sexual attraction. Cover (2019, 50) explores this new range of possibilities by describing a change in traditional modes of thinking beyond the framework of heterosexual and homosexual. Cover borrows Butler's term "heterosexual matrix" (Butler 2006, 7) to describe a form of orientation that "must be directed towards a gendered object of attraction" (Cover 2019, 50). In other words, Cover is implying that online relationships are moving away from attraction and identity based "along dichotomous lines" (52). Hilton-Morrow and Battles (2015, 7) agree that sexual identity does not need to rest on a gender binary; the authors refer to Plante's (2015) research regarding sexual orientation. Plante observes that current frameworks of understanding regarding sexual attraction are problematically focused on physical characteristics and sex organs. Hilton-Morrow and Battles note that sexual orientation can extend beyond a physical consideration into "people's fantasies, feelings, and behaviors" (2015, 7).

Examples of media exist where sexuality is explored in ways other than those determined through biology. Filipowich refers to *bishōnen*, a popular subgenre of Japanese fiction that explores "male sexuality beyond heteronormative limits" (2018, 125). This subgenre is most popular with women (125) and represents a fantasised exploration of concepts of sexuality and masculinity. Through recontextualising heteronormative values regarding male sexuality, media such as *bishōnen* hold the capacity to broaden understandings of more varied kinds of sexual orientation. Representation of sexual identity in media most often follows the predominantly heteronormative norms and values of the parent culture. However, the research discussed above on sexual orientation questions the basis of sexual identity as concerned primarily with the reproductive organs of others. Within media, and particularly virtual worlds, sex can be 'oriented' along different coordinates, primarily that of gaymers' desires and actions (Hilton-Morrow and Battles 2015, 7). Later sections of this chapter will investigate how role-play acts as the mechanism through which new forms of sexuality are actively explored in MMORPG communities.

Queer individuals within virtual communities are at the forefront of challenging accepted norms and boundaries around sexual identities. In her book on queerness in video games, Ruberg (2019, 7) outlines a double meaning of the word “queer”. In one sense, the word is “an umbrella term for people and experiences that do not conform to mainstream norms of gender and sexuality” (7). Also, queerness aligns with a particular political and social ideology of resistance against heteronormative norms and values. In other words, queerness is as much a marker of sexual orientation as a means of “desiring differently” (7) in a political sense.

Consequently, the current generation of young queer people think about sexual identity in a new and distinct way. Robertson argues that there is an “integration and normalization of homoeroticism” (2019, 15) in contemporary media with the rise of more diverse representation and a move towards protecting marginalised groups in the law and broader society. These social and legal changes over the last thirty years have led to what Robertson describes as the “gay adolescent and the emergence of sexually diverse young people” (15).

Robertson’s research provides additional insight into what Cover (2019) describes in his observations on online communities. Young people are decreasingly aligning themselves on either side of the hetero/homosexual binary. Instead, younger individuals see their sexual identity as more malleable and fluid. Savin-Williams agrees with this position, positing that “the gay adolescent will eventually disappear” (2006, 21). Savin-Williams is careful to stress that this does not mean same-sex attraction among young people will cease to exist. Instead, Savin-Williams argues for a separation between “behaviour, identity, and sexual orientation” (21). However, the identity politics that is currently at work in queer communities serve to subdivide them still further.

Shaw’s (2012, 76) research also points towards a trend in young people moving away from ‘traditional’ identifiers such as gay or lesbian. However, Shaw’s (76) interviews with young queer people indicate that this move is not universal in acceptance or pace. In one interview, Shaw’s respondent notes that there is an exclusion of transgender individuals within the gay community, as trans identities are perceived as at odds with gender essentialist ideals. For example, a respondent remarks, “it’s easy to understand a man loves men compared to a man that wants to be a woman that loves women” (A. Shaw 2012, 76).

While Robertson, Savin-Williams, and Shaw’s work in the field of sexual identity among young people all seem to indicate a trend towards the detachment of behaviour and identity, I do not attempt to argue that this trend is broadly accepted. Many queer individuals still regard themselves as more socially normalised identities of lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The interviews

conducted by Shaw (2012) underline a fundamental anxiety among specific queer individuals: that deviating too far from heteronormative boundaries may completely alienate queer communities from the broader social milieu.

2.3.3 *Queering*

The term queer encompasses a broader range of behaviour and ways of being that resist or challenge dominant norms. Robertson describes “queer” (2019, 13) as a means of being in the world that opposes what is considered ‘normal’. Robertson (28) expands that not all LGBTQIA+ people may identify as queer, and not all heterosexual people are excluded from the term. Considering the term queer in this way expands the concept beyond a simple label for sexual orientation or gender identity. Instead, queer scholars such as Acosta et al. (2017, 80) argue that queerness should not be fixed or owned by any one group but instead should be continually reinterpreted and used for varying purposes. Therefore, the term queer should be a site of ongoing contestation and dialogue rather than a fixed identity or label. Queerness remains open to multiple interpretations and uses that to facilitate a range of historical reflections and future imaginings. As the authors note (80), considering queerness in such a way allows for the concept of queer to evolve and adapt to changing political contexts and goals. Queerness is a term used to describe the attitude with which individuals engage with systems of power, both within and without virtual worlds (Acosta et al. 2017, 80).

The relationship between queerness and video games should be considered from both the perspective of the developer/designer and the gaymer. The act of creating games as a queer person is a political act, and Ruberg (2020, 6) notes that the current political climate may be dangerous for queer individuals. Therefore, the act of creating games as a queer person is fundamentally radical or revolutionary as it challenges and resists the biases and prejudices that are entrenched within a heteronormative culture. This thesis does not seek to speculate on the sexual identity of the developers; instead, the focus of this research is on how gaymers within the world of *FFXIV Online* play the game in a manner that foregrounds queer ways of being. In both queering the gameplay mechanics as well as introducing queer narratives for their avatars, gaymers engage in an act of resistance. For them, playing ‘queer’ is inexorably tied to their identity as individuals. Ruberg supports this notion by arguing that “playing queer” (2019, 19) in video games can be a form of self-expression, pleasure, and resistance for all players but that it is

particularly significant for individuals who live their lives as queer people both within and beyond the context of virtual worlds.

One can read Ruberg's (2019) concept of playing queer in two ways. Playing queer can mean playing the game in such a manner as to resist dominant power structures, i.e., resisting the narrative, exploiting game mechanics for other purposes, or playing the game in unanticipated ways (15). The other reading of the term can mean playing the game as a queer individual, regardless of one's sexuality in the physical world. There are such cases of individuals who engage in this kind of "queer acting" (16), playing characters involved in same-sex relationships, even though they identify as heterosexual. This kind of play-acting is explored in more depth in the later chapters of this thesis. From both the perspective of the developer and the gaymer, queerness shapes the individual's relationship with a particular video game beyond an "inclusion of gay characters" (A. Shaw 2012, 80). Whether or not the individual identifies with the queer community, the inclusion of queer themes or a queer style of play inextricably links that person with an act of resistance against heteronormative norms. In other words, queering a video game can be approached from multiple perspectives or for different reasons.

One form of queer play is modifying a game's code or assets, such as the example of player-artist Kent Sheely and *Day of Defeat* (Valve 2003). In the original game, players take on the role of a soldier in combat. However, Möring and de Mutiis remark that Sheely edited the game's code to repurpose the aiming mechanics for photography, transgressing the bounds of the original game design (2019, 84). In doing so, Sheely subverted—or queered—the original intention of the developers to suit his own needs (84). Ruberg unpacks "playing queer" (2019, 17) by suggesting that it is primarily brought to games by players who bring alternative perspectives to the medium. Ruberg suggests that playing queer can involve interpreting games in queer ways, either through the game's content or its mechanics. Moreso, playing queer can challenge or resist dominant norms and expectations. Forms of resistance could include "playing to lose, playing to hurt, playing too fast or too slow" or adopting other "defiant, deviant, ecstatic, languid, silly, or absurd" (17) approaches to playing the game. The example of Sheely suggests that modding can be a way for players to explore and express alternative perspectives within video games.

I extend this argument to include queer identities, as gaymers might use 'modding' to create and explore characters or storylines that reflect their own experiences. In this way, modding is adopted as a form of 'queer play', as it allows gaymers to challenge and disrupt the assumptions and expectations built into the original game design and to create alternative modes

of being and representing themselves within the game. Indeed, within the context of *FFXIV Online*, ‘modding’ is used for such a purpose, as will be explored in later chapters. Within *FFXIV Online*, gaymers engage in role-play and form communities around playing the game. While this is facilitated in ways by the game itself, how gaymers act out role-play within *FFXIV Online* fits Ruberg’s description of playing queer. Scholarly research indicates a desire for deeper self-expression and freedom within virtual worlds, which gaymers express in multiple ways.

Approaching video games from a queer perspective allows for new ways of reading virtual worlds. Queerness and video games share a common desire for new ways of being. Ruberg’s (2019, 1) titular argument is that queerness and video games are intrinsically linked. Both queerness and video games are, therefore, concerned with the desire to imagine and create alternative ways of being in the world. Also, queerness and video games are both forms of resistance against dominant norms and power structures. In other words, there is a shared ethos or ideology between queerness and video games. Both are concerned with creating and enacting alternatives to mainstream narratives and ways of being. By exploring queerness in video games, one can learn more about both.

Moreover, researching queerness in games affects a broad range of individuals. For example, Shaw argues that it is “politically problematic to assume that only homosexual gamers are the targets of, or bothered by, homophobia in online gaming (or elsewhere) or desire queer game content” (2012, 75). A better understanding of queerness in virtual worlds informs all individuals who are affected, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Therefore, researching queerness in virtual worlds affords a better understanding of video games and all the players who play them.

2.4 Conclusion

Chapter 2 reviewed relevant academic literature relating to the topics of online identity, virtual avatars, digital self-representation, online gender, sexuality, and queer virtual spaces. The chapter addressed these topics in two themes, discussing identity representation in virtual environments and online queer sexual identity construction, respectively. A primary finding from the reviewed research is the dynamic interplay between self-representation and social feedback in identity construction. MMORPGs are exemplary in this case, affording gaymers many opportunities for social feedback and experimentation with their identities. The research, drawn from constructionist theories, depicts identity development as an ongoing and dynamic process

influenced by cultural and social interactions. The avatar's role is central in this exploration, functioning as both devices to observe and interact with the social-virtual landscape. Lastly, the importance of self-representation in identity construction was discussed, highlighting the need for gamers to express their identities through visual and textual means.

Queerness in games has given rise to the term 'gaymer', a player that resists gender and sexual hegemonic norms in gaming culture. These 'gaymers' have unique relationships with gender and sexuality. They work to carve spaces in a heteronormative game culture that is representative of their lived experiences yet are suspicious of significant corporate interests that seek to profit from the tokenisation of marginalised identities in media. Instead, gaymers craft their own experiences and communities through online private social networks, modding, and role-play. Another way gamers attempt to navigate the complexities of online sociality is through a representation of self via the avatar. Virtual photography, a focus in the following chapter, is critical in how gamers extend their representation through their avatars beyond the gaming context. In this way, gamers explore and express multiple identities through various social media accounts dedicated to their avatars.

The complexities of online gender identity construction are further informed by the radically different way young people view gender and sexuality, a result of online identity exploration and social interactions. Online spaces have become 'safe havens' for gamers, affording them opportunities to find community, support, and knowledge regarding their sexual orientation and gender identity. *FFXIV Online* was selected for my research in part due to its large and active gamer population that actively works to recontextualise their avatar gender and sexuality in new ways.

FFXIV Online offers unique affordances in terms of gender fluidity. Gamers can change the gender of their avatar on a whim, opening new avenues for gender exploration. A further point to consider is the complexities of social interaction in such a gender-fluid landscape. Gamers' notions of gender and sexuality online differ from offline contexts, necessitating new theoretical perspectives. Another avenue of investigation is how gamers engage in resistant, or 'queer', play by engaging in alternative modes of play and representation. The use of mods, role-play, and imaginative play are forms of resistance against dominant heteronormative power structures and norms.

In summary, this chapter has discussed the central role the avatar plays in gamers' development of their online gender and sexual orientation. This framework of identity is not

relegated to the digital but has a significant impact on the offline self, particularly for queer individuals. Understanding the dynamic relationship between the online and offline self is vital in furthering research into the diverse communities in MMORPGs such as *FFXIV Online*. These virtual worlds are essential platforms for gamers to engage in self-expression, identity exploration, and resistance against dominant social norms.

CHAPTER 3: NEW MEDIA AND DIGITAL IMAGERY

3.1 Introduction

New media technologies like virtual environments can significantly influence perspectives on communication, art, and self-expression. Individuals widely use digital images to articulate themselves and their lives in virtual communities. Virtual photography is a largely under-researched topic that uses digital imaging techniques entirely within a virtual context. This practice holds great potential in furthering academic understanding of the processes of gamers' identity formation and self-representation online. This chapter approaches the topic by weaving together scholarly work from various disciplines to explore the complex interactions between the gamer, avatar, and the virtual environment.

Chapter 3 explores scholarly work on the digital subject, computer software, and virtual photography. First, Turkle's (1995; 2005) early work on digital selfhood is explored in virtual environments. Computer software is also discussed in terms of Martin Heidegger's *Zuhandenheit*, or "handiness" (2010)¹ and its relevance to the functionality and utility of digital tools in shaping gamers' experiences of the online environment. Second, Boellstorff's term "techne" (2008) is explored in relation to the intentional creativity expressed within virtual environments. The work of Manovich is also discussed in terms of the "deep remixability" (2013) at work in virtual environments in recontextualising traditional photographic practice in contemporary MMORPGs. Finally, through the research of Möring and de Mutiis (2019), Moore (2014), and Poremba (2007), the topic of virtual photography is unpacked. The practice is considered in relation to its traditional counterpart, carefully examining their similarities and differences.

3.2 Computer software and the digital subject

Computers act as a medium through which the self is continuously altered, fragmented, and reformed. Virtual worlds, in particular, are a way of making visible "a mirror of the mind" (Turkle 2005, 20). Turkle points to the powerful projective capacity of computer software, drawing a similarity between virtual worlds and "a Rorschach inkblot test" (20). Similarly to the psychological tool, computers offer a conceptually blank canvas upon which an individual may transfer a desired

¹ Usually translated as 'ready-to-hand', the translation by Stambaugh (rev. Dennis J. Schmidt) refers to *Zuhandenheit* as 'handiness' in her text.

identity (20). In other words, the software on a computer becomes a frame through which notions of self are viewed. Turkle (6) relays this point through her investigation of users of MUDs. Turkle (6) notes that these online virtual environments reflect users' internal thought processes. They are, in effect, "objects-to-think-with" (6), worlds that expand the individual's ways of conceptualising their inner self. Turkle's point is reminiscent of Heidegger's concept of *Zuhandenheit*, or "handiness" (2010, 69), by which an object's usefulness only becomes apparent through regular use. Computer software becomes a tool whose usefulness is discovered in its use rather than its appearance.

Boellstorff works off Turkle's arguments by deploying the term "techne" (2008, 25). Using this term, Boellstorff calls attention to the assumption that virtual identity is based on "intentional creativity" (25). Boellstorff argues that the individual's virtual self is a product of that person's purposeful decision-making in constructing their virtual environment. However, as will be argued later in this section, such a claim must be framed within the context of a virtual world primarily predetermined by the developers and designers who constructed it. As Katherine Hayles observes, the idea of complete and total creative freedom is a "skeuomorph" (1999, 17) of an early design feature of virtual worlds. Skeuomorphs are "threshold devices" (17) that sit at the boundary between one "conceptual constellation and another" (17). They are features and ideas that belong to previous generations but whose inclusion is not based on concerns of functionality but rather familiarity. The idea of virtual selfhood is, in some ways, a skeuomorph. The early virtual worlds of text-based MUDs allowed for a more complete projection of the self as much of the creative work was left in the hands of the user. In MMORPGs like *FFXIV Online*, the setting, world, characters, and appearance options are largely predetermined. The choices that are up to gamers such as race, gender, attire, etc., are from a predetermined list of options. Thus, while there is creativity and choice within this framework, it is within the context provided by the designers of the virtual world.

The software determines more than just the affordances available to gamers; software frames any experience an individual might have while interacting with a physical computer. In facilitating the many daily activities of gamers, software invariably inserts itself within the production of culture. Manovich defined this concept as "cultural software" (2013, 21) or "certain types of software that support actions we normally associate with 'culture'" (21). Manovich mainly refers to software programs explicitly designed with creative applications in mind, such as *Adobe Photoshop*, *Corel Painter*, and Apple's *Final Cut Pro*. However, Manovich's term can also be

applied to *FFXIV Online* in how gamers use the game's world as a tool for creating virtual photographs. Manovich (23) subdivides cultural software into seven main kinds. Manovich notes that there is cultural software that “[creates] cultural artifacts and interactive services which contain representations, ideas, beliefs, and aesthetic values” and “[engages] in interactive cultural experiences” (23). These two kinds accurately describe the behaviour of the gamers identified in my research. They use virtual self-portraits to represent their “ideas, beliefs, and aesthetic values” (23) while engaging in an online image-sharing community.

Manovich also outlines a subtype of cultural software, “media software” (2013, 24). Manovich defines media software as the programs used when “creating, editing, and organizing media content” (24) or, more specifically, as software that is “used to create and interact with media objects and environments” (26). While *FFXIV Online* is ostensibly advertised as an MMORPG, it also falls within this category of media software. The game contains numerous features in the Gpose mode that allow users more control when taking screenshots of the game. In addition to these built-in features, gamers use third-party software such as *Gshade* or *Reshade* to apply several advanced filters to their image, such as realistic depth-of-field or other effects not available directly within the game.

Furthermore, the image-sharing practices of gamers on their Instagram accounts are a testament to the perception by many that the world of *FFXIV Online* is for exploration, gameplay, and creative expression. As Manovich (9) notes, theorising around new media often focuses on distribution networks: the internet, social media, or cyberspace. Research should acknowledge that the software environment influences the creative expression they enable.

Cultural software is not a mirror of culture but a reflection of culture bound to power relations. T.V. Reed theorised the relationship between culture and technology from the perspective of “actor-network theory” (2019, 12). This framework considers technological actors, in this case, media software, as “agents” having the “power to impact events” (12). However, actor-network theory also emphasises that agents, whether human or technological, are always “caught up in larger networks of power and causality” (12). Reed means that while media software can affect users, it does so within the constraints of a pre-existing relational structure. These relations can be economic, political, social, or cultural (12). Gamers in *FFXIV Online* may express their virtual identity through their avatar; however, they must do so within the predetermined social, racial, sexual, and gender frameworks the game provides.

Moreover, the game provides these frameworks based on the developers' offline economic, political, and social contexts. Margot Lovejoy argues in her research that artists who work with interactive media have more in common with “systems designers” (2004, 8) than with other traditional artists. Lovejoy argues that interactive works are “[ones] which use branching systems and networks” (8), reiterating Reed's sentiments. Such an approach does not invalidate the ‘culture’ produced by these media agents. As Reed notes, culture is “as always [an] artificial construction of observers” (2019, 3). The validity of cultural production depends on the observers, not an external authority. To paraphrase Charles Peirce (1985), nothing is culture until it is interpreted as culture.

Creating digital images via cultural software questions the relationship between the viewer and the subject. For instance, Poremba argues that digital images are not burdened with the same obligations towards representing ‘the real’ as their analogue counterparts and instead seek new “representational imperatives” (2007, 53). William Mitchell alluded to these new imperatives in his discussion of the digital photograph (1992, 7). Digital images, according to Mitchell, give the appearance of being “coherently whole”, all while being assembled from various image sources such as “photograph[s], part computer-synthesized shaded perspective, and part electronic ‘painting’” (7). Manovich labels mixing image elements from different sources and media as “deep remixability” (2007). Deep remixability is the potential of computer-based media to simulate different media, such as photography, cinematography, painting, and typography, in one visual space. However, Manovich does not argue that digital images are free to seek radically new forms of representation. In their book *Remediation*, Bolter and Grusin (1999) note that new forms of media inherit conventions from the forms they absorb. Computer graphics, for example, remediate painting from the Dutch masters to “validate” (116) their understanding of the physical properties of light. Meanwhile, Moore notes that social media platforms are “at the center of a ‘communal aesthetic’” (2014, 143) concerning digital photography. As these communities publish images on popular platforms such as Flickr (143) and Instagram, a single image does not define its own representational strategies, but forms part of a network of strategies that together coalesce into a representational paradigm.

However, virtual communities and images are not divorced from material considerations. Hayles (2012, 11) argues that digital media experiences are embodied. Hayles’ observations point to two material considerations. First, the gamer interacts with media through a physical body. As much as their interactions occur online, the physical body interacts with the computer and social

media. Second, Hayles' (12) point also relates to the material conditions of the platform itself. As good as the internet is at pretending it only exists within the metaphorical 'cloud', computers are physical objects constructed from material components. Poremba's (2007) work around the representational strategies of virtual photographs is part of a scholarly tradition that traces the evolution of digital imagery. From deep remixability to remediation, scholars have outlined how virtual imagery appropriates, remixes, and ultimately attempts to transcend the real. However, these images are, for the moment, rooted in the material world.

3.3 (Virtual) photography

Virtual photography is an umbrella term describing different approaches and methods to document virtual worlds. It is important to note that the authors are careful to stress how virtual photographs are not actual photographs but that there are enough "characteristics of the photographic tradition" (71) present in these virtual images to warrant studying them using similar modalities. Researchers Möring and de Mutiis note that virtual photographs are used for different purposes, resulting in multiple "in-game photographies" (2019, 71). These photography forms differ in their approaches and how "photographic and ludic elements interact and overlap" (71). Virtual photography can be described as falling into one of four paradigms. According to Möring and de Mutiis, virtual photographs can either be "(a) simulated photography central to the gameplay condition; (b) an additional photo mode; (c) artistic screenshooting; and (d) creative photographic interventions made possible by photo modifications" (2019, 74).

Of these different kinds, photographic interventions are particularly interesting for my research. The researchers describe this kind of game modification as more commonly undertaken by artists and involves modification of the game code or assets (Möring and de Mutiis 2019, 84). While not all my research participants may describe themselves as artists, they modify the game assets and animations to craft specific outcomes in their images. Olli Sotamaa argues that modifications go beyond "simple oppositions of co-optation and resistance" (2003, 1) and are ways in which gamers fundamentally reshape their relationship with the games industry from consumer to participant (14).

Moore suggests that virtual photographs can be understood in terms of their "cybernetic, affective, and remedial" (2014, 142) capacities. In terms of cybernetics, virtual photographs are the product of human-machine interaction. The images resulting from this interaction can emotionally affect both the gamer and the viewer. My thesis seeks to address all the avenues of

investigation explored above to address the question of the relationship between the gaymer, image, and notions of self. Virtual photographs are complex creations that arise from the interaction between the game world and gaymers. Different gaymers have different motivations for their images; some are related to the game's outcomes, while others seek to express themselves artistically. The gaymers who use the new medium of virtual photography to construct and maintain a sense of self in a networked environment are of interest to my research.

Virtual photography is pluralistic by operating in technical and cultural spaces. Poremba argues that virtual photography is cultural in that it remediates “the screenshot in cultural practice” (2007, 50). In other words, Poremba argues that screenshots perform the same cultural function as photographs: to commemorate meaningful experiences, places, or things. Poremba says virtual photographs “play out the technical role of photographic production” (50). Poremba does not argue that screenshots share the exact technical origins of photographs; instead, her word ‘play’ connotes a kind of acting. Virtual photographs are, in essence, a ritualised abstraction; gaymers ‘act out’ taking photographs via screenshots for the same reasons individuals take photographs offline.

An interdisciplinary approach is thus required to study virtual photographs better. Möring and de Mutiis note that virtual photography is “clearly an intermedial phenomenon” (2019, 70). As such, the authors argue that visually oriented academic fields such as “media studies, art history... and visual culture studies” (70) are essential tools for understanding virtual photography. As a cultural practice, virtual photography is interdisciplinary, and fields such as identity theory, gender performance, and social networking theory would advance academic understanding of the phenomenon. Even though virtual photography is a reenactment of photographic rituals within a virtual space and bears little material similarity to images produced by a physical camera, the affective qualities these images have on gaymers and others are central to my research.

For example, gaymers may perform photography because virtual photography calls attention to the subject like photographs do. Roland Barthes describes the relationship between photograph and subject as the photograph is always “[pointing] the finger” (1981, 5) at the subject, thereby laying claim to the viewer’s attention. Poremba calls on Barthes’ argument, pointing out that virtual photography is employed in a kind of ‘virtual tourism’ to “show evidence of their experiences to friends and family” (2007, 50), thereby ‘pointing’ and calling attention to gaymers’ experiences.

Virtual photographs can also become a means of communication between individuals online. Moore points to the link between photograph and subject by observing that virtual photographs “provide evidence of screen activity” (2014, 141). In other words, Poremba and Moore claim that virtual photographs function as a visual record for gamers. Moore (141) continues to add that virtual photographs are private experiences shared across the internet with other players as a means of communication. Thus, screenshots are evidence of gamers’ participation in social activities or transforming private activities into public ones. Moore uses increasingly romantic metaphors to describe the role virtual photographs play in online culture: they are the “flotsam and jetsam” of digital communication, they are “echoes” and “footprints” of moments and eventually, become a “talisman” and “exotic” (145). All these exciting terms aside, Moore’s argument regarding virtual photographs’ critical role in online culture is supported by other scholarly work. Again, virtual photography is not photography. However, virtual photography is very similar in that gamers use it to give form to memorable experiences and call attention to them. There are enough similarities in how gamers treat virtual photographs like ‘real’ photographs that merit a comparison between the two forms of media.

Traditional photographs are a record of the existence of a person, a place, or a thing. Both professional and amateur image makers share this desire. Susan Sontag summarises the desire of photographers as the need to “show something ‘out there’” (2005, 3). Photographs are affirmations and testaments to the validity of personal experiences of the world. The proliferation of the camera, first through the single-lens reflex camera and then the smartphone, has greatly popularised recording images as “souvenirs of daily life” (3).

Moreover, photographs become proof that the individual cares about something. Sontag (5) raises the point that not only photographs themselves but the practice of photography has become ingrained in society. Indeed, Sontag’s statement has perhaps only become more insightful since the publication of her book. Taking a photograph to commemorate an event is as important as the resulting image, no matter how trivial. Being seen taking a photograph or posing for one is to be seen enjoying, caring, or appreciating a thing.

Photographs also point towards the transient nature of our experiences. When referring to photographs, Sontag uses the phrase “memento mori” (11), a Latin idiom used to remind people of their mortality and the importance of living a meaningful life. In other words, they do not just point towards the subject, captured in a moment, but rather remind the viewer of the fleeting nature of their existence. As *memento mori*, photographs compel viewers to take action and use

their time to do something worthwhile. Therefore, photography is a ritualised performance as much as a mechanical or electronic process. In a visual culture, photographs are part of the act of showing individual attachment to people, places, or things. Individuals wish to capture momentous events for personal reminiscence and wider dissemination online. It is not sufficient to capture a photograph but to share it for others to see.

The relationship between photography and ‘the real’ is a discourse with a lengthy history. In exploring photography in virtual spaces, Poremba offers the critique that photographs only capture the ‘real’ “if the photo is seen to operate according to the logic of transparency” (2007, 53). In referencing Bolter and Grusin’s (1999, 110) double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy, Poremba refers to how the medium of photography operates concerning the viewer. Immediacy is the logic of immersion, for media to ‘disappear’ and render themselves as seemingly natural or transparent (6). Hypermediacy is a contrasting approach, favouring a plurality of media forms that call attention to themselves and act as a layer through which representations must first pass through. If the viewer understands photographs as subjective interpretations of a subject rather than unmediated representations, then what is ‘real’ has little bearing on the image. Therefore, what determines the ‘reality’ depicted in a photograph depends on the viewer’s assumptions and expectations rather than the image’s content.

The subjective nature of the image is underscored by what Poremba (53) refers to as the hallmark of postmodern photography. Postmodern photography emphasises the process and artistic aspects of the medium rather than the final product. Poremba (53) suggests that postmodern photographs are meant to be viewed and appreciated as objects in their own right rather than as transparent windows through which the viewer can see an unmediated representation of the subject. The perspectives illustrated by Sontag and Poremba outline the change in cultural attitudes towards images. First, as windows affirming the existence of ‘real’ things to subjective interpretations and aesthetic objects. While the underlying principle of capturing and recording a light field has changed little since the Daguerreotype, the viewer’s expectation of the image and what it represents has evolved significantly. Images are the photographer’s interpretation of how the world should be or what it is to them.

Poremba observes that video games remediate traditional photographic conventions “through... [an] ambient cinematic camera” (2007, 49). The purpose of this camera is to “manipulate and define visual space” (49) for the gamer, rendering the virtual world for them. Using the term ‘camera’ is purposeful, as virtual cameras are programmed to behave like their

physical counterparts. Virtual cameras use mathematical formulas that define lens aperture, focal length, depth of field, and other factors to emulate the appearance of film cameras (49). In other words, video games define the visual space of the game through cameras and photographic techniques, not as the human eye would perceive it. Möring and de Mutiis (2019, 70) speculate that the remediation of photography in video games has a converse effect on traditional photography. While such an effect is outside the scope of this research, other scholars have investigated this phenomenon in the past (Aloisio-Shearer 2019).

Video game screenshots remediate photography in both aesthetic and purpose. Poremba argues that gamers take screenshots that purposefully emulate photographs to achieve a “photo aesthetic” (2007, 51). For example, gamers turn off or hide the user interface (UI) in games when taking virtual photographs to achieve the appearance of a photograph (51). Poremba argues this is a “particularly revealing” (51) insight. If gamers were interested in contextualising their experiences within the framework of a virtual world, they would ensure the UI elements were visible. Poremba implies that this contextualisation cannot occur when the in-game UI is rendered visible.

Considering Sontag’s (2005) argument regarding the purpose of photographs, gamers seek to affirm their experiences in the virtual world by commemorating moments, places, things, and others they encounter. Virtual experiences are as ephemeral, if not more so, than those in the physical world because the world itself may not be there in a few years. Gamers in virtual worlds are keenly aware that the servers hosting the video game they are playing may shut down. Therefore, they use virtual photographs to “possess the past” (Sontag 2005, 128). The existence of the game camera necessitates the remediation of photography in the space of video games. However, gamers have adopted the game camera to express their desire to memorialise their experiences within the virtual world in an otherwise transient space.

The similarities between photography and virtual photography go beyond technical or aesthetic aspects. I do not argue that screenshots are photographs or that the video game camera is “a photographic apparatus” (Möring and de Mutiis 2019, 71). Instead, despite the technical differences, the similarities in purpose, technique, and approach make the comparison between virtual photographs and the physical camera worthy of study. Regardless of the different origins and contexts within which they exist, photographers and video game players share a similar desire to commemorate experiences and express this desire in similar ways. Poremba echoes this sentiment, saying, “screenshots do not necessarily make any claim to be real photographs,

and they do not have to” (2007, 53). In other words, most screenshots are not attempting to create ‘real’ images of ‘real’ places. Instead, gamers use similar techniques and approaches as photographers to express themselves, lending an “essential photographic quality” (53) to their work.

Poremba notes that images which capture in-game environments are not meant to be viewed as “inferior representation[s] of our reality” (2007, 51). Instead, she argues that virtual photographs are faithful depictions of “an alternate reality” (51). Manovich refers to this alternate reality as the depiction of a “synthetic vision” (2001, 183), a way of looking at the world that is free of the “layer of noise created by filmstock and by human perception” (182). In other words, the images captured by virtual photographers are not less real; they are “hyperreal” (182). Scholars such as Manovich and Poremba argue that virtual photographs are not photographs precisely because they do not have traditional photography’s intrinsic ‘flaws’. Virtual photography, they claim, is not an inferior form of traditional photography but rather a medium ideally suited to documenting the game environment.

However, like photographs, virtual imagery commodifies its reality. Sontag claims that photographs turn the individual into “customers or tourists of reality” (2005, 85), rendering the world into an “object of appraisal” (86). Poremba’s (2007, 50) stance on virtual photography is less severe, noting that virtual images allow gamers to make their experiences in the virtual environment meaningfully real to them. Sontag’s warnings about the commodification of the world through photography are nonetheless still relevant to virtual photography. Although virtual photographs allow gamers to affix their emotions and memories to specific points in time, they also turn their experiences and memories into shareable objects that others can consume and repurpose.

This kind of virtual photography contrasts with other kinds of “photo as play” (53). Möring and de Mutiis (2019, 71) comment on Poremba’s research, noting that the author distinguishes between two kinds of virtual photography: firstly, screenshots are captured by gamers to memorialise “glitches and gameplay trophies, but also ‘performance photography,’” (71). The second, as Poremba (2007, 54) describes it, is an approach to photography as a central mechanic of the play experience. This research focuses on the first kind of virtual photography, whereby gamers use screenshots to express themselves. Virtual photography is not photography; gamers create images within virtual worlds for the same reason individuals do in physical

spaces. They wish to remember their interactions with the virtual environment, whether that is their achievements, memorable experiences, or as a medium for storytelling.

Virtual photography is a means to remediate the virtual environment and the self, and they do so through a digital lens. Moore illustrates that individuals record “online and offline forms of play experiences” (2014, 149) to assert a certain amount of power over them. In some ways, gamers gain power over the game through recording. Moore draws a parallel between Sontag’s point regarding photography and the subject in that the subject is appropriated (Sontag 2005, 2) by taking their picture. Moore argues that gamers attain such power through a “remediation of the representational elements of the game texts” (2014, 149), meaning the characters, places, and environment. As Poremba (2007, 51) notes, remediation does not extend to other game elements, such as the interface, game icons, chat boxes, etc. Therefore, gamers seek to appropriate the game-as-world and not the world-as-game, foregrounding the game’s aspects that matter to gamers: the environment and its inhabitants.

Sharing virtual photographs through a social network becomes a part of the gamer’s persona. Moore argues that gamers engage in virtual photo sharing as a means of “self-expression produced in the experience of play” (2014, 148). The purpose of sharing these images is to establish and reinforce “the individual’s persona” (148), and sharing images gives rise to a “socially networked expression of the self” (149). Therefore, Moore suggests that virtual photographs are not part of personal or private rituals enacted by gamers for their pleasure. Instead, they share virtual photographs on social networks to craft an online identity. Cover supports this reasoning. Through integrating Butler’s theories on identity performance and social network theory, Cover argues that online individuals construct their identities through acts such as “status updates, uploading and captioning photos” (2012, 179). However, as Moore’s research suggests, uploading and sharing images does not need to be of a physical reality—it can be a virtual one.

As an emerging practice, the relationship between virtual photography, academia, and the wider commercial world is still developing. Virtual photography as a field of study has only recently become a topic of interest among academics. Moore observes that scholarly research around virtual photography “has rarely been attempted in media studies” (2014, 141). A few years later, Möring and de Mutiis (2019, 70) also observed that virtual photography has been under-researched, particularly in media studies. The authors note that the little academic work conducted on the practice was “exclusively written by game scholars” (70). Moore, Möring, and

de Mutiis all agree that the study of virtual photography will significantly benefit from a visual culture-oriented approach. Moore argues that such an approach offers “powerful and complimentary means” (2014, 141) for understanding the cultural, ideological, and personal mechanisms at work. Möring and de Mutiis (2019, 70) point to the multidisciplinary nature of virtual photography as necessitating a multidisciplinary theoretical approach. However, virtual photography has begun to garner attention from museums and galleries. While serious academic interest in virtual photography has yet to manifest, several books, exhibitions, and creative projects have achieved some notoriety. Robbie Cooper’s *Alter Ego: Avatars and Their Creators* (2007) is a book of portraits of in-game avatars. Eva & Franco Mattes exhibited a series of avatar portraits titled *13 Most Beautiful Avatars* in 2006, and more recently, in 2019, Nicholas Aloisio-Shearer hosted an exhibition of virtual photography titled *Fragile Fantasy*. Virtual photography is increasingly commonplace as an artistic practice with both commercial and fine arts applications.

Academic interest surrounding the practice has almost exclusively originated from the work of game studies scholars. However, as noted by those same scholars, a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the affective capacity of virtual photography in terms of gamers can reveal much about the relationship between self and virtual image. Virtual photography allows gamers to recontextualise their relationship with the virtual world. Gamers use virtual photography to express something other than what the game requires. Virtual photography can “subvert the gameplay condition” (Möring and de Mutiis 2019, 84) and, by doing so, move beyond the dynamics of gameplay and allow them more freedom in self-expression. Virtual photographs are also a means to appropriate predefined play spaces. By necessity, video games predetermine the gameplay experience in narrow terms to keep development costs within reason. Poremba (2007, 52) argues that virtual photography is one way gamers can break free of these constraints. The virtual photograph becomes a “surrogate possession” (52), a way for gamers to exert some control over their virtual world. While not entirely free from the constraints imposed by the game, gamers become empowered through virtual photography. By approaching the virtual world as a “stage” (Möring and de Mutiis 2019, 83), gamers redefine their experience with the game in ways they can control. Virtual photographs become more than tokens that memorialise important events to gamers. By virtue of their construction, virtual worlds must impose certain restrictions on gamers: how they can appear, where they can go, and what they can do. Virtual photography is a means by which players can transcend these limitations and more fully realise their avatars within the space.

Virtual photography reflects gamers' notions of what kind of representation is desirable in a virtual world. Avatar portraits can give the viewer insight into how gamers represent themselves. In *13 Most Beautiful Avatars*, Eva and Franco Mattes deliberately chose their thirteen avatars from thousands of options, carefully constructing a representation of the players in *Second Life* (Patti 2017, 181–82). Consequently, the exhibition reveals as much about the artists' intent as the players', i.e., who is worthy of being seen as much as those who want to be (184). However, in virtual spaces, gamers are not limited by physical constraints regarding appearance. In MMORPGs, gamers can “move beyond the commercialized beauty ideal towards an aesthetics of virtual surface and augmented bodies” (Apter 2008, 10) and experiment with new forms of bodily expression. In a fantasised virtual environment like *FFXIV Online*, this freedom is expressed through character creation and customisation, ‘modding’ game assets, and virtual photography combined with visual filters. Exhibitions such as *13 Most Beautiful Avatars* risk misrepresenting the demographics in virtual spaces. As Patti observes, the exhibition by Mattes & Mattes is a purposeful “selection of featured avatars and subjects” (2017, 181) chosen for their racial and gender diversity. However, within MMORPGs, there is a “consistent underrepresentation of women and racial minorities” (181). Artists can use virtual photography to capture representations of avatars and showcase them to a broader audience. Likewise, gamers use virtual photographs for self-expression and to celebrate their avatars' beauty, conventional or not.

Virtual photographs have a specific function when posted on social media sites. In one example, gamers validate their experiences in the game by sharing photographs. People document their activities in games to memorialise their encounters with others, preserve essential experiences, or document their travels through the virtual space (Poremba 2007, 50). Gamers capture images of their avatars for another reason: to make the temporary nature of their digital selves permanent. These images, and more importantly, the reaction to these images on social media, function as an external means of validation for what would otherwise be private or personal experiences. In this way, the construction of the avatar persona is legitimised. In another sense, sharing photographs via social media garners rewards. Moore (2014, 147) also discusses photographs' role in validating gamers' experiences. However, differently from Poremba, Moore argues that social media facilitates social interaction and “invite [the] player to display screenshot collections directly” (147) for others to view, comment on, and ‘like’. By generating discussion around images of experiences, gamers memorialise their avatars through the responses of other

individuals. Virtual photographs are therefore not simply memorabilia for gamers. Instead, virtual photographs transform via the online communities of Reddit, X, and Instagram into a kind of social currency that is used to purchase the avatar's persona. In doing so, virtual photographs allow gamers to curate the context of their online experiences.

Patti (2017, 181) argues that virtual photographs are not an isolated element, but similarly to their analogue counterparts, the context of the game world informs the reading of the image. Clues embedded within the image, such as the background elements and social environment, position the viewer within the virtual world. However, virtual photographs are only part of the online experience. Moore extends Patti's point by also mentioning the metatextual elements associated with in-game photography: "status updates, hashtags, scores, achievements, savegames, and online profiles" (2014, 146) all work towards building a framework of meaning with which gamers express their online identity. Virtual photographs are essential tools for providing insight into the lives of gamers and their avatars; however, they are only one element in a larger tapestry of interconnected online products of play. In this milieu, virtual photographs act as an anchor which becomes tagged, commented on, shared, and liked.

Virtual photographs thus expand beyond the visual experience via social media's textual and interactive features. Two features underpinning social engagement around virtual photographs are tagging and sharing the images. Moore argues that these online practices "offer a different, nonproximal claim to a notion of the real" (2014, 148). In other words, Moore observes that the text-based activities surrounding virtual photography serve as additional acts of affirmation of the 'realness' of the imagery being shared. Therefore, a sense of permanence is gained when virtual photographs are shared with others, especially if those individuals comment on or share the image themselves.

Furthermore, tags are used in surprising ways by online communities. The hashtag was first used in 2007 to organise topics of interest in a searchable way on the social media platform X (Bernard 2019, 8). The purpose of tagging was, therefore, to aid "contextualisation [and] content filtering" (9). Moore notes how hashtags organising posts online "are not constrained by categorical thinking" (2014, 143). Moore later says hashtags can add context to images or alter an image's meaning (Barbour, Lee, and Moore 2017, 5). As explored in the analytical chapters of this thesis, hashtags function as framing devices or are used to alter the meaning of images deliberately.

Sharing virtual photographs on social media platforms serves multiple functions. First, sharing virtual photographs validates gamers' experiences in their audience's reactions and "social performance" (Moore 2014, 143). Second, by utilising the technologies embedded in social media platforms such as X and Instagram, individuals can recontextualise their images by adding captions, descriptive text, or narratives. Moreover, virtual photographs are evidence of the private activities of gamers made public. Virtual photographs combine private and public spaces, which David Marshall calls "micropublics" (2014, 161). Moore claims virtual photographs signify the convergence of "personal memories with communal narratives, documentary evidence, and a collective mass-mediated past" (2014, 145). In other words, virtual photographs embody the private expressions of avatars made available to remix within a broader communal narrative. For example, portraits taken by gamers of their avatars become linked to their online activity. Gamers often use portraits of their avatars to "produce themselves" (147) through icons and profile pictures in online communities.

Consequently, avatars "become associated with the actions, messages, chats, status updates, and posts of the individual" (147), allowing gamers to maintain privacy while still expressing themselves online. As such, avatars become gamers' tools to establish their online identity and embody their digital presence. Virtual photographs thus allow them to establish and maintain their online presence in a personal and communal way, a crucial feature of virtual communities. Additionally, virtual photographs allow gamers to express their identity communally.

Virtual photographs facilitate identity curation on social media. This phenomenon is partly because game developers encourage virtual photographs as a form of publicity. Game developers have an economic incentive to facilitate or encourage gamers to take and publish virtual photographs on social media sites. Developers gain access to a "well-functioning crowd-sourced publicity tool" (Möring and de Mutiis 2019, 78–79) and provide a lens through which the gamer's online persona is expressed. The authors do not mean to say there is no benefit for gamers or the community. Virtual photographs have emotional value for the gamers and those who view the image (Moore 2014, 149). As Moore says, virtual photographs can produce "powerful reactions to the digital object rendered in the moment of interaction between human and machine, code and performance" (149). In other words, virtual photographs capture a specific point where gamers, the game, and their virtualised persona intersect. Virtual photographs are distinguished from moment-to-moment gameplay because these recordings can be distributed

across social media to contribute to the broader community for comment and remixing (149), which benefits gamers and the developer. For developers, there is an economic benefit as gamers raise awareness of their product, which may entice others to join. For gamers, the benefit of sharing their virtual photographs online is to engage in participation with a particular community. As evidenced through the case study analysis of later chapters, this engagement primarily takes shape in creating and sharing avatar portraits.

Avatar portraits capture the experience and representation of gamer identities in virtual worlds. Avatar portraits allow gamers new avenues of self-expression and representation. Poremba (2007, 49–50) calls on the remedial nature of virtual photography by noting the capacity of photography to document the self. However, what distinguishes virtual photography from analogue forms are “opportunities for representation and expression unique to the genre [of video games]” (49). One aspect of what Poremba is referring to is the hybrid avatar/camera nature of gamers in the game world. For example, in *FFXIV Online*, gamers control their character on screen and the camera that floats above and behind their avatar. Through this duality of avatar/camera navigation, gamers are constantly reframing their virtual world experience—always already filming their experiences through a digital lens. Individuals in the physical world must consciously pick up a camera to take a picture, while gamers continuously record the virtual world and avatars within it. Virtual photography remediates the camera’s capacity for self-representation and the documentation of experiences because, unlike cameras in the physical world, virtual cameras in the game world are always on and recording. Gamers constantly engage with the world through a digital viewfinder and document their experiences, bearing constant witness to the identity performances of others.

Virtual photographs are a form of play that extends the boundaries of identity performance outside the virtual environment. Moore argues that virtual photography remixes the “textual components of the game” (2014, 146), meaning the environment and characters, to perform identity. Within the context of social media, virtual photographs intersect with hashtags to connect the image with identity markers. Gamers in *FFXIV Online* make use of hashtags such as “#ffxivgay”, “#gaymiqote”, and “#gayorzea” to simultaneously connect their images to a framework of identity and to connect themselves to a broader community. Gamers link their images to social media tags to perform “identity beyond the simulation” (Moore 2014, 148). Virtual photographs facilitate identity play within the virtual environment and social media communities. Gamers use virtual photographs to highlight aspects of the virtual environment they identify with, namely, their

avatar interacting with others and the world. Furthermore, virtual photographs are linked to popular tags to further a constructed persona.

Virtual portrait photographs allow gamers to express their identities online, and avatar portraits become a part of their online persona. Gamers utilise a variety of means to communicate their identity online, from “in-game names” and “characters” (Moore 2014, 147) to online biographies and self-assigned tags. Moore also observes that gamers rarely use images of their physical selves in their profiles; instead, relying on pictures from “popular culture and screenshots” (147). In the case of *FFXIV Online* gamers on Instagram, all profiles surveyed used virtual photographs of their avatars, suggesting an awareness of themselves as “mediated, cultural, and social being[s]” (147). Avatar portraits are helpful to gamers as their avatars may detach them from specific identity markers. As Patti (2017, 185) explores in her discussion of the exhibition *13 Most Beautiful Avatars*, there is a disconnect between the perceived and intended identity of the avatars photographed in the works. Franco & Mattes’ work purposefully reframes the avatar portraits through extreme closeup, occluding other identity markers viewers might use to contextualise their understanding of the portrait. Patti’s analysis highlights that virtual photographs can reframe the viewer’s perception of identity differently from what gamers or game designers intended. Virtual photographs offer a powerful tool for gamers in how they choose to represent themselves online. Gamers can deploy their avatars outside the game world as proxies to interact with online communities and other elements such as profile names, descriptions, and tags. However, virtual photographs do not objectively document the subject; instead, they reframe and remediate the digital subject in new ways.

The book *Alter Ego* (2007) explores the construction of online avatar personas via virtual photography. Photographed by Cooper, *Alter Ego* is a book of fifty avatar portraits. Cooper’s work explores the relationship between the physical and digital selves by photographing the players offline and juxtaposing their ‘real’ portraits with virtual avatars (Patti 2017, 179). Cooper’s work recontextualises the virtual by deanonymising and revealing the ‘real’ person behind the screen. Cooper’s work positions the virtual portrait as lesser, the eponymous alter ego, by juxtaposing the image against a ‘real’ person instead of documenting the player-as-avatar on their own. *Alter Ego* provides some insight into the diversity of avatars and players, highlighting interesting combinations of identities. However, as Patti notes, Cooper seeks to impress upon the viewer a breadth of different kinds of players rather than “the presentation of a single quality that all of the portraits share” (2017, 190). In other words, Cooper’s work focuses on the myriad differences

between avatars and players rather than investigating the possibility of a shared motivation or other similarities players may have. Previous artistic endeavours on avatar portraits have ranged from exhibitions that showcase the diversity in avatar design to the contrast between player and avatar. This research proposes an alternative route to documenting the player-as-avatar that approaches the subject on their terms and focuses on understanding the individuals within the context of their digital lives.

The relationship between the virtual portrait and gaymer is based on the projection of personality traits. In some examples, gaymers design their avatars to resemble their physical selves. These gaymers intend for their avatars to function as digital extensions of their physical personas by ensuring their avatars match their offline appearance as closely as possible (Patti 2017, 190). Patti notes that “the subject has successfully transgressed the border between worlds and entered the virtual world as an almost exact graphical replica” (190). To borrow a term from semiotics, Patti suggests that the avatar is an *icon* of the gaymer or a direct visual representation of the person (Chandler 2017, 52). However, as Daniel Chandler (52-53) notes in his discussion, depictions of people, even photographs, are *indexical* of their subject, i.e., the image results as a direct cause of the subject it depicts. As Chandler points out, “images do of course ‘resemble’ visual features of their subject” (53), but as Roger Scruton argues, “the camera, then, is being used not to represent something but to point to it” (1983, 113).

Similarly, avatars are indexical. They arrive in the virtual world because of the gaymer’s desire to be present and interact with their new environment. Therefore, it is not the likeness of the avatar that transcends the physical/virtual boundary, as Patti (2017, 190) suggests; instead, the gaymer’s desire to attain agency within the virtual world gives a direct *causal* rise to their digital representation. This argument is supported by the idea that gaymers do not always design their avatars to reflect their appearance. As Patti (190) notes, others design avatars that can significantly differ from their physical appearance. Some gaymers choose to appear with different physical features, such as a different height or build, a different gender, or, if possible, use the fictional races designed by the developers. Patti’s observations on gaymer-avatar likeness imply that gaymers who attempt to recreate themselves in virtual worlds are the only ones who wish to “[transgress] the border between worlds” (190). Her line of inquiry into avatar design is to consider the avatar concerning its visual approximation to the gaymer controlling it. However, such an approach assumes that the relationship between the gaymer and the avatar is one of resemblance or semiotic correspondence (Chandler 2017, 48). My research proposes that no two

such distinct categories of gaymers exist: one which seeks to be a digitised version of themselves and another that does not. This thesis proposes to consider the causal relationship between avatars and gaymers as they enact their desire to manifest within the virtual world.

The virtual camera is a gaymer's primary means of interacting with the virtual world. In one sense, gaymers use cameras as a creative tool. The virtual camera is not a passive element of the game world but an integral part of their interactions with their surroundings (Poremba 2007, 49). The virtual camera is so vital to gaymers' creative expression that authors Ellen Sandor and Janine Fron liken video games to "21st Century art studios" and that the taking of virtual photographs is like "bringing performance art to video games" (2001, 2). Therefore, manipulating the camera—sometimes in ways not intended by the developers—is essential to gaymers. Poremba argues that the virtual camera allows gaymers to "make creative decisions in the work" (2007, 51). The "work", in this instance, refers to the desire to convey a particular sense of self through documentation. Gaymers use in-game tools and modifications to the game's code to achieve the desired outcome in their self-representations, moving ever closer to a "photo aesthetic" (51). Players extend the functionality of the game camera by remediating photographic techniques and approaches in the pursuit of self-expression. Furthermore, virtual photography is not relegated as a practice that has barely been undertaken but is a significant part of *FFXIV Online's* culture.

Virtual photography is a discipline practised and refined by gaymers, and taking virtual photographs requires skill in the game. Researcher Betsy Book (2003, 16) notes that early virtual photographs often emulated the appearance of tourist photographs. She also observes that virtual photographers "put a great deal of thought into the screen capture's content" (17), emphasising the skill and understanding of the game controls required to achieve the desired image. To take 'good' virtual photographs, Moore points out that gaymers must be familiar "with the norms, skills, and politics of play" (2014, 146). In other words, gaymers need to be familiar with the game's systems and demonstrate an understanding of the conventions of taking virtual photographs. As will be explored in later chapters, a clear set of norms and conventions contextualise avatar portraits within MMORPGs. Virtual photographs are also a way for gaymers to exert control over their experiences in the virtual world. Poremba (2007, 52) recalls Sontag's point regarding photography as a demonstration of mastery over the experience by drawing a comparison to the virtual image. Virtual photographs, like traditional photographs, allow gaymers to 'own' their experiences within the virtual world and the avatar they have designed. Gaymers use

transformative play to achieve these specific images. Curator Katie Salen refers to transformative play as the moment the gamer “transforms the space as a whole” (2002). Through certain acts of play, individuals can modify the rules of the game environment to make photo albums, use the game engine to make films, or perform various other purposes. In the case of *FFXIV Online*, the Gpose function of the game is often used in combination with modifications to the game code to create portraits for avatars, construct narratives, or as the basis for engaging in role-play. Virtual photography is an opportunity for gamers to showcase their understanding of the game mechanics, particularly when attempting to create complex scenes or compositions. Virtual photography is often used in combination with other methods, both using in-game tools and 3rd-party software, to transform the game environment to suit their desired narrative.

Virtual photography, therefore, informs the virtual environment similarly to how photographs of the physical world affect our understanding of that space. In line with Manovich's (2001) and Poremba's (2007) arguments, gamers take virtual photographs of naturalised digital spaces. This notion is exemplified by how gamers regularly intermix photographs from their travels in the physical world with images taken in MMORPGs (Poremba 2007, 50). The social and personal experiences that occur online are as meaningful to gamers as their experiences of their physical selves. In the words of Moore, gamers “demonstrate a powerful capacity to modulate an affective sense of time and space” (2014, 145). They move between the physical and the virtual worlds seamlessly in their online galleries, blurring the boundaries that divide these spaces.

Virtual worlds can become, in one sense, tourist destinations for gamers to experience. Book defines tourism as “the act of gazing at (and photographing) various objects, landmarks, and views” (2003, 3), noting that this definition applies to virtual tourism as much as it does tourism in the physical world. The virtual world offers the same “visual experience” (3) as exotic destinations, to be consumed and documented through a lens. Book notes that virtual tourism, and by extension virtual photography, is the culmination of a trend in physical tourism to offer “increasingly hyperreal” (4) environments. However, there is a difference between online and offline tourism. Nakamura observes that individuals who frequent online spaces can sometimes adopt avatars from different races and genders to “exploit them for recreational purposes” (2002, 42). She notes that such exploitation occurs through the guise of parody, utilising stereotypes, or engaging in fetishised role-play as another gender (44). Such behaviour would be far more difficult, if not impossible, in offline spaces. The implications of these behaviours are outside the scope of this chapter. However, the concerns regarding the appropriation of marginalised

identities for recreation—identity tourism—will be explored in the analytical chapters of this thesis. The digital camera has much the same potential as its physical cousin. Gamers utilise the documentative capacity of virtual photography to record the places they have been and their experiences while there. However, as much as photography has transformed portions of the world into a ‘backdrop’ for the visual consumer’s benefit, virtual photography can potentially render particular gender and race identities into ‘costumes’ that can be worn and discarded on a whim.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter examined how computer software acts as a medium for self-alteration, identity fragmentation, and identity co-construction through virtual photography. The practice of virtual photography is complex, occupying many contexts and gameplay functions. This chapter focused on virtual photography’s capacity for creative self-expression and self-representation. After a review of relevant literature, it becomes apparent that gamers adopt the techniques and conventions of traditional photography in new ways to recontextualise expressions of selfhood collaboratively.

However, the research reviewed also demonstrated that this process is not unconstrained. Gamers must negotiate their desire for self-expression within the limits of the developers and the game world. Therefore, virtual photography’s self-representation and identity construction capacity are bound to specific cultural and social norms. The virtual photographs gamers take thus operate within more extensive networks of power and causality. The images they produce are not representations of ‘pure’ selves but are culturally mediated articulations. This argument is expressed in Donna Haraway’s notion of the “skeuomorph” (1991, 17), evidence of previous paradigms in new technologies that remain as conventions. Virtual photography is crucial in how gamers communicate, validate their experiences, and build social capital. Gamers use visual self-representation to foster an online community and maintain a consistent social persona. However, arguments such as Hayles’ (2012) are a reminder that avatars are not entirely digital beings. They are operated by physical persons whose material and embodied experiences shape their online lives.

In conclusion, this chapter investigated computer software, notions of digital selfhood, and virtual photography. The importance of self-representation and articulating a coherent self online is consistent across the literature reviewed. From the early text-based MUDs to the visually rich *FFXIV Online*, gamers appropriate and recontextualise the tools available to them to convey

their desired selves to others. However, avatar portraits are not purely digital creations. Informed by the embodied experiences of gaymers, virtual photographs are created within the dominant paradigm of traditional photographic aesthetics, cultural norms, and the conventions of the communities within which they exist. Virtual photographs, much like their analogue namesakes, are reflections of the broader cultural and social context in which they are made.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODS AND METHODOLOGIES

4.1 Introduction

4.1.1 *Background and purpose of the chapter*

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed in this PhD thesis. It begins with an explanation of the research design utilised in the study, followed by a description of the data collection procedures. Collecting Instagram posts entails gathering images, public comments, and hashtags for analysis. Additionally, this chapter will delve into the ethnographic work undertaken for this research, comprising virtual photography and interviews with informants. Lastly, a discussion on data integration will ensue, focusing specifically on the advantages and disadvantages of employing a multifaceted approach to data collection across multiple platforms. By analysing this data, the research aims to uncover the multifaceted phenomenon observed within the *FFXIV Online* community. This community, focusing on gaymers, uses their avatars as powerful vehicles for self-expression, both within the game itself and beyond its boundaries. These three interrelated data streams converge to form a comprehensive framework that illuminates the intricate dynamics and significance of avatar-based self-expression, specifically about gender and sexual exploration, in the context of the *FFXIV Online* community.

This research seeks to identify and interview informants actively exploring their identities through avatars. The aim is to enhance understanding of gaymers' engagement with their avatars and their role in expanding the boundaries of sexual identities. The focus of this investigation centres on the phenomenon of gaymers utilising their avatars as a means of self-expression. The participants for this study are sourced from Instagram and private Discord servers, while the case studies were selected entirely from Instagram. It is worth noting that while not all case studies self-identify as queer or as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, they were chosen based on their exhibited behaviour on Instagram, which aligns with gaymers' notions of gender and sexual identity.

Finally, this study encompasses my visual ethnographic practice centred on photographing avatars within *FFXIV Online*. This project aims to visually explore and critically examine the diverse manifestations of avatars, as well as their intricate connections with the virtual and social milieu. Throughout this ethnographic endeavour, extensive visual

documentation was conducted within the *FFXIV Online* community, with instances of role-playing events and various public gatherings organised by players.

4.1.2 How the design addresses the research problem

The initial research question encompasses multiple facets of the research design. It focuses explicitly on gaymers' capacity to navigate their identities by utilising a combination of avatar customization in *FFXIV Online* and engaging in social media activities featuring their digital avatars. This phenomenon is comprehensively examined through theoretical exploration, ethnographic inquiry, and informant interviews. The research problem is further explored by closely analysing and interpreting images and accompanying text from carefully selected Instagram profiles. This analysis is conducted within the established theoretical framework and simultaneously employed to investigate gaymers' behaviours and social interactions.

The second research problem on the correlation between gaymer identity and role-play is approached through an exploration of pertinent theoretical domains, including queer theory and virtual ethnography. Furthermore, a comprehensive analysis of the images taken for this study is a critical component of this investigation. The remaining two research problems pertain to sharing avatar images on the popular social media platform Instagram. My research design integrates theoretical frameworks and essential themes within the field to investigate this phenomenon. Employing a meticulous examination of avatar portraits, supplemented by an analysis of accompanying captions and text derived from Instagram posts, I aim to gain profound insights into the intricate interplay between gaymer engagement on social media platforms and the representation of their avatars. This investigation promises to deepen understanding of the multifaceted dynamics underlying the connection between gaymers' online presence and their virtual identities.

4.1.3 Overview of methodology

The research conducted for this PhD thesis employed several approaches to examine the phenomenon of online identity formation within the context of *FFXIV Online* and Instagram. The first approach involved contacting potential participants on Instagram and Discord. Four individuals were then invited to engage in one-on-one interviews with the researcher. This method, although constituting a fairly small sample size, facilitated in-depth conversations and personal insights into gaymers' experiences, motivations, and perceptions as they navigated the intersection between their avatars in *FFXIV Online* and their representation on Instagram.

The ethnographic framework employed in this study is the second approach that aligns with previous research that has utilised virtual ethnography to investigate online communities and their dynamics¹. By adopting this approach, I gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex social and cultural practices that emerge within the context of *FFXIV Online* and Instagram, shedding light on the novel ways in which individuals utilise visual representations of their avatars to explore diverse forms of gender and sexual expression.

This ethnographic project extends over multiple years and involves the researcher taking portraits of avatars belonging to players. The project serves as a critical exploration into how these players opt to depict themselves through their avatars. By shedding light on the significance of self-expression within a virtual environment, the project also delves into the intricate relationship between the individual and the virtual. This examination encompasses the social aspect of interactions among players and how specific individuals deliberately design their avatars to stand out from the collective populace.

Finally, the collection of images and text played a crucial role in conducting a thorough examination and analysis within the framework established in Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis. Instagram served as the source for gathering these materials. The primary focus was on images shared by gamers, depicting either their avatars or those belonging to others. The textual component extracted from Instagram encompassed the descriptions provided by individuals on their profiles. Furthermore, captions accompanying the images, relevant hashtags associated with them, and any pertinent comments contributed by other users were also collected, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter.

4.1.4 *Ethical considerations*

Virtual ethnography carries little risk of physical or psychological harm; however, as virtual ethnographers Boellstorff et al. remind the reader, there is the potential for “informational risk, the risk that private information could be made public” (2012, 133). Boellstorff et al. (137) offer that the simplest and most effective solution to avoiding informational risk is using pseudonyms or numerical identifiers when recording and publishing any informant's data. As the choice of pseudonym is also quite significant (137), this study requests a preferred pseudonym from the informant, allowing them to self-identify within the study.

¹ See Boellstorff (2008), Boellstorff et al. (2012), Consalvo and Begy (2015), Massanari (2015), Nardi (2010), and Pearce and Artemesia (2009).

Protecting the anonymity of informants is of particular importance. Boellstorff et al. (2012, 136) provide numerous examples of where inadvertently revealing personal information of the informant can lead to traumatic or distressing work or familial interactions, loss of social status, removal from the community within which they are being studied, or potentially even implicating them in criminal activity. As this research project focuses on the study of queer individuals, there is the potential that informational risk could very well translate into online or offline harm. Robertson (2019, 25) echoes these concerns. In her study of queer individuals at an LGBTQIA+ support centre, Robertson (25) developed a protocol that ensured the anonymity of her informants to protect them from potential harm or violence. In contrast to this study's focus on adults, Robertson (2019) also interviewed minors; thus, her study had additional complications to consider when gathering and publishing information.

This study seeks to develop its protocol, adapted from Boellstorff et al. (2012) and Robertson (2019), to eliminate any informational risk to informants to the greatest extent possible. The protocol involves: the development of a recruitment script that is deliberately vague in order to not "implicate participants" (Robertson 2019, 25); minors will strictly not be allowed to participate in the study as obtaining permission from guardians could inadvertently force informants to disclose sensitive information; recruitment will only occur through private messages to the accounts of potential informants and at no point will informants be required to publicly respond to or acknowledge their participation in the study; any data collected on participants will not be directly published in the study; any demographic information provided by participants will strictly only be used for the purposes of generating statistical data; all data gathered will be subject to the procedures outlined in the South African Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act) of 2013 ('Protection of Personal Information Act (POPI Act)' 2013); participants are free to cancel their participation from the study at any time; participants are free to request at any time that any information they provide be removed from the study.

4.2 Research methods

4.2.1 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework employed in this study encompasses several key themes. Firstly, it delves into the concept of identity formation in the digital realm, with a particular emphasis on the role of avatars as a means of representation. Secondly, it explores the multifaceted nature of gender and sexual expression online. Lastly, the framework considers the significance of virtual

photography and its influence on self-presentation in online gaming. By incorporating these three interconnected themes, the study aims to address the research inquiries by drawing upon the insights and perspectives of researchers who have examined and analysed similar case studies.

The study explores different examples within *FFXIV Online* to examine how various character jobs either conform to or challenge traditional gender stereotypes by applying theories of gender performance. Investigating these dynamics makes it possible to understand how gamers negotiate their gender identities within the game. Additionally, the study considers how the broader *Final Fantasy* series often subverts conventional gender roles within its narrative and explores the potential implications of this subversion for gamers within the MMORPG space. By delving into these theoretical frameworks and analysing the specific instances of gender and sexual expression observed in the interactions between *FFXIV Online* and Instagram, this research sheds light on the complex interplay between virtual avatars, social media platforms, and the exploration of diverse gender and sexual identities.

Throughout Chapters 2 and 3, the argument is made that virtual photography is vital in enabling gamers to express themselves. Furthermore, when combined with online interactions and the curation of social media profiles, gamers can construct a coherent online identity. This identity serves as a platform for experimentation and expression of gender and sexual identities that may not be feasible within the confines of the physical world.

4.2.2 *Ethnographic work*

Pearce describes in her writings on game avatars, “the reason for this is more technical than philosophical: you cannot observe a virtual world without being *inside* it, and in order to be inside it, you have to be embodied. In other words, you have to create an avatar” (2009, 196). Following this argument and in alignment with the perspectives of other scholars in the field of ethnography (Boellstorff 2008; Nardi 2010) who have studied online communities, this research endeavour necessitated the establishment of an avatar which would enable observation and interaction within the virtual realm. However, it was a deliberate decision on my part not to create a distinct avatar exclusively for ethnographic purposes. Instead, I repurposed my pre-existing avatar from *FFXIV Online*, Sue Satie. This approach allowed for a duality in the avatar's role: at times facilitating the required ethnographic investigation, while also providing opportunities for personal enjoyment and relaxation. Consequently, Sue Satie assumed a pivotal role as the primary lens through which I investigated gamer communities within *FFXIV Online*.

The ethnographic research undertaken for this doctoral study commenced in March 2020. This research project's visual approach is also the foundation, driving the initial interest and inspiration. Initially conceived as a personal endeavour aimed at documenting diverse avatar designs created by gamers within *FFXIV Online*, it became evident that the research conducted held the potential for a comprehensive postgraduate investigation. Thus, the project evolved from a documentary-oriented undertaking into a structured ethnographic study. From that juncture, the ethnographic research has been ongoing and will persist until the culmination of this project, which will conclude in 2024. This practice involves documenting avatars in virtual environments using virtual photography. It provides a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives surrounding the various ways gamers customise their avatars in a mediated articulation of digital selfhood. By employing a combination of one-on-one interviews and documentation practices, this research explores how individuals leverage images of their avatars to explore novel avenues of gender and sexual expression.

The ethnographic portfolio of this research project encompasses various methodologies to explore the phenomenon at hand. The primary mode of investigation involves conducting one-on-one interviews with a carefully selected group of individuals who maintain Instagram profiles featuring images of their avatars from *FFXIV Online*. These interviews offer invaluable insights into the participants' motivations, experiences, and the role of avatar images in their online identity formation.

As Boellstorff et al. argue “ethnography is a flexible, responsive methodology, sensitive to emergent phenomena and emergent research questions” (2012, 6). In this study, which adopts a constructivist perspective, ethnography is particularly suitable due to its ability to accommodate open-ended research questions and designs. Ethnography is an invaluable tool for enhancing visual analysis by offering additional critical insight into the social dynamics among diverse individuals and groups. Moreover, ethnography yields data that cannot be solely acquired through visual analysis. For instance, it facilitates examining public interactions between individuals and comprehending the motivations underlying individual stances.

4.2.3 *Multimedia analysis*

This study examines how individuals employ images of their avatars from *FFXIV Online*, posted on Instagram, to engage in novel forms of gender and sexual expression. The analysis and

investigation encompass a total of seventeen Instagram accounts, constituting a total of 2,018 posts, which were carefully selected based on the following criteria:

1. The Instagram profile must feature virtual photographs from *FFXIV Online*, showcasing the avatar. These images may constitute the entirety or most of the profile's content.
2. The selected profiles should exhibit indications of a queer sensibility concerning sexuality. Such indications can manifest through various means, including using relevant hashtags, descriptions within the profile, or the images' content.
3. The profiles should demonstrate some form of role-play, wherein the gaymer identifies themselves as the character, blurring the distinction between their identity and that of the avatar.

It should be noted that an individual's self-identification as queer was not a prerequisite for inclusion in this study. Throughout the research process, it became apparent that certain individuals, despite not explicitly self-identifying as queer, portrayed sexual or romantic relationships of a queer nature through their profile content.

These Instagram accounts' meticulous selection and examination will provide valuable insights into the complex interplay between online gaming, social media platforms, and the emergence of diverse gender and sexual expressions. This study contributes to understanding contemporary digital culture and its implications for identity construction by exploring how gaymers leverage virtual avatars to navigate and negotiate their identities.

An early observation reveals that most of the profiles under study have been established within a range of four years. The dataset includes the oldest profile created in 2017 and the most recent profile created in 2021. The growing prevalence of these profiles can be attributed to the game's increasing popularity. As more individuals become acquainted with *FFXIV Online*, there is a subsequent surge in the popularity of corresponding Instagram profiles. The data collection process commenced in June 2021, during which most profiles remain active. As of 2024, some of the profiles have been removed from Instagram.

The analysis involves systematically selecting pertinent images from the profiles under investigation, adhering to a predefined set of criteria. The chosen images were selected based on the following criteria:

1. The images were required to demonstrate manifestations of sexual identity expressions aligned with gaymer culture, either through depictions of same-sex romantic content or by challenging traditional gender norms.

2. Moreover, the selected images had to actively contribute to forming the avatar's identity, thereby engaging in an ongoing process of identity construction.
3. Additionally, the images had to be accompanied by a caption and relevant hashtags that facilitated their placement within a broader network of visually expressive content sharing similar characteristics.

These criteria were established retrospectively, as the initial exploratory research phase lacked certainty regarding the most appropriate elements for a comprehensive analysis. Instagram was selected as the primary social media platform for this research due to its emphasis on visual content, particularly images, as a primary mode of expression. While members of the *FFXIV Online* community also utilise other platforms like Reddit and X, they serve different purposes. Reddit is commonly used to share gaming experiences, seek assistance from others, and address issues within the game, such as bugs. On the other hand, X is predominantly employed for concise textual communication and is not necessarily the primary medium for constructing one's avatar identity. In contrast, Instagram emerges as the preferred platform for individuals to engage in identity construction through the presentation of their avatars. Using an Instagram profile allows users to curate a visual representation of themselves that aligns with their desired gender and sexual expressions.

The present study employs a close reading approach to analyse the images utilised, drawing upon the theoretical framework in Chapters 2 and 3. In Chapters 6 and 7, this framework is applied and contextualised within the images. Consequently, the images are unpacked, employing the themes established in the preceding chapters. These themes encompass sexual identity development, *FFXIV Online* gaymer communities, the process of self-development facilitated through the avatar, and lastly, the significance of visual representation and ritualistic photography in constructing online identities. In addition to this analysis, ethnographic research conducted as part of this study serves as a complementary element. By employing participant interviews, a deeper contextualization of the images is achieved. Finally, the images are examined within the context of my ethnographic practice. A comparative analysis of various documentation and virtual photography approaches is undertaken, leading to a discussion on the implications of the similarities and differences discovered.

4.2.4 *Virtual ethnographic project*

The virtual ethnographic project constitutes a photographic project spanning from 2020 to 2024, for a total of four years. During that time, 341 subjects were captured, with 299 images posted on the Instagram account created for the project, @dyadigraphy. In keeping with the ethical principles established by Boellstorff et al. (2012, 141–142), anonymity of documented avatars was ensured in the following ways, A) by making invisible the usernames, Free Company tags, or chat logs and B) avoiding documenting uniquely identifiable locations that may reveal the identity of the player. Furthermore, due to the limited nature of character customisation in the game, it was not required to obscure or blur the faces of the avatars² (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 141). Permission to document the avatar or publish the image was not requested.

Unlike many contemporary video games, the absence of a free-roaming camera mode in *FFXIV Online* necessitates implementing various in-game techniques to attain the desired visual outcome of my images. Firstly, the UI within the game is concealed to emulate a photographic representation (Poremba 2007, 51). Additionally, a first-person perspective is adopted to lower the camera angle, ensuring that the researcher's character does not obstruct the view. *ReShade* is utilised to modify the game's shader code, introducing visual effects such as depth of field to enhance the aesthetic appeal (ReShade 2023). Subsequently, these images are collected, organised, and subjected to post-processing software for final editing before being shared on the dedicated Instagram account @dyadigraphy.

The selection of subjects for this study employed a convenience sampling method, as outlined by John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, convenience sampling is where “respondents are chosen based on their convenience and availability” (2018, 212). Given the nature and constraints of this research project, convenience sampling proved to be the most appropriate strategy. Consequently, subjects were selected based on availability during the researcher's login times to the game servers. It is important to note that the character used in this study was established in the European data centre *Light*, resulting in the documentation of predominantly European subjects, if not all.

Character customization in *FFXIV Online* involves a two-stage process. Initially, gamers create a character, defining and selecting various features, including race, skin colour, eye colour,

² In *FFXIV Online* each of the eight races and two gender options typically has four face options and a limited set of colour swatches to choose from for hair and skin tones. These limited combinations must be shared by over 20,000,000 players, leading to significant repetition in avatar design.

general physique, and facial structure. Apart from certain purchasable items, this initial level of character customization is permanent and cannot be altered except for minor details like makeup and hairstyle. The second stage of customization occurs through selecting the character's gear and the visual appearance of their armour. Participants for this study were selected based on their distinctive armour aesthetics within the *FFXIV Online* community. Some individuals demonstrated a greater inclination towards customising and crafting a unique appearance for their characters, distinguishing them from other avatars and making them suitable candidates for examination.

Moreover, the server exhibited increased activity during post-work hours compared to daytime, indicating that a significant portion of players bear offline obligations such as education, family responsibility, or employment that restrict their engagement during working hours. The scheduling of numerous role-play and public events in the evening facilitated the participation of individuals with daytime commitments. These events also provided favourable circumstances for documenting and capturing multiple individuals within a public setting.

The documentative project aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the virtual personas within *FFXIV Online*. This investigation primarily focuses on the visual aspect, delving into the diverse approaches employed by players to tailor the appearance of their avatars. The project aims to construct a visual compendium showcasing players' various customisation options and design choices. Through an extensive survey of the variations in character design, this project serves as a launching pad for critical reflection and exploration of the myriad perspectives facilitated by the character customization feature in *FFXIV Online*.

It is crucial to acknowledge that while character customization offers significant possibilities, it is not without limitations. These limitations arise from the influence of cultural norms and biases. Hence, the virtual ethnographic project also strives to shed light on the boundaries of character customization, highlighting the extent to which prevailing cultural expectations circumscribe it.

Incorporating the virtual ethnographic project establishes a triangulation of data points encompassing theoretical inquiry, historiographic research, and visual exploration. Its inclusion enables a critical examination of the arguments and concepts introduced within the theoretical framework. It also serves as a point of comparison for the data gathered during the interview and case study research phases. My virtual ethnographic practice introduces a novel dimension to explore the research problem visually. While Instagram profiles serve as a medium for self-expression, primarily exploring personal identities through visual media, the virtual ethnography

conducted in *FFXIV Online* delves into spontaneous encounters, investigating the everyday expressions within virtual worlds.

4.3 Data collection

Creswell and Creswell (2018, 212) define several criteria regarding identifying interview candidates as essential when defining a research plan. These criteria include population, sampling design, type of sampling, and sample size determination (212). The sampling strategy of this study will be defined through a short discussion of these criteria.

The sample population is derived from individuals who fulfil three core criteria: (1) the individuals play, or have recently played, *FFXIV Online*; (2) the individuals have created an Instagram account primarily to post avatar images; (3) the individuals either self-identify as queer through their profile or content or engage in boundary-challenging behaviour concerning avatar/player gender and sexuality, i.e., gaymers.

There is no way to determine the actual size of this population using available tools. Instead, a sampling design is determined through a combination of “snowball sampling” (Turner, McCracken, and Bizzocchi 2010, 473), searching associated hashtags³, and exploring the social networks of individuals (Boellstorff 2008, 76) through an examination of an account’s list of followers. This approach is summarised in Creswell and Creswell as “convenience sampling” (2018, 212), an approach best used when participants for a study cannot be identified from a predetermined list, and the availability of participants may be limited.

In order to determine the ideal size of the sample, Creswell and Creswell suggest that “sample size determination should be based on your analysis plan” (2018, 212). Alan Bryman (2012, 425–26) echoes this statement, highlighting that sample sizes for qualitative studies can vary from as many as 350 participants to just one person. Determining the optimum sample size for any study is exceedingly difficult, but as Bryman argues, “rather than rely on others’ impressions of suitable sample sizes in qualitative research, it is almost certainly better to be clear about the sampling method you employed, why you used it, and why the sample size you achieved is appropriate” (426).

³ These hashtags are #finalfantasyxiv, #finalfantasy14, #ffxiv, #ff14, #ff14screenshot, #ffxivscreenshot, #ffxivcommunity, #ff14community, #ffxivonline, #ff14online, #gshade, #gposers, #virtualphotography, #virtualphotographer, #arealmreborn, #heavensward, #stormblood, and #shadowbringers. Hashtags relating specifically to sexuality, such as #gaymiqote and #gayorzea, were not prioritised so as to not skew the population sample to accounts self-identifying as queer.

As this study does not seek to make generalist claims about a large population but is interested in a few individuals' more detailed personal reflections and interpretations, I argue that a sample size of more than twenty participants is not required. This study advocates for a focus on the personal experiences that gaymer individuals have with expressing their identity through video game avatars. Andre Cavalcante notes, "I am interested in creating a theoretical framework for thinking through quieter, less heroic, and less politically charged forms of media use, those that often go overlooked by researchers" (2016, 111). This study has identified seventeen potential case studies from Instagram thus far. In addition to these case studies, four participants agreed to one-on-one semi-structured interviews. As often happens in social research (Bryman 2012, 425), many others declined to participate. Lastly, the virtual ethnographic component has observed and documented more than 300 individual players from one of the game's servers, Twintania. The collected work has been published on the Instagram profile @dyadigraphy. This study ceased to approach new participants when the point of theoretical saturation, or "when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new properties" (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 262) arose.

4.3.1 *Selection criteria*

The Instagram images selected for analysis were chosen based on their content, with particular emphasis placed on discerning the presence of a "queer sensibility" (A. Shaw 2012, 69) conveyed within the displayed subject. Within the scope of data collection, a queer sensibility is defined as the representation of characters who partake in actions or possess designs that challenge traditional gender and sexual norms (69). For instance, an image may depict two characters of the same gender engaged in a pose or activity that implies romantic or sexual interest. Subjects were identified according to the criteria established by Adam Sadowski and Anna Lomanowska, where "avatar poses were classified as *intimate* when they allowed for physical contact between avatars" (2018, 3). Alternatively, an image could feature a solitary character participating in an activity or displaying a design that subverts the norms associated with their respective gender.

A crucial factor influenced the selection of images for this study: deliberate efforts to shape an identity through or for the avatar. Some profiles demonstrated a conscious endeavour to construct a persona for the avatar where individual images contributed to an overall expression of selfhood. This method enabled the gradual development of a more comprehensive backstory and personality for the character. On the other hand, specific profiles actively engaged in role-

play as a recreational activity, placing less emphasis on creating a singular avatar as an expression of personal identity. Instead, they focused on crafting a distinct persona or character unique to each avatar. In some instances, these profiles maintained multiple avatars within a single account, each possessing a distinctive personality.

The selection criteria for participants in this study focused on their self-identification as expressed through their avatar profiles. It was imperative to choose profiles where individuals displayed a conscious level of self-identification, specifically as queer individuals or, in some cases, as individuals who did not identify themselves as queer. While most selected profiles belonged to self-identified members of the queer community, a few instances presented a contradiction between the player's self-identification and the visual content posted on their account. Consequently, the decision to include profiles was not solely based on the players' self-identification in their profile description but on the interplay between the profile description and the contents of the associated Instagram profile.

Comments identified as contributing to the co-construction process and deemed relevant for the later stages of the study were recorded. The selection criteria for these comments included the following: (1) comments acknowledging the avatar as a distinct personality separate from the gaymer, (2) comments aiding in the development of the avatar's personality or background story, and (3) comments that exhibited a negative or dismissive attitude towards the avatar's identity. Thus, an effort was made to strike a balance between comments that both supported and critiqued the independent identity of the avatar.

Participants selected for individual interviews must be at least eighteen years old; however, age verification is challenging to establish as Instagram and *FFXIV Online* do not require proof of age when creating an account. To prevent the inclusion of minors in the study, in the initial selection phase, the researcher confirms the age of each participant chosen for the study to ensure they are over eighteen years old. This verification process is also incorporated into the consent form that participants must sign, confirming their eligibility. Given the potential risks to participants' privacy and safety, requesting government-issued identification to verify their age was deemed inappropriate and thus not pursued.

The recruitment process prioritises individuals who self-identify as members of the gaming community, as they are crucial participants in exploring the theme of identity construction within the context of this research. Given their inclination towards engaging in the specific forms of identity formation under investigation, these individuals constitute the primary candidates for

selection. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the study also aims to compare online self-expression with participants' offline personas. Therefore, prospective participants are not necessarily required to self-identify as members of the queer community. In such instances, individuals are selected based on the disparity between their online sexual and gender expression and their self-identified gender and sexual identities.

In order to ensure the integrity and relevance of the interview data, participants included in the interview process must exhibit active engagement in identity exploration through the medium of role-play. As highlighted by Williams et al., the conventional notion that role-play primarily serves as a means of "identity negotiation" (2011, 194) among adults will be critically examined in this study. A combination of ethnographic methods, including virtual photography and informant interviews, will be employed to accomplish this objective. Consequently, individuals who demonstrate evident involvement in constructing their identities through role-play will be prioritised as primary targets for the informant interview phase selection.

Finally, it is vital to address the data collection methods, which predominantly employ snowball and convenience sampling techniques. Given the nature of these approaches, the accessibility and willingness of prospective participants become significant considerations. It should be noted that participants did not receive any financial remuneration for their involvement in this study, thus highlighting that their motivation to participate primarily stemmed from altruistic reasons. Informants indicated that most reside within the European Union and South Africa. Furthermore, since these individuals are adults, it was presumed that they will generally be available for interviews during non-working hours and weekends.

4.3.2 Data collection procedures

The primary method employed to collect data for this research entails the utilisation of screenshots as a means of capturing pertinent information. Within the Instagram context, screenshots of user profiles are taken, including profile images, noteworthy captions, and comments. Additionally, on Instagram, textual copies of essential profile details belonging to the identified subjects involved in the study are made. These textual copies encompass profile descriptions and hashtags for organising and categorising images and their associated captions.

The data amassed for this investigation is securely stored in three distinct locations. Firstly, it resides on the researcher's designated working device, safeguarded by a login password. Secondly, it is archived on an external hard disk drive within the researcher's primary

premises, ensuring long-term storage with adequate security measures. Finally, the data is also preserved through cloud backup, employing the Google One cloud storage service. Adhering to the data storage guidelines outlined by the University of Pretoria, the archived data will be retained for a minimum of 10 years. Moreover, this data will be accessible to all participants involved in the study. If any participant requests the removal of their information, it will be promptly deleted from all storage locations.

Participant interviews for this study were conducted using the online platform Google Meet, which was chosen for its various advantages. Firstly, Google Meet facilitates automatic recording of the interviews, which are securely stored in a password-protected cloud storage account. Secondly, the interviews are automatically transcribed, with subsequent editing to ensure textual accuracy. Lastly, the researcher and the participant can access the recorded interview. If a participant decides to withdraw from the study, their interview recording can be promptly deleted.

The complete transcript of the interview is not disclosed to uphold the participants' privacy. Instead, selected portions of the interviews are anonymised to safeguard their confidentiality. Additionally, any personally identifiable information revealed during the interview is promptly removed. A comprehensive questionnaire has been devised to investigate pertinent details during the interview process. The questionnaire serves as a foundation for initiating initial discussion points, which are then delved into further through subsequent follow-up inquiries. The number of questions in the interview is intentionally kept minimal to ensure a thorough examination of each discussion point. In addition, the researcher takes supplementary notes during the interview, adhering to the procedures detailed below to ensure proper storage and documentation.

4.4 Data integration

Data integration is a fundamental practice in mixed methods research, facilitating the combination of quantitative data obtained through structured data collection procedures with qualitative data collection methods (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 301). While this study does incorporate the collection of certain demographic information from Instagram users in a quantitative format, statistical methods are not employed for its analysis. Instead, the quantitative data gathered in this study is employed to attain a general understanding of the community under investigation. Nevertheless, data integration remains essential as information is sourced from diverse channels, primarily virtual ethnographic practices, one-on-one interviews, and textual and visual analyses.

Although these data collection methods predominantly possess qualitative characteristics, the variation in data sources necessitates a systematic approach to data integration and analysis.

The critical challenge in integrating data from diverse sources is ensuring its applicability and relevance. The individuals observed during case study selection differ from those documented in virtual ethnography, or individuals approached for interviews. Consequently, the virtual ethnographic project findings cannot directly correlate with those obtained from the semi-structured interviews. Thus, this research study identifies overarching themes and genres pertinent across all these distinct data sources, enabling meaningful comparisons between the derived data.

The research methodologies employed in this study differ primarily in the modality of gamers-researcher interactions. The nature of the virtual ethnographic practice in this study involves minimal interaction between the researcher and the participants. Subjects are typically selected based on their state of being 'AFK', an initialism for *away from keyboard*, indicating temporary absence from their computers. Conversely, on Instagram, interactions predominantly occur asynchronously. Platform users generate content by sharing their avatar images accompanied by captions, and subsequently, others provide comments, share, or engage with these posts at a later time. Case studies identified from Instagram document the evidence of such asynchronous interactions. Finally, participant interviews are synchronous exchanges involving the respondent and researcher, facilitating dialogue and gathering personal insights. This study benefits from a comprehensive and extensive data set by considering the entire spectrum of synchronous and asynchronous interactions.

A multimodal research design offers several advantages beyond expanding the data sample diversity. This study aims to validate the hypothesis that identity negotiation is an emergent process resulting from a combination of real-time social interaction within a role-play environment, asynchronous exploration of identity through textual and visual content generation on Instagram, and utilisation of in-game avatar design features for constructing and visually exploring identities through avatar customization. This study provides a unique perspective by integrating data from these diverse sources. Previous postgraduate research papers addressing similar research problems have typically focused on one field of study exclusively⁴. In contrast,

⁴ See Aloisio-Shearer (2019), Chang (2012), Megan Amber Condis (2015), Richard Tazz Curry (2014), Erica Ruth Hill (2010), Emma Jane Hutchinson (2013), Jones (2007), Cody Jay Mejeur (2019), Jeremy Omori (2017), and Kristopher Purzycki (2019).

this research project employs a pluralistic approach that combines these different methodologies, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the everyday experiences of the average gamer.

4.5 Conclusion

The research methodology employed for this study adopts a theoretical framework that places significant emphasis on previous research conducted in the field. The literature review conducted in this study extensively examines areas of knowledge on online identity formation, queer communities on the Internet, and theories on avatar design. Ethnographic methods such as snowball and convenience sampling were employed to ascertain a sample representative of the larger community and manageable in size. These methods allowed for the identification of a smaller yet diverse sample.

Several considerations are made regarding this study's approach to queer methods and methodologies. Queer methods challenge the binary of insider/outsider (Gorman-Murray, Johnston, and Waitt 2010, 100), crafting spaces for researchers to examine the dichotomies inherent in the field. My research is undertaken from the perspective of a liminal space, occupying the boundary of researcher and gamer. Insider perspectives and knowledge drive many of the insights discussed in later chapters, while the data is examined through a carefully constructed theoretical and critical lens. Queer methods do not throw out established data collection techniques but reexamine them for new possibilities. While the research methods discussed in this chapter are conventionally approached, the way the data is synthesized does not privilege one source. Insights from the field, case studies, and interview participants are equally weighed. Such an approach problematizes embedded power relations between various data sources, calling into question the assumption that any one form of data is superior to another. Virtual ethnography's use in this study is one example, presenting an opportunity for the researcher to gather insights "from a vulnerable engagement with one's interlocutors in a field site" (Boellstorff 2010, 221).

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 Introduction

The methodology employed in this chapter adopts a tripartite approach, aiming to establish a comprehensive research framework. As delineated in the preceding chapter, this methodology encompasses three principal investigative methods: participant interviews, case study analysis, and a virtual ethnographic component. The interviews were conducted individually with participants recruited for this study, utilising the online tool Google Meet. The case studies selected for analysis comprise specific Instagram profiles. These profiles were chosen based on earlier criteria and examined through the theoretical lens developed from the literature review. Analysis of the case studies aims to understand the intersection of online identity formation and virtual representation in these chosen profiles. Lastly, the virtual ethnographic work comprises over 300 images of players from over four years in Twintania in *FFXIV Online*. The virtual ethnographic project facilitated a broader perspective on trends in avatar customisation in virtual environments.

Additionally, the ethnographic work undertaken in this study served as a reflexive tool, allowing for an introspective examination of the research process. By engaging in a visual and practical investigation of the topic, the study aimed to unpack any potential biases the researcher held critically. This reflexive practice is integral to maintaining the objectivity and rigour expected in academic research, particularly in a field that intersects with personal and community identities.

5.2 Gender and sexuality

5.2.1 *Gender and sexual expression*

In *FFXIV Online*, the significance of gender expression and affirmation becomes particularly salient for gaymers who identify beyond traditional gender binaries. These virtual environments provide a platform for flexible gender representation, enabling individuals to explore and express their gender identity in ways that may be restricted in the physical world. Braenna, identifying as a transgender individual with pre-hormone treatment, highlights the profound impact of gender affirmation in the game: “I think a big thing is how affirming it is for my personal gender to have my character referred to as she. A big thing for me is just NPCs referring to me by my desired pronouns. It would honestly be a little dysphoria-inducing to be referred to as he, him” (interview

with author, June 12, 2023). This flexibility in gender representation is a crucial aspect of the game's appeal. Kiki comments on the attitudes of the role-playing community regarding gender identity, “the social groups that I’m part of they’re all sort of very respectful to characters appearances... especially in game there is quite the diversity of designs that people can do for their characters” (interview with author, October 27, 2023). For gamers from marginalised communities, the ability to experiment with and affirm their gender identity through their avatars in *FFXIV Online* is empowering and a crucial aspect of self-expression. This virtual gender expression is a significant personal fulfilment and identity affirmation tool.



Figure 5.1. erastyozz, “I am straight. 101 present straight.”, 2021, screenshot by author of an Instagram post. (Erasty Ozz (@erastyozz) 2021b).

Avatars in the online gaming environment often embody gendered forms, with gamers expressing gender identity predominantly through fashion choices. Figure 5.1 above demonstrates a user engaging in satirical commentary about their avatar's appearance, highlighting its relationship to their sexuality. There is a discernible recognition among gamers that styles and modes of dress are often culturally associated with specific sexual orientations. In this context, the avatar's revealing attire is interpreted by the user as indicative of a queer aesthetic, reflecting broader societal tendencies towards the sexualization of queer identities. This phenomenon underscores how gamers in the community actively engage with and repurpose

existing fashion tropes to articulate their sexual orientation and gender identity, integrating these elements into their avatar's presentation and persona.



Figure 5.2. Karl van Heerden, *The Gang's All Here*, 2020, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

Documenting players within the game environment of *FFXIV Online* offers valuable insights into gender dynamics and its expression. Generally, individuals tend to conform to the gender constructs established at the game's launch, as seen in figure 5.2. Initially, *FFXIV Online's* means of gender expression were heavily influenced by the strict gender norms and roles prevalent in contemporary culture. Although the game has since evolved to offer a more diverse range of appearances and outfits for character customization, it is notable that some players still opt for traditional fantasy roles and Western-centric interpretations of gender expression within this fantasy context. The preference for traditional fantasy roles and Western-styled gender representation indicates the enduring influence of offline gender norms on virtual identity formation, even amidst the increasing possibilities for diverse gender expressions in online gaming environments.

5.2.2 *Does gender matter?*

In online environments, gaymers exhibit a nuanced understanding of the influence gender has on their gameplay and the depth of their connection to their characters. They recognize gender as essential in shaping their interactions and attachments within the game. Braenna, for instance, notes the impact of gender on gameplay: “Yes, the gender that the character I'm playing as does affect how I interact with others. The only reason I can confidently say that is because when I play, I'm Soluna, my alt, who is a gender fluid Au'Ra” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Braenna's experience further emphasises the significance of gender in forming an attachment to characters: “I have very few memories of ever playing male characters, but playing female characters just always felt better for me”. She adds, “I do not want to represent myself as a male. When a game lets me create my character, there is never a part of me that feels I want to make a male character” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Thus, gender plays a substantial role in crafting a gaymer's ideal avatar. Gaymers know how their character's gendered virtual bodies will engage with others in the shared online environment and tailor their avatars to reflect this understanding.

While gender is acknowledged as an influential factor in character creation, it is not the sole determinant of identity. As Kiki explains, “I think the visual aspect is only when you're in RP (role-play) is only a small part of it because a lot of the time it's the story and the talking between characters that you do” (interview with author, October 27, 2023). This perspective is reinforced by observations of gender fluidity in non-sexual interactions within the game. Palar notes, “But beyond ERP (erotic role-play), I ask myself now, does [gender] affect how I interact with them like just in a more casual, immersive role-play? And I don't think that it does” (interview with author, June 13, 2023). Therefore, character creation in these virtual environments is a creative and premeditative process. Gaymers conceive an idealised or alternate self to actualise this persona within the virtual world. This process underscores that gaymers often view gender as one of several elements in shaping their virtual identity rather than the primary factor.

5.2.3 Gender fluidity



Figure 5.3. jaydenrikku, “Loveliest marriage ever!”, 2020, screenshot by author of Instagram post. (Jayden Rikku (@jaydenrikku) 2021b).

Posts such as figure 5.3 from Jayden Rikku's Instagram account exemplify the diverse and multifaceted expressions of gender and sexuality that virtual communities facilitate. Jayden, who identifies as a cisgender heterosexual male and has a girlfriend offline, engages in a unique dynamic in the virtual space of *FFXIV Online*. Both he and his girlfriend have chosen female Miko'te characters for their online personas, leading to the formation of what appears to be a lesbian relationship within the game. Their characters are depicted in intimate settings, partaking in various recreational activities together.

In *FFXIV Online*, Jayden's gameplay involves playing as a female character, and on several occasions, his Instagram posts depict the marriage of his avatar to another female character. His profile highlights a notable distinction among gaymers between real-life relationships and those formed in role-play. Gaymers with offline partners often play the game alongside them, basing their in-game interactions more closely on the identity of their actual partner. This scenario illustrates a striking dichotomy: Jayden maintains an online lesbian relationship through his avatar while concurrently identifying as a heterosexual male in real life. Such divergence between online and offline identities is not uncommon in virtual communities. It is often implicitly understood that an individual's online character can significantly differ from their

offline persona without being perceived as unusual or extraordinary. For instance, role-players often engage in fictional relationships within the game, maintaining a clear boundary between their identities and those of their characters.

5.2.4 *IRL gender*

Furthermore, a discernible trend emerges where gaymers frequently overlook the ‘real-life’ gender of their fellow gamers, instead shaping their interactions based on prevailing gender stereotypes. The relevance of a gaymer’s offline gender in the game context is often considered immaterial. For instance, Braenna notes, “It often feels like their [real life] gender versus their character gender doesn't really influence how they interact with Braenna” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Similarly, Palar observes, “I don't think it massively influences how they interact with Sybil, with my character. I have seen no situation... where because my character is male [it] limits how any character, any player, interacts with them” (interview with author, June 13, 2023).

Despite this tendency to disregard offline gender, gaymers are conscious of offline norms and their influence on gameplay. Braenna explains, “I, as a player, am acutely aware of gender stereotypes and therefore am able to conform or break them with my character when I play them” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). This paradoxical situation reflects a unique aspect of online gaming dynamics. While the real-life gender of gaymers is not deemed significant by others, the awareness and manipulation of gender norms within the game are prominent factors in how gaymers engage with one another’s avatars.

5.3 **Relationships and communities**

5.3.1 *Socialising*

In *FFXIV Online*, the nuances of social relationships between gaymers are often not apparent to outsiders. Much communication, interaction, and the overarching social framework among groups of gaymers are confined to private in-game messages, Discord servers, or private party chats. Consequently, while observers might infer that characters standing together belong to the same group, the specifics of their interrelationships remain elusive.



Figure 5.4. Karl van Heerden, *Waiting for the Raid*, 2020, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

Nevertheless, group affiliation is essential for groups within *FFXIV Online*, and the game facilitates limited expression methods. Commonly, groups in the same social group join the same Free Company to which they are publicly affiliated. Subtler indications of group association include coordinating themes or outfits, such as adopting similar clothing styles or matching colours. However, the most observable way gamers signal their group identity is through the informal claiming of ‘territories’ within public game spaces, such as the group depicted in figure 5.4. I use the term “claiming spaces” to describe an emergent behaviour, as opposed to a formal process made possible within the game's mechanics. Instead, certain groups often frequent specific locations in public areas, establishing a sense of ownership over these spaces. As a researcher repeatedly visiting the same areas, I observed the same groups' consistent occupation of specific spots in player hubs. This territorial behaviour mirrors similar patterns in the physical world, where groups often claim and occupy specific spaces in various contexts.

The significance of these spaces extends beyond mere socialisation; they provide a consistent, permanent location for groups to reconvene. Despite many of the game's systems not requiring physical proximity, it is apparent that gamers value being together visibly. Gamers'

preferences for physical proximity are reflected in their choice to congregate not in secluded areas but in prominent public spaces within the game's main cities, underscoring the importance of visibility and presence in these virtual communities.

Socialising within the game's online communities is equally pivotal. Felon shares, "I like seeing my friends on [*FFXIV Online*] and spending time with them, and then I like to do some of the daily things I usually do" (interview with author, August 8, 2023). Thus, *FFXIV Online*, as a shared virtual environment, accentuates the significance of character identification and gaymer interaction. The game naturally fosters an atmosphere conducive to role-playing, where gaymers are encouraged to envisage themselves as their Warrior of Light and, in turn, to conceptualise their avatar as an extension or variation of their own identity. These imaginings can manifest as an exploration of a self that gaymers may not feel safe expressing in other contexts or as an embodiment of traits they find admirable.



Figure 5.5. Karl van Heerden, *Selfie in the Crowd*, 2020, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

The social dimension of *FFXIV Online* plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of community and providing emotional support for its gaymers. The game features a variety of events, some organised by the developers and others by communities. An example of this is depicted in the image above, where a development team member was scheduled to visit a server, engage with players, and address their questions. These events contribute to a sense of community and

belonging among players, creating shared experiences that can be reflected upon and discussed later. The social bonds and connections from such shared experiences enhance players' mental well-being. This aspect of *FFXIV Online* enriches the gaming experience and is a vital support system for many within the game's community.

In online gaming environments like *FFXIV Online*, there is a prevalent commitment to fundamental social courtesies, ensuring respectful engagement among participants. Felon, reflecting on this, mentions, "I mean, I suppose I try and, like, treat everyone equally. I'm nice to them as long as they're nice back and they're not annoying or like being toxic or whatever" (interview with author, August 8, 2023). It is crucial to recognize that gamers treat social interactions in the virtual world with the same weight as offline interactions. However, given the nature of online communities, gamers often encounter a broad range of gender and sexual identities online. Felon's approach appears to be a common one: to treat all individuals with respect and courtesy, yet to retaliate in the face of harassment, bigotry, or confrontation.

5.3.2 *Offline and online relationships*

In online gaming, gamers often forge profound and committed relationships within the virtual space. However, they are keenly aware of the distinction between offline relationships and those developed through in-game interactions. Rich and varied relationships are common in the online domain, as Braenna illustrates: "Weiss is kind of [my character's] main squeeze domi-momi at this point, but she flirts actively with a lot of people and has had ERP encounters with others as well, including Chrono, who's a jacked-up bunboy" (interview with author, June 12, 2023). This kind of online sexual relationship, divorced from the offline world, is common. Palar explains, "Kiki and Sybil are in a relationship. Myself and the player are friends. We are not in a relationship. We are not dating" (interview with author, June 13, 2023). Despite this clear distinction between 'real' and 'in-game' relationships, Palar further observes that some gamers struggle when they see their in-game partners engage romantically with others in *FFXIV Online*, highlighting the complex interplay between character and gamer relationships. Kiki, Sybil's role-play partner and friend, echoes this sentiment, noting the importance of maintaining a distinction between gamer and avatar, "in-game, [Kiki's] got friendships and more romantically sided ones. So obviously, Kiki and Sybil are sort of more into a romantic relationship in-game, but that doesn't at all affect my and Sybil's friendship. Like in voice chat and stuff, it's strictly a friendship" (interview with author, October 27, 2023).

These accounts underscore the careful distinction gamers make between narrative-based relationships within the game and interpersonal relationships between each other. The interviewed gamers generally view relationships beyond role-play as undesirable, often discouraging emotional connections that extend outside the virtual. This distinction draws a clear line between acceptable role-play desire and offline desire, reflecting a nuance in the dynamics of relationships in online gaming environments.



Figure 5.6. k.nigrum, “We met us in the game now we are best buddies in real life”, 2021, screenshot by author of an Instagram post. (k.nigrum (@k.nigrum) 2021).

However, this trend towards separating in-game and offline relationships is not universal. Figure 5.6 above showcases an instance where a user has captured a virtual photograph of two gamers. The accompanying caption narrates the user's encounter with these individuals within *FFXIV Online*, developing a significant bond beyond the game's confines. This observation indicates that relationships formed within online environments are not confined solely to the virtual realm. Instead, they often influence offline social networks, effectively blurring the lines between virtual and offline friendships. Virtual photography serves as a crucial medium for immortalising and celebrating these relationships. Without it, these connections might remain ephemeral, limited to transient interactions within the game. Thus, virtual photography emerges as a vital tool in solidifying and preserving the essence of online relationships, extending their significance beyond the virtual space.

Determining individuals' relationship status through visual cues is as challenging in *FFXIV Online* as in the offline world. However, in the offline world, certain behaviours and norms are associated with sexual attraction and orientation, and these have found their way into the virtual environment, adapted by gamers. Given the lack of speech and physical mannerisms as tools for expression in *FFXIV Online*, gamers resort to more spatially oriented indicators to communicate their relationships or orientations concerning others.



Figure 5.7. Karl van Heerden, *Shelter*, 2021, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

A key signifier of relationship status within the game is the aspect of physical proximity between characters. It has informally become accepted that characters who maintain close physical proximity are likely expressing an emotional, often romantic, bond, such as the individuals in figure 5.7. This virtual closeness is also interpreted as a substitute for the physical proximity gamers may be unable to achieve offline. Such dynamics in the game underscore the complex and nuanced ways gamers convey and interpret relationships and orientations in a virtual setting, compensating for the lack of traditional communication cues available in physical interactions.

5.3.3 *Geographic limits*

While geographic boundaries become less significant due to the virtual nature of the environment, the organisational structure of game servers still plays a role in shaping gaymer interactions. Gaymers often find themselves confined within the parameters set by these servers, which inadvertently influence the dynamics of social and cultural norms. Felon reflects on his virtual confines, saying, “Because I’m from the Chaos [datacentre], I never really went to the Light [datacentre] before” (interview with author, August 8, 2023). This comment highlights how gaymers’ experiences and interactions can be limited by their chosen server. Gaymers in *FFXIV Online* must navigate their social interactions within the constraints of the game’s server infrastructure rather than cultural or geographic barriers. While these ‘walls’ are less tangible and ostensibly more permeable in a virtual environment, they still significantly impact social group formations. Gaymers have the option to traverse these boundaries, yet these unseen but present barriers subtly influence their social circles.

Moreover, gaymers replicate the social and cultural norms familiar to them from the offline world within these online spaces. Felon observes a continuity of social dynamics from the physical to the virtual world, “Sometimes you hear the same kind of problem, and it’s like, well, why is that happening? Why can’t people just be nice to each other?” (interview with author, August 8, 2023). Felon’s observation highlights more than an exasperated awareness of the problems gaymers face in virtual environments. Felon’s response indicates that, to him at least, virtual environments offer a safe harbour from the social intricacies of the offline world.

5.3.4 *Mental health*

The enduring appeal of *FFXIV Online* is significantly linked to its profound impact on gaymers’ mental states, indicating a deep psychological engagement that extends beyond simple gameplay. Braenna reflects on this, noting, “*Final Fantasy [XIV Online]* started as a game that hooked me and just didn’t let go in big part because of my mental state” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). While not explicitly mentioned by all respondents, it is discernible that participating in online role-play and engaging in character avatar design has positive implications for gaymers’ mental health. *FFXIV Online* thus serves as more than a mere diversion for some gaymers; it becomes a crucial aspect of their social lives. It enhances their self-confidence and provides a secure environment for expressing their gender identity. This aspect of the game

underscores its role as a form of entertainment and a significant medium for personal development and expression within a supportive virtual community.

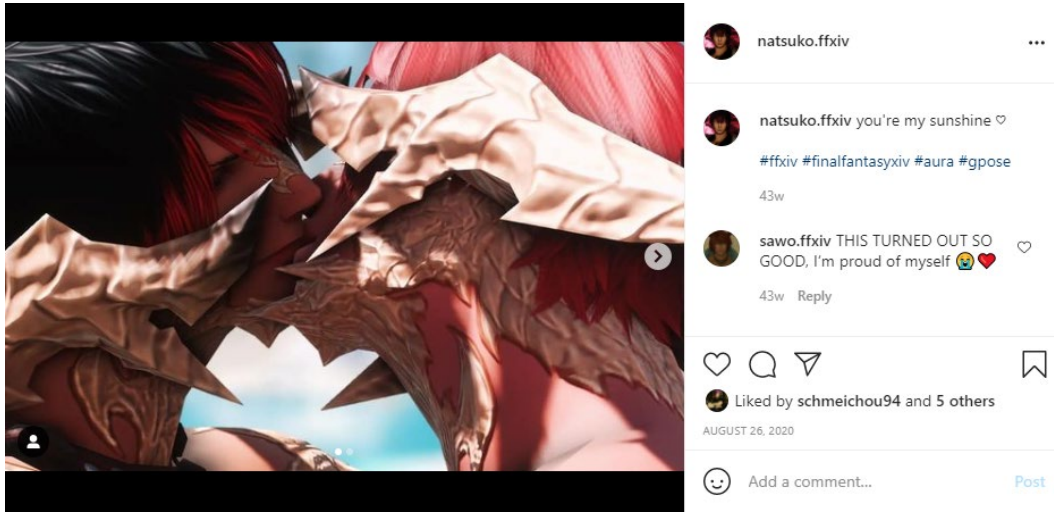


Figure 5.8. natsuko.ffxiv, “you’re my sunshine”, 2020, screenshot by author of an Instagram post. (n a t s u k o (@ntasuko.ffxiv) 2020).

The Instagram post above in figure 5.8 visualises the emotional bond between two gamers. Their avatars, two male Au’Ra, are photographed sharing an intimate moment. For gamers grappling with mental health challenges, others often serve as a support network, offering aid and camaraderie. Engaging in virtual photography, gameplay, or role-play fosters collaboration and mutual support, contributing to a positive environment. Moreover, gamers use virtual photography and role-play to articulate positive or negative emotions. The theme of the image in question is notably positive, reflecting the uplifting impact of interactions with other gamers on the individual's experiences. This aspect of the game highlights the potential of online gaming environments like *FFXIV Online* to offer entertainment, emotional support, and a space for expressive catharsis.

5.4 Character creation

5.4.1 Character creator

In online gaming, particularly in *FFXIV Online*, character creation is a crucial platform where gamers articulate their ideal selves. This process involves embodying these characters and strategically utilising character design to establish a unique presence within the virtual

environment. During character creation, gamers articulate a vision of their desired self. For instance, Kiki explains his choice for using a male *Viera* avatar because “they are a bit more effeminate than some of the other races” (interview with author, October 27, 2023), providing him with an opportunity to explore non-binary gender expressions.



Figure 5.9. Karl van Heerden, *Hanging Out*, 2022, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

FFXIV Online distinctly facilitates gamers’ self-expression through avatar creation, a feature prominently highlighted in its marketing material, notably with the ‘Warrior of Light’ motif. This emphasis on personal representation within the game is further evidenced by the continual evolution of game systems, adapting in response to feedback to strengthen the connection between gamer and the avatar. Consequently, this MMORPG accommodates the need for self-expression, fostering a deep sense of attachment to one’s avatar, all within the realms of a fantasy setting. As exemplified by the avatars documented in figure 5.9 above, this unique blend of personalization and fantasy elements positions *FFXIV Online* as a standout platform for gamer identity formation and engagement.

Furthermore, the creation of character identities frequently precedes actual gameplay. Palar, referring to their character, states: “So Sybil, my character, his gender was kind of already decided before I even launched *Final Fantasy [XIV Online]* for the first time” (interview with author,

June 13, 2023). Braenna, discussing their character, remarks: “Braenna was, or at least my first character of Braenna was made before I knew anything about the game, and therefore, she was made just purely in my own image” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). While *FFXIV Online* encourages gamers to think of themselves as the ‘Warrior of Light’, they often have preconceived notions of how this figure would look and act. Based on the interviews, gamers rarely craft a persona to match the Warrior of Light motif. Instead, they often have a previously conceptualised persona that becomes the Warrior of Light.

Gamers also develop an intricate and creative persona beyond the initial character creator. This involves crafting unique personality traits, elaborate backstories for their avatars, and creating multiple versions of the same character—each adapted for specific roles within the game’s universe. Felon describes how character traits are personalised: “Felon likes sweet things, and so if he gets angry, you calm him down by just giving him something sweet” (interview with author, August 8, 2023). Palar (interview with author, June 13, 2023) discusses the evolution of his character backstories:

Being engaged in the entire RP sphere and seeing so many other people having these backstories, I would often get asked questions regarding Syb's past. And in the beginning of, when these events unfolded, I improvised. Just a lot of the answers there based on how I was currently feeling. But thereafter, I decided I should probably just sit down and just construct a rough guideline of what Sibyl's history was like.

In some instances, avatars are vehicles through which gamers enact their desires, but avatars can also be objects of desire for their gamers. Some thus shape their characters to conform to their sexual preferences. Felon touches upon this when mentioning his motivations for creating a male character, “I suppose just because I'm, well, I'm gay, and I prefer looking at like male people” (interview with author, August 8, 2023). In other words, some gamers simply enjoy looking at their avatars.

5.4.2 Character clothing

Character creation is only the initial step in designing the gamer’s avatar. Beyond setting initial parameters such as height, skin colour, or race, gamers continuously select and pair clothing for their avatar through the glamour system. In *FFXIV Online*, the aesthetic appeal of characters is a critical factor in engaging gamers. This allure is rooted in the extensive clothing options, allowing gamers to express themselves through their avatars. Braenna emphasised the significance of clothing aesthetics: “[Palar] started sending me glammers and stuff, selling me on the aesthetics

of the game because I really like dressing my characters up in games” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). From the research data, the glamour system emerges as a crucial process through which gamers identify with their avatars.



Figure 5.10. Karl van Heerden, *Halloween*, 2020, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

Gamers in *FFXIV Online* customise their avatars to self-express, selecting specific fashions and accessories to convey their personality. For example, the avatar in the image above is styled and accessorised to align with a specific theme, Halloween. This customisation is particularly significant as communicating one's personality through text-based communication in crowded areas can be challenging. A popular hub for such displays is Limsa Lominsa, one of the busiest cities on the continent of Eorzea. Gamers frequently showcase their avatars, flaunting gear, and unique outfits here. This bustling location is also a prime spot for engaging in role-play interactions with others. Thus, The choice of attire becomes a critical method for gamers to express their individuality and communicate non-verbally with others in the community.



Figure 5.11. Karl van Heerden, *Howdy*, 2022, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

In *FFXIV Online*, visual language is a primary mode of communication among gamers, particularly in expansive public spaces. For instance, the avatar in figure 5.11 has a carefully curated appearance designed by the player. An individual's initial impression of other players is predominantly based on their avatar's design and appearance, making gamers acutely aware of the messages conveyed by their chosen aesthetics. While further information about a player can be accessed through contextual menus and additional windows, such details are often overlooked in the dynamic, moment-to-moment gameplay occurring within large public areas. The game developers have introduced features like adventurer plates, recognising the importance of visual communication. These plates function as player cards, offering additional insights about them. The design of these adventurer plates emphasises the character's portrait, underscoring the visual aspect of social interaction within the game. Consequently, the appearance of a gamer's avatar remains crucial in expressing their persona to others, highlighting the significance of visual representation in the game's social dynamics.

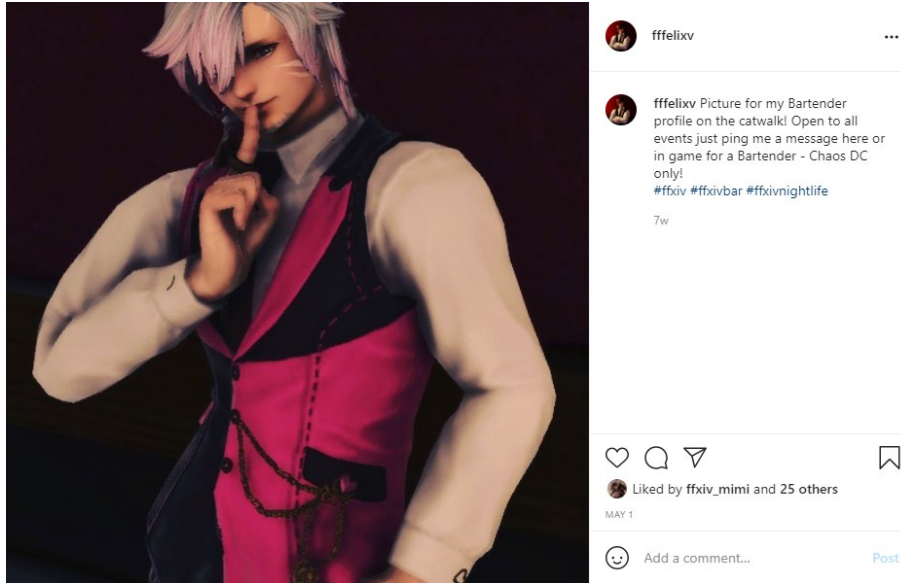


Figure 5.12. fffelixv, “Picture for my Bartender profile on the catwalk!”, 2021, screenshot by author of an Instagram post. (F’elix Vhicri (@fffelixv) 2021b).

Gaymers meticulously design their avatars in *FFXIV Online* and social media platforms for specific purposes. They adeptly utilise the game's glamour system, which allows for creating distinctive personas through fashion choices. For instance, in figure 5.12, the gaymer, fffelixv, has styled their avatar as a bartender to promote their services for role-play events. Using the glamour system and avatar fashion enables gaymers to tailor outfits to their needs anytime. The flexibility of the glamour system allows them to switch between these outfits effortlessly. As a result, their avatars can adapt to various in-game contexts, encompassing gameplay and role-play activities. This adaptability enhances the gaming experience and enriches the role-play narrative, offering gaymers diverse avenues for expression and engagement within the virtual world of *FFXIV Online*.



Figure 5.13. Karl van Heerden, *Portrait of a Samurai*, 2022, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

Communicating an avatar's persona in *FFXIV Online* involves conveying rich visual information to numerous individuals within a shared virtual space. Many gamers leverage design elements within the game, often utilising well-known tropes and visual stereotypes, to efficiently communicate critical aspects of their character's personality. For instance, in figure 5.13, the player's avatar is from the 'Samurai' job. To express this identity clearly and visually, the player adopts elements of East Asian garment design, a common trope associated with this job. While such a specific visual design is not a prerequisite for playing as a Samurai, its use effectively conveys the character's role and identity. It is essential to acknowledge that this reliance on visual tropes is a player-driven choice and a deliberate design element implemented by the game's developers. The marketing and portrayal of the Samurai often draw inspiration from Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's depiction of the warrior class, influencing players' perceptions and representations of the job within the game.

Considering the data presented, it becomes evident that the aesthetic and symbolic value of character armour in online games is a significant aspect for gamers, reflecting their keen interest in the intricacies and aesthetics of in-game design. Braenna articulates this fascination,

stating, “I really like the intricacies and aesthetics of armour in games” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Braenna also notes a nuanced view towards the game's overall aesthetic: “It took me a long time to even accept the merge of super high-tech with Western fantasy” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). However, there appears to be a recognition among gamers of the broader communicative power inherent in these visual elements. Palar observes, “I have a mood that I want to strike into my images, more so than the narrative, more so than the message behind the photo” (interview with author, June 13, 2023). This comment highlights a predominant emphasis on virtual photography's emotional or atmospheric qualities. Thus, virtual photography emerges as a pivotal tool in expressing avatar identity. Gamers demonstrate a deep understanding of the symbolic power of virtual images, dedicating substantial time to the conceptualisation, planning, and execution of these photographs. Therefore, virtual images in online gaming transcend mere 'screenshots' or 'snapshots'; they are integral to constructing and expressing the avatar persona, offering rich avenues for identity exploration and expression within the digital realm.

Consequently, gamers place value on the symbolic potential of specific aesthetic attributes. Braenna noted, “Because there's obviously a lot more factors beyond just gender. People are fickle, like the shade of her hair can just absolutely do it for some people and just absolutely not for others” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). She further remarked on the nuances of avatar presentation: “but a lot of the primary compliments that [gamers] give are in reference to secondary sexual characteristics, using medical terms, like the femininity with which she portrays herself or her feminine body” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). The prioritisation of particular visual features in character design is evident. Braenna shared, “Elezen get infinitely better when they wear a high collar” (interview with author, June 12, 2023) and further explained her modifications: “So she was on the more unattractive side, but I've modded Braenna to have Elezen ears” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Therefore, character appearance in *FFXIV Online* fulfils multiple roles. Beyond mere aesthetic and genre considerations, gamers are acutely aware of the semiotic power of their avatars. They seek to find a balance in design that aligns with their taste while simultaneously conveying the intended gender, sexuality, ideological, and cultural messages. This careful curation of appearance underscores the depth of personal investment and identity exploration within the game.



Figure 5.14. Karl van Heerden, *Warrior's Rest*, 2021, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

Gaymers in *FFXIV Online*, while enjoying a degree of freedom in fashion choices, are influenced by the norms and values ingrained in the Western fantasy genre. Initially, armour sets were rigidly aligned with traditional gender norms, with many options restricted to specific genders. Masculine outfits, emphasising traits like strength and protection, often featured heavy materials, metals, and thick armour. Although these rigid fashion norms have gradually diminished as the game has evolved, the early emphasis on gender norms in 'levelling gear' has left a lasting impression on how gaymers present themselves. For instance, in figure 5.14, a low-level player is depicted wearing the levelling gear from the Marauder class. This class, which eventually specialises in the Warrior job, is typically associated with attributes such as strength, virility, and aggression, reflecting the game's initial adherence to traditional gender representations within its fantasy setting.

It should be noted that throughout the game's lifespan, the glamour system in *FFXIV Online* has undergone significant evolution. Over the past decade, the game has shifted towards more gender-neutral outfit options. Additionally, many previously gender-specific clothing choices have been made accessible to all genders. This relaxation of gender norms and stereotypes reflects the players' growing desire for greater freedom in expressing their characters' gender identities. Despite these advancements, it is essential to acknowledge that a substantial portion

of the game still adheres to conventional gender norms. Nevertheless, as will be explored in subsequent chapters, gamers have continually found innovative ways to navigate and transcend these established boundaries.



Figure 5.15. Karl van Heerden, *Returning Adventurer*, 2023, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

The significance of avatar appearance in self-representation within *FFXIV Online* cannot be overstated. A key character design element is acquiring specific and challenging gear pieces, such as the rare coat and scarf in figure 5.15. Often, these items are accessible only through chance encounters in certain dungeons, completion of challenging raids, or the exchange of rare currencies. The challenge in acquiring these pieces underscores the importance gamers place on outfit design as a means of self-expression, to the extent that they engage in the game's most demanding content primarily to collect glamour pieces. These items serve a dual purpose: they demonstrate the gamer's skill in overcoming tough challenges and reflect a commitment to aesthetic enhancement over character strengthening. This pursuit of style over substance in avatar presentation is a testament to the value gamers place on visual expression within the game's virtual environment.



Figure 5.16. Karl van Heerden, *Chocobo Rider*, 2021, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

Gaymers actively engage in character design with the intent of being observed, regardless of whether these designs are captured through virtual photography. The significance lies in gaymers' appreciation of their avatars and their desire for them to be seen by others. Utilising the glamour system, gaymers meticulously shape their characters to convey a particular message or persona to fellow participants within the game, such as the careful colour coordination by the player in figure 5.16. This character customisation process is crucial for communication and expression within the virtual environment.



Figure 5.17. schmeichou94, “Time to cosplay a bit”, 2020, screenshot by author of an Instagram post. (Heichou (@schmeichou94) 2020).

The significance of an avatar's appearance extends beyond mere individual expression within the virtual realm. Gamers often employ their avatars as vessels for artistic expression, utilising their attire to convey various artistic inclinations. In this context, the phenomenon of cosplay emerges as a notable facet of avatar design. For instance, Heichou, depicted in figure 5.17, uses their avatar to cosplay characters from popular Anime series. Unlike traditional self-expression, gamers adorn their avatars like cosplay in the physical world. They are not necessarily projecting their identity but, instead, engaging in dressing up their avatars as distinct characters. This form of virtual cosplay mirrors the physical world's cosplay culture, focusing on the artistic recreation and portrayal of different characters rather than a direct expression of the gamer's identity.

5.4.3 Distinguishing characters

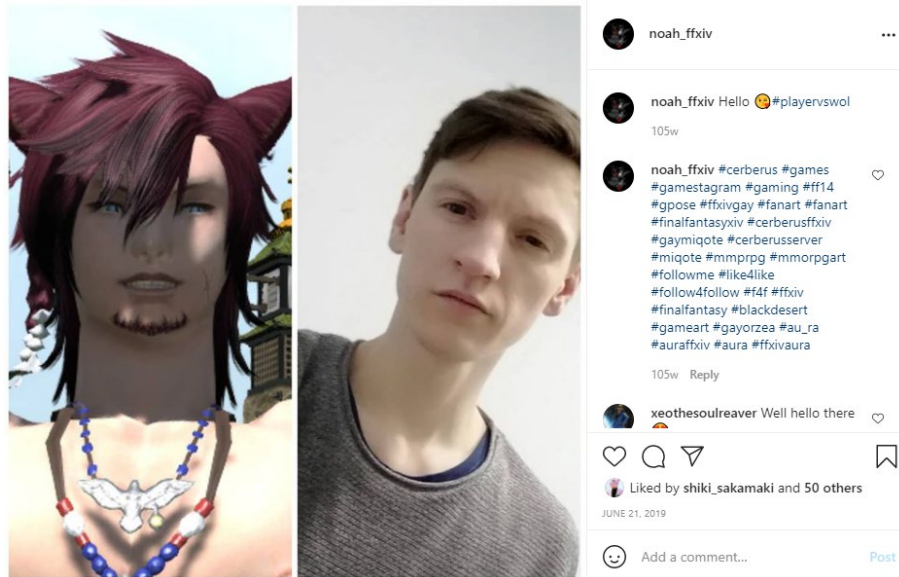


Figure 5.18. noah_ffxiv, “Hello”, 2019, screenshot by author of an Instagram post. (N O A H (@noah_ffxiv) 2019).

In *FFXIV Online*, gamers meticulously shape their characters' personas as distinct entities separate from their own identities. However, they frequently draw comparisons between their personalities and those of their avatars. A prevalent method for this comparison is the “#playervswol” challenge on social media, where gamers juxtapose a photograph of themselves with that of their avatar. In figure 5.18, for instance, Noah presents portraits of himself and his avatar to contrast his online and offline personas. This popular challenge allows gamers to compare the similarities and differences between their real-life selves and virtual personas, as the image above exemplifies. Engaging in this challenge often serves as a means for gamers to connect with others, using it as a platform to foster social interactions. The exercise highlights the diversity in character creation. It acts as a bridge for gamers to engage and share aspects of their identity, both virtual and real, with the broader gaming community. This phenomenon illustrates the nuanced relationship between gamers and their avatars and the role of social media in facilitating community connections within the context of online gaming.

Character design is critical for gamers to differentiate their characters from others. Felon explains, “I think I always try to be a little bit different in real life, and my cat boy is sort of grey-skinned. So, there's not a lot of grey-skinned cat boys, at least not in the EU datacentres anyway”

(interview with author, August 8, 2023). Felon adds, “I mean, I still act the same in game, but it's nice to just look different” (interview with author, August 8, 2023). Thus, the creation of avatars is a deliberate and considered exercise in self-expression and experimentation. Gamers meticulously design their avatars to project-specific qualities, be they social, gendered, or ideological, demonstrating the significant role of character creation in virtual identity formation.



Figure 5.19. Karl van Heerden, *Strange Visitor*, 2023, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

Avatar appearance in *FFXIV Online* is an invaluable medium of self-expression; it is a deliberate tool for gamers to convey facets of their character's personality to others. A notable feature of characters in the game is the extensive range of archetypes that gamers can choose to present. Some characters are designed with a more serious aesthetic, while others are styled in casual attire, reflecting a less formal approach. Additionally, some gamers embrace character design's playful and whimsical possibilities, indulging in silliness and frivolity, as shown in figure 5.19. This diversity in character appearance allows gamers to explore and express a broad spectrum of identities and personalities, highlighting the game's capacity as a versatile platform for creative self-expression and communication within the virtual community.

5.4.4 Multiple characters

Gaymers often create different incarnations of the same character for varied purposes. Palar explains, “There are two identical incarnations of Sybil existing within *Final Fantasy [XIV Online]*. There is one that exists in Twintania, and there is an exact duplicate that I created in the Lich server for the purposes of the RP work that he engages with” (interview with author, June 13, 2023). Palar also mentions, “I have a Viera named Kaden, who I initially created for the purposes of joining my friend to join her through the MSQ when she started gaming” (interview with author, June 13, 2023). Felon also speaks about utilising alternate characters: “I’ve got two other alts which I don’t really use, but I made them to attend a bonding ceremony in a different world, and then I made another alt which I tried to make look a bit like me in real life” (interview with author, August 8, 2023). Felon plans to create more ‘alts’ for practical reasons, such as increasing inventory space or adding rooms to their Free Company (FC) housing; thus, gaymer avatars serve diverse functions. The primary characters often have detailed backstories and multiple outfits and are featured in numerous photographs. Meanwhile, alternate characters or ‘alts’ may be used for practical purposes like replaying content, managing in-game economy activities, or expanding in-game housing capacities.

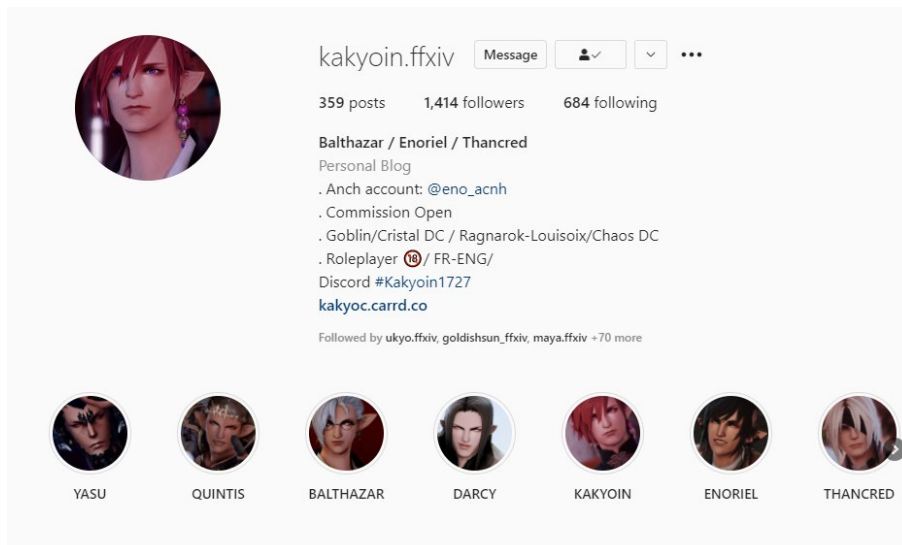


Figure 5.20. kakyoin.ffxiv, “Profile page”, 2021, screenshot by author of Instagram profile. (Kaky (@kakyoin.ffxiv) 2021a).

However, other gaymers engage with multiple avatars for different reasons. The above Instagram account, the user Kakyoin (fig. 5.20), demonstrates its use as a platform for showcasing a range

of personalities and characters created for role-play. The Instagram stories, as illustrated in the figure above, reveal that the account holder engages with multiple characters, each possessing distinct personality traits. Notably, although the user predominantly roleplays male characters, they explore various gender expressions, including female and non-binary identities. The account includes a link to *Carrd*, a website that provides detailed biographical and backstory information on these various characters. This instance marks the first identification of *Carrd*'s usage in conjunction with an Instagram account within this study. It offers profound insight into how roleplayers meticulously develop their characters' personalities.

Examining the *Carrd* website reveals that users actively express a wide range of gender identities through their characters. Simultaneously, a clear distinction is maintained between the user's identity and the identities of their characters. This distinction underscores a complex relationship between the gaymer's self and their virtual personas, highlighting the multifaceted nature of identity formation in online role-playing environments.

5.4.5 *Modding*

In the online gaming community, using external enhancement tools, particularly shaders, is a prevalent practice for augmenting the visual appeal of games. These tools significantly contribute to redefining the game's visual style and altering the quality of in-game imagery. Palar elaborates, "a big criteria for me is the shader that I use. I use Gshade" (interview with author, June 13, 2023), highlighting the critical role shaders play in crafting the desired visual ambience. Palar (interview with author, June 13, 2023) further explains the meticulous process:

With every single photo, I might have a rough idea of what kind of pose I want or what kind of little narrative I want to convey in the way that the character is posed or the camera is angled. A big thing for me is the mood that is struck with the colours. That can only be altered with the use of the lighting, the three-point light system in *Final Fantasy [XIV Online]*, and with the shaders. Usually, I take fifteen to thirty screenshots, each one the exact same camera angle, the exact same lighting system, just different shaders.

Kiki provides a different motivation, "I search for things that just sort of feel attractive visually. The mods that came up when you download them, and you present them on your character just like felt right for this character. It just snowballed into that, and that's this character now" (interview with author, October 27, 2023). Hence, gamers in *FFXIV Online* have creatively adapted game modifications to gain more nuanced control over their avatars. However, such modifications are not without risks. Modifying game files can lead to violations of the terms of the service agreement,

potentially resulting in account suspension and carries the risk of corrupting game files. Despite these risks, gamers' dedication to modding underscores virtual photography's significant role in their gaming experience, reflecting its value in personal expression and identity formation within the virtual world.

5.5 Social media

5.5.1 Uses of Instagram

Instagram is a versatile platform for the *FFXIV Online* community, showcasing the creative use of Gpose and in-game screenshots and as a medium for fostering friendships. Its role, however, is nuanced by the apprehensions associated with social media engagement. The platform enhances awareness of in-game photography features. Felon observes, "I think I noticed on Instagram that people made profiles, and I thought 'oh, it's a good idea'" (interview with author, August 8, 2023). Instagram also facilitates social connections. Felon shares, "I mean, through [Instagram], I've met a lot of friends and some of the friends I have now, I wouldn't have met unless it was for Instagram" (interview with author, August 8, 2023). Concurrently, concerns about social media risks are prevalent among those interviewed. Palar expresses, "I found that I am actually quite terrified of social media, of the possibility for just an overwhelmingly negative response". They add, "I consume a lot of social media, but I won't say I actively put myself out there. I'm way too terrified" (interview with author, June 13, 2023). Finally, Kiki remarks, "I barely have enough time for my own person for social media, let alone a fictional one" (interview with author, October 27, 2023). It is evident from the diversity of responses that the amount and reasons for using Instagram to post images of avatars are pluralistic. While some interviewed gamers have accounts dedicated to their avatars, others are either disinterested or fearful of posting images on social media.

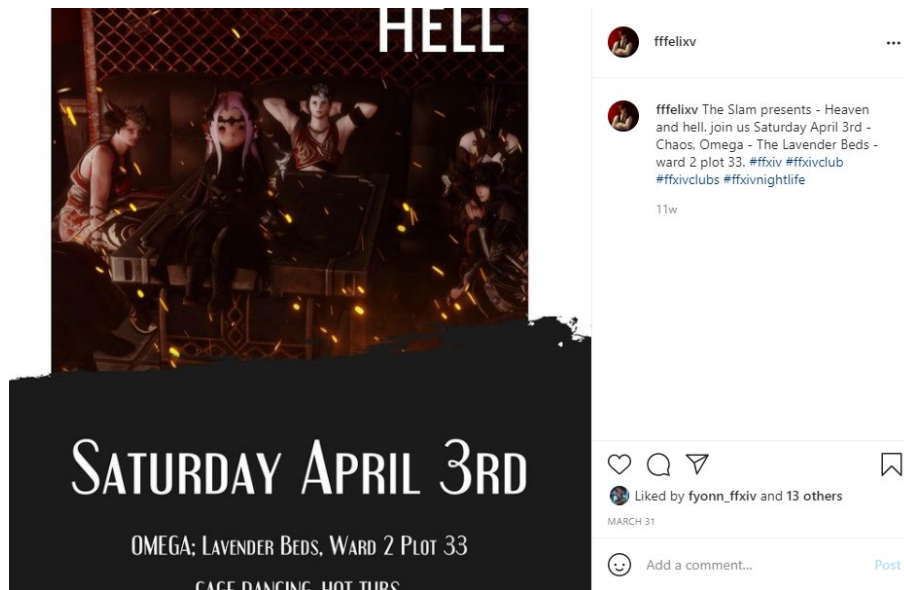


Figure 5.21. fffelixv, “The Slam presents — Heaven and hell”, 2021, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist. (F’elix Vhicri (@fffelixv) 2021c).

It is not uncommon for Instagram users who post images from *FFXIV Online* to downplay the game's aspects in their visual presentations. Commonly, UI elements and other game-specific indicators are deliberately obscured. An illustrative case is figure 5.21, promoting a performance at a role-play venue. Although it is discernible as a screenshot from a video game, the composition's artistry significantly alters this perception. The characters are strategically positioned, and the application of specific visual effects, along with the graphic design of the advertisement itself, subtly detracts from the image's gaming origin. This approach reflects a nuanced effort to transcend the boundaries of the virtual world, presenting the content in a manner that emphasises the narrative or thematic elements over the game's mechanical aspects.

5.5.2 *Problems with Instagram*

In online games, gamers frequently maintain a clear distinction between their personal social media presence and that of their game characters. Although Instagram is a favoured choice for many, it does not hold a universal appeal as the primary medium for these interactions. Gamers consciously separate their personal social media profiles from their in-game personas. Palar reveals, “I have an Instagram and a Twitter, actually, for Syb set up” (interview with author, June 13, 2023). They elaborate, “I kind of want to isolate all of that into one big just *Final Fantasy [XIV]*

Online] social media” (interview with author, June 13, 2023). The preference for social media platforms also varies among gaymers. Palar (interview with author, June 13, 2023) notes,

I consume most of my social media content through Twitter. Instagram has a lot more images, and I can kind of see what they are trying to achieve but it doesn't satisfy my needs specifically. I want the story. I enjoy the messages that people send. I feel like I get to know the people behind these Twitter accounts because it's incentivizing just posting about what's going on and just putting it out there, whereas Instagram is very much cultivated for images or for creative displays.

This distinct separation between gaymers' real-life identities and *FFXIV Online* avatars could stem from various motivations. For some, it might be a protective measure to prevent their gaming alter-egos from being discovered by their offline peers. For others, keeping these identities separate is a matter of convenience. In addition, it has become evident from the interviews that gaymers frequently utilise multiple social media platforms, each fulfilling a specific need. Consequently, the initial assumption regarding Instagram's pivotal role in the community's socialisation, content publication, and role-play engagement appears to have been overestimated.

During this research, it became evident that Instagram has no unique functionality that sets it apart significantly from other social media platforms. The specific features that define Instagram are seldom exploited or employed substantially by the accounts under scrutiny. Typically, these accounts post their content with minimal interaction or collaborative engagement on the platform. While hashtags are typical, there is a notable absence of interaction with other users on Instagram. The lack of engagement suggests that, for the accounts examined, Instagram functions primarily as a tool for visual documentation or as a visual diary rather than an interactive social media platform. The preference for Instagram over other potential platforms seems to be influenced more by its general popularity rather than its distinct features.

Interestingly, this research reveals that while some gaymers use Instagram, it represents just a fraction of the broader activities related to virtual photography and role-play. The participants expressed reluctance to post on Instagram, preferring more private settings like Discord for sharing their content. The popularity of Discord indicates that the scope and significance of virtual photography in the community are more extensive than initially anticipated, whereas the role of Instagram as a primary sharing platform was overvalued in the early stages of my research.

Within the gaming community, Discord has emerged as a preferred platform for gaymers to share and celebrate their in-game images, highlighting the creativity and quality of these digital representations. Participants in this study frequently use Discord for image sharing instead of photograph-centric social media platforms. For example, Braenna states, “I’m active on three Discords where I don’t have an Instagram that I post on. I don’t use photography-based social media to post [my images]” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Kiki elaborates, “me, Sibyl, and Braenna are all part of this little role-play community, but that is directly linked to the people who know me and my character as Kiki. So, it’s only sort of people we’re ‘friends’ with” (interview with author, October 27, 2023). Palar echoes this approach, noting a preference for sharing screenshots within close-knit friend groups on Discord: “I have posted a few screenshots of Sybil before, but those are usually allocated to just close friend groups, where I’m just like, look at this nice little photo I took” (interview with author, June 13, 2023).

The respondents’ emphasis on Discord as a sharing platform is consistent with other findings that suggest Discord may be more widely used than Instagram for disseminating virtual images and fostering role-play communities. One of the Discord servers, *The Menagerie*, had a membership of over 400 individuals in December of 2023, much larger than any of the communities I investigated on Instagram. Gaymers invest considerable effort into their images, often sharing them within these private yet active Discord communities. However, this predilection for privacy underscores the challenge of fully understanding the extent and nature of these activities, given the closed-off context in which they occur, which lies beyond the scope of this research.

5.6 Role-play

5.6.1 Role-play and identity formation

FFXIV Online’s dynamic role-play community flourishes, providing a platform for personal exploration and expression. Role-play in *FFXIV Online* occurs almost entirely through the game’s chat feature, with gaymers engaging in dialogue in private, public, or semi-public settings. During the role-play activity, gaymers are expected to remain ‘in character’ as much as possible; however, an opportunity to speak directly to each other is also made possible. Palar explains, “So within the community, we usually have the umbrella term for immersive role-play, where we kind of play as our characters. We speak as a character, we use quotation marks, and if we were to

speak out of character, then we use notations for all of that” (interview with author, June 13, 2023). For Palar, role-play is the construction of a believable narrative.

Kiki, on the other hand, notes that role-play “kind of fills the void a little bit while still kind of keeping engaged in the game” (interview with author, October 27, 2023). For Kiki, role-play is primarily recreational, citing his age differences with other gaymers, “it’s an opportunity for them to like explore things they necessarily wouldn’t have the opportunity to explore in real life. Because I’m older, I don’t necessarily feel as though I have to do that, you know, but having the option there is pretty cool” (interview with author, October 27, 2023). These two responses demonstrate the breadth of motivations gaymers have when role-playing.



Figure 5.22. Karl van Heerden, *Rainy Day*, 2021, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

Role-playing’s immersive potential holds considerable significance for some gaymers in *FFXIV Online*. For instance, despite lacking any gameplay or mechanical impact, gaymers often engage in immersive actions such as deploying umbrellas during in-game rain, illustrated in figure 5.22. This simple act, while not equating to the development of intricate personas or backstories explored earlier in this chapter, nonetheless underscores the allure of embodying one’s character within the game’s universe and adhering to its internal logic. Such actions exemplify the fundamental role that role-playing plays in enriching the *FFXIV Online* experience, where gaymers are invited to envision themselves as Warriors of Light and are provided ample opportunities to enact this role.

Braenna highlights her profound engagement with character role-play, stating, "I would say at least 300 hours have been spent just sitting in menus, trying on armour and tweaking mods—for all intents and purposes, perfecting my character" (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Palar (interview with author, June 13, 2023) echoes this sentiment, mentioning,

Every other day that I find myself logged on, it is for various reasons regarding role-play, whether it be later in the evening, where myself and some friends we decide to go to a venue. Or if it's usually during the day, it is to set up glamours or to think of ideas and sketch out all kinds of different things for future role-play encounters.

Role-play is particularly vital for transgender gamers, who find a secure and validating environment in this community to explore and articulate their identities. Braenna, an active member of this community, reflects on the role of role-play in her journey of self-discovery, stating, "Because I am learning a lot about myself through RP. Now, I'm well-known and well-liked within the community. And I 100% don't think that that's because of luck. It's because I've been putting myself out there more and more" (interview with author, June 12, 2023). She credits role-play with enabling her to form meaningful connections and gain insights into her identity. Braenna recounts her initial role-play experiences, "They were my first RP partner, in a romantic sense, my first ERP partner. I learnt a lot about stuff from them, just by writing. They ended up introducing me to *Seventh Heaven*, which is the Discord community I'm active in" (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Braenna finds solace in role-play. She expresses,

My body doesn't work the way I want it to in a way that is upsetting for me. The ability to play a cis-gendered woman, and not just in ERP, who everyone sees as a woman and treats as a woman—even though gender is basically non-existent in this game because everyone's queer seven ways past Sunday—but the fact that I'm able through Braenna to insert myself into cis-gendered situations is immensely gratifying for me.



Figure 5.23. kyoyaniri, “Please, don’t drop me again”, 2020, screenshot by author of an Instagram post. (kyoyaniri (@kyoyaniri) 2020)

Role-playing on Instagram typically intertwines textual and visual narratives, leveraging images as a pivotal medium for visual storytelling, often depicting key scenes within a user-crafted narrative. While expressive, these images are frequently supplemented with text to enhance contextual understanding or infuse fictitious dialogue into the storyline. For instance, figure 5.23 above captures a playful and intimate interaction between two characters, enriching the storytelling visually. This approach to role-playing on Instagram, where scenes are depicted and elaborated upon through a blend of imagery and text, is a prevalent practice among role-playing enthusiasts. While virtual photography plays a significant role in expressing role-play narratives, it is almost invariably complemented by textual elements that further elaborate on the gaymer-created universe.

In summary, role-play in *FFXIV Online* is a central aspect of the game's community and a critical medium for personal expression and discovery. It offers a creative and inclusive space for gaymers, particularly those from marginalised groups, to explore various facets of their identities through avatars. For transgender gaymers like Braenna, role-play becomes a powerful tool for navigating and affirming their identity in a supportive virtual environment.

5.6.2 *Erotic role-play*

In the sphere of online role-playing, participants differentiate between general immersive role-play and the more intimate subset of erotic role-play, the latter being particularly fulfilling due to its emphasis on gender and sexual dynamics. Gaymers exhibit a heightened sensitivity to the privacy concerns inherent in role-play interactions. Palar reflects on this aspect, stating, “[Role-play has] taught me to be careful about whenever I talk about the narratives that I have from this backstory or these events that happen in a role-play context” (interview with author, June 13, 2023). Role-play is a deeply personal and introspective journey. Palar shares their observation: “I’ve been in situations where people are talking to me about their RP adventures, and they are going off for easily an hour, two hours, three hours” (interview with author, June 13, 2023). Despite its inherent intimacy, there is a collective understanding and respect for such interactions’ boundaries and personal nature. Palar remarks, “I’m not going to jack off to writing ERP. I find that is a disservice to my character’s partner’s player. It feels like it crosses a boundary” (interview with author, June 13, 2023). Erotic role-play thus emerges not as a form of erotica but as an intimate form of self-expression and exploration, with a shared acknowledgement among gaymers of its sensitive and personal nature.

Online erotic role-play profoundly shapes the experiences of gaymers who often regard these virtual encounters as equally emotionally and psychologically rewarding as real-life interactions. Kiki (interview with author, October 27, 2023) makes use of erotic role-play as a substitute for offline experiences,

I fall more into— in real life—the asexual aspect, so very, very, very, very rarely am I even remotely romantically interested in people in real life. I do this; it’s not a big thing for me, so playing onto that romantic side in a character, I guess, kind of gives me—and this is in air quotes again—the experience of [sex] without actually having to do it. Because obviously, there’s no confines of an actual relationship because it’s in character. I think it falls on there because, in real life, I’ve got no immediate plans to date anybody.

Where respondents reported that the gender or sexuality of their role-play partner mattered little in a generalised setting, in erotic scenarios, gaymers have strict boundaries for their partners. Palar comments, “I am not interested in ERPing with any female-presenting characters” (interview with author, June 13, 2023). Braenna (interview with author, June 12, 2023) notes this requirement placed on her character,

On the more ERP side of things... Braenna's more submissive and, therefore, gets acted upon by more dominant personalities and the way they present themselves. I've interacted with doms of both male and female persuasion, and that gender didn't change how they dommed Braenna. But the fact that they took interest in Braenna at all would be because she is female.

Palar (interview with author, June 13, 2023) adds further nuance, stating,

However, in an ERP circumstance, [gender] very much does [matter]. I myself play Sybil as a homosexual, and I'm not interested in exploring an ERP narrative with a woman. I have seen other players, other characters, doing the exact same, where they write and present their characters as straight, as gay, as bi, as pansexual, as asexual. So, in that context, yes, the genders of the characters that they are role-playing with will very much influence and affect where that role-play can lead to.

Erotic role-play is a common practice within the broader role-playing community, and the participants attest to its fulfilment. These reflections indicate the profound impact that online relationships and role-play narratives can have on gaymers, offering avenues for exploration and expression within a safe and controlled environment. These interview comments also highlight a pronounced awareness of avatar sexuality and gender in particular contexts. While gaymers demonstrate an overall understanding of gender dynamics in social settings, these concerns appear to only rise to the surface when directly applicable to the scenario. These findings do not suggest that general role-play settings occur in a gender-neutral space. Instead, it appears that gaymers do not engage critically with the gendered nature of their interactions outside of erotic encounters.



Figure 5.24. sawo.ffxiv, “Guess these belong into the NSFW section, huh...”. 2020, screenshot by author of an Instagram post. (Sawo (@sawo.ffxiv) 2020).

Erotic role-play is less frequently documented on Instagram, likely due to concerns about potential censorship. Despite this, instances of erotic role-play, such as figure 5.24 above, are still present on the platform, suggesting that gamers are interested in expressing more mature themes through their virtual photography. The photographer's comment shows that gamers know these images may contain sensitive content. However, this tendency to capture and share erotic moments indicates a desire among gamers to explore and publicly showcase a broader range of experiences and themes within *FFXIV Online*.

The medium of erotic role-play provides a safer and more inclusive space for individuals, including transgender persons, to explore and express their sexuality and preferences, markedly more accessible from the constraints and risks often associated with offline interactions. The exploration of sexuality in these spaces is perceived as less physically risky, yet emotionally and psychologically fulfilling, by gamers. Braenna comments, “With Braenna, if I'm uncomfortable, I can just ALT F4, and I'm out of that situation. Not that I'd ever want to because I find it fascinating to explore uncomfortable situations as a character” (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Therefore, online ERP enables individuals to navigate their sexuality safely. Braenna (interview with author, June 12, 2023) articulates,

I get very little physical gratification out of ERP because it's not my body on the line. But the emotional or spiritual vibes I get from ERPing as a cis-gendered woman is just so fulfilling. After a good ERP session as Braenna, I feel emotionally gratified, as if I had just had a sexual encounter with another person in real life. I'm able to explore Braenna's body and preferences and kinks in a way that I can't right now.

Thus, online spaces offer a safer alternative for gaymers to experiment with their sexuality, gender, and sexual identities without the commitment or risk associated with physical world interactions. This role-play mode also allows gaymers to explore their preferences and kinks securely. Braenna adds, "I'm figuring out what kind of dom/sub Braenna is", adding that "She's more of a submissive *tsundere*¹ and that kind of manifests in RP where I do discover my own preferences and kind of kinks" (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Gaymers appreciate these virtual environments for the opportunity to explore various aspects of their identity in a context devoid of physical danger.

5.7 Virtual photography

5.7.1 Virtual photography as self-expression

In *FFXIV Online*, gaymers dedicate significant time and effort to crafting their virtual images, a practice that encompasses more than just personal satisfaction. This investment in virtual photography serves multiple purposes, reflecting the complex dynamics of image creation and dissemination in digital spaces. Braenna describes the meticulous process: "I [take] the photo and then take shots from a bunch of different angles and using different shaders. I use the ones that show off the pose, look most aesthetically pleasing, and have the best shader" (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Braenna also highlights the time-consuming nature of this craft, noting that creating a custom pose can take several hours.

The motivation behind posting these images extends beyond self-gratification. Braenna acknowledges, "I do get a little bit of self-gratification from the act of taking them, but it's entirely for the purpose of other people to see and other people to react to them that I do it. If people weren't spamming hearts and cute faces and reactions to the post under the image, I would not be motivated to post them" (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Palar (interview with author,

¹ *Tsundere* is defined as "the change-over-time of the performer's behavior toward the beholder transitioning from cold (TSUN) to kind (DERE) as the relationship deepens" (Tainaka et al. 2021, 154).

June 13, 2023) shares a similar sentiment about virtual photography, noting its diverse motivations:

Every single one kind of has their unique inspiration, has their unique motive behind why I want to take it. The largest collection of screenshots that I have in my archive, let's say, is just spur-of-the-moment screenshots, but other times, I also kind of set up more complex screenshots. I have a vision in my head, and I want to take this specific screenshot. I find it quite fulfilling, I guess. I find it enjoyable to compose this art piece of my character. It could be an erotic pose; it could be just a fun one. It can be full of tomfoolery; it can convey a narrative, it may not convey a narrative. There are all these little reasons and all these little, perhaps, stories that I want to tell. I try to convey that in a single image.

Kiki as well derives pleasure from sharing his photographs on private Discord servers, “it's an expressive art form, and I like that people see them and like them as I do theirs. Because I go on [Discord] and there's lots of images on there that people produce that I also like” (interview with author, October 27, 2023). This discernment underscores the significance of virtual photography beyond mere documentation of avatar appearance. Gamers recognise the criticality of self-representation autonomy, a principle that extends to their avatars. Since avatars cannot communicate verbally, their visual representation becomes their voice. Consequently, gamers are deeply committed to ensuring their avatars' imagery aligns with their meticulously crafted personas.

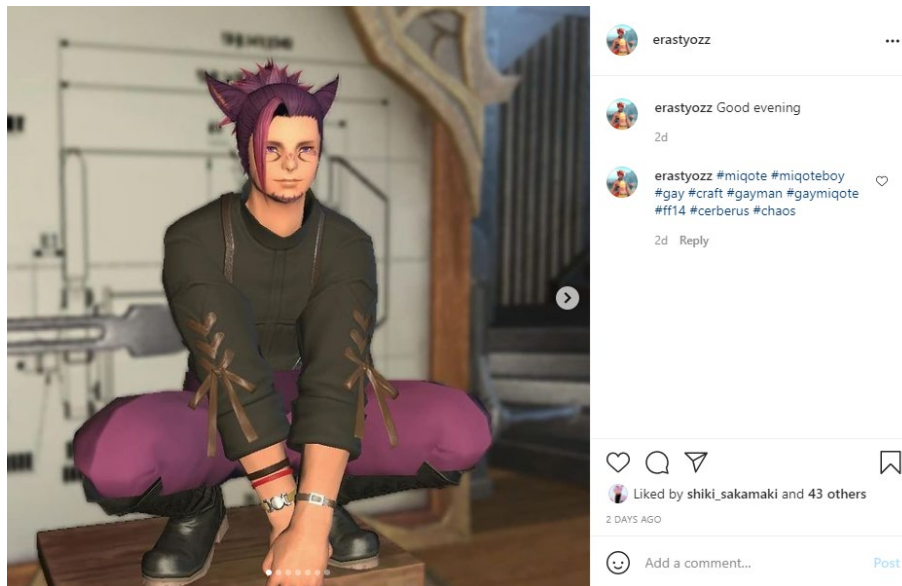


Figure 5.25. erastyozz, “Good evening”, 2021, screenshot by author of an Instagram post. (Erasty Ozz (@erastyozz) 2021a).

On Instagram, a prevalent activity for users is taking self-portraits, commonly called 'selfies'. For *FFXIV Online* gamers, this aspect of Instagram serves a similar purpose. These gamers frequently capture images of their avatars, posting them as selfies on the platform and engaging in a subtle form of role-playing. For instance, they might accompany these avatar selfies with captions like "good evening", such as in figure 5.25, normalising the act of selfie-taking for their avatars. As a result, the settings for these images often lean towards the mundane, contrasting with the game's fantastical elements. The posing and styling of the characters are deliberately crafted to mimic the everyday images prevalent on social media platforms. This approach reflects gamers' aspirations to normalise their avatars within the virtual environment. The images of their avatars are thus designed to resonate with the everyday, familiar quality of social media content, underscoring a desire for a seamless integration of their virtual personas into the typical social media landscape.



Figure 5.26. fyonn_ffxiv, "Saturday night out!", 2021, screenshot by author of Instagram post. (F'yonn (@fyonn_ffxiv) 2021).



Figure 5.27. Dave Swindells, *Shoom Nightclub*, 1988, photograph, London.

The avatar image (fig. 5.26) above resembles the photographs Dave Swindells took (fig. 5.27), who documented the British gay club scene in the 1990s. Whereas Swindells' work captures spontaneous moments in time, the virtual photograph by Fyonn represents a meticulously crafted simulation of reality. Creating an appearance of spontaneity in a virtual environment demands

considerable time and effort. This observation does not suggest that the enjoyment or activities *FFXIV Online* gamers engage in are artificial or insincere. Instead, it highlights their desire to document their virtual experiences using a visual language like that used for capturing offline events despite the time and effort required. This approach allows gamers to draw parallels between their in-game experiences and those occurring in the physical world, legitimising and validating their virtual experiences through a familiar and accessible photographic aesthetic.

Virtual photography addresses a fundamental human need: recognition and connection in a world where physical interaction is increasingly scarce. Sharing an image online and receiving validation for it holds substantial significance. This need for acknowledgement and validation is not confined to personal images but extends to virtual avatars, as seen in the images above. The avatar, functioning as a proxy, is showcased in a context like the self-affirming selfies on Instagram. This phenomenon suggests that the quest for validation and recognition can be effectively satisfied through avatars, serving as stand-ins for the individuals.

In summary, virtual photography in *FFXIV Online* is not a monolithic activity. Gamers engage in it for various reasons, from documenting their gaming journey to enhancing their avatar's identity. The joy derived from the community's positive feedback on their creative outputs is a significant aspect of this experience, showcasing the interconnectedness of individual creativity and communal engagement in online gaming environments.

5.7.2 Virtual photographs remediating photography



Figure 5.28. Karl van Heerden, *Pointy Hat*, 2023, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

In my exploration of virtual photography within *FFXIV Online*, I have observed that numerous traditional photography principles apply to virtual subjects, albeit in novel contexts. Skills like managing focal length, lighting, composition, depth of field, and lens aberrations, exemplified in figure 5.28, remain pivotal in crafting images in the virtual domain. While virtual photography distinctly differs from traditional photography in many ways, it shares enough foundational principles to make transitioning skills from the physical to the digital realm relatively seamless. My background as a photographer enables me to infuse a photographic perspective into creating virtual images, blending artistic sensibilities with the unique characteristics of the digital medium.

The reasons for capturing virtual photographs mirror their traditional counterpart in several aspects. Virtual photography serves diverse purposes, such as recording collective experiences, weaving narratives, and fulfilling the intrinsic human need to be noticed. The essence of virtual photography's impact lies in its unremarkable nature; its novelty or distinctiveness is not noteworthy. Instead, its significance is derived from its familiar mode of visual engagement, now transposed into an entirely new digital context. Despite the medium shift, this continuity in visual perception lends virtual photography its unique appeal.

Virtual photography is analogous to traditional photography in that it bridges the gap between self-representation and image. It transforms the virtual self into a tangible reality, imbuing

it with significance, authority, and a distinct identity. This medium allows gamers to materialise their characters, giving them form and legitimacy beyond the fleeting in-game interactions. It immortalises these characters, allowing them to extend beyond the confines of mere graphical representations within the game's universe.



Figure 5.29. Karl van Heerden, *Sunday Dress*, 2023, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

Virtual photography within *FFXIV Online* presents a distinctive perspective of the game's environment, focusing on the scene's essence by eliminating superfluous elements. Removing UI components is not solely to enhance photographic realism, as other scholars have suggested (Poremba 2007), but more crucially, to omit irrelevant and non-essential details. This practice aligns with a fundamental principle in design: the distillation of visual content into its most communicative elements². In figure 5.29, for instance, I have removed in-game elements such as distracting UI and game icons. In some cases, other characters are also hidden using in-game settings. By excluding extraneous details, a focused composition of the avatars and their surroundings remains. The essence of virtual photography lies in the deliberate design of the

² Often described as the Law of Prägnanz, or, the tendency for people to prefer simpler and contiguous compositions over complexity (Lidwell, Holden, and Butler 2010, 144).

avatar and its interaction with the environment. The positioning and posing of the avatar reveal insights into the player's intentions and mindset, offering a window into their virtual experience.



Figure 5.30. Karl van Heerden, *Sue Satie*, 2022, virtual photograph, artwork in possession of the artist.

In my personal experience, virtual photography has been a profoundly introspective endeavour and highlighted certain aspects of my relationship with my avatar, as shown in figure 5.30. Although I do not perceive my character as a conduit for exploring different facets of selfhood, a pronounced bond exists between myself and my avatar. This connection is reinforced and articulated through the images I capture and share. My approach to virtual photography does not stem from a desire for self-exploration; instead, it serves as a medium to express and affirm the distinct character of my avatar, Sue.

5.7.3 Collaborations in virtual photography

Gaymers blend communal engagement and individual discretion, particularly when permitting others to photograph their characters. Collaborative activities occur, yet there is a discernible cautious approach to such interactions. Felon remarks on collaborations, stating that he engages

in them "not too often, just because I kind of prefer doing it by myself" (interview with author, August 8, 2023). He elaborates, "I think it depends how comfortable I am with the person because some are a bit picky about how they want you to make the character, and others are more relaxed" (interview with author, August 8, 2023). There is a prevalent reticence in allowing others to capture images of their characters. Palar reflects this sentiment: "I've never explicitly asked somebody to take a photo of Sybil, nor do I think I really have the intention to. I'm kind of stubborn, where I'm just like, if I want something, I will do it myself" (interview with author, June 13, 2023). This preference for self-capturing avatars' images underscores this activity's significance in augmenting the avatar's persona.

The cautiousness among gamers of *FFXIV Online* about granting others the liberty to manipulate or photograph their avatars reflects a strong preference for personal oversight in portraying and disseminating their virtual personas. Braenna articulates this sentiment: "I don't think I'd just go to anyone and allow them free manipulation of my character, either" (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Nevertheless, the willingness to occasionally collaborate highlights a sense of community and collective identity formation. This behaviour aligns with the initial hypothesis that avatar creation is not solely an individual endeavour but involves interaction and cooperation with others, thereby enriching the gamer's narrative and persona.

5.8 Conclusion

The research findings from the interviews, case studies, and visual ethnographic work were grouped into the themes of gender and sexuality, relationships and communities, character creation, social media, role-play, and virtual photography. The findings relating to gender and sexuality exposed the complex understanding gamers demonstrate of their online selves. Gamers view gender as necessary yet fluid, paradoxically placing great emphasis on the gender of avatars while seemingly disregarding the gender of their offline peers. Relationships and communities were reoccurring concepts that arose across all research methodologies. Gamers were interested in forming and maintaining online relationships with individuals and groups. Furthermore, these gamers found safety and comfort in their online relationships yet frequently remarked on the intricacies of navigating online romance.

Character creation is deeply significant to gamers, and *FFXIV Online*'s character creator was a main draw for some of them. Gamers emphasised the importance of self-representation, 'standing out', and appearing distinct from other avatars. Character creators allow them to

experiment with various selves or trial versions of themselves they wish to enact offline. Gaymers are aware of the limitations of character creation in *FFXIV Online* and utilise mods to resist the limitations imposed by developers and uniquely tailor their avatars to their interests. However, the findings on social media are nuanced. The case study analysis revealed a vibrant and active queer *FFXIV Online* community on Instagram, where gaymers regularly post images of their avatars and engage in collaborative role-play. However, interviews with gaymers exposed an underlying anxiety around navigating the politics of online communities. They opt not to post their images and use private servers on Discord publicly—the exception being Felon. While not explored for this study, Discord communities present a rich opportunity for further studying the world of micropublic online communities.

A surprising finding was the importance of role-play—namely erotic role-play—in the co-construction of online identities. Role-play emerges as a hybrid textual and visual practice that constructs and regulates the avatar persona. Gaymers in role-play communities engage in writing complex backstories and narratives for their characters, inevitably expressed in virtual photographs. Gender and sexuality are recontextualised in surprising ways through erotic role-play and often permit gaymers to explore new aspects of their sexuality. Finally, when turning to virtual photography, the research findings support the initial hypothesis that it is crucial in how gaymers convey their online persona. Virtual photography lends permanence and credibility to persona work in games in combination with role-play, character customisation, and avatar fashion. An immense variety of approaches and perspectives on avatar customisation arises from the visual virtual ethnographic work conducted for this study.

The research findings present a complex picture of gaymer/avatar identity construction. Identity formation online is visual, textual, active, embodied, and social. Gaymers engage in practices that construct, refine, and maintain their personas through role-play and virtual photography. Moreover, they engage in this process socially and develop cultural norms around gender, sex, and identity tailored to their virtual environment. The following two chapters analyse the research findings in the context of contemporary academic discourse on gender, sexuality, online communities, virtual photography, and video game studies. The analysis considers the sexual identity formation of gaymers in MMORPG communities from the perspectives of role-play, avatar creation, avatar fashion, social media, and virtual photography.

CHAPTER 6: GAYMER IDENTITY FORMATION IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

6.1 Introduction to the analysis

The central objective of this chapter and the subsequent chapter is to present and critically analyse the findings derived from the research methodology employed, as outlined in Chapter 4. This analysis will synthesise insights from participant interviews, case study examinations, and empirical work in a comprehensive critical evaluation underpinned by the theoretical framework delineated in Chapters 2 and 3. This evaluation will provide an in-depth understanding of how online avatars in MMORPGs and social media platforms contribute to the nuanced processes of gender and sexual identity formation among gamers.

In Chapters 2 and 3, the literature review is structured into three thematic categories. The first theme pertains to self-representation and identity within online environments. This category critically examines the role of avatar customisation in online communities, emphasising how individuals utilise these digital personas to project their idealised identities. The second category delves into queer sexuality within virtual communities. Here, the focus is on gender studies and queer theory, particularly their application and relevance in digital contexts. This theme underscores the profound influence of virtual communities on queer individuals, highlighting their role in providing educational resources, emotional support, and fostering vital social networks. The third and final category addresses the role of virtual photography in constructing and articulating online identities. This section explores various facets of virtual photography, analysing its impact on the representation and collaborative formation of identities within virtual communities.

The following two chapters organise the research data around four pivotal topics: sexual identity in virtual communities, gamer communities, self-representation in *FFXIV Online*, and the role of virtual photography in identity construction. These themes serve as the foundation for understanding the dynamics of online identity formation in virtual spaces, particularly within *FFXIV Online* and Instagram. These topics facilitate a structured discussion of the critical insights obtained from the research data. They were developed to systematically categorise and interpret the findings from the interviews, case study analysis, virtual ethnographic work, and literature review. Each theme offers specific insights into distinct facets of the online role-playing experience. Collectively, these topics address the fundamental aims and research questions

posed at the outset of Chapter 1. They provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the various aspects of identity formation and representation in virtual environments, thereby contributing valuable insights to online identity studies.

The analytical framework for this study was developed through a thematic synthesis of interview data, cross-referenced with insights from case studies, virtual ethnographic work, and the established theoretical framework. The central aim of foregrounding interview data in this analysis was to ensure that the voices of study participants, belonging to a closely-knit community, played a pivotal role in guiding the research. As a member of this community, I am reminded that Gorman-Murray et al. observed that “being aware of your own subject position” is a crucial step in exploring how the positions of power and privilege affect “the process of communication” (2010, 99) between participants and researcher. Given the focus on exploring the nuances of this community, it was crucial to allow their/our perspectives and understandings to shape the subsequent analysis. However, it was equally essential to contextualise the contributions of all participants within the ambit of existing research, employing a critical lens to examine their/our input.

This study addresses a research problem of considerable importance, stemming from the limited academic focus on the gaymer community in *FFXIV Online*. Investigating this under-explored phenomenon contributes substantially to an academic understanding of identity co-construction and the development of gaymers within the context of MMORPGs. A critical insight offered by this research is understanding the influence that role-playing, virtual photography, and social media engagement have on exploring and experimenting with identity among these individuals. This study also explores the role of MMORPGs in fostering identity exploration and co-construction among gaymers.

The selection of *FFXIV Online* as the focal point for this thesis provides a unique perspective within the MMORPG genre. The game's culture and setting create an environment conducive to a vibrant and dynamic role-playing community. This aspect is particularly appealing to a diverse range of individuals. For instance, the popularity of the Miqo'te race among young gay men underscores this appeal. Moreover, *FFXIV Online*'s customisation and glamour options strike a notable balance, facilitating the expression of sexuality and sexual identity without excessively fetishising or sexualising any specific gender expression. Notably, the game provides sartorial choices typically confined to one gender to all players, thereby promoting fluidity in gender expression. The combination of extensive customisation options and the comprehensive

in-game virtual photography toolset, Gpose, offers gamers enhanced opportunities for self-expression, surpassing many other MMORPGs.

6.2 Sexual identity formation in *FFXIV Online* and Instagram

6.2.1 *The importance of avatar design in identity formation*

The game system of *FFXIV Online* emphasises and facilitates gamer expression through avatar customization. The developers meticulously crafted this aspect of the game, encompassing character creation and further modification of outfits and appearances, to foster a deep connection between gamers and their avatars. As Kafai et al. note, avatar customisation is central to how gamers experiment with identity in an “identity playground” (2010, 38). However, these virtual embodiments are not limited to serving as experimental vessels. The reality is multifaceted, encompassing a spectrum of motivations and intentions behind how gamers depict their characters. A salient aspect of this phenomenon is using avatars as tools for artistic expression. Wood and Szymanski refer to this kind of expression as “cosmetic customisation” (2020, 125), alterations to the avatar’s appearance that do not directly impact the character’s performance in the game.

Varied approaches to customisation are evident: some gamers harness their characters for narrative articulation, crafting and sharing stories they wish to tell. Others adopt a more visual approach, meticulously styling their characters, positioning them in carefully chosen settings, and capturing these compositions in images. Patti (2017, 179), for example, documents how transgender individuals make use of the gender fluidity afforded by virtual avatars to destabilise norms around identity and gender expression. This multiplicity in use underscores the diversity of how avatars are perceived and utilised within the *FFXIV Online* gamer community, revealing a myriad of personal and artistic expressions. While it is uncertain whether the developers' original intent was for avatars to be used extensively as instruments for experimentation and expression, it has become evident that they recognise and support this usage. However, Shaw warns that the limits of character customisation are up to the developers, who may impose cultural biases or reinforce unhealthy norms due to a lack of proper training (2014, 231).

The respondents in my research reported spending significant time refining their characters’ appearances using the game’s glamour system, underscoring the importance of achieving their desired look. Bartle highlights that character customisation typically confers only indirect benefits to gameplay, a category he refers to as “intangibles” (2003, 219). However, Bartle

notes that these intangibles are critical components of virtual worlds (290). Additionally, gamers extend their creativity beyond the game's default offerings by employing modifications. Initially, I assumed these modifications were for personal enjoyment, as they are typically visible only to the installed user. However, Klastrup and Tosca note that an often-cited reason for customising avatars is for gamers to "make their characters noticeable" (2009, 11). There exists a third-party application for *FFXIV Online*, *Mare Synchronos*, that enables gamers to synchronise and view each other's customizations, transforming modifications from a personal indulgence to a potent tool for crafting specific images visible to others (Penumbra-Sync 2024). Meanwhile, Poremba claims game modifications are a "critique of authorial determinacy" (2010, 41) and a means of repositioning the gamer as a co-author in the video game experience.

The capabilities of *Mare Synchronos* elevate modifications to an integral part of the character creation process, allowing gamers to transcend the game's inherent limitations and utilise community-generated assets to realise their idealised avatars. In their research, Kafai et al. describe a community-driven marketplace for character customisations, or "face parts" (2010, 32), in the virtual world of *Whyville*. The authors outline that with the commodification of character modifications, communities experience a tension between the ease of access to premade assets and a desire for originality (36). This tension is also evident in the community of *FFXIV Online*, such as Braenna and Kiki who commissioned original 'parts'—tattoos, clothing, or body parts—for their characters from others. Notably, modified characters frequently appear on Instagram despite the risk of account suspension or banning, as modifying the game is against the terms of service.

Nevertheless, gamers appear undeterred in sharing images featuring modifications, indicating a strong desire to express their unique sense of self. Ruberg posits that the power of queer art is "in destabilizing the very notion of a mainstream" (2020, 29). In other words, gamers continue to post content that may violate the terms of service of either *FFXIV Online* or Instagram to resist dominant heteronarratives.

Some respondents revealed they crafted avatars to mirror their appearance, suggesting a conscious or subconscious desire for visual resemblance. However, Emily Apter (2008) warns that it is naïve to consider the avatar a mere "idealized double of the player-subject" (13). Instead, the avatar is a "vicissitude of the [Freudian] drive" (13), enabling transformation in the gamer through a "subjective agency" (13). Yee and Bailenson term this the "Proteus Effect" (2007), whereby gamers perceive traits in their avatars and act accordingly. For example, Yee et al.

(2009, 299) demonstrate that gaymers with taller avatars expressed greater confidence than those with short characters. In contrast to the research, much of the focus on avatar design for gaymers lies in its utility for specific scenarios, with them placing greater emphasis on clothing and attire rather than the character's physical attributes. Klastrup and Tosca illustrate that much of this concern around character clothing stems from a desire to reduce “status anxiety” (2009, 10) or the concern that an avatar's design does not align with the group's norms.

From the research data, I have observed a pronounced awareness among gaymers regarding the communicative power of their avatars' appearance in *FFXIV Online*. The interviews I conducted highlighted the significance they place on their avatars' aesthetics, viewing them as a vital means of self-expression and narrative construction. Kafai et al. describe avatars as the interface between “individual agency” and existing “social structures” (2010, 26), meaning avatars are the mechanisms through which gaymers negotiate their intentions with the constraints of the broader social milieu. Avatar design underpins the three aspects of self-representation: “resources, constraints, and agency” (26). Gaymers meticulously curate their avatars' appearance, employing character design as a tool to shape narratives and project desired identities within the game's universe. Ruberg (2019, 19) likens gaymer self-expression to a queer, i.e. resistant, mode of play. Queer play, she claims, is where “the queer body... press[es] up against a game” (19) as a way of exploring the queer self in the medium of video games.

Instagram analysis corroborates this finding, revealing that avatar design is instrumental in crafting and communicating gaymer narratives. Patti notes that video game portraits are placed within a “contextual network that includes the textual world of the game, the player's social environment while engaged in gameplay, and the viewer's position in relation to the portrait” (2017, 181). In other words, digital portraits encapsulate the lived experiences of gaymers, both within and outside the virtual environment. Furthermore, gaymers strategically tailor their avatars' appearances to align with specific scenes or to embody specific narratives they wish to convey. Evelyn Deshane and Travis Morton (2018, 139) argue that while gaymers engage in the ‘doing’ of video games, they perform the work of identity construction. The authors substantiate their argument by linking Shaw's (2012) observations that gaymers, in some scenarios, concentrate less on the character than on the act of gameplay with Butler's (2006) concept of gender identity as an active process.

The imagery on Instagram also reveals further reasons behind avatar design. These avatars are meticulously tailored for distinct objectives, such as promoting personal services or

enhancing role-play events. The importance of fashion is evident in images showcasing avatars dressed in outfits that align with the narratives being constructed by gamers. Williams et al. highlight three primary motivations through their ethnographic study of role-players: “enhancing creativity, building skills, and functioning as a health coping mechanism” (2011, 190). Avatars are dynamically altered and customised to suit the unique context of each narrative, eschewing a uniform appearance that is applied across various storylines. This approach highlights the adaptability of avatar presentation, reflecting an intricate relationship between character design and narrative development in virtual spaces. Taylor describes avatars as the objects that “influence and propel the formation of identity and relationships” (2006, 96). In other words, avatars are the mechanism through which gamers construct their role-play narratives both in *FFXIV Online* and on Instagram.

My documentation of characters within the game world of *FFXIV Online* demonstrates that character design is a deliberate and thoughtful process, reflecting an understanding of the labour involved in identity construction. While traversing Hydaelyn, the avatars I observed showcased considerable attention to detail in their creation. Wood and Szymanski highlight that gamers identify with their avatars in one of two ways, either through “similarity identification” or “wishful identification” (2020, 127). In the former, gamers deliberately craft avatars that mimic themselves physically or psychologically (127). In the latter, gamers project desired characteristics onto the avatar as a “role model for future action” (127). The various ways gamers identify with their avatars underscores the profound significance of aesthetic choices in online identity formation, signifying their role in conveying narratives, desires, and personal expressions.

Gamers who create avatars in *FFXIV Online* exhibit a discernible preference for certain physical features and racial designs over others. This trend emerged consistently across different data collection methods, including interviews, analysis of Instagram images, and observations from the virtual ethnographic project. Yee and Bailenson's (2007) research provides one possible explanation for this phenomenon. The authors highlight in their research that gamers experience a desire to conform their appearance in alignment with “local group norms” (274). The desire for conformity implies that popular physical features are chosen because of their already-defined status within the community. Consalvo and Begy (2015, 37) explain that the early players of video games—dubbed ‘beta’ players—shape the norms and standards of the community. *FFXIV Online* is unique in that the game was relaunched in 2012, two years after the initial release of the game, due to overwhelming complaints from players (Square Enix 2012a). This turbulent period in the

game's history proved formative, creating a particular class of 'legacy' players—those who have played since 1.0—who acted as senior community members. Legacy players received exclusive in-game items with a lower subscription, and their names appeared in the credits of the rereleased game (Square Enix 2012b).

Therefore, it is likely that these early players proliferated the preferences observed in my research. In particular, the races of Miqu'te and Au'Ra are predominantly represented in high-level player populations, overshadowing other available races such as Hyur, Lalafell, Elezen, Hrothgar, Roegadyn, and Viera (FFXIV Census 2024). Nakamura, in her later work, describes digital bodies as “positioned within a command and control paradigm of desire” (2008, 66), in other words, a fetish. Digital bodies are fetishised for their otherness and strangeness (Nakamura 2002, 40). The alien races of *FFXIV Online* are no different, offering new sanitised expressions of desire and power without the fear of objectifying racial groups in the physical world. Several authors have noted a similar trend in the fetishisation of Blood Elves in *WoW* due to their more feminised appearance than males of other races (Corneliusen 2008, 73; Sundén 2012a, 171; Nardi 2010, 169).

Participants in this study indicated that they had conceived their characters' identities before actual creation within the game. This insight is helpful as it is difficult to corroborate gamers' offline and online experiences (Boellstorff 2008, 61). Cover argues that the 'true' self does not lie in the offline or online self but that both are “mechanisms for attempting to be effective in articulating a coherent and recognisable self” (2012, 180). Early research by Yee et al. (2009, 307) indicates that gamers often define their characters based on their self-perception. Their research suggests that some gamers import preconceived notions of character archetypes and designs into the MMORPG environment.

In contrast, in *WoW*, Rgnhild Tronstad (2008, 249) observes a difference in capacity—a character's capabilities—and appearance, which causes friction for gamers. For example, certain character races or jobs have unique abilities, influencing a gamer's choice. However, in *FFXIV Online*, this access to traits or abilities is unrestricted, as gamers can apply any appearance regardless of what kind of character they want to play.

The process of avatar customisation in *FFXIV Online* extends beyond personal gratification. It is not solely about creating a character that resonates personally with the gamer; it also involves a social dimension where the character gains reality and substance through interaction and acknowledgement by others. Kafai et al. note that the primary motivation for many

players is in the “social interaction with others” (2010, 28); however, Boellstorff questions the depth to which players view their avatars as extensions of themselves rather than just “fitting the part” (2008, 149) in social settings. Taylor, meanwhile, argues that customising the avatar is a crucial step in forming social connections and “in becoming an individual and making the body real” (2002, 51). My research confirms Taylor’s observations: when other gaymers respond to, compliment, or remark on an avatar’s appearance, it enhances the character’s reality for its creator. This external validation and social interaction play a critical role in shaping and affirming the gaymer’s identity within the virtual space, which combines personal expression with the desire for social acknowledgement.

6.2.2 *Gender dynamics between gaymers and avatar*

Gender is pivotal in gaymers’ attachment to their characters in *FFXIV Online*. Interviews revealed that they often seek a strong identification with their character’s gender, which significantly impacts their engagement. Butler goes so far as to claim that gender identity is the very thing that “determines... the living versus the dead body” (2006, 93). In other words, gaymers affirm the ‘life’ of their avatars by producing a gendered identity through it. Emma Westecott (2017, 240) likens this form of gender play to drag performances in that both call attention to the artificial structure of gender itself. Newman offers an intriguing counterpoint, claiming that gaymers are less concerned with the representational nature of the avatar and favour the “capabilities, potentials and techniques offered to the player by the character” (2002, 8). This perspective is somewhat echoed by the interview respondent Braenna, who considers various other aspects of her character equally or more influential than gender in shaping her online persona (interview with author, June 12, 2023).

The variation in gender expression employed by gaymers within *FFXIV Online* indicates a complex relationship between them, their avatars, and their gender identity. Notably, during character creation, gaymers often choose their avatar’s gender as an idealised representation of themselves. Bessière et al. (2007, 534) make an intriguing connection, noting a direct correlation between a gaymer’s self-esteem and how highly they rated their avatar. The more depressed the gaymer, the more highly they regarded their avatar. The link between mental health and self-perception was also a recurring theme among the interviewees in my research.

For Braenna, a transgender respondent, the opportunity to role-play and enact her identity within the game was particularly impactful, offering a means to express herself in ways not

validated in her physical reality (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Deshane and Morton add insight into Braenna's testimony, noting that "cisgender people will be considered real in their [gender] performance, while transgender people will be seen as fake" (2018, 140). For cisgender interviewees, the focus was less on gender exploration and more on articulating other aspects of their identity that are challenging to express in daily life. This expression often manifests through adopting admired personality traits or character qualities. Cover notes that online users view online interactions as a means to "overcome problematic distinctions grounded in the body" (2016, 109) but warns that online interactions are always mediated through a physical body.

Perhaps because of their experiences in the game, gamers often deem others' offline gender inconsequential in the context of *FFXIV Online*. The research respondents highlighted that it is the gender of the avatar rather than the player that holds significance in their role-playing experiences. This distinction underscores a sense of authenticity and credibility in interactions based on avatar identities, irrespective of the offline gender of the players. This phenomenon is echoed in the anxiety demonstrated by gamers when characters of a particular gender appear too masculine or feminine (Sherlock 2013, 166). Gamers, therefore, emphasise the gendered characteristics of their avatars. As will be discussed later, the dynamic shifts to where there is a great deal of concern around the gender of partners in the context of cybersex and erotic role-play.

However, most users' avatars on Instagram correspond with their gender identity, but there are notable exceptions where gamers have characters of different genders. A prime example is Jayden, who identifies as a male but has a female avatar. Valkyrie (2011, 82) perhaps best describes Jayden's female avatar as designed for pleasure for the male player. However, in Jayden's case, he also engages in romantic role-play with his female partner. Denni Waskul describes online interactions as making new forms of sexual encounters possible that gamers "would not (or could not) experience in 'real' face-to-face sexual encounters" (2003, 82).

In contrast, the role-player Kakiyon exhibits a range of gender identities across their characters, often preferring to role-play as male. Ruberg defines the term 'structural queerness' as "the idea that game mechanics themselves can be queer" (2020, 185). In Kakiyon's case, they utilise the mechanics of avatar creation and customisation to challenge conceptions around gamer gender identity. These two cases present an intriguing dichotomy: Jayden appears less conscious of his character's gender transgression, whereas Kakiyon actively engages with gender as a concept, exploring its fluidity and boundaries. These examples highlight how *FFXIV Online*

facilitates diverse gender expressions, allowing gamers to navigate and experiment with identity in ways that may differ from their offline experiences.

Gamers in *FFXIV Online* are keenly aware of the gendered avatar's impact on their gameplay and interactions with other avatars. The respondents I spoke with clearly understand how gender influences their interactions. Some have multiple accounts with avatars of different genders, while others have created characters that deliberately blur traditional gender boundaries. Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Dana Mastro (2009) present research that seems to suggest that it is not the gender of the avatar but rather the degree of sexualisation of the avatar that informs gamers' opinions on their avatar. They argue that "playing the 'sexualized' character resulted in less favorable attitudes toward women's cognitive... [and] physical capabilities" (820). On Instagram, the emphasis on gender and gender identity is somewhat less pronounced. However, it is still evident that gamers are conscious of how their avatars' gender representation affects their self-perception and how others perceive them. Social status is particularly significant for gamers, who rely on social media sites to maintain and strengthen peer bonds online and offline (Drushel 2010, 66).

Generally, Instagram users tend to dress their characters in ways that align with their gender identity. There is limited evidence of users actively seeking to blur gender lines or use non-conforming gender identities as a means of self-expression. It would appear that these gamers are satisfied with mimicking the "ritual social dramas" (Butler 2006, 191) they observe in their everyday lives. In her later work, Butler offers some insight into this dilemma. She (Butler 2011, 86) notes,

[gender identity is] always beset by ambivalence precisely because there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, resignify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely.

Therefore, gamers are engaged in the constant struggle of asserting their identities through virtualised performance. One way in which this struggle has not manifested itself, in my observations, is in the leveraging of a "new discourse and taxonomy of identity labels" (Cover 2019, 153) that seek to challenge the dominant hierarchies of hetero/homosexual. Gamers appear to embrace more 'accepted' labels such as "gay", "lesbian", or "bisexual".

6.2.3 *Role-play and the exploration of sexual identity formation*

Role-play in *FFXIV Online* represents a deeply personal and immersive experience. This activity allows gamers to forge a profound connection with their avatars, facilitating an intimate exploration of their personalities and characteristics that they have meticulously crafted. Gary Alan Fine (1983, 211) notes in his research on role-play that this dedication to constructing a persona may come even at the cost of ‘succeeding’ at the game. Avatars have been discussed in academia as collaborative tools for self-expression (Pearce and Artemesia 2007, 314), and my research suggests that the essence of self-discovery lies more in role-playing through these avatars. Research on the Proteus effect (Yee and Bailenson 2007), *EverQuest* (Taylor 2002), and the cybersex role-play of Goldshire in *WoW* (Sherlock 2013) support this observation. The deliberate act of role-play “allows people to construct, express, and perform the identity they are seeking” (Taylor 2002, 52).

In live gameplay, as observed in the virtual ethnography project, numerous instances of character interaction were noted. Physical proximity emerges as the most prominent indicator of social affiliation, consistent with previous findings. Seated hangout spots are frequently utilised to foster a sense of camaraderie. The desire for gamers to inhabit the same virtual space is so strong that researchers Anna Lomanowska and Matthieu Guitton refer to it as “a characteristic feature of social interactions in 3D virtual spaces” (2012, 322). Gamers familiar with each other often employ physical closeness as a visual method to signify and mirror their relationship status within the online context. Sadowski and Lomanowska demonstrate that gamers seeking out physical intimacy is “an important component in developing and/or maintaining these types of relationships and is related to the level of satisfaction experienced in these interactions” (2018, 8).

The avatar, significant as it is, forms just one component of a broader, more complex process. The immersive experience of role-playing through the avatar enables gamers to explore and express different facets of their identity. The importance of role-play is evident in the responses gathered during interviews and the narratives and character details in Instagram posts related to *FFXIV Online*. Frederica Fornaciari calls upon symbolic interactionism to consider online identity construction as “constantly renegotiated in interaction, and individuals together create the realities of their social groups” (2013, 67). From this perspective, the ephemera collected from Instagram are evidence of a collaborative exercise in social identity formation.

In my research, I have discovered a profound engagement with character development among *FFXIV Online* gamers, evidenced by the meticulous crafting of personality traits and backstories for role-play. A meta-study by Frederica Sibilla and Tiziana Mancini concluded that most research agrees that avatars “usually tended to be a ‘better’ version of the user’s personality” (2018, 6). Therefore, crafting the avatar personality is a means to improve upon the gamer’s own perceived flaws. Gamers are not content with merely creating visually appealing avatars; they enrich these characters with detailed histories and personality traits based on their ideals (7), enhancing their believability. Fox and Ahn qualify this idealisation by noting that gamers “must feel that [the avatar] is similar enough to them that they are able to experience the same outcomes” (2013, 257). In other words, the avatar’s design, narrative, personality traits, and backstory cannot be so perfect as to feel unattainable to the gamer.

There is an intriguing disparity in how respondents perceive their characters' backstories and personalities relative to the game's context as a role-playing platform. While the respondents weave aspects of the game into their characters' backstories, they do not regard the virtual world as a *game* in their character-creation process. The characters, as described by the role-players I interviewed, exist within the fictional world of Hydaelyn, seemingly detached from the technics of video game design. Tanya Krzywinska describes the “intertextual features for the generation of meaning and recognition” (2008, 123) that underpin fantasy-themed MMORPGs. Games such as *FFXIV Online* include references and allusions to other texts to “[locate] players meaningfully in the game world” (124).

Interestingly, from the interviews conducted, gamers are conscious of these references and include them in their character backstories. References to magical resurrections, mysterious artefacts, and objects of desire to be rescued abound. However, they also emphasised adherence to the internal logic of the game world itself. This form of intratextuality “makes for thick text and a rich experience” (128) on the gamer’s part, further immersing them in their role-play narrative. Similarly, the Instagram images I analysed do not acknowledge or incorporate gameplay as a vital aspect of the character’s existence. This observation underscores an apparent inclination among both Instagram users and interview respondents to disengage from the game aspect of *FFXIV Online* in their role-play. Their focus, instead, is on inhabiting and exploring a narrative-rich, fictional universe within the game’s setting.

FFXIV Online gamers actively rehearsed their characters' interactions, manifesting as a ritualised performance. The ritualised nature of character role-play is highlighted by Braenna, who

practises dialogues before enacting them in social settings. Her insight reveals that such performances are not spontaneous or intuitive expressions of self but represent rehearsed, ritualised behaviours that gamers refine before engaging socially. This process could be interpreted as building confidence or deepening their understanding and connection with the character they portray. Demosthenes Akoumianakis demonstrates that “communities emerge and sustain their function through the members’ recurrent interactions with cultural artifacts, which reflect the practice the community members are engaged in” (2011, 49). The cultural artefacts in question for the role-playing community of *FFXIV Online* are chat-based interactions. Braenna rehearses these interactions alone before engaging in role-play (interview with author, June 12, 2023). Taylor’s (2006) research indicates that ‘role-play as practice’ is an opportunity to rehearse offline social scenarios. Thus, role-play serves a dual function: to engage with and sustain the cultural artefacts of an online community while allowing gamers to ‘try out’ different social scenarios in a lower-risk environment.

In this context, Instagram posts can also be seen as a form of character practice, particularly those where captions provide additional context or narrative elements. These images may serve as a platform for exploring how the character might react in various scenarios, offering gamers a space to refine and practise their character’s persona. In her early work on collaborative environments, Pearce defines this kind of storytelling as “emergent authorship” (2002), wherein gamers enter into the role of “consumer-producer” (21). Within the paradigm of *FFXIV Online* role-play, gamers produce their identities and consume the identities of their peers. Thus, Instagram has become a medium for sharing personas and a tool for developing and honing the virtual identities that gamers create and inhabit in *FFXIV Online*.

Role-play in *FFXIV Online* offers a vital avenue for transgender individuals to explore and affirm their gender identity, particularly for those in marginalised groups. While Yee et al. (2007; 2009) never discuss transgender gamers within the context of their research, their discussions on the Proteus effect apply nevertheless. If gender is, as Dea notes, a collection of “socio-cultural psychological matters” (2016, 18) and if avatars demonstrate a profound and “instantaneous effect... on behaviour in digital environments” (Yee, Bailenson, and Ducheneaut 2009, 285) then it is logical to conclude that transgender gamers experience a profound shift in their gender identity via their avatars. Cavalcante (2016, 114) concurs, noting that transgender gamers use video game avatars as early forms of gender experimentation. *FFXIV Online* provides an inclusive environment where transgender gamers can adopt and experience various identities, offering

validation and a sense of achievement that might be challenging or unsafe to pursue in their offline circumstances.

Respondents in my interviews have shared that constraints in their current real-life situations prevent them from thoroughly or safely transitioning, making role-play a crucial and sometimes the only means of gender affirmation available to them. However, on Instagram, discussions about the discrepancies between an individual's offline and online gender or sexuality are rare. From Boellstorff's interviews with players of *Second Life*, it becomes clear that players consciously disregard offline identity markers such as "gender, race, and age" (2008, 159). One player notes, "in real life, you get to know someone from the outside in, but in *Second Life*, you get to know them from the inside out" (in Boellstorff 2008, 159). Boellstorff does not mean to say that the avatar's sex is inconsequential. As he elaborates, players would often engage in sexual experimentation with others that "they were unable or unwilling to enact in the actual world" (165).

Furthermore, on Instagram, I observed a trend of character diversification. Several accounts featured various characters, each meticulously crafted to embody a specific archetype within their role-play narratives. These archetypes are derived from famous examples in media. Cover notes that "media images are utilized as a 'resource' for the code that make performativity of that identity coherent and recognizable" (2016, 65). In other words, gaymers rely on media-derived archetypes to fashion a digital self that others recognise. From subordinate to dominant personas and encompassing a spectrum from sadistic to joyous characters, gaymers indulge in portraying sharply defined, narrowly focused identities. These bespoke characters, each designed to fit precisely into their respective archetypal roles, illustrate gaymers' use of media codes in constructing their role-play. Apter also observes this phenomenon in the avatar body, describing avatars as "decoys masking the thingness of data" (2008, 10). Such a less-than-flattering description reminds the reader that avatar bodies are configurations deliberately constructed from data to project a self into virtual space.

In *FFXIV Online*, I observed gaymers actively delineate the parallels and divergences between their real-life personas and virtual avatars. Turkle discusses the relationship between the online and offline self throughout much of her work. In *Life on the Screen*, Turkle describes the potential for anonymous connection that virtual worlds provide, "one can be a loner yet never be alone" (1995, 30). Many years later, Turkle reflects on this idea from a more concerned standpoint, remarking that online conversations reduce apparent risk to the user but at the cost of experiencing in-person conversations as "a crucible for discovery" (2015, 40). Contrary to Turkle's

observations that gaymers prefer their online identities to minimise the ‘risk’ of offline interactions, my findings suggest a conscious effort to maintain a clear demarcation between offline and online sociality while engaging in both. This separation appears to be a protective strategy against the potential blurring of ‘reality’ and virtuality rather than an attempt to avoid offline interactions altogether.

Furthermore, interview respondents have a pronounced awareness regarding the distinction between actual relationships and those formed in role-play. It is essential to highlight that role-players carefully distinguish between gaymer-to-gaymer and character-to-character relationships. Role-players form deep and meaningful relationships with their peers as friends (Williams, Kennedy, and Moore 2011, 189). However, respondents in my research emphatically noted that their virtual relationships are distinct from their real-life connections, maintaining these within a fictitious context.

However, on Instagram, the demarcation between role-play and offline relationships becomes more ambiguous. Here, relationships are often portrayed as authentic within the game’s universe, with little distinction drawn between gaymers and their avatars. This approach is likely adopted to foster a cohesive and engaging narrative for the audience viewing the images, blending the lines between virtual role-play and gaymer to enhance the storytelling aspect of the shared content. Lee Sherlock observes that amongst queer role-players, there exists a desire to “challenge the assignments of value given to ‘real-life’ versus ‘role-played’ interaction” (2013, 169). Therefore, it becomes apparent that some gaymers on Instagram deliberately eschew the distinction between narrative and social connections to oppose attempts at delegitimising virtual friendships. In contrast, the respondents I interviewed did not express either pride or shame in their role-play relationships with other characters. The interviews revealed that these virtual relationships were viewed by these gaymers as exciting and enjoyable recreational activities rather than as crucial elements for their mental health or well-being, nor as something to be perceived as shameful or wrong.

However, instances of gaymers being in offline relationships are also evident. This dichotomy raises intriguing questions about distinguishing between those in a role-play relationship and those in an offline relationship. Tyler Pace, Shaowen Bardzell, and Jeffrey Bardzell explain that “intimacy is often located across real and virtual worlds, and not *in* one or the other” (2010, 235). As offline intimacy can be facilitated through *FFXIV Online*, gaymers do not appear to see offline intimate experiences as more ‘real’ than their online counterparts.

Instead, it becomes apparent from the interviews that gamers distinguish between manufactured intimacy within a role-play setting and everyday gestures of affection.

On Instagram, role-play is predominantly presented through imagery and textual narrative. Susan Murray describes this image-taking as “an autobiographical narrative of sorts, it rests upon old versions of the self as well as collections of objects and experiences encountered in everyday life” (2008, 156). Contrasting sharply with the collaborative and immediate nature of in-game role-playing, Instagram users tend to post retrospective visuals depicting role-play events they have participated in within the game. These posts capture and preserve fleeting moments of interaction, transforming ephemeral experiences into tangible memories. However, the dynamics of consent in these instances are not always transparent. While the interviewees in this study frequently underscored the importance of obtaining consent before publicising role-play scenarios involving others, it remains unclear whether this standard is universally upheld across all activities, particularly in taking images of each other. This ambiguity raises questions about the ethical considerations in documenting and sharing multiplayer role-play interactions on social media.

An intriguing ritual observed is the marriage ceremony in *FFXIV Online*, which requires a financial investment from gamers. Boellstorff (2008, 170) explores the implications of online wedding ceremonies and notes that many of his respondents felt virtual marriages are as, if not more, significant than their offline counterparts. However, these commitments may not always be romantic or sexual. As Taylor notes, it is not uncommon for players to marry individuals who are not their offline partners, even if both play the same game. Instead, marriages can be a “marker of deep friendship commitment” (2006, 54).

As Pearce and Artemesia (2009, 220) outline in their research, weddings in virtual worlds are styled after offline commitment ceremonies. Pearce herself was hired as a ‘photographer’ for a ceremony, documenting the day for the participants. Her observations highlight the complex interplay between online role-play relationships and offline connections, demonstrating the diverse ways gamers navigate and express their relationships in virtual worlds. Turkle (1995, 196) recounts from one of her interviews that these online ceremonies are not separate from the offline contexts of the players involved. Commitment ceremonies such as the eternal bonding ritual hold the potential to positively impact gamers’ self-confidence in social scenarios in both physical and virtual spaces (196). The necessity of a real-money payment for the marriage ceremony in *FFXIV Online* reiterates that it is a significant commitment. It raises an interesting

question about how the dynamics of in-game marriages might change if there were no costs associated with the ceremony, potentially altering the perception and value of these virtual unions.

Although it is challenging to gauge the exact impact of role-play and avatars on individuals' mental health through Instagram images alone, the meticulous effort invested in creating these images and developing characters is noteworthy. This level of attention to detail, a common thread among images examined, suggests that Instagram users likely find the role-playing process beneficial for their mental health. A recent study by Craig et al. supports this conclusion, noting that "social media also helps stigmatized youth maintain critical access to emotional support, develop their identities, find important information, and be entertained" (2021, 8). Sarah Evans further notes that participation in virtual networks, particularly for queer people, "increases their sense of belonging, connection to others, and self-esteem" (2018, 23). This research indicates that the activities within *FFXIV Online*, later published on Instagram, serve as a pastime and a meaningful engagement with significant psychological implications for gamers.

For some gamers, role-play becomes a self-care practice that improves mental health. Ruberg (2020, 210) explores in their research that queer games, or playing games queerly, can be a form of therapy that allows gamers to process grief and trauma. Numerous individuals have discovered robust support networks within *FFXIV Online* and perceive role-playing as pivotal in enhancing their mental well-being. Tronstad notes that the role-playing experience exists within a "continuum of empathic experiences" (2008, 251). It is empathy, Tronstad argues, that elicits various forms of engagement in the participants, such as "fictional engagement", "aesthetic experience", "aesthetic appreciation", and finally "self-reflection", wherein the gamer "is turned toward herself and how she would have reacted were she in a similar situation as the one unfolding on the screen" (253). As danah boyd (2014, 127) notes, empathy is an effective solution in constructing online support networks for young people.

Notably, respondents I interviewed seldom discussed role-play from their partners' perspectives. Little emphasis was placed on how the other person perceives, thinks, or reacts within the role-play context. Role-play emerges as a profoundly personal activity conducted collaboratively, yet the focus often reverts to the self once safety and privacy boundaries are established with the other player. Prominent researchers in the field of role-play, such as Williams et al. (2011) and Fine (1983), also do not explore implications from the perspective of other gamers. Their observations and arguments rest on the assumption that both gamers mirror each other's intentions and desires, even when conflict arises. Turkle (1995), however, discusses

in detail the consequences of non-consensual role-play on the other gaymer. She describes how the “challenge is to integrate some meaningful personal responsibility in virtual environments” (1995, 254) as the fragmented nature of online reality renders it difficult for gaymers to hold each other accountable for their actions. Perhaps the most extreme example is the LambdaMOO case of a player enacting sexual violence on others using “voodoo dolls” (Dibbell 1994, 237) to control the actions of their victims. Cases such as these signify how gaymers become attached to their avatars and can experience significant trauma when their autonomy is violated.

On Instagram, users continue engaging others in role-play; however, it is between the poster and the audience, not two gaymers. The text and content of the images are crafted for the viewer, who assumes the role of the role-play partner. This change in role-play dynamic suggests a similar pattern of focusing primarily on personal catharsis, with the audience now playing the part of the interactive counterpart. Kim Barbour, Katja Lee, and Christopher Moore describe the activity of posting as “making visible... people’s engagement with both the production and consumption of media” (2017, 5). While not typical images of everyday life, the images posted by gaymers on Instagram consciously mimic ‘real’ accounts, appropriating the visual language of everyday life as a means of legitimising their activities. With the more role-play-focused accounts, the focus shifts more towards individual narratives and character development, with less emphasis on documenting social dynamics. Despite this, certain emerging social norms on the platform are noticeable. There is a prevalent trend of tagging individuals in photos where they feature, indicating a recognition of their presence and contribution to the shared virtual experience. Moore describes tagging as “part of the act of remixing play into the networked identity performance of a gamer persona” (2014, 146–47). In other words, gaymers tag each other to interpellate and sustain a collective gayming subculture.

One novel finding of my research highlights using the *Carrd* website, a platform that enables gaymers to construct comprehensive biographies for their characters. *Carrd* offers an enhanced capacity to amalgamate images and long-form text, providing a more holistic view of the character. In Moore et al.’s discussion of the performative dimension of persona, they note that constructed personas for public consumption are “neither entirely ‘real’ nor entirely ‘fictional’” (2017, 4). Instead, personas are attempts at connecting different characteristics, such as sexual identity, personality traits, and physical appearance, to engage with others. Although *Carrd* is not a popular social media platform, like those explored by Moore, its detailed and user-friendly interface for character biographies makes it a valuable tool for gaymers.

Consequently, some integrate their *Carrd* profiles with their Instagram accounts, linking detailed character narratives with their social media presence. In other words, gaymers have found a means to augment the complex performance affordances of the *Carrd* website with the “micro-public” networks of Instagram, “where self-mediations are linked to self-promotional activity across multiple platforms, sites, and services” (Moore, Barbour, and Lee 2017, 6). The *Carrd* pages I analysed were remarkably intricate, offering extensive insights into the characters’ backgrounds and personalities. The detail of the character profiles demonstrates gaymers’ commitment to creating fully realised virtual identities, blending visual aesthetics with rich narrative elements.

During my virtual ethnography project, I observed several instances of public role-play. Some were spontaneous exchanges in public chat as I traversed through cities, while others were more structured, such as musical performances in major player hubs. Nardi comments in her research that public virtual spaces often “enabled males to establish rhetorical practice as they liked” (2010, 154), remarking that men enjoy privileged positions within these spaces. As a woman, Nardi was forced to accept herself as the “exception” (155) and constantly validate her presence. The instances of public role-play I observed do not include similar examples, evidence perhaps of a change in cultural attitudes over the last fourteen years or merely an unwillingness by gaymers to address the latent hierarchies of power embedded within these spaces.

Organised role-play events, particularly popular among gaymers, offer another dimension to the role-playing experience within *FFXIV Online*, highlighting the diverse ways they engage with each other and the broader community within the game's virtual environment. Pearce describes in-game events as “blending of the liminal and the liminoid” (2009, 59). In other words, these events are moments where gaymers straddle the boundaries of physical and virtual, offering “a respite between daily activities of production” (59). The developers of *FFXIV Online* are aware of this popularity, as official events run in tandem with community-driven ones. All Saints Wake, The Moogle Treasure Trove, and The Rising are events coordinated by developers based on offline holidays, signify periods before significant game updates or the anniversary of the game’s launch, respectively (Vaynshteyn and Shearon 2024).

Meanwhile, gaymers organise events for music festivals, holidays, or seasonal celebrations. These activities may not encompass detailed character development, yet they exemplify the essence of role-play, immersion in the game's world and adherence to its unspoken rules. For instance, 'The Lalafell Walk'—a spontaneous gathering where players of the Lalafell

race congregate and traverse major player hubs—is a quintessential example of such interaction. This activity engenders a sense of community and becomes a spectacle, drawing others into its fold.

From a pragmatic viewpoint, the developers' emphasis on role-play could be interpreted as a strategic decision. By fostering role-play, the developers extend engagement without necessitating extensive resource allocation for new content creation. As Pearce (2009, 174) notes in her study of the online world of *There.com*, developers are keenly interested in fostering gaymer-created content to bolster the longevity of their games. This approach enhances gaymer satisfaction by enriching their in-game experience and benefits the developers by potentially increasing subscription revenues without significant additional development costs. Boellstorff describes this approach as “creationist capitalism” (2008, 212), whereby developers and publishers benefit from the cultural production, i.e., labour, performed within their games by gaymers. Although this labour is rarely monetised, such as being sold to others directly, companies gain significant positive media attention and subscription revenue.

6.2.4 *The role of Instagram in identity formation*

In my research, community formation through shared experiences in *FFXIV Online* emerges as significant, particularly regarding their memorialisation. In Craig et al.'s study on social media usage among queer youth, they report that “studies have been mixed regarding the effect of social media on young people” (2021, 2) and that while a majority of queer youth use social media, this trend is not universal. While some respondents in my interviews lacked social media accounts, others possessed them but showed little interest in active usage. A notable few expressed hesitancy in posting images due to concerns about public reception. The apparent contradiction in the respondents' willingness to role-play with strangers on the internet and hesitation to publish their images online may be attributed to what Damon Lazzara terms the “tension between the traditional impulse for privacy and the online compulsion to over-disclose” (2010, 58).

Gaymers are caught between their need to keep their lives private and their desire for self-expression. However, among those actively using Instagram to showcase their avatars, the platform serves a dual purpose: constructing narratives and chronicling daily experiences, like how individuals document their lives in the physical world. Jan Švelch attributes this to a screenshot's “perceived indexicality” (2021, 4) as evidence of gameplay activity. Mainly, screenshots unedited by image filters and aesthetic interventions trace gaymers' daily lives.

While offering the potential for capturing daily experiences, Instagram also functions as a medium for visual storytelling within the *FFXIV Online* community. The participants in my research appear to prioritise the platform's capacity for narrative documentation over its social interaction features. It emerges as a digital diary, where gamers chronicle their in-game experiences, preserving these moments for posterity. Möring and de Mutiis (2019) explore four different relationships between video games and digital screenshots: photography simulated as part of the gameplay systems; bespoke 'photo modes' programmed in games; "artistic screenshotting" (82); and finally, modifying the game engine or assets to facilitate in-game photography. The authors present these typologies as distinct categories; however, within the Instagram community around *FFXIV Online*, the boundaries are much less distinct. Gamers use modification tools and external shaders, discuss and debate the artistic merits around their images, use *FFXIV Online*'s Gpose mode, and participate in organised events around image-taking hosted by the community and developers. Thus, I reframe the typologies presented as modalities and methods employed in varying combinations to suit the gamer's needs. Alex Urban agrees, noting that video game photographs "empower the player to document and artistically reconstruct moments from purely digital worlds" (2023, 16).

However, a few gamers strategically employ their accounts for visibility and to reach others outside of *FFXIV Online*. This approach positions Instagram as a tool for drawing attention to their in-game activities and persona, effectively functioning as advertising. Veronica Thomas, Marisol Chavez, Erica Browne, and Alexandra Minnis describe the difficulties in garnering attention via social media, noting that "the effective use of social media requires both a keen understanding of the platform and user behaviors, alongside the identification of nimble strategies that adapt to design and technological changes of the platform itself" (2020, 12). It is not enough for users to post generic images in the hopes of attracting a large following. Instead, gamers rely on posting specific content that they feel will draw the attention of their peers. For example, numerous role-play accounts are curated entirely in character, with posts and interactions crafted from the avatar's perspective.

Interviews also reveal that apprehension towards using Instagram as a social media platform is driven mainly by concerns over potential negative consequences, such as harassment and other forms of online violence. Wright offers insight into the hesitation displayed by some participants in fully utilising Instagram as a platform for furthering their identity construction work. Wright questions Instagram and other social media's desire to "increasingly [intertwine] with offline

life” (2017, 5) by mandating “consistency, authenticity, and accountability across contexts” (6). Instagram’s push towards only including ‘real’—or at least verified—identities on the platform excludes gamers from participating in experimental identity construction, mainly if it introduces the potential of cross-contamination with their offline social networks. Boyd notes that while “technology enabled people to engage in more sustained harm” (2014, 133), it is nevertheless rare for individuals to experience “distributed and continuous cruelty” (133) online. While the threat of online harassment is indeed severe, gamers may overestimate the prevalence of online bullying. Nevertheless, there is a pronounced awareness within the community of the dual nature of social media platforms. While they offer significant opportunities for positive interaction and connection, they also present risks of virtual and physical harm.

Shaw (2014) explores the contradictory nature of online spaces as safe spaces from offline harassment and avenues for targeted violence. However, in her research, she demonstrates an attempt by gamers to safeguard games as spaces that exist outside of cultural discourse and critical investigation, particularly in how marginalised groups are treated and represented. Shaw disparagingly observes, “those who carry gender, racial, and sexuality privilege are the only ones who can afford to think [representation does] not matter” (2014, 189). This dichotomy instils a sense of caution, leading some gamers to approach social media engagement hesitantly. In addressing this concern, gamers strategically compartmentalise their personal and in-game identities on social media, driven by the potential risks associated with online platforms. Noah Tsika (2010) observes that compartmentalisation is a defensive strategy adopted by queer individuals as a means of acclimating to environments that are traditionally hostile to them. By “desexualising” (231) or outright denying their queer identities, individuals can inoculate themselves from potential harm. Respondents in my interviews indicate that maintaining separate accounts for their avatars and personal lives allows them to curate content specific to each sphere of their lives. For instance, they prefer not to mix offline events, such as personal celebrations, with their *FFXIV Online* activities. While presented as an issue of convenience, it becomes apparent from the discussions that some respondents held an underlying anxiety around their non-MMORPG friends and family finding out about their online activities.

Of note in the analysis of Instagram posts associated with *FFXIV Online* is a lack of exploration by gamers of how cultural production might vary between virtual spaces. The observed trends and tropes in these Instagram accounts primarily reflect practices established by other popular social media accounts in the past. It appears that Instagram users are

predominantly interested in remediating the cultural practices they observe in their everyday lives online. As evidenced in the case study analysis and interviews, virtual role-players do not appear to be particularly invested in exploring or challenging the limits of representation in a virtual setting. Their reluctance indicates a tendency towards maintaining established cultural paradigms rather than pioneering new forms of social and cultural expression in online communities. Gaymers adhere to conventions with reason; as Cover observes, "a liveable life depends entirely on being able to articulate a subjectivity... within coherent, intelligible and recognisable norms" (2019, 6). Gaymers thus rely on the cultural practices they remediate to convey a recognisable self that is consequently 'real' to others.

It is notable, however, that Instagram does not typically serve as a primary platform for community building or social interaction for the interview respondents, especially when compared to platforms like Discord or the game itself. Barbour et al. note that a significant feature of Instagram is its "interconnectivity and interoperability" (2017, 2), which allows users to deploy a consistent identity across multiple social networks. Moore et al. agree, highlighting that the Instagram user is "connected to multiple publics, making the collective dimension of persona a meta-collective complex" (2017, 6). Therefore, Instagram constitutes part of a larger networked identity for gaymers.

Interviews reveal a preference among some participants for more intimate, community-focused applications like Discord. Others express a penchant for platforms like X, emphasising narrative and text-based content. This observation suggests that while community building on Instagram is not prevalent for the majority, it does enhance existing social networks. Instagram often functions as a bridge, channelling individuals from the platform to pre-existing communities within *FFXIV Online*. Tim Highfield and Tama Leaver are careful to stress that Instagram usage should not be studied in a vacuum because "there are practices and communities on one platform which might not be present on the other" (2016, 51). This trend is also discernible within Instagram bios, where profiles often feature links to additional social media accounts. Commonly, these include Discord and *Carrd*; the latter—though not a social media site per se—serves as a repository for extensive information on characters' personas.

While a user may occupy multiple platforms concurrently, the communities and practices, such as tagging, commenting, or sharing, they engage in will be tailored to the affordances of each particular social media platform. Moore explains that the practice of tagging images on social networks creates "clusters, or communities" (2014, 143) to form a micro-public, something "similar

to the notion of a personal public... that takes into account the practices of social media” (2017, 6). In other words, tagging images organise the various performances and expressions of a digital self in a way that is meaningful to the user but simultaneously exposes these performances to a broader public. Leaver and Highfield observe that the trend of tagging images is not always in an attempt to reach a broader community but may at times function to “[explain] to that user’s existing audience the context and content of the media shared” (2018, 5). Tagged images form the basis of the user’s persona in that they “[negotiate] between the individual and the collective” (Moore 2020, 2).

6.3 Gaymer communities in *FFXIV Online*

6.3.1 The welcoming and inclusive communities existent in FFXIV Online

Socialising and forming online communities are integral elements of the *FFXIV Online* experience. The game presents a unique platform where gamers globally can interact within a virtual space, fostering the creation of communities and social ties that may be inaccessible in their offline environments. Boellstorff makes the significant observation that virtual worlds “do not mediate between places; they are places in their own right” (2015, 4). Boellstorff questions the distinction between the ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ worlds, arguing that “the assumption that everything physical is, by definition, real” (2) is questioned through research into virtual worlds. Therefore, it is not an overstatement to acknowledge gamer interactions in *FFXIV Online*’s significant positive impact on various groups. For individuals lacking supportive networks or community connections in their physical surroundings, *FFXIV Online* offers a vital gateway to relationships that can profoundly affect their lives.

Through virtual interactions, gamers often find encouragement, gain access to support systems, and experience an overall enhancement in their quality of life. Pearce (2009, 253) recounts her personal experiences with the conflicts they experience and the supportive nature of their peer groups online in her example of the avatar Raena, a female avatar who later confessed to being played by a man. Similarly, the communal dimension of *FFXIV Online* becomes an essential support structure for some, particularly those in marginalised or disadvantaged groups, underscoring the game’s multifaceted role in the lives of gamers. Taylor highlights the importance of community support in her research on *EverQuest*: “the role-playing tools for communication or community building form an integral part of the game” (2006, 38–39).

Making full use of community tools, *FFXIV Online* facilitates a dynamic environment for role-play, especially within gaymer-hosted social events. Gaymers utilise the game as a versatile platform to orchestrate and participate in various social activities, ranging from intimate gatherings to large-scale public celebrations like dance parties and holiday-themed events. Role-play groups often spearhead these events, contributing to the game's rich community culture. Boellstorff remarks that an online event requires “place, time, and sociality” (2008, 182), underscoring the importance of virtualised and synchronous co-presence with participant communication. However, virtual worlds suffer from material constraints when it comes to addressing the needs of gaymers. As Boellstorff illustrates in *Second Life*, “limitations of server and broadband technology meant that most events involved five to fifteen residents” (183). While *FFXIV Online* can accommodate more individuals, it must often separate large groups into smaller instances to lessen the server load. Hardware constraints give rise to what Boellstorff calls “relatively intimate instantiations of sociality” (183), wherein gaymers cluster around established server lines.

FFXIV Online's housing system is a feature built to accommodate server constraints. This system allows gaymers to establish fixed locations and times for their events, adding a sense of continuity and permanence to various role-play communities and organisations. An illustrative example is the virtual tea houses, where gaymers assume employees' roles, serving and interacting with guests in a role-playing context. Gaymers can own and customise these establishments within designated areas of the game. Boellstorff comments on the importance of housing in virtual worlds by observing that “building could act as a craft by which the virtual became real” (2008, 101). Pearce describes the importance of housing in consolidating group identity through “social mediation of the world” (2009, 104). Gaymer homes serve as personal virtual properties and stages for immersive role-play experiences, inviting others to partake in these creatively curated environments.

Instead of a unified virtual world, *FFXIV Online* is hosted on different servers and divided into physical data centres in North America, Europe, Japan, and Oceania. These centres are further segmented into *logical* data centres like the European Chaos, Light, and Shadow centres. Furthermore, each logical data centre houses multiple ‘worlds’, for example, Light, which contains Alpha, Lich, Twintania, and Zodiark (Square Enix 2024). Participants indicated that gaymers' countries of origin are less crucial than the territorial delimitations established by the game's data centres. Although gaymers can easily travel between worlds within a single logical data centre, cross-world movement is uncommon. However, geographic realities, such as time zones, must

still be accounted for, as Pearce (2009, 201) recounts the challenge of scheduling events for players in *There.com*.

Meanwhile, Boellstorff (2008, 224) observes that although virtual worlds may be multicultural, they remain disproportionately influenced by Western, English-speaking, political and cultural ideologies. Western influence notwithstanding, different data centres and their respective worlds develop distinct norms, values, and player bases (Taylor 2006, 96; Nardi 2010, 17). Instagram imagery reveals a robust role-playing tradition among various worlds in the same data centre, with this study examining role-playing in more detail in European data centres compared to those in North America or Japan.

Furthermore, role-players often tag their posts with their world or data centre and include this information in their profile data. This practice appears to serve a practical purpose, aiding others in finding them more easily. Moore's (2014) research discusses tagging as an online identity performance. Taylor (2006), meanwhile, explores the specific cultures that arise in different servers for the same game. Taylor reveals how "much of the game is confined to very specific server-based experience[s]" (85), highlighting how cultural practices and social norms vary from one network of gamers to another. In other words, gamers who indicate which server they belong to signal their digital cultural background to others. To the initiated, server tagging indicates whether a person is interested in raiding, role-play, or other forms of content. My virtual ethnographic project focuses specifically on the world of Twintania, and my observations are drawn from this context. Coincidentally, many of the Instagram accounts and interviewees I have engaged with are from Twintania's parent logical data centre, Light. Twintania is not known for any one kind of activity because it is a relatively new server; however, older worlds such as Shiva and Zodiark have established reputations as trading and role-play hubs, respectively.

My virtual ethnography project provided limited evidence on the depth of peer interaction. Nevertheless, observations in social hubs showed groups frequently congregating, implying a shared sense of identity and community. Despite a text-based chat platform in *FFXIV Online* that facilitates communication across the server, gamers will often congregate in one space to converse—something I have observed in my interactions with others. Taylor describes presence "as an embodied activity" (2002, 44) that "creates and confirms to the user that they are, in fact, *there*" (42). Taylor also notes that avatars are the foundation of the "broader social economy" (2006, 118) between gamers, i.e., the vehicles through which they express and participate in sociality. Social congregations in virtual worlds serve as a kind of mutual affirmation of each other,

a way of ‘checking in’ on other gaymers. Thus, the gaymer’s sense of presence in the space is constructed, and their participation in the world is affirmed.

Gaymers in *FFXIV Online* often evolve into each other’s support networks, a theme recurrent in the interviewees’ narratives. They spoke of the pivotal role others play in personal development and nurturing their interest in the game and role-playing. Howard Rheingold (1993, 200) discusses how online communication can be crucial in establishing support networks for those without access. Bruce Drushel notes that this is especially true for queer youth, where online peer groups “[provide] positive feedback, empowerment, and a sense of community” (2010, 63). On Instagram, this interconnectivity manifests in the tagging of peers in photographs featuring their characters, group photo sessions, and collaborative projects. This insight highlights how collaboration bolsters the role-play narrative.

6.3.2 *The queer micro-publics of FFXIV Instagram*

By creating and maintaining dedicated accounts for their avatars, gaymers enter a space where they can find and interact with others engaged in similar activities. This interaction forms a dynamic of co-construction on Instagram, where users seek validation for their avatars and engage with others. Sundén describes the process of collaborative identity construction in online groups as “naming that makes possible recognition based on sameness” (2012b, 154). In other words, gaymers use imagery and vernacular specific to their community to signal their ‘sameness’ to others. This mutual exchange fosters a sense of community among gaymers, enhancing their experience by providing a platform where their avatars are seen and actively interacted with and appreciated by a group of like-minded individuals. This aspect of Instagram, thus, becomes a vital tool for gaymers seeking to affirm and celebrate their virtual identities.

The motivations behind many Instagram posts seem to be deeply personal. However, a critical difference between my discussions with respondents and the content on Instagram is the public nature of the latter. Anyone on the platform can view and comment on these images; thus, publicising these narratives assumes a political dimension. Barbour et al. observe that many Instagram images are more concerned “with the pleasures and gratifications of personal/self-expression... than with asserting particular identities” (2017, 8). However, Jonathan Alexander and Elizabeth Losh note that for queer individuals, disclosing one’s sexual identity via social media “attempts to negotiate the boundary between intensely personal desires and public identities” (2010, 38). It represents, in a sense, an expression of pride. As Shaw testifies, “finding

a space to express [queer] identity was more important to members of this community than the existence of LGBTQ video game characters” (2012, 69).

Similarly, in the public spaces of *FFXIV Online*, gamers who engage in public emoting or conversations with their partners are effectively making their relationships visible—queer or otherwise. As mentioned, Boellstorff explains that the phenomenon behind this conflation of public and private spaces is “the influence of creationist capitalism” (2008, 213), where gamers engage in cultural production under the auspices of play and leisure. Adopting Boellstorff’s position for the moment, public gamer interactions are a kind of free advertising for the social aspects of the MMORPG. A similar phenomenon is observed on Instagram, where gamers’ labour, in the form of photographs, advertise the character designs and aesthetics of *FFXIV Online*. Developers are incentivised to allow these otherwise copyright-infringing instances of expression, benefitting from the increase in publicity. The posts I collected show gamers expressing romantic interest or physical affection not naively but as a deliberate statement of visibility to others. Since most communication between gamers occurs outside public spaces, these acts are choices rather than necessities, underlining their intentionality and significance in the virtual community.

Although present on nearly every post, respondents did not discuss their use of hashtags. Among those who post regularly on Instagram, there appears to be a lack of critical engagement with the hashtags used, suggesting that their inclusion can sometimes be more habitual than deliberate. Andreas Bernard describes hashtags as “important identity units” (2019, 73), while Crystal Abidin describes hashtags as a part of “visibility labour” (2016, 5) or the work users “perform to be noticed by prolific elite users” (5). It becomes apparent that gamers categorise—if inadvertently—aspects of their identity when sharing images of their avatars. For example, there is a tendency among users to identify their characters as part of the *FFXIV Online* community, often specifying the region or data centre to which their character belongs. Notably, nearly all the Instagram accounts I reviewed included hashtags indicating queer sexuality. These findings align with Leaver and Highfield’s (2018, 5) observation that some hashtags serve primarily as devices to contextualise posts, such as the hashtags that denote the home server of the gamer. Meanwhile, others are part of the performance of identity, such as tags that signal the gamer’s sexuality as ‘other’. This distinction becomes apparent when comparing the Instagram posts of queer individuals with their heterosexual counterparts.

In the case of heterosexual users, their identity is not explicitly tagged, implying an assumption that a character’s default sexuality is heterosexual. Therefore, when a character

diverges from this assumed norm, they are often distinctly labelled, indicating the identity ‘work’ gaymers must do to affirm their sexuality to others. Alexander (2002, 88) observes a similar trend in his early investigations into queer blogs. Queer identities must be defended, justified, explained, motivated, and signalled to others. Cover highlights how the labour undertaken by these users is for a “coherent performance of a unified identity/subjectivity” (2012, 187). The use of hashtags on Instagram guards against moments where the user “is persistently countered by the comments *about* that person” (187), meaning users must consistently work on maintaining their queer identities for fear of being labelled as ‘fake’.

Notable examples of this trend are young gay male players, who frequently use queer-related hashtags in their posts, such as #ffxivgay, #gaymiqote, and #gayorzea. This practice highlights the nuanced ways gaymers use social media to navigate and express aspects of identity within the virtual context of *FFXIV Online*. Butler is more direct in her discussion of the construction of queer identities, arguing that queerness is “to be engaged in a confusion and proliferation of categories that make sex an impossible category of identity” (2006, 166). Therefore, gaymers who make use of queer hashtags are not involved in the construction of a queer identity but in the deconstruction of “compulsory heterosexuality” (166).

Fox and Ahn explain that “no *avatar* is perfectly mapped to the self, and thus users must adjust to embody their representation and test its fit to the self, particularly through encounters with others” (2013, 260). Their work underscores the social nature of identity construction in avatars. Only through ‘testing out’ one’s identity through peer feedback does a gaymer know if their avatar is right for them. Although Instagram is not predominantly a space for interactive collaboration or feedback in this context, it serves as a public gallery where individuals display and share their explorations of gender expression. As Cover noted earlier, users “surveil” (2012, 187) each other for signs of identity incoherence. This “conversational policing of identity” (188) occurs in the micro-public spaces of Instagram comments and private direct messages.

There is also a notable trend of users experimenting with various forms of gender expression, often diverging from their physical selves’ gender identities. These profiles showcase a range of gender conventions and norms, visually representing the diverse spectrum of gender identity. Vasileios Stavropoulos, John Rennie, Maria Morcos, Rapson Gomez, and Mark Griffiths suggest that the “need for an idealised presentation via the avatar is so strong... that it overarches gender differences” (2021, 831). Their research highlights the importance of idealised

representation, along with Western standards (826), and it is so great that gaymers de-emphasise the significance of the avatar's gender.

Analysis of Instagram captions collected throughout this study reveals a broad spectrum of user intentions regarding the interplay of text and image. Some users seem to employ text primarily for journaling thoughts or making casual remarks, while others use captions to enhance the narrative depicted in their images more strategically. Mariya Kozharinova and Lev Manovich distinguish between two types of Instagram accounts, “narrative or modular” (2024, 2). The latter demonstrates a “strong stylistic coherence” but lacks “preconceived plots that develop over time and space” (2). However, the authors note that the distinction between the two is not often easily delineated (3). The Instagram images collected for this study demonstrate varying modularity and narrative content levels. The more narrative-focused posts “always demonstrate a fixed internal focalization”, with the user-player-avatar depicted as the “main character” (12).

My research reveals that the character designs featured on Instagram often adhere to specific, archetypal visual styles. Filipowich (2018) extensively discusses the relationship between character design and archetype in the *Final Fantasy* series. “Matronly” (123) characters such as Maria, Rydia, and Terra signify their role through their use of incredible power as “witches or even physically powerful fighters” (123). *FFXIV Online*'s Y'shtola fulfils this role as a powerful mage and mother figure to the Warrior of Light. Cover explains that gaymers produce identity “in the über-mediated world of participatory engagement” (2016, 30). Gaymers in *FFXIV Online* appropriate the character archetypes they encounter in the game and other media and recontextualise them to articulate a mediated expression of self, employing narrative and modular posts in their usage of Instagram. These styles conform to well-defined boundaries and genres, enhancing their visual distinctiveness and ease of identification. Furthermore, the game environment of *FFXIV Online*, particularly player hubs, are vibrant and bustling, fostering a natural inclination among gaymers to differentiate their characters from the crowd. Donna Davis and Boellstorff label this the desire to stand out as “digital embodied states” which “can manifest in the perceived beauty or distinction of that embodiment, or even one's mastery at online roleplaying” (2016, 2108–9). In other words, gaymers gain digital social capital through their avatars' appearance and commitment to their role.

The topic of sexualization and objectification of avatars within *FFXIV Online* has not emerged prominently in the interviews regarding how gaymers choose to present their avatars. On Instagram, a primarily visual platform, there are instances where gaymers sexualize or

objectify characters, often those of others rather than their own. Valkyrie outlines the eroticisation of avatar bodies as objects of pleasure, noting that one player “could enjoy looking at them when he logged on” (2011, 83) while simultaneously enjoying the attention of being looked at by others. Nakamura observes that virtual spaces allow users to “appropriate exotic identities” (2002, 42). While Nakamura was discussing the fetishisation of Asian bodies, *FFXIV Online* allows for a ‘safe’ eroticisation of exotic races such as the Hrothgar, Miqo’te, and Viera. However, there is no evident objectification in the case of users like Jayden; his character is not depicted as overtly sexualised. Valkyrie again notes that gaymers such as Jayden are “difficult to label with our current sexuality dichotomy” and that it would be erroneous to consider these acts as “lesbian sex between two avatars, heterosexual sex between two players, homosexual sex between two players, just cybersex, or possibly not even labeled sex” (2011, 84). From the collected images in the documentary project, it appears that the primary goal for gaymers in character presentation is to achieve an aesthetically pleasing appearance, careful not to overtly include the sexualised contexts in which they may occasionally place their avatars.

Interviews suggest that Instagram represents only a tiny segment of a larger, more private image-sharing community. These gaymers prefer not to publicise their images broadly due to concerns over judgement or potential offline repercussions. Zizi Papacharissi and Emily Easton explain that “self-editing” (2013, 180), the ability to choose what to publish and to whom, is significant to users on social media platforms. In 2011, Boyd posited that users will “try to make sense of how to negotiate the structural transformations” (2011, 52) brought about by a loss of privacy on social media. I argue that the proliferation of the curated micro-public private servers on Discord is one way users attempt to regain control over their public selves.

My research showed that Discord is an essential platform for gaymers to share virtual photography. Consequently, a significant portion of identity work is done within private Discord servers or smaller community forums. Despite these varied attitudes, a common thread among all interviewees is their desire to publish their images, albeit through different mediums, negotiating between their offline and online social lives. In adherence to ethical research standards and respect for individual privacy, I have refrained from utilising any images from these Discord servers. My study solely includes images sourced from Instagram, specifically those posted in public domains, not restricted by private account settings, and not designated as private. This approach ensures that the study respects the privacy expectations of the community and remains within ethical boundaries.

6.3.3 *Erotic role-play*

While narrative-based role-play has been discussed earlier, erotic role-play entails the enactment of sexual scenarios between characters across diverse settings—a subset of cybersex (Turkle 1995, 21). Nathan Thompson regards erotic role-play as an act of queering, both as “sexual identity... and a process of de-normalizing” (2014, 5). Erotic role-play allows gamers to destabilise heteronormative structures that regulate their behaviour outside the virtual world. Respondents in this study have also emphasised the importance of erotic role-play in their narrative experiences within the game. However, erotic role-play is not exclusively the primary motive for engaging in role-play activities. This form of role-play serves as a channel for self-discovery, allowing gamers to explore and express sexualities that may not be feasible in their offline contexts. As Yee and Bailenson (2007) note in their studies of the Proteus effect, avatar attractiveness affects the gamer’s self-esteem. Consequently, some may find it easier to engage in erotic scenarios as a more confident version of themselves. Certain respondents highlighted the importance of engaging in erotic role-play for self-development, viewing it as a means of achieving self-actualization in online environments.

Gamers often perceive online sexual encounters in *FFXIV Online* as equally fulfilling as offline experiences. This observation contradicts the findings of Valkyrie, who notes, “cybersex was not assessed as having the same gravity as a solid world sexual relationship” (2011, 90). However, participants in my study reveal diverse reasons why they find erotic role-play rewarding. Waskul also opposes Valkyrie’s more sceptical viewpoint, noting that erotic role-play “is meaningful and highly valued” (2003, 82) to gamers. Waskul further argues that cybersex is an integral part of online identity construction as individuals discover or explore aspects of their sexuality. Braenna, a transgender respondent, has articulated how playing as a female character in *FFXIV Online* is particularly meaningful and fulfilling for her. For instance, she engages in erotic role-play as a means of alleviating her gender dysphoria. Cavalcante labels these virtual spaces as “counterpublic, a special kind of public that caters to the marginalized and disenfranchised” (2016, 117). The counterpublics of erotic role-play scenarios offer gamers like Braenna a place where she can find a sense of belonging and safely express a desired self. Palar, on the other hand, finds such role-play distinct yet equally significant compared to his regular sexual encounters. Kiki, who identifies as asexual, discovers fulfilment in this form of role-play as an alternative to offline sexual experiences. As Fiona Attwood (2013, 342) explains, the ephemeral

and detached nature of the avatar body makes it a highly effectively vehicle to explore desire and fantasy without risk to the physical body.

In erotic role-play, complications arise because of unexpected variations in gender pairings between avatars and gamers, a stark contrast to the more gender-neutral interactions observed in general role-play scenarios. Sundén (2012a, 185) astutely observes that the gender identity of others in a virtual world is a constant source of anxiety for players. There is a “policing of the boundaries around credible gender performances” (185) to affirm a player’s sexual orientation concerning the gender identity of their partner¹. It would appear that gamers project a desired gender onto the body of their avatar as a means of affirming and ‘orienting’ their sexuality (Ahmed 2006, 112). However, during the interviews, it was intriguing to note a lack of acknowledgement of gender dynamics in non-erotic interactions. It is enough for some gamers that their avatars and the avatars of others sufficiently perform the gender roles they have been assigned, never questioning the “heterosexual matrix of desire” (Butler 2006, 72) within which they operate.

This ambiguity is evident on Instagram, where case studies reveal no universal ‘rule’ between gamer-avatar gender pairing. Several Instagram users whose offline identities do not align with being male, for example, engage comfortably in erotic role-playing as male characters of varying sexualities. Valkyrie highlights that the various combinations of gender and sex identity between gamers and avatars “is difficult to label with our current sexual dichotomy” (2011, 84). He is careful to warn the reader not to project offline assumptions around gender or sexual identity onto gamer-avatar relationships in an erotic setting. Valkyrie also points out that it is dangerous to apply sexual norms from the offline world to the virtual as cybersex “[allows] for the possibility of multi-bodied, multi-gendered sex” (2011, 84). Blank poses this problem in the form of a question, “If I’m attracted to, and in love with, someone who is technically speaking neither male nor female, does that make me heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or something else altogether?” (2012, 6).

While examining Instagram posts related to *FFXIV Online*, it is apparent that explicit erotic content is scarce, primarily due to the platform's censorship policies restricting such material. Valkyrie (2011, 86–88) offers another possible explanation, observing that homophobia, policing of avatar gender versus offline gender, and harassment by others are common occurrences for

¹ Gender is used here in lieu of sex to emphasise the virtual/social aspects of identity conveyance in *FFXIV Online* as opposed to the embodied—and often obscured—nature of player sex identities.

those who engage in erotic role-play. Therefore, while it is likely that content moderation on social media plays a part in the relative scarcity of erotic imagery on Instagram, concerns over harassment from others, evidenced in testimony from the interview respondents, are also possible. Even so, numerous images subtly hint at romantic or erotically themed scenarios, skirting the boundaries of erotic themes. Meanwhile, the bulk of explicitly erotic content is typically found on alternative platforms or websites where such restrictions are not in place, such as private Discord servers; as Valkyrie astutely notes, “cybersex is subjugated to the sewers, abandoned inns, and less populated areas” (92). These observations reinforce the idea that sexuality is a prominent aspect of virtual world interactions, persisting despite attempts at censorship.

Signifying its importance, erotic role-play in *FFXIV Online* provides gaymers with a secure environment to explore their kinks and various aspects of their sexuality. Gaymers, such as Braenna, have expressed how they use their avatars to safely delve into interests like BDSM and kink, which is a scarcely discussed topic in the context of video games. Mattie Brice, however, notes that kink is “a type of play design that deeply confronts life contexts” (2017, 79). Brice emphasises the importance of consent and aftercare, arguing that aftercare, in particular, “creates a moment for reflection and integration” (81). Kink, in this context, takes on a plurality of purposes for gaymers, serving both as an avenue of sexual exploration and critical self-reflection. This exploration is facilitated by the virtual nature of the game, allowing for experimentation without offline risks. While numerous images from Instagram accounts delve into the realm of kink, none of the accounts I studied were exclusively dedicated to kink or fetish role-play. However, this may be attributed more to Instagram's content moderation policies than a lack of interest among gaymers. In *FFXIV Online*, certain glamour items resemble BDSM and kink attire. These items are often used as signifiers during role-play events—akin to the Hanky code—to signify a gaymer’s sexual interests to others (Kollock and Smith 2004, 43).

CHAPTER 7: GAYMER SELF-EXPRESSION AND VIRTUAL PHOTOGRAPHY

7.1 Expressing gaymer identities in *FFXIV Online*

7.1.1 *The importance of avatar clothing in queer self-expression*

In *FFXIV Online*, fashion becomes a crucial medium for gaymers to express their personalities, especially since communicating in crowded spaces can be challenging. Klastrup and Tosca (2009, 11) show in their research that gaymers greatly emphasise avatar clothing as an opportunity to distinguish themselves from others. Taylor notes that gaymers may choose their clothing “for very utilitarian reasons” (2006, 96). While the respondents in my interviews did not explicitly emphasise the importance of fashion, their comments suggest that appearance plays a significant role in how they present themselves to others. Cover explains that “hair, clothing, grooming, accessories, and self-presentation” (2016, 114) constitute aspects of stereotypical codes that are a consequence of the “information overload” (114) on the Internet. Individuals online use stereotypes, however inappropriate, to “make quick interpretations of information about the bodies one sees represented on a screen” (114). Thus, avatar clothing serves the dual function of distinction and recognition based on pre-determined stereotypes. In *FFXIV Online*, these stereotypes arise within and outside the game environment.

I have also explored the role of the glamour system from *FFXIV Online* in shaping avatar personas. This system allows gaymers to craft their character's appearance meticulously, articulating specific facets of their identity through fashion. Boellstorff considers creativity the defining feature of virtual worlds, labelling the “virtual worldview as *techne*” (2008, 25). Thus, in utilising avatar design, gaymers participate in *techne* or “intentional creativity” (25) to contextualise their lives within the virtual environment. While the game allows gaymers to blend clothing options across genders, they do not universally exercise this option. Their behaviour suggests a nuanced approach to gender representation in the game, where gaymers selectively navigate and utilise the available options for expressing their virtual identities. In addition, Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce indicate that avatars “make dress-up more socially acceptable for men” (2007, 18), allowing male gaymers to participate in the activities of fashion and costuming that are typically labelled as ‘for girls’.

Instagram posts further underscore the importance of the glamour system in defining character identity. Numerous posts highlight various outfits, focusing on their aesthetic appeal

and how they influence the characters' perceptions. Intriguingly, some posts humorously or earnestly query if an outfit conveys a specific sexual orientation, illustrating the profound impact of appearance on character interpretation. Krobová et al. argue that the adoption of stereotypical codes in character appearance is deliberate “stylized performance” (2015, 8). Gaymers consciously make use of stereotypical modes of dress as a way of signalling their sexual identity to others. The virtual ethnographic project at the heart of my research is driven by an interest in how gaymers utilise the glamour system over time to evolve their characters' identities. The project has captured various glamour combinations, showcasing gaymers' extensive creative freedom in expressing themselves through this system. Klastrup and Tosca underscore the importance of fashion in virtual worlds, noting that “it would be foolish (and judgemental) to reject fashion as a superficial ingredient” (2009, 6). The diversity and ingenuity gaymers demonstrate in using the glamour system highlight its significant role in the virtual identity formation process.

Interviews revealed that character modification further augments the glamour system when personalising characters in *FFXIV Online*. Such modifications, or ‘modding’, serve as distinctive markers, setting avatars apart within the virtual environment. Specifically, modifications favoured by gaymers often focus on introducing new avatar clothing options. Kafai et al. contextualise modding as part of the “participatory features” (2008, XVII) that typify modern game’s reliance on user-generated content. Meanwhile, Erik Champion observes that modding “extends the notion of a virtual world” (2015, 138), further enriching the virtual environment for gaymers. Lastly, Evan Lauteria argues that modding is “a site of resistance” (2012, 1) against the heteronormative structures imposed on virtual environments. These authors support the findings from my interviews that modding serves an essential function for gaymers in their pursuit of self-expression outside the boundaries of the framework created by the game’s designers. Despite the emphasis on fashion on Instagram, there is also evidence of modifications of the avatar body. Gaymers would use mods and alter the avatar's body to alter body proportions, such as increased breast size, musculature, or the shape of the avatar’s face.

The customization and presentation of avatars' attire serve as a means of personal expression, demonstrating fashion's integral role in shaping online identities within the *FFXIV Online* community. Svitlana Matviyenko observes that through the avatar, “users can visualize fantasy which... allows sustaining desire” (2010, 43). Moore further illustrates that images of avatars are “part of the performance of the self” (2014, 148). Images on Instagram tend to be tagged with words associated with “the body and particularly the face” (148), highlighting how the

avatar's appearance communicates the gaymer's online gender. As Klastrup and Tosca (2009, 12) note, these 'expressions' also coalesce in collaborative projects such as the in-game fashion magazines *Gizmpolitan* and *Gposers* for *WoW* and *FFXIV Online*, respectively.

Character design is not merely an expression of personal taste but a strategic means of communication for gaymers, as evidenced by the interviews and Instagram profiles I have analysed. However, the conventions gaymers adopt are highly specialised to their specific virtual context. For example, Yee and Bailenson note that "unattractiveness may be associated with a hardy, war-weathered fighter, and thus code for competence and power" (2009, 307), contradicting their expectations that unattractive avatars are wholly undesirable.

Nardi (2010, 55) also points to the clothing avatars wear as a demonstration of mastery over the game, as certain items may be difficult to obtain. Henry Korkeila and Juho Hamari observe that the value of gear is in "accumulating these items and feats over periods of time" (2020, 19). Raquel Green, Paul Delfabbro, and Daniel King note that the allure of rare items can lead to addictive tendencies in gaymers, who eventually view their avatar "as a 'means to an end' rather than the primary reinforcing aspect of the game" (2021, 229). Thus, acquiring rare items plays a complex role in the presentation of self, allowing gaymers to gain status and mould others' perceptions of themselves as experienced players. In *FFXIV Online*, the intricacies of gear-as-status instilled in gaymers demonstrate a heightened awareness of their avatar's appearance and that of others. Although there are no material considerations to virtual clothing, the choice of clothing available to a gaymer is nonetheless constrained by their progress in-game. Avatar aesthetics often serve as an aspirational benchmark, with gaymers drawing inspiration from and appreciating the designs of others, fostering a sense of community around character creation.

Gaymers also often rely on diverse tropes to convey their persona effectively. These tropes, drawn from Western fantasy, Eastern cultural influences, and prevailing gender and social norms, provide a form of visual shorthand. Sveningsson describes a tension "between familiarity and otherness" (2012b, 62) in the depiction of races in MMORPGs. Mainly, there is a perceived sexual aggression in races that "deviate the most from Western beauty ideals" (62). However, Shaw warns against drawing too much significance from how gaymers portray themselves as 'the other', noting that creating an avatar of a different race "was not necessarily or always oppressive, transgressive, or even perspective altering" (2014, 139). Gaymers' approach to adopting cultural codes is particularly significant given the game's visual-centric nature and the limitations in facilitating in-depth conversations through the platform. Indeed, as Kafai et al. observe, a common

motivation in avatar design is to visually “[communicate] status and abilities to others” (2010, 25). In this context, gamers’ use of cultural codes in their avatar designs can be understood as using the existing references within the game to convey status and archetype: White Mage, Dark Knight, Samurai, etc. Based on observations, the allure of *FFXIV Online* for at least some gamers lies in the codified aesthetics of their avatars.

Interview respondents highlighted avatars’ attractive design and customizability as crucial factors in their initial engagement with the game. As Westcott notes, the potentialities of avatar clothing “let us try on different experiences and subjectivities and perform in game as another” (2017, 238). The respondents in my interview, however, also noted the aesthetic design of the clothing as a critical factor in their motivation to play the game. Kafai et al. (2010, 37) observed a similar preoccupation with the aesthetics of avatars in their research, suggesting this appeal lies in the potential they offer for personal expression. A survey of 905 *FFXIV Online* players conducted by Korkeila and Hamari (2020) highlights the significance of avatar design as a vehicle for immersion. Their findings concluded that “the ability to customize one’s avatar is important, and many seem to care how their avatar are represented and expressed in a virtual world” (19). The author’s findings are illustrated in my virtual photography, where avatars reflect gamers’ or characters’ identities and express diverse concepts.

In the game world of *FFXIV Online*, avatars’ outfits can be examined in detail, revealing the composition and origins of their attire. Moreover, platforms like *Eorzea Collection* facilitate sharing outfit designs and details, enabling others to replicate them. Taylor offers a contradictory perspective, claiming that “instances where users attempt to copy exactly another’s avatar is generally taken as an offense” (2002, 52). In the *FFXIV Online* community, this mainly appears not to be the case. Websites like *Eorzea Collection* attest that sharing outfit designs is a popular activity, and interview respondents appeared to take pride in others reproducing their outfits.

However, sharing gear combinations in the game world contrasts with the practices observed on Instagram, where avatar design becomes primarily a visual showcase. Here, gamers exhibit their avatars’ fashion without delving into the specifics of outfit assembly. As Moore et al. demonstrate, the avatar’s value “depends on agency, reputation, and prestige” (2017, 7) on social media sites such as Instagram. Avatars increase in value concerning their ability to achieve the user’s goals, gain reputation from others, and gain prestige among the user’s private/public network. Pearce observes that offering specific clothing options as rewards increase their value and “influence [player] behavior” (2009, 111). *FFXIV Online* regularly offers

unique clothing items as rewards for engaging in the game's events. Gaymers seek these items and, regardless of their original context, showcase them in various scenarios to demonstrate their veteran status. For gaymers in *FFXIV Online*, their avatar's appearance advertises a mastery over the game's aesthetics. In this context, Instagram emerges not as a tool for collaborative fashion creation but as a medium for gaining social capital.

In general gameplay settings, the approach to character clothing is somewhat more flexible. While gaymers may have different clothing sets for various aspects of gameplay, adherence to this is not strict, and there is no social taboo associated with deviating from these conventions. Cooper et al.'s (2007) interviews with players from various MMORPGs reveal many reasons gaymers customise their avatars. One player linked their love of Visual Rock with character design, noting that both rely on costume design to engage the viewer (64). In *FFXIV Online*, it is not uncommon to see gaymers engaging in combat in formal attire, such as wedding dresses, or conversely, attending role-play events in armour or battle gear, though the latter is rare.

Within the *FFXIV Online* gaymer community, there appear to be established preferences regarding attractive attire. According to the interviews, some emphasise the deeper symbolic meanings that fashion choices might convey to others. Palar, for example, uses stereotypical Eastern dress to integrate his character into the role-play 'tea house', *The Menagerie*, where his character works as a courtesan. However, a character's outfit selection is primarily driven by aesthetic considerations and subsequently linked to a broader narrative gaymers wish to convey. Klastrop and Tosca (2009, 14) note that clothing choices are essential for visualising affiliation with a particular group, club, or guild. Kafai et al. (2010, 39) offer further insight, using the term *lamination* to describe the multiplicity of motivations in avatar customisation, "there is aesthetic pleasure in creating a good look, personal motivation to represent oneself in some way, pressure from the social environment (which also provides many resources for avatar design), and functional goals like disguise or surprise".

Cover provides another perspective in understanding the design of digital bodies by adapting Foucault's concept of "docile" as "the consequence of endlessly more intensified self-regulation, self-management, and self-control" (2016, 136). The customisable avatar body in *FFXIV Online* becomes an infinitely pliable digital body, more amenable to regulation and control than avatars' digitised representations of physical bodies, i.e., images of actual people. Regarding gaymers on Instagram, they take advantage of the freedom to reshape their avatar bodies to suit

their needs, which fluctuate as social and individual pressures and desires change. Krobová et al. refer to this as “imaginative play” where “the player takes advantage of polysemy in order to adjust characters’ sexualities” (2015). In other words, gaymers make use of the plurality of meaning inherent in avatar bodies to project an intended sexual identity onto them. However, as the sexual orientation of the Warrior of Light is never discussed in the fiction of *FFXIV Online*, there is an underlying assumption that the character is heterosexual. The polysemy noted by Krobová et al. collapses under the weight of heteronormative expectations; therefore, gaymers must actively work to justify their sexual identities through their avatar design (Lauteria 2012, 21).

Gaymers in *FFXIV Online* significantly rely on visual cues such as uniforms, Free Company colours, or clothing styles to signify social affiliations. The respondents I engaged comprehended the pivotal role of visual indicators in portraying their relationships with other avatars. They often participate in role-play events or work at role-play venues, acknowledging the necessity of adopting varying roles and relationships due to the game's visual-centric nature. Yulei Zhang, Yan Dang, Susan Brown, and Hsinchun Chen explain that “people form their behavior by observing themselves from a third-person perspective” (2017, 381) and are more likely to conform to social norms “when a given society is anonymous or has a large number of people” (381). As the authors point out, virtual worlds are primarily anonymous, and gaymers must rely on visual cues from other avatars to navigate norms in their newfound social groups.

The impact of the job system on character aesthetics is a pivotal aspect of the game's design, influencing gaymers’ interactions with their avatars. Bartle (2003, 198) notes that gaymers often struggle to understand what forms of identity exploration are possible in virtual worlds. As he describes, class systems are a “provision of ideals” (198) or a preconfigured set of characteristics provided to gaymers. Class systems can form the basis of identity templates for them to follow in their exploration of identity. However, the influence of job on identity is more pronounced within *FFXIV Online* than in the curated presentations on Instagram. In the game, many characters are often seen in levelling gear, not limited to role-play-focused outfits. This disparity arises because, as Klastrup and Tosca note, gaymers may prioritise appearance, but not at the cost of “[wearing] disadvantageous gear in dangerous situations” (2009, 11). Function is an essential consideration in the game environment, whereas aesthetics is the primary concern on Instagram.

Thus, while the game’s structural design influences character appearances through job-based attire, gaymers, particularly those engaged in role-playing, seek to challenge these

constraints, creating avatars that reflect a more personalised and less job-constrained identity. Klastrup and Tosca (2009, 14) point out that one of the critical contributions avatar customisation makes is invoking a group identity. Gamers intentionally craft avatars that move away from a job-based identity and opt to adopt the colours or themes of the group, or Free Company, to which they belong. Williams et al. support this notion by highlighting how vital private role-play groups are for “disaffected, marginalized, or psychologically troubled” (2011, 195) gamers. Invoking a sense of belonging to these groups is crucial to them, and avatar design is one way to accomplish this.

More experienced gamers invest substantial time in curating their avatars’ aesthetics. Patti highlights that avatars form part of a gamer’s “network of representation that acknowledges yet resists the boundaries of representation and identification” (2017, 180). Gamers greatly emphasise how their avatars form part of a network of representations that convey facets of the self to others. This insight aligns with the respondents’ observations about the game’s appealing visuals and the wider community’s sentiment that fashion is the real ‘endgame’ of *FFXIV Online*. Character design at the onset of the play experience is only the beginning; further customisation in the form of clothing and accessories are “unexpected ways of making statements about [player] identity” (Klastrup and Tosca 2009, 4). Gamers’ emphasis on aesthetics reflects a significant aspect of the game’s culture, where character appearance becomes a common focus for gamers after the story’s completion. Klastrup and Tosca corroborate these findings, noting that veterans utilise clothing to mark their status and to “encourage role-play and interaction with other players” (8).

Furthermore, gamers often choose to dress their avatars in revealing attire, showcasing more of the avatar’s body, which they perceive as aligning more closely with queer styles of dress. This trend towards sexualisation in avatar appearance, where more revealing clothing is commonly associated with queer sexual identities rather than heteronormative ones, highlights an essential aspect of sexual identity expression within the game. Sveningsson (2012b) outlines two modes, *representational* and *interactional*, that contextualise how gamers perceive their relationship with their avatars based on the play scenario. In terms of narrative or roleplay scenes, it is “a player-avatar-hybrid who was the acting subject” (68), whereas, in gameplay contexts, gamers tend to regard their “offline self as the acting subject” (68). Sveningsson’s findings mean that gamers’ relationships with their avatars change depending on whether they are engaged in the ‘regular’ objectives of the game, such as raiding, questing, or levelling their jobs, versus when

they are engaged in role-play with others. Notably, gaymers appear to identify more closely with their avatars while engaged in role-play activities. Interview respondents have expressed that the ability to display the sexual aspect of their avatars overtly is a liberating experience, mainly when such expressions of their sexuality have been restricted or unattainable in other areas of their lives. As Cover illustrates, “for a few minutes or a few hours one could immerse oneself in a subjectivity that was chosen” (2019, 105). Thus, the vital link between sexual expression and queer identity within the game should not be viewed merely as an endorsement of an overly sexualised subculture. Instead, it represents a celebration and a freedom to openly embrace and express their sexual identities in a space that allows for more freedom and acceptance than they might find elsewhere.

On Instagram, the function of avatar fashion assumes a different form. Here, gaymers are not engaged in live role-play but create their stories through a series of still images. Cover argues that users of social media are always already literate in the “discourse that informs [their] reading” (2016, 50) of media. In other words, users approach each media expression as part of an overarching process of identity work and “interactive textuality [that] constitute the subject” (50). Gaymers adopt appearances and compositional strategies like those found in other photographic genres to communicate their intended messages effectively. They take advantage of Instagram’s “strongly pronounced multimodality” (Kozharinova and Manovich 2024, 2) to leverage the familiar forms of identity expression, “text, static images, audio, and video” (2), in their construction of a persona.

7.1.2 Gender and sex norms in virtual worlds

The strategic use of gender tropes allows gaymers to communicate various aspects of their avatar’s identity rapidly and clearly to others within the game. Such aspects include, but are not limited to, gender expression, sexual orientation, and personality traits. Sveningsson observes that female players often “used the appropriation of masculine traits to legitimize their interest and skill” (2012a, 94). In other words, gaymers copy traits observed in others to ‘fit in’ and avoid stigma. Consequently, it is not unusual for gaymers to opt for stereotypical designs, leveraging these as unambiguous recognition and communication tools. This preference for archetype-driven character personas serves a dual purpose: it captures viewer attention and articulates the essence of the character swiftly and effectively in the virtual milieu.

The game's developers also use archetypal visual designs to differentiate between jobs. Each job possesses a distinct visual identity, influencing character design among gamers. Filipowich observes that the job system regulates gender expression but that its “power comes only by existing in fluctuating gender expression” (2018, 127). Cornelia Brunner refers to the “*butch-femme continuum*” (2008, 36), a concept that loosens the ties between sex and gender while acknowledging that performances of gender can vary between bodies. Different jobs are coded as either *butch* (Warrior, Dragoon, and Samurai) or *femme* (Dancer, White Mage, Astrologian) to adapt Brunner’s lexicon. However, while most MMORPGs enforce a single class identity onto the avatar, *FFXIV Online* embraces variability through its more flexible job system, affording gamers variety in their gender expressions.

Furthermore, the game offers a range of glamour pieces, many of which are aligned with specific job identities. Alongside these, a range of informal attire and glamour options do not conform to the job system, and these alternatives are notably popular among gamers. In their meta-study of over two decades of avatar research, Sibilla and Mancini note that the collected research indicates that gamers use avatar customisation “to elicit reactions in the other users, to stand out from the other avatars, or to conform to the character or the role playing” (2018, 6).

Visual expression also becomes a vital tool in signalling to others the nature and characteristics of their avatar, enhancing the overall experience of identity formation and interaction within the virtual world. Boellstorff (2008) observes that even when gamers attempt to project themselves into the game instead of role-playing another character, there remain gaps between them and the avatar. In these spaces occurs what Boellstorff calls “persona-play” (119), exploring the incongruities between the virtual and physical self. Even though gender does not inform the affordances available to gamers, gender norms often form the foundation for social interactions between them within *FFXIV Online*. Braenna, for example, demonstrates a keen awareness of gender scripts, which significantly influence her approach to role-playing.

Kakyoin, on Instagram, on the other hand, employs stereotyping and tropes to create distinct character archetypes, allowing for a diverse exploration of characters by appropriating conventional norms. Williams et al. (2011) observed in their study of role-players that while they engaged in multimodal interactions through text and emotes, they displayed reticence using voice-based communication tools. The findings from my research offer insight into the fact that role-players such as Kakyoin avoid voice-based communication because they are interested in role-playing various genders and identities. As the authors note, voice-based communication

“leads to players revealing more of their true age, gender, and personality than the relative anonymity of text chat” (177). While Williams et al. considered this a possible benefit, my findings indicate that the revealing nature of voice-based communication is why gaymers choose not to use it.

However, within *FFXIV Online*, characters predominantly adhere to traditional gender norms in their attire. The interviews for this research revealed that only a few respondents actively experimented with gender non-conformity in their character design. Additionally, most characters observed in-game strictly adhere to conventional gender norms, with instances of gaymers crossing gender boundaries in a meaningful way being exceedingly rare. Although numerous studies explore the concept of gender swapping between avatars and players¹, little, if any, research has been done on gender non-conformity within the game world itself. My research introduces the novel concept of gaymers deconstructing gender norms through the avatar body and its representation in the world. One such example is Kiki, who employs androgynous game and character modifications to render their avatar as non-binary. However, Cover warns that performing non-binary gender “reproduces the ideas of cismasculinity and cisfemininity as ‘normal’, associating that normality with banality” (2019, 59).

Initially, the attire in *FFXIV Online* adhered closely to conventional gender norms, with certain clothing options being gender specific. The developers' decisions in designing these gender-specific clothing options demonstrate how virtual worlds can initially mirror offline cultural biases and constraints (Pearce and Artemesia 2009, 111). For example, jobs with butch connotations—emphasising attributes like strength, aggression, or protection—typically feature heavy materials, metals, and robust armour. This aspect points to a notable disparity between the game's aesthetic design and how role-players conceptualise their characters' appearances. Rebecca Waldie (2018, 77) observes how gaymers are interpellated into expressions of masculinity through stereotypical depictions of male clothing in other games. In her example, gaymers can progress in the story only through performing specific masculine identities.

In contrast to the narrow script in Waldie's example, *FFXIV Online* offers butch and femme identities as a choice and never denigrates gaymers, regardless of which combination they select. The interview respondents even reported that their character creations detached from the game's

¹ For example, see Sibilla and Mancini (2018), Vasalou and Joinson (2009), Fron et al. (2007), and Thompson (2014).

job system. They did not view their avatars primarily as White Mages, Warriors, Scholars, or other defined jobs but as unique individuals independent of these roles.

This tendency is mirrored in Instagram images, where avatars are often portrayed as generic figures without specific job characteristics. Such depictions allow gamers to distance themselves from the gendered connotations associated with specific jobs. Instead, avatar bodies on Instagram are regulated in the gendered expressions of the digital body. As Kath Albury observes, self-representations are asymmetrical along gendered lines, where male bodies “had more freedom to publicly display their bodies without risking adult or peer condemnation” (2015, 1742). In contrast, the documentative project reveals a more substantial alignment with the gameplay aspect, where gamers more readily embrace their job identities and gendered contexts.

The initial gender-based constraints on specific clothing options in *FFXIV Online* faced dissatisfaction among gamers, as they limited the ability to explore diverse gender identities. Male characters could not wear dresses, and female characters could not wear particular pants, for example. The developers’ response—albeit slow—signifies a commitment to accommodating gamers’ desires for more expressive freedom. Clothing is essential for gamers; as Ahmed puts it, “objects extend bodies” (2006, 110). They orient the gamer regarding their affordances in the virtual world and provide a reference against which they form their sense of self. Avatar clothing is no different in this regard. However, it is essential to note that these restrictions also set the stage for gamers’ later exploration and experimentation with gender identity and sexual expression within the game. Another possibility Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin explores is using the avatar body as “a site of resistance, with the help of parodies” (2017, 102). As she observes, gamers express their dissatisfaction with stereotypical gender presentation through humour and critique in the form of fan-made machinima. Over time, as gamers voiced their desire for more diverse and inclusive options in *FFXIV Online*, the game evolved to allow more fluid and expansive expressions of gender and sexuality, gradually breaking away from the stereotypical norms initially imposed.

Paradoxically, *FFXIV Online*'s job designs notably diverged from traditional gendered clothing long before non-job clothing options. Male and female White Mages have always worn similar flowing robes, gowns, and dresses. Warriors, Paladins, and Dark Knights all feature thick metal armour, regardless of the avatar’s gender. However, it would be unwise to infer too much from this seemingly contradictory stance on gender identity and character design; as Filipowich

(2018, 116) notes, “*Final Fantasy*’s gender roles must negotiate within the norms of very different cultures. As a result, the ‘queering’ of a figure to one audience may be normative to another, which highlights not only gender’s fluidity but the extent to which social factors author its scripts”. Thus, *FFXIV Online* does not necessarily exemplify a wholeheartedly gender-fluid approach to character and job design. Instead, the ‘scripts’ that inform the game’s aesthetics are informed by the complex interplay of Japanese and global social norms, audience expectations, and artistic vision.

Analysis of Instagram images presents another picture. While most images downplay the gameplay aspect, a few still resonate within the structural framework of *FFXIV Online*. It is observed that these gaymers either conform to or are mindful of the gendered job traits established by the game’s developers. Regardless of sex identity, tanks are often associated with the masculine or butch, while healers are typically feminised in their appearance. Valkyrie observes that the gendered traits embedded in the job design “reinforce assumed differences between men and women, and in doing so [avatars] are seen as proxies for the players controlling them” (2017, 143). Furthermore, the characters examined in my virtual ethnography project predominantly embody or creatively engage with these job archetypes, faithfully enacting the scripts they are given.

Despite the game’s tendencies towards gender-neutral expression, gaymers deeply invested in role-play and character customisation have turned to modifying game files to realise their ideal character representations. This practice, quite prevalent in the community, underscores a persistent need for self-expression beyond the game’s default offerings. Thompson argues that one reason why queer people, in particular, make use of game modding is in response to the industry’s lack of representations of queer sexuality, or sexuality in general, which leaves the gaymers “feeling excluded and neglected” (2014, 197). Modding is a way for gaymers to represent themselves in the game world more sincerely. Though not officially supported by the developers, this practice is widely embraced among role-players for the creative freedom it affords in character design. Nardi (2010) explores a wide range of modifications in her study of *WoW*, noting that the relationship between modders and Blizzard is much more amicable than in other MMORPGs. Modding is, as she observes, “part of a larger movement of participant production on the Internet in which people create content simply because they want to” (150).

The findings from my virtual ethnography project are more varied and nuanced. While the individuals documented adhere to conventional gender expressions as a means of self-

expression in the game, a small number embrace non-conforming gender clothing to articulate their character's identity. Krobová et al. refer to this as stylised performance, where “the player deliberately performs as a queer character by marking the character with stereotypical signs of his or her sexuality” (2015, 8). Without an opportunity to express queer identities in games, gaymers rely on stereotypical markers for their male avatars, such as drag or wearing pink, as a means of embodying queerness in their avatars. Sometimes, this choice may be driven by a desire for comedic effect or to attract attention, with some gaymers associating the transgressing of gender codes with humour. In other cases, a conscious attempt at gender play does not appear to be the primary goal for the gaymer; for example, gaymers often prioritise gear attributes over design, resulting in avatar appearances that inadvertently perform inconsistent gender scripts. Sundén observes that this form of gender play between avatars and gaymers “is understood as a consequence of the game itself, and as such unproblematic” (2012a, 185). Some gaymers do not consider their activities to be transgressing gender norms; instead, they view their behaviour as fitting inside the gender norms of the game world. They demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the association between sexual orientations and specific appearances. This awareness reflects a broader cultural recognition of how stereotypes, tropes, or archetypes are more commonly linked to specific sexual identities.

However, this does not imply that sexual orientation is visually identifiable; instead, it highlights how gaymers consciously employ these associations as a means of indicating their sexual orientation or exploring varied forms of sexual identity expression within the virtual world. Cover (2012) illustrates how identity in online spaces is restricted to a limited range of gender expressions. For gaymers to “perform as a coherent subject in a process over time” (181), i.e., to express and maintain an identity that is recognisable to others, they must perform their genders within the narrow confines prescribed by the platform. Utilisation of these limited cultural signifiers aids in the portrayal of their avatars' sexual identities and allows for a deeper exploration and expression of sexuality in the virtual environment. Gaymers achieve this goal through ‘counterpublics’, which “have alternative behavioral standards, communicative rules, and ideological norms” (Cavalcante 2016, 118). Counterpublics problematize identity norms found in media to explore and cultivate new expressions of identity. This study initially hypothesized that one such counterpublic was the micro-networks of Instagram. While evidence of exploring and expressing identity is present on the social media platform, interview testimony has shed light on the community-driven identity construction at work on the private servers of Discord.

In *FFXIV Online*, the influence of sexual orientation on social interactions presents a nuanced picture. While some participants do not perceive their sexuality as a significant factor in their general interactions with other characters, this dynamic shifted notably in erotic contexts. This observation highlights the underlying role of sexual identity in shaping interpersonal connections, albeit varying according to the scenario. A typical example is Valkyrie's research, where they note that a male player created female avatars because "he could enjoy looking at them" (2011, 83). Although this observation likely also holds for some gaymers, researchers like Valkyrie assume that female avatars are created by heterosexual male players for the pleasure of visual consumption. However, the findings in my research complicate the issue. For the queer individuals interviewed in this research, avatars are not necessarily objects of erotic pleasure. My research focuses less on avatars as *objects* of desire but as *agents* of desire. In this way, I consider how gaymers engage with their avatars and the avatars of others in the pursuit of erotic pleasure.

The impact of sexual identity on gaymer interactions is discernible on Instagram. Analysis of user behaviour on this platform reveals that tagging practices and the nature of content posted are often reflective of the gaymers' sexual identities. Bernard explains that hashtags have "made the keyword a central element in the organization of knowledge" (2019, 28). Hashtags are ways users on social media organise their information and make sense of the virtual world around them (Verhoven 2014, 214). The gaymers of *FFXIV Online* make use of hashtags such as #gayorzea, #ffxivgay, and #gaymiqote as lodestones by which to navigate social networks on Instagram. By signalling to each other overlapping interests in sexuality and games, gaymers render themselves 'searchable'. Such tendencies suggest that sexual orientation plays a more prominent role in how gaymers curate and engage with content on Instagram, influencing the formation and maintenance of social connections within the virtual community.

Interview respondents frequently discussed behaviours characterised as dominant or submissive, aggressive or passive, reflecting a transference of offline dynamics into *FFXIV Online*. Consequently, in the game, where gender can be fluid and lacks consequential impact on gameplay, traditional gender norms and values from offline society remain largely unquestioned. On this point, Sundén warns, "there is a tendency within game studies and queer theory alike to favor a player/subject who is active, creative, unruly, transgressive—be it in relation to the game as norm or to heteronormativity" (2012a, 172). Sundén argues that while it is vital to explore transgressive methods of play, it is also essential to understand the limits to which gaymers

actively attempt to resist the heteronormative structures of virtual worlds. As she later notes, gaymers engage in transgressive forms of play for a diverse number of reasons, often resulting in tensions arising in queer communities. Evidenced by Sundén's research and the testimonials gathered for this study, some gaymers may likely be content with the gendered structure within which they operate. Understanding that a plurality of motivations exists within the community of *FFXIV Online* gaymers necessitates an analysis that does not presuppose a deliberate intent on the part of all of them to queer gender. However, this lack of engagement with gender norms is intriguing in an environment where gender primarily serves as a cosmetic attribute rather than a defining personal characteristic.

7.1.3 *The gender fluidity available through multiple avatars*

In addition to the varied uses showcased in the above section, some members within the gaymer community of *FFXIV Online* explore the possibilities of a gender-fluid space using multiple avatars. The interviews revealed that gaymers frequently go beyond developing a singular character; they often conceive different versions of the same character, each adapted to specific roles or environments. For instance, one gaymer maintained multiple avatars, each distinguished by unique gender identities, to enrich their gameplay experience. Sometimes referred to as 'mules' (Z. C. Valkyrie 2011, 83), in *FFXIV Online*, they are dubbed 'alts', a shortening of 'alternate'. Korkeila and Hamari note this is a rare occurrence in *FFXIV Online* "as the game allows for leveling up multiple classes and jobs on the same character" (2020, 17). Kafai et al. (2010, 35) argue there are economic reasons for maintaining multiple avatars, as in-game marketplaces limit interactions per avatar and not per account. In addition to these more pragmatic concerns, the authors note "other functions such as disguising oneself from one's friends or experimenting with gender" (35). Some avatars are intended to be a more persistent online persona for gaymers. In contrast, others serve as methods of ensuring privacy, gaining an advantage in the game, or as platforms for discrete experimentation.

Other gaymers replicated their primary character across different servers, a strategy stemming more from the game's structural constraints than personal choice. Nevertheless, this practice underscores a deep attachment to their avatars, with gaymers eager to continue their experience across various servers. Taylor explores the idea of server culture, noting that norms and values vary between servers as they are "contextual, socially negotiated, heterogeneous, ambiguous, and quite often contradictory" (2006, 157). In response to varying server cultures,

some gaymers choose to cross server boundaries as their main avatar, while others create avatars that 'live' on that server exclusively. Motivations for visiting other servers range from convenience and economic gain to insulating more experimental traits or behaviours from their social networks. Boellstorff et al. (2012, 100) also note the intriguing possibility that multiple individuals may control the same avatar, an aspect of avatar-player relationships that this thesis has not explored.

Rather than perceiving all of their avatars as mirror selves or secondary identities, as proposed by Turkle (2005), gaymers treat their 'alts' more as external entities. These avatars serve specific functions, acting as tools for exploration and expression within *FFXIV Online*. Jeremy Bailenson and Andrew Beall (2006, 2) observe that avatars augment the sensory capabilities of the user while reshaping situational context. The authors also observe that avatars allow for a phenomenon of "hyperpresence, using novel visual dimensions to express otherwise abstract emotions or behaviors" (3). Hyperpresence is particularly significant for gaymers who utilise avatars to experiment with or present idealised versions of themselves, especially in the contexts of gender and sexual expression.

Regarding role-play accounts on Instagram, it is observed that the majority of the accounts focus on a single character. However, some accounts feature multiple characters, demonstrating a range of gender and identity expressions. As Williams et al.'s study into role-players highlights, gaymers "showed that immersion was a key motivator to role-play, with social motivations a close second" (2011, 188). In this context, immersion is a conflux of "discovery, RP, and escapism" (179). Gaymers, therefore, desire to enact new gendered identities through play/discovery and role-playing embodied narratives as their avatars. Although there is a discernible preference for certain genders within these accounts, those with multiple characters often showcase a variety of gender identities. Ruberg (2020, 185) explores how the encoding of sexuality and gender in games evokes certain norms, usually reflecting society at large. In MMORPGs such as *Second Life*, once an avatar gender has been selected, it is irreversible, reflecting certain attitudes on the essentialism of gender/sex binaries. *FFXIV Online*, on the other hand, facilitates more fluid expressions of gender and sex identity by creating alts or in-game items. My research reveals that gaymers use gender and sexual expression in *FFXIV Online* to explore many alternative identities. Analysis of the interview data indicates that gaymers engage with various modes of gender and sexual expression to address personal issues or explore identities inaccessible to

them in the offline world. Braenna, for instance, employs her characters as a medium to investigate identities she cannot embody in real life.

Examining images on Instagram further highlights that gamers are delving into diverse identities through role-play. The posts on Instagram include experimenting with character archetypes that embody varying degrees of sexual dominance or submissiveness, as well as exploring romantic interests. Williams et al. observed, “a high correlation with the ‘be like the character’ question” (2011, 180) and role-players, elaborating that a small group of dedicated role-players use the practice to project their identities into the virtual world. From the interview testimony conducted for this study, gamers echoed the sentiments expressed by Williams et al.’s interviewees. However, they also used their avatars as an opportunity to ideate drastically different expressions of self through alts. Due to the short-form nature of role-play interactions with alts, gamers can oscillate between contrasting experiences as different selves to rapidly explore new expressions of gender or sexuality. These experimentations are separate from but inform their primary avatar, allowing gamers to incorporate aspects of their experimental experiences into their ‘regular’ avatar persona.

7.1.4 *The safety of virtual expression*

Exploration of sexuality in online spaces is perceived as safer by the respondents. These gamers frequently mentioned that the virtual environment of *FFXIV Online* offers a secure setting for experimenting with new ideas or identities related to sexuality. In some instances, the experiences of the avatar can even substitute for experiences in the physical world, satisfying specific needs or curiosities within the safe confines of the virtual world—an extension of the Proteus effect (Yee and Bailenson 2007). Acosta et al. (2017, 82) note several reasons virtual communities offer safe environments for gamers: anonymity in communication, more agency in self-disclosing private information, asynchronous contact, and the ability to transcend geographic boundaries. Notably, this perspective was more prevalent among younger respondents, with older participants showing less inclination towards online sexual exploration. My findings support the study by Craig et al. that found “younger adolescents were more likely to use social media for emotional support, entertainment, and access to LGBTQ+ information—and that use decreased as age increased” (2021, 7).

In the context of online role-play, particularly within *FFXIV Online*, gamers exhibit heightened sensitivity towards the privacy and consent of others, especially in scenarios involving

sexualised themes. The nature of role-play, often delving into sensitive and personal areas, necessitates a strong emphasis on privacy and respect for fellow participants. However, what constitutes private information is not always correlated with offline scenarios. Peter Kollock and Marc Smith (2004, 91) illustrate with the example of gaymers attempting to verify the gender identity of the role-play partner. They note, “such sleuthing is not considered an invasion of privacy” (91) but that it is the right of others to know if they are being ‘tricked’. Respondents highlighted the importance of explicit and transparent discussions on boundaries and consent in role-play settings during the interviews. These conversations typically occur outside the role-play context, where gaymers establish mutual understanding and agreement on what is acceptable within their role-play interaction. Brice attributes this to the incorporation of BDSM and kink sexual norms into broader game culture, observing that “what separates kinky and vanilla sex for me is the active recognition of consent” (2017, 80). This practice of setting well-defined boundaries is notably more rigorous in sexualised role-play encounters compared to typical offline sexual interactions. Brice further notes, “consent is its own context, and it allows play to be both affective and expressive” (80). Such meticulous attention to consent and boundaries underscores the responsible approach towards these sensitive themes and uncovers how role-players view consent and privacy as integral to the play experience. This process is essential in satisfying both partners; as Yee illustrates in his interviews with role-players, role-play “reflected and accentuated differences in their personalities and worldviews” (2006, 198).

When gaymers do choose to reveal or discuss their real selves, they consistently establish clear boundaries between their identity and that of their avatars. This careful distinction underscores the complex relationship between gaymers and their virtual representations, characterised by immersion and detachment. Sibilla and Mancini describe this relationship as a socio-constructionist approach wherein “the avatar is seen as a means to ‘experiment’ with identities that are distant from the offline one, disconnected from what the user actually is” (2018, 10). Gaymers purposefully create distance between themselves and their avatars to explore new revolutionary concepts of selfhood better.

On Instagram, the extent to which personal information is revealed varies significantly. Some accounts blur the boundaries between the gaymer and their avatar, providing insights that facilitate discussion about them. However, it is worth acknowledging that users may consider their profile private despite the technically public nature of their account. As Leaver and Highfield warn, “even if Instagram images were technically public years ago, the experience of using the app may

have felt largely private” (2018, 5). In contrast, other users maintain public accounts strictly dedicated to their character, with no personal information disclosed. Generally, gaymers are reticent to share personal details about themselves, yet they are often open about the identities of their avatars. Barbour et al. argue that the public nature of user accounts, combined with the adept use of hashtags, is part of a mediated persona's “visual production and performance” (2017, 2). In other words, rendering oneself visible online is doing the work of maintaining one’s online persona.

7.2 Virtual photography and identity co-construction

7.2.1 Photography remediated in virtual worlds

Considering virtual photography within *FFXIV Online*, my experience as a traditional photographer has intersected with this emerging field in exciting ways. This crossover offers a unique perspective on virtual image capturing. While certain principles of traditional photography apply, such as composition and photographic logic, virtual photography diverges in its technical capabilities and applications. Bolter and Grusin refer to this relationship between old and new as the “twin logics of immediacy and hypermediacy in their efforts to remake themselves and each other” (1999, 5). Virtual photography seeks to imitate the approaches of photography by inviting the viewer to look through and at the image, which Edmund Husserl refers to as “image consciousness” (2005).

It is worth acknowledging that my background in photography influences my interpretation of these virtual images, possibly seeing them through a 'photographic lens' due to my professional inclination. Insights gathered from Instagram and interviews within the *FFXIV Online* community confirm that even non-photographers perceive these images with a similar photographic understanding, recognising their potential and composition like traditional photography. Poremba argues that gaymers recognise the photographic potential of virtual images because they “present affordances and opportunities for representation and expression” (2007, 50), similar to photography. Manovich, however, observes that digital images resemble ‘traditional’ photographs in appearance only. In terms of affordances, digital images “can function in ways which, in my view, make it radically different from its traditional equivalent” (2013, 62). From my research, it emerges that gaymers gravitate towards virtual photography precisely because it shares some similarities with physical photography while being excited by the unique opportunities for self-expression that the new medium provides.

Moore attempts to understand virtual photographs from multiple perspectives, as tokens to recall past experiences, as an adaption of photographic convention, and as modulators of “an affective sense of time and space” (2014, 145). From his exploration, it becomes apparent that the emotional engagement and responses elicited by these images of virtual subjects parallel those provoked by photographs of the physical world. Thus, virtual photography should not be perceived as an attempt at the mimesis of photography but rather as an adaption of the photographic art form into a new, virtual dimension. It maintains the essence of traditional photography regarding emotional impact and narrative potential, yet it operates within the unique context of virtual environments and characters.

Virtual photography offers novel representational possibilities. For instance, it allows complete control over exposure and lighting that defy physical laws. Švelch introduces the concept of a continuum of “representation, which combines indexicality and iconicity” (2021, 5) and observes that ‘unmodified’ screenshots that are directly captured from the game world represent indexicality, or “a notion of a causal link” (5). On the other end are “transformative practices of promotional screenshots and in-game photography” (5) that give rise to iconic² interpretations of the screenshot. Furthermore, the capability to freeze subjects before capturing an image or to generate and manipulate invisible light sources for visible effects opens many creative avenues. Möring and de Mutiis (2019, 85) note that visual artists such as Kent Sheely use these interventions to alter the gameplay condition radically. Gaymers in *FFXIV Online* do much the same, subverting the ‘intended’ gameplay by substituting it with new forms of interactivity and expression.

Virtual photography mirrors the function of traditional photography in the interplay between self and image, like conventional self-portraiture. It serves as a medium for capturing the ‘punctum’, Barthes’ (1981) term denoting the poignant, personal response elicited by a photograph. Barbour et al. also demonstrate that virtual photographs are part of the “visibility labour” (2017, 8) in articulating an online persona. Kozharinova and Manovich (2024) consider the relationship between gaymer and Instagram account analogous to that of the protagonist and narrative. Within the plot and story of the Instagram page, viewers are invited to participate in the gaymer’s constructed narrative. Thus, this digital form of photography, disseminated on social

² That is to say, emphasis is placed on the resemblance screenshots bear to the game worlds they represent (Švelch 2021, 4).

media, is a method of record-keeping, identity labour, and storytelling, allowing individuals to document and assert their identity through a coherent narrative.

The practice of documenting these virtual environments parallels the visual narratives and aesthetics characteristic of queer spaces, suggesting a continuity of the need for safe, expressive spaces, albeit in a digital context. Jason Orne (2017) explains that physical queer spaces, such as bars and clubs, serve as essential opportunities for queer individuals to explore their sexuality in a relatively safe environment. There is a need for queer spaces above and beyond private messages and dating apps, “sexy spaces must include a social element, but they also must be place based to generate a community. They can’t remain solely online without social feedback. Someone must be able to observe” (Orne 2017, 96). While Orne does not consider the spatial and temporal nature of virtual places, *FFXIV Online* gamers demonstrate a discernible aspiration to document their social experiences within the virtual world, effectively creating a new, safe virtual space like those found in queer communities of the 90s. Donald Jones recognises that some queer individuals view these virtual spaces as “the only alternative to a gay bar” (2002, 143), highlighting how virtual spaces afford queer communities new ways of gathering and forming. The inhabiting of spaces of queer communities is essential, as Ahmed argues, “sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we inhabit spaces with” (2006, 1). These scholars underscore the ongoing importance of such spaces for identity exploration and community building within the queer community, extending from physical spaces to digital platforms.

For gamers, capturing and sharing images often embodies self-gratification and self-actualization, reflecting personal achievements and milestones within the virtual world. Moore considers in-game photography to be a “highly gestural action” (2014, 151), placing these visual objects within the contexts of “the will to action and the capacity for self-expression through the products of play” (150). In other words, virtual photographs are evidence of the twin processes of actualisation and idealisation that occur in forming an online persona (Mancini and Sibilla 2017, 276). This photographic practice also significantly impacts viewers, fostering visible social connections among diverse groups and preserving avatars' memories. Moore explains that virtual photographs are validated by other players with the currencies of “votes, favourites, or comments” (2014, 147). Social media transforms the practice of virtual photography from a personalised experience into a participatory exercise whereby the comments and ‘likes’ of others regulate the individual’s artistic expression. Craig et al. observe that this form of “active social media use...

has been linked to positive well-being” (2021, 9) in the creation of support networks for queer youth. These images, therefore, chronicle individual experiences and reinforce the collective identity of the gaymer community.

At the heart of virtual photography lies the intricate design of the avatar and its dynamic interaction with the virtual environment, encompassing both the avatar's positioning and posture. This essence of virtual imagery diverges from the pursuit of eliciting responses like those evoked by traditional photography. Rather than imitating conventional photographic techniques, virtual photography engages in “deep remixability” (Manovich 2001) and combines photographic language with other media approaches to convey the gaymer's avatar within the digital realm. As Jim Blascovich (2002, 131) demonstrates, their sense of immersion is not dependent on photographic realism. Instead, gaymers seek “*agency* and *behavioural realism*” (131). In other words, they do not want to imitate the appearance of a traditional photograph; instead, they use photographic techniques to emulate the cultural labour of having their photograph taken—of being seen. The primary aim of virtual photography parallels that of traditional photography: to place subjects within contexts that define and reshape them. It underscores the myriads of social interactions within these virtual spaces, interactions that fundamentally shape the identity and narrative of the avatars involved. Joanne Finkelstein astutely observes, “When we come to see ourselves through the eyes of others... then a new level of significance is added to our social experiences” (2019).

Interviewees highlighted that virtual photography captures the essence of their characters and illuminates the social fabric of *FFXIV Online*. It showcases the varied social engagements and role-playing activities that define the online community's vibrancy, i.e., a visual culture tailored to virtual worlds arises using virtual photography. From fashion magazines (Klastrup and Tosca 2009, 12), advice columns on creating the perfect avatar (Kafai, Fields, and Cook 2010, 36), to virtual sex work (Guest 2007, 178), gaymers make use of virtual imagery to promote themselves, regulate cultural norms around appearance, and engage in online sexual activities. Thus, virtual photography is crucial for visually representing the game world and unravelling its layers of social connections and identity formations. My virtual ethnographic approach keenly focuses on uncovering this virtual world's subtleties. The project is not solely concerned with recording images; it explores the nuanced interactions and relationships that breathe life into these digital avatars. However, I remain cognizant of Boellstorff et al.'s warning, “capturing images is not a

shortcut for interpretive or analytic work. Photos or screenshots are never simply representations of objective social facts” (2012, 115).

Furthermore, the objective of eliminating UI elements from in-game images is to discard extraneous details, thereby centring attention on the most pertinent aspects. Contrary to Poremba's (2007) assertion that removing UI elements is an effort to mimic traditional photography, my analysis suggests a different motivation. Based on inferences made during the interviews, gamers typically do not regard UI components as essential to the narrative or aesthetic value of the image. The omission of these elements is not a pursuit of realism like conventional photography; instead, it is a strategic decision to sharpen the viewer's focus on the virtual environment and the avatar, which are deemed the crux of the visual experience. These images move against a strategy of metareferentiality, which Hans-Joachim Backe describes as “elements of digital games that highlight properties of digital games” (2018, 7). Backe includes examples of in-game paintings and imagery that call attention to the ‘gameness’ of the experience. The images documented for this study oppose such a stratagem, not to seek photographic realism but to call attention away from the ludology embedded in *FFXIV Online*. Similarly to how role-players exclude game mechanics from their narratives and backstories, *FFXIV Online* photographers seek to call attention to the world they inhabit.

7.2.2 *Self-expression through virtual photography*

Gamers exhibit notable pride in their virtual images, indicating a distinct approach to image creation in *FFXIV Online*. There are two categories of image capturing observed among gamers. The first involves incidental screenshots, primarily used to capture fleeting moments or to commemorate specific events—a form of visual documentation. Tim Gorichanaz and Kiersten Latham (2016) distinguish between the content, docemes, and the form, or docs, of documentation. Docemes are “any part of a document, which can be identified and analytically isolated” (Lund 2003, 7).

Furthermore, docemes “cannot exist in the same capacity outside documents as they do within them” (Gorichanaz and Latham 2016, 1125); therefore, the elements of documents that contain meaning are contextually dependent on their placement concerning other docemes. This conceptual framework for understanding documentation applies to the virtual photographs of gamers in *FFXIV Online*. They seek to contextualise their experiences within the wider virtual environment by documenting themselves within their virtual environment, considering the avatar

as docume, and highlighting the interdependency between avatar representation and the activities, people, and surroundings. These images typically do not have modifications, focusing on preserving the moment or individual of interest without extensive artistic intervention. This category of in-game photography most closely aligns with Urban's (2023) notion of virtual photographs as creative trophies. As Urban (14) recounts, virtual photographs can serve to preserve the in-game achievements of gamers.

The second category encompasses more deliberately crafted photographs. In these instances, gamers apply a thoughtful photographic approach, evident in their careful consideration of framing, focal lengths, and lighting effects. Möring and de Mutiis refer to this use of virtual photography as "artistic screenshotting" (2019, 82), whereas Urban uses the term "aesthetic tokens" (2023, 14). These images demonstrate a higher degree of intentionality and artistic insight as gamers work to present their characters in a particular light. For example, Urban notes how these images "provide a glimpse at a game's themes, motifs, tropes, and other ambient qualities" (15). Möring, de Mutiis (2019) and Poremba (2007) observe that a primary component of artistically inclined in-game imagery is the use of techniques that either resist the gameplay condition or remediate it within the context of play. Gamers' fixation with virtual photography is inferred from my interviews or the Instagram images reviewed and reflected in platforms like *Gposers* magazine. Magazines like *Gposers* dedicate themselves to the art of virtual photography within *FFXIV Online*, highlighting the seriousness with which gamers approach this aspect of the game. Klastrup and Tosca highlight that the images in magazines such as *Gposers* are "used as inspiration, discussed as consumption, and as objects of desire" (2009, 12).

Virtual photography in *FFXIV Online* serves a fundamental human need for recognition and validation from others. This need is usually fulfilled through social media photography, which parallels virtual photography. Cover views images of a virtual self as an act of curation, which "involves a mythical framing of choice and change" (2019, 106). Gamers select and edit images as part of a more comprehensive activity of identity construction. Although respondents in my study did not explicitly articulate this, their engagement with virtual photography and its impact on their experiences suggests its significance in affirming identity. As Patti notes, virtual photography contextualises gamers' experiences with the game, their social network, and the "textual world of the game" (2017, 181).

Instagram users and interview respondents dedicate considerable time to planning and executing their photoshoots, adhering to specific visual criteria to render their images natural or

spontaneous. Sontag argues that what “photography’s program of realism actually implies is the belief that reality is hidden” (2005, 94), indicating that photographic techniques are orientated towards an ‘unveiling’ of hidden truths through artifice and careful compositions. Similarly, Instagram images are deliberately crafted to appear as if taken spontaneously, relying on the “index/icon hybrid” (Švelch 2021, 5) of photographic norms to convey a sense of believability. Gamers paradoxically move towards a ‘truer’ interpretation of their avatars using external programs or modifying the game engine or assets. Poremba (2010) places game modification within a tradition of folk practice. She notes that mods “primarily serve to support an active sharing of meaning” (46). Mods are also participatory in engaging gamers in “community building and social exchange” (45).

Engaging with the posts on Instagram, I found that gamers’ use of virtual photography within *FFXIV Online* is driven predominantly by personal passion rather than the pursuit of social capital or popularity. Barbour et al. concur that many images on social media “can be understood as personal communication, despite being shared publicly” (2017, 5). Korkeila and Hamari present a contrasting opinion, noting that gamers seek social capital in some sense and achieve their goal through “immersion-customization, immersion-escapism and immersion-role-playing” (2020, 19). While the authors do not mention posting images online, my research indicates that gamers utilise social media as an extension of their role-play activities. Interviews I conducted revealed that these gamers consider virtual photography a personal endeavour, primarily sharing their images within close-knit circles rather than broadcasting them widely for public consumption, indicating that while they view their images as personal/public, they are nonetheless engaged in the *maintenance* of social capital rather than its accrual. The absence of a concerted effort to expand social networks or to use avatar images as a means of self-promotion suggests that the primary impetus behind sharing these images is artistic self-expression to a close-knit friend group. The focus remains on personal satisfaction and the intrinsic value of the creative process rather than external validation or commercial gain.

Moreover, virtual photography is crucial in enhancing and underpinning role-play activities within the game. It often catalyses narrative development, enabling gamers to construct and participate in collaborative storytelling. While role-play has extensively been researched in virtual worlds³, there is a dearth of research on virtual photography’s role in constructing online

³ For example, see Williams et al. (2011), Rosalie Hooi and Hichang Cho (2014), Sibilla and Mancini (2018), Korkeila and Hamari (2020), and Yee and Bailenson (2007).

narratives. While Kozharinova and Manovich explore the possibility of Instagram as a narrative platform, this is discussed outside the context of MMORPGs (2024). Through virtual photography, my findings indicate that gaymers can illustrate and augment their in-game role-playing, using images as starting points or focal elements around which stories evolve and unfold. This observation is tentatively supported by Williams et al., who note that role-players engage in storytelling because “RP lets them be more of who they truly ‘are’” (2011, 174). Virtual photography facilitates the need for creative storytelling and self-representation in role-players. This dual aspect of virtual photography—as a tool for personal expression and a communal storytelling device—underscores its significance to gaymer communities. Gaymers’ self-expression via virtual photography is multifaceted, encompassing a range of experiences and explorations that extend beyond the conventional gameplay, indicating a deep engagement with *FFXIV Online*’s potential for identity formation and exploration.

Instagram emerged as a platform for garnering attention and directing viewers to more detailed content hosted on other platforms. Highfield and Leaver (2016, 51) concur with my findings, noting that the content users share on Instagram may shift in form as it is distributed to other platforms, or the kind of content users post varies across networks. Despite the interviewees’ general wariness towards social media, individual approaches vary. For instance, Felon appreciates Instagram’s ability to showcase images online, while Palar exhibits significant apprehension about social media usage due to the fear of potential backlash. Papacharissi explains that this anxiety is due to “the persistent, replicable, searchable, and scalable nature of networked acts” (2011, 51) that lead to different online contexts colliding. The gaymers of *FFXIV Online* are careful to maintain separate domains of self between the public ‘real’ and the private virtual selves. Instagram’s algorithm plays a crucial role in this, as it actively connects users with similar interests through features like suggested accounts, personalised feeds, and the *explore* section. Gaymers maintain these contexts through the labour of tagging, which relegates their images within specific desired “micro-publics” (Moore, Barbour, and Lee 2017, 6).

Determining how gaymers construct a self through the Instagram images of their avatars is complex. However, my analysis of the images collected for this study suggests a tendency towards idealisation. These gaymers share images portraying their avatars enjoying life in aspirational ways. My finding is corroborated by Yee and Bailenson’s (2007, 281) notion of the Proteus effect, where the researchers noted a direct correlation between the user’s idealisation of their avatar and their self-esteem. Similarly, there is a noticeable trend of constructing idealised

relationships on Instagram, with posts often depicting romanticised moments of intimacy, sexual or otherwise. These depictions point to the everyday use of Instagram as a platform for portraying an enhanced, perhaps more aspirational, version of gamers' virtual lives and relationships. The deployment of idealised relationships on Instagram consolidates a coherent and engaging persona that, as Kozharinova and Manovich claim, "from whose subjective viewpoint the audience explores the world of narration" (2024, 12). The proliferation of images across diverse Instagram accounts underscores virtual photography's centrality in the *FFXIV Online* role-playing community. The practice underpins the establishment and communication of character identities.

Some gamers actively collaborate with in-game 'photographers'. In contrast, others view capturing images as a demonstration of skill and thus prefer to maintain individual control over the photographic process. This dichotomy in attitudes towards collaboration reflects the multifaceted nature of gamers' engagement with virtual photography, highlighting its role as both a social connector and a medium for personal artistic expression.

7.2.3 *Virtual photography and mods*

In *FFXIV Online*, gamers frequently utilise external tools in addition to shaders to enhance the game's visual appeal. These tools—such as *FFXIV TexTools* (TexTools Github Group 2024) and *Mare Synchronos*—are widely adopted across the community, as evidenced by the numerous accounts and interviews I have examined. Shaders are not the only modifications used; gamers also download asset modifications that alter in-game outfits. Lauteria argues that mods have "the capacity to do politically [and] create new spaces for resistant play" (2012, 18), meaning modding is a means for gamers to resist and change the heteronormative conventions embedded within a virtual world. While these changes are typically visible only to the individual, there are methods to synchronise these modifications with others. The mod *Mare Synchronos*, mentioned earlier, enables the synchronisation of asset changes, allowing gamers to share their customised visual experiences.

In addition to aesthetic modifications, gamers use custom programs to alter animations, emote sets, and visual effects associated with different character jobs. While gamers may use mods as a means of expressing a sexual identity not available to them otherwise in *FFXIV Online*, Thompson warns that "just because something is made 'queer' does not mean it is automatically intersectional and destabilizing of other identity markers such as race" (2018, 196). For example,

in his study of queer mods, Thompson found that overwhelmingly gaymers privileged normative standards of beauty such as “muscularity, able-bodiedness, and large penis size” (197).

Shaders are crucial in defining the style of images taken in *FFXIV Online*. Shaders are tools that modify the game's visual appearance by applying various effects. While playing the game, these modifications are subjective and visible only to the gaymers using them. However, once a photograph is taken, the shaders are applied to the resulting image, rendering their interpretation of the world public. In defining a personal aesthetic, gaymers are free to reinterpret the contexts of the game world to suit their own needs, as Urban (2023, 13; ellipsis in original) relates in his use of shaders,

You can see this kind of grainy filter on it [that I used] to make it feel like it's from the late 19th century. It's used to embody that feeling of an old-timey hunting photograph, a trophy... This facial expression, the positioning, it feels realistic... I could imagine seeing something like that on a mantel in a cabin somewhere in the Old West. It feels authentic... It's me showing my achievement, so it's very staged: 'Put the camera in the right position, put the filter on.' I wanted it to embody that feeling of an old-timey memento.

The complexity of shaders varies; some may adjust colour contrast, while others incorporate more advanced effects like screen space reflections, ambient occlusion, or real-time ray tracing. The impact of shaders on the game's appearance can range from subtle to profound, depending on the gaymer's preference. When taking photographs, gaymers utilise shaders and remove or minimise what Švelch refers to as “circumstantial details” (2021, 8), such as character names, icons, or other ‘game-like’ elements. This behaviour is an attempt by gaymers “to create something more than a basic screen capture” (9). Gaymers use shaders to create art and “expose the diverse aesthetic and social experiences that define online identification and interactivity” (Patti 2017, 191). For gaymers, shaders are instrumental in enhancing their creative expression, particularly in the context of virtual photography for platforms like Instagram. My analysis reveals that nearly all the examples studied in this research employ shaders to some extent, signifying their importance in the community's pursuit of personalised visual aesthetics.

The use of shaders has become almost ubiquitous and widely accepted as a norm for enhancing the visual experience. This practice does not alter gameplay and has not attracted significant criticism or punitive action from the developers. Game studios and publishers have no incentive to do so, as “images created this way can then be leveraged as crowdsourced video game promotion” (Švelch 2021, 12). Despite the vibrant community around these modifications, it is essential to note that they technically violate the game's terms of service. The game

developers do not officially support these modifications, nor do they consider them during game development or design. However, *FFXIV Online*'s approach of a silent tolerance for graphical mods is not universal. Nardi (2010, 149) recounts how Blizzard Entertainment was originally openly hostile but eventually officially supported many mods in *WoW*, integrating some into the official game code. While repercussions for using these modifications in *FFXIV Online* are rare, there have been instances where gamers faced penalties.

7.2.4 *Virtual photography as a research tool in virtual ethnographic work*

Within the framework of my documentary project, virtual photography has been instrumental in visually navigating and interpreting the world co-created by the game's developers and its gamers. Thus, virtual photography emerges as a critical tool for examining virtual phenomena. Boellstorff et al. concur, noting the usefulness of virtual photography in documenting the "visual culture" (2012, 115) of virtual worlds. My approach to virtual photography draws from the principles of street photography and visual ethnography. Due to the dynamic nature of the game environment, where subjects may log out or relocate unexpectedly, I am compelled to capture images swiftly. This necessity for prompt photography shapes my technique, differing from the more deliberate and time-intensive methods employed by the gamers I interviewed. In my approach, I am inspired by the words of street photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson in *The Impassioned Eye* (Bütler 2003),

I prowled the streets all day, feeling very strung-up and ready to pounce, determined to "trap" life—to preserve life in the act of living. Above all, I craved to seize the whole essence, in the confines of one single photograph, of some situation that was in the process of unrolling itself before my eyes.

My approach somewhat draws from Cartier-Bresson in that I seek to capture the transitory moments experienced and created by players within a virtual world. As Mitchell observes, traditional photographs "can denote only something that exists at definite spatial and temporal coordinates in the physical world" (1992, 195). Photographs are the evidence that something, at some time, was *there*. What differentiates my work from that discussed by Mitchell is that the 'something' is data, and the 'there' exists in the collected imaginings of developers and players. My methodology draws attention to the inherent tension between the viewer's engagement with the image as a piece of virtual photography and the orchestrated reality behind its creation. However, I do not engage in this practice alone. By documenting other players, I place myself

within the context of participatory culture in *FFXIV Online* and seek to document the “many unauthorized and unanticipated ways of relating to media content” (Jenkins 2006, 133).

Although my avatar, Sue, was not a part of my identity formation as a young person, I nonetheless experienced a profound connection with my avatar. This relationship with my avatar is understandable, given that I began exploring Eorzea as Sue at the age of twenty-nine—an age range more commonly associated with using virtual worlds for escapism and relaxation (Craig et al. 2021, 8). Even now, I find parallels between my own experiences and those of Pearce and Artemesia (2009, 216) in their research. Speaking from the perspective of Artemesia, she writes,

As the avatar has been socially constructed, so has the person. So the question becomes, did she make me or did *they* make me? And to what extent have *I* made her? Being me has changed her in ways she never anticipated. She made me to study others like me, and now she has become one of them, one of us. At the same time, I have also served as an instrument for the social construction of Dr. Celia Pearce, PhD, for her transition into her new performative role.

Contrary to the views expressed by the participants in this study—who often regard their avatars as integral extensions of their persona—my relationship with my avatar is different. Sue embodies certain traits that resonate with me that I actively engage with in *FFXIV Online*. However, I cannot deny the socially constructed nature of my avatar or myself. While my avatar does not represent an aspirational or idealised self, it mirrors specific facets of my character that have inevitably shifted in subtle and almost imperceptible ways. By the time my study concluded, I had found myself changed by and through Sue’s experiences in *FFXIV Online*, which I reflect on in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

8.1 Summary of thesis

The primary objective of this thesis is to examine and analyse how gamers in *FFXIV Online* navigate and collaboratively construct their identities. The investigation has revealed a nuanced interplay among gamers' existing self-perceptions, their aspirational selves, and their modes of narrative and artistic expression through role-play, including text and image creation. This process involves participants engaging in cooperative role-play activities to elaborate on their avatars' personas, facilitating a deeper exploration of identity.

However, the function of the avatar transcends the idealisation of the gamer's self-concept. Instead, it serves multiple roles, acting as a personal expression for the individual and catering to gamers' diverse needs and objectives. In this capacity, avatars are instrumental, offering multiple possibilities for outcomes. They may serve as conduits for identity exploration and experimentation or as mediums for storytelling. This multifaceted use of avatars underscores their significance in the digital realm, highlighting their role as pivotal tools in identity construction and narrative development among gamers in *FFXIV Online*.

Chapters 2 and 3 delineate the theoretical underpinnings employed in this study, systematically partitioned into three distinct themes. The initial theme scrutinises the interplay between gamer identity and their engagement with avatars within computer-mediated and digital environments. The subsequent theme explores the dynamics of queer gender and sexual identities within online communities, examining the intricacies of these relationships. The final theme addresses the complexities surrounding self-representation and the essence of virtual photography in digital spaces. This comprehensive framework facilitates a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted interactions between users and virtual environments, mainly focusing on identity formation, representation, and community dynamics within online platforms.

Regarding the first theme, this study embarked on an exploration of identity development, with a particular emphasis on the evolution of queer identities within online environments. The study sought to understand the implications of digital presence for queer individuals, analysing the influence of virtual communities on their identity construction. A significant focus was placed on the identity formation processes in adolescents and young adults, underscored by evidence indicating heightened activity in identity development among individuals younger than twenty-five.

Furthermore, the role of computers and digital media in shaping identity was scrutinised, with a particular interest in how *FFXIV Online* influences gamers' perceptions of self and community.

Additionally, the discourse extended to examining digital avatars, delving into the intricate relationship between avatars and their creators. Research within this domain highlighted the bidirectional nature of this relationship, exploring concepts such as the Proteus effect to underscore the transformative influence avatars may exert on their users. This part of the literature review contributes to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted connections between digital representations, identity, and the broader implications for queer individuals navigating online spaces.

The second thematic strand of the literature review delves into the nuanced theories surrounding queer gender and sexuality, focusing mainly on their manifestation and operational dynamics within online environments. This segment scrutinises the concepts of gender performativity and the ritualistic aspects of gender, examining their representation and enactment within virtual realms, notably in *FFXIV Online*. A critical element of this literature review is investigating how the game's job system influences gamers' embodiment and performance of specific gender roles.

Furthermore, the discourse extends to sexuality, with a particular emphasis on the expressions of queer sexualities within a gaming context. This part of the theoretical framework pays close attention to how video games serve as platforms for the exploration and expression of queer identities. Additionally, the concept of heteronormativity is critically evaluated, particularly concerning its impact on gamer expectations and interactions within social settings in the digital sphere. This comprehensive examination aims to illuminate how participants navigate and articulate theories of gender and sexuality in online spaces.

This thesis's final theme critically examines virtual photography's impact on the gamer's experience, juxtaposing its practices with traditional media to contrast the distinctions and connections between them. This analysis delves into the unique role that virtual photography plays in MMORPGs, particularly highlighting its capacity to enable gamers to document their own experiences and narratives within these digital landscapes.

Furthermore, the literature review intensively explores the significance of representation, with a specific focus on self-representation, for gamers within the context of MMORPGs and avatar-based interactions. The exploration of avatars as mediums for self-representation through virtual photography is thoroughly investigated, underscoring the profound implications of these

digital embodiments for identity expression and visibility in virtual environments. The final theme aims to contribute to the broader understanding of how virtual photography acts as a tool for personal expression and documentation as well as a critical interface for exploring and asserting identities—especially within queer communities engaging with online gaming platforms.

Chapter 4 delineates the methodological framework employed in this study, adopting a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that integrates various qualitative methods to construct a nuanced understanding of the research question. The primary strategies for data collection included formulating a theoretical framework via an extensive literature review, virtual ethnographic observations within the environment of *FFXIV Online*, long-form semi-structured interviews with research participants, and an analytical examination of case studies through media analysis. The chapter briefly concludes with a reflection on how queer methods and approaches informed the collection and integration of the data.

The presentation of the collected data in Chapter 5 involved the identification of key themes and patterns across the different data sources. Virtual ethnographic efforts for this research encompassed a documentary project employing virtual photography to capture and preserve gamers' experiences in *FFXIV Online*. Furthermore, interviews were selectively conducted with several participants, aiming to delve deeper into the specific nuances of their experiences, particularly from the perspective of young queer individuals. This methodological approach facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter, ensuring a robust and insightful analysis. Finally, a selection of case studies from Instagram are presented and discussed with the rest of the research collected. These findings are subsequently interpreted through the lens of the established theoretical framework, enabling a contextualised understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

Following the methodological framework detailed previously, Chapters 6 and 7 present an analysis segmented into four principal themes, which emerged from data collection and interpretation. These themes are (1) Sexual identity formation in *FFXIV Online*; (2) Gaymer communities in *FFXIV Online*; (3) Gaymer self-expression in *FFXIV Online*; (4) Virtual photography and identity co-construction. These thematic areas highlight the intricate dynamics experienced by gamers concerning their own identities, others, the broader community, and their avatars. The following section discusses the findings derived from the analysis conducted in these chapters.

8.2 Summary of findings

The overall finding of this analysis is the multifaceted and complex way gamers engage with their avatars. Notably, avatars serve as pivotal instruments for self-expression, enabling gamers to explore and articulate aspects of their identity that may remain unexpressed outside the virtual domain. The principal conclusion drawn from the first theme, sexual identity formation in *FFXIV Online*, reveals that individuals utilise avatars in *FFXIV Online* and Instagram to explore gender and sexual identities, which they might be unable to do physically, legally, culturally, or socially, in other contexts. For a significant portion of young gamers, avatars thus serve as a conduit for expressing an ‘inner’ self. This self may not necessarily represent an idealised identity but a private aspect of gamers freely expressed within the virtual environment. It is essential to highlight that for older gamers, particularly those beyond the age of twenty-five, the exploration of sexual and gender identity within *FFXIV Online* assumes a lesser degree of importance. These individuals often exhibit greater comfort with their identities and consequently do not engage with their avatars as tools for exploring new or experimental identity facets. This theme also delves into the critical role of role-play in shaping the gamer’s sense of identity and the development of the avatar’s persona. Initially, the significance of role-play in this context was not entirely appreciated. However, as the study progressed, it became evident that role-play is instrumental in cultivating a gamer’s sense of self.

The interviews conducted as part of this study highlight the fluidity and intricate exploration of gender identities within *FFXIV Online*, with character creation serving as a crucial mechanism for investigating the ideal self, where gender plays a significant, though not universally central, role. These conversations have uncovered that character customisation transcends aesthetic choices, profoundly influencing gamers’ psychological well-being and mental health. In essence, avatars and the relationships fostered through them are pivotal to personal development, with the role-playing community providing a particularly supportive space for exploration and validation, especially for transgender individuals.

The second theme, queer communities in *FFXIV Online*, explored the impact of social dynamics on gamers and their relationships with their avatars. This topic uncovered the influence of virtual world design on queer gaming communities within *FFXIV Online* and the ‘micro-publics’ of Instagram. A novel finding in this study is the significance of ‘private’ community platforms, such as Discord, that arose because of the increasingly public nature of more popular social media sites such as Instagram and X. Another key finding from the second theme was the

importance of articulating sexual fantasies, desires, or identities through erotic role-play. A particularly novel finding from this research is the central role of erotic role-play in identity formation. This variety of role-play, imbued with sexual energy, is intimately connected to fulfilling the gaymer's idealised self via the avatar's persona. Interviewees report experiencing profound spiritual and emotional satisfaction through engaging in erotic role-play. This activity often transcends into other facets of their gaming experience, most notably in capturing and sharing virtual photography.

Furthermore, the interviews have identified Discord as the preferred platform for exchanging in-game images, challenging the initial hypothesis of this research. This preference underscores a broader inclination towards privacy and selective sharing within the community, with gaymers favouring intimate, close-knit interactions over broader public social media engagement. Such a preference also manifests in a cautious approach to permitting photographs of their avatars, underlining a desire for autonomy in their virtual representation.

A notable dichotomy emerges in the openness towards gender exploration within non-erotic role-play scenarios versus the context of more sexually explicit interactions. While there appears to be a general indifference towards the identities of others in standard role-play settings, the gender and perceived sexual identity of partners become significantly more important in the context of erotic role-play. This contrast reveals a complex interplay between gender identity exploration and the dynamics of sexual orientation within virtual environments, highlighting the nuanced ways gaymers navigate identity and intimacy online.

The analysis of the case studies offers a thorough examination of how gaymers utilise Instagram and virtual photography to document their identities and cultivate community connections. Despite the interviews highlighting a preference for platforms like Discord over Instagram, the insights gained from the analysis of the Instagram case study are still deemed significant for discussion. The analysis accentuates the critical role of virtual photography in articulating and disseminating the identities and experiences of gaymers, providing emotional support, and enhancing mental well-being while also allowing for the exploration of artistic and narrative dimensions of avatar representation.

Theme three, queer self-expression in *FFXIV Online*, indicates that the investigation into the dynamics between the avatar and gaymer unveils a relationship of considerable complexity, transcending the simplistic notion of mere wish fulfilment. Avatars do not invariably represent the most idealised versions of gaymers. Instead, they exhibit a multifaceted functionality for the users.

For others, avatars hold a deeply personal significance, with their relationship to their avatars being shaped exclusively by their contributions. Furthermore, a category of avatars with a more utilitarian purpose exists, designed primarily to fulfil specific in-game objectives. These objectives include facilitating travel across different data centres within the game or navigating character limitations related to in-game economies. This diversity in avatar usage underscores the rich tapestry of gaymer identities and interactions within virtual environments, illustrating that avatars serve as extensions of the self and tools for a broad spectrum of personal and pragmatic objectives.

The fourth theme, new possibilities in virtual photographs, outlines the pivotal role of virtual photography in avatar identity formation and explores the diverse ways gaymers incorporate virtual photography into their narrative experiences. Virtual photography is crucial in the gaymer's toolkit for crafting the avatar's persona. A particularly insightful observation from this research is gaymers' often limited recognition of the full extent to which virtual photography contributes to shaping their avatar's identity. Instead, gaymers predominantly perceive virtual photography as a means of aesthetic self-expression rather than the principal mechanism of avatar persona construction. This underestimation notwithstanding, gaymers exhibit meticulous care in creating their virtual photographs, aiming to convey the desired personality and narrative precisely. This careful construction of virtual images underscores the nuanced relationship between virtual photography and identity expression, revealing the complexity of how digital self-representation practices contribute to the ongoing construction and communication of the avatar's persona within virtual environments.

A salient observation is that gaymers predominantly use Instagram as a visual documentation medium rather than a tool for interactive community engagement. Virtual photography is vital to fulfilling the human need for recognition and connection within digital realms. This discovery highlights the transition of visual engagement from traditional to virtual photography, effectively narrowing the divide between self-representation and digital imagery and affording virtual characters a palpable sense of reality. My virtual ethnographic practice shed light on the profound level of gaymer engagement with identity expression and the dynamics of social interaction within *FFXIV Online*. This project delved into the significance of avatar customization for identity articulation, examining how gaymers navigate social exchanges, focusing on conforming to traditional gender norms and employing visual communication tactics. Additionally,

it underscored gamers' endeavours to acquire aesthetic items alongside the game's progression towards inclusivity and the facilitation of gender expression via its evolving glamour system.

Furthermore, the discussion introduced virtual photography as a sophisticated medium of self-expression, marrying traditional artistic concepts with digital instruments to reinforce the connection between gamer and avatar. This project provided invaluable insights, encompassing the social use of space, visual motifs, the quest for aesthetic customization, and the artistic value of virtual photography, thereby enriching the study with a comprehensive exploration of these facets.

The following section explores how the synthesis of research findings from this study addresses the four research questions posited at the commencement of this thesis, yielding sixteen pivotal insights. These insights include: the distinction between pre-25 and post 25-year olds in terms of identity formation, the importance of avatar design and customizability, the importance of role-play and exploration of sexual identity formation, the lack of importance of Instagram as a social media platform, the importance of role-playing venues as a centre of queer community activity, the welcoming and inclusive communities for gamers existing in *FFXIV Online*, the queer micro-networks on Instagram, the importance of smaller and private Discord communities, the importance of avatar clothing and glamour in self-expression, the appropriation of offline stereotypes to denote sexual identity, the gender fluidity available through multiple avatars and fluid avatar expression, the safety of virtual expression, photographic practice as a cultural tool of self-expression recontextualised for virtual purposes, the significance of virtual photography as a role-play and storytelling aid, virtual photography as a means of archiving the journey of self-exploration in *FFXIV Online*, and virtual photography as a research tool in virtual ethnographic work.

8.3 Research question 1

An insight derived from this study highlights the distinction in how young adults between eighteen and thirty engage with their avatars for identity exploration and formation. My research offers diverse perspectives on this phenomenon. Firstly, it is observed that younger individuals conceptualise queer identity distinctively from previous generations, often not integrating their sexuality with personal identity markers such as attitudes, values, politics, religion, or life philosophy. Secondly, evidence suggests that, for the most part, young people construct their identities online, with virtual worlds providing a secure environment for experimentation.

MMORPGs offer the advantage of anonymity, enabling young individuals from sexual minority groups to explore new identities without fear of repercussions.

Moreover, avatars are crucial for young individuals exploring and expressing their identities within virtual spaces. The ability to customise avatars facilitates identity experimentation, allowing for exploring various aspects of their persona. Additionally, young individuals engage in queer resistance and queer play by challenging dominant power structures within games or adopting play styles that emphasise queer identities and experiences. Conversely, the literature suggests that older individuals are less inclined to use virtual spaces for identity formation and experimentation. Instead, they tend to view these environments as avenues for entertainment and escapism, highlighting a generational divergence in the use and perception of virtual worlds for personal and communal identity exploration. The outcomes of my research align with those identified in the literature review. The interviews, case study analyses, and virtual ethnography undertaken in this study have clarified the multifaceted motivations behind individuals' engagement with MMORPGs.

The second insight pertinent to this research question addresses the significance of avatar design and customisability for gamers within virtual worlds, particularly in developing a sense of self. The discourse surrounding avatar design focuses on the role of avatars in self-representation. Research findings suggest that avatars are fundamental to shaping gamers' perceptions within the game environment, thereby playing a pivotal role in managing social interactions. My research reiterates that the creation of avatars extends beyond mere aesthetic considerations, encompassing the expression of gamers' social identities, interests, or personality traits. In some instances, avatars are experimental platforms for exploring new identities, interests, or traits. A key concept emerging from the literature is the Proteus effect, which describes the bidirectional influence between the gamer's identity and their avatar's design. This phenomenon implies that gamers may exhibit changes in their personality aligning with the characteristics ascribed to their avatar, highlighting the profound impact of avatar design on personal identity within virtual spaces.

An element not elaborated on in existing research is the deliberate intentionality gamers demonstrate in the customization and creation of their avatars. My research foregrounds gamers' intent as a crucial element in avatar design, challenging the notion that personality traits are projected onto avatars subconsciously or intuitively. Instead, it is evident that gamers strategically select personality traits to incorporate into their avatars. The interviews and case

studies I have conducted reveal gamers' pronounced, conscious efforts in shaping their avatars, underpinned by a deep understanding of their relationship with these digital representations. In certain instances, avatars are employed as social intermediaries, enabling gamers to role-play with others. Conversely, avatars serve as utilitarian entities in different contexts, acting as 'mules' or 'alts' to facilitate more efficient completion of specific in-game objectives. This nuanced approach to avatar creation underscores the complexity of gamer-avatar dynamics and the strategic considerations involved in avatar design.

The third insight pertinent to this research question underscores the pivotal role of role-play in fostering identity experimentation through social positioning and interaction within virtual environments. A critical concept drawn from the work of Erik Erikson (Williams, Kennedy, and Moore 2011, 176) is role diffusion. Role-play in virtual worlds allows gamers to experiment with various roles or personas, facilitating the process by which young individuals consolidate their sense of self. Role-play scenarios serve as a conduit for role diffusion, permitting the exploration of diverse identity characteristics.

Regarding the exploration of queer identity and role-play, the practice of queer or subversive playing—modifying games to develop characters or narratives that mirror queer experiences—provides a means for gamers to challenge prevailing heteronormative standards. This approach allows for the affirmation of queer identities and promotes a broader understanding and acceptance of queer experiences through interactive storytelling and character development.

The research undertaken in this study substantiates the findings presented in the existing literature, with a particular emphasis on the significance of virtual photographs on role-play that exceeds what current research suggests. Role-play is fundamental for individuals who use avatars for identity formation and exploration. Developing robust character backstories, personas, and continuous narratives is a critical element, indeed the primary mechanism, through which identity exploration is facilitated. A novel finding in this study is virtual photography's role in articulating the avatar narrative. In some instances, role-play has been highlighted as a critical factor contributing to the positive impact of MMORPGs on participants' mental health. These insights underline the therapeutic potential of role-play within virtual environments, offering a valuable avenue for psychological well-being and personal development.

A principal hypothesis of this study posited that Instagram serves as a leading platform for the publication of virtual photography, playing a significant role in the identity exploration and formation processes of young MMORPG gamers. The literature reviewed for this study

supported this hypothesis, underscoring the pivotal role that social media platforms like Instagram play in disseminating virtual photographs. Specifically, social media facilitates crafting an avatar's persona through sharing, liking, and commenting on virtual images. Moreover, platforms such as Instagram validate gamers' experiences through the social engagement of their audience, leveraging the technologies inherent to these platforms. The ability of individuals to recontextualize their images with captions and descriptive narratives further enriches the construction of their online identity, illustrating the dynamic interplay between virtual photography, social media, and identity formation in the digital age.

However, the interviews and case studies conducted for this research illuminate new dimensions of this phenomenon that challenge the initial hypothesis. While the role of social media sites in facilitating identity exploration and formation aligns with existing literature, concerns regarding privacy and online harassment have emerged from the interviews, indicating an aversion among some in the *FFXIV Online* community towards public social media sites like Instagram. Instead, a preference for smaller, more intimate online communities, such as those on platforms like Discord, has been observed.

Consequently, the analysis of Instagram's role in this research captures only a minor segment of a broader and more dynamic sphere of cultural activity. Testimonies from interviews reveal that these gamers share their images on private Discord servers. Nevertheless, their underlying motivations align with the themes identified in contemporary academic discussions. These gamers continue to pursue validation and a sense of belonging by sharing and engaging in discussions around virtual photography, underscoring the sustained significance of these practices in the construction of community and identity online.

8.4 Research question 2

The initial insight derived from this research question sheds light on the significance of role-play venues as focal points for queer activity within virtual environments. The existing literature reviewed in this study does not extensively explore these venues' role in developing and exploring online identities. Furthermore, it does not delve into their function as community hubs or spaces for socialisation among virtual world participants. Instead, the literature examined focuses predominantly on role-play as an individual or private endeavour among small groups. The aspect of role-play as a communal activity or its role within broader social contexts has been notably absent from the discussion.

The research conducted through interviews and case studies highlights the significant role that role-play venues play in the daily activities of MMORPG gamers. These venues serve as essential hubs, facilitating various role-play interactions. A notable example within the European data centre is *The Menagerie*, which stands out as a nexus for queer role-play communities. This venue employs individuals who are engaged by other gamers for various role-play activities. Additionally, *The Menagerie* operates a private Discord server. It promotes its services on Instagram, indicating a sophisticated use of social media and online platforms to enhance and extend its reach within the virtual community.

While the analysis of Instagram images did not yield extensive evidence highlighting the benefits of such communities, there were indications of community-driven activities and events being promoted on Instagram accounts. A notable reflection of community importance was observed through the documentary work conducted for this study. The game's spontaneous gatherings and scheduled events serve the broader player base. Although not always exclusively designed for queer participants, these events are inherently inclusive, fostering an environment that welcomes individuals of diverse backgrounds. This inclusiveness highlights the overarching significance of community within these virtual spaces, underscoring its role in enhancing the gaming experience for all players.

The interviews and research conducted for this study offer fresh insights into the role of communities on social media sites, particularly Instagram, augmenting the existing literature on their importance. This research highlights the profound influence that community formation can have on queer individuals. Although initial findings from my research support this impact, interview data introduce an additional dimension to this discovery. Respondents were reluctant to share images or engage with others on Instagram due to fears of backlash and potential social harm. For the participants, the platform's public and open nature raised concerns about adverse reactions to their posts. Consequently, while certain members of the queer community utilise Instagram, it does not necessarily serve as a comprehensive representation of the community at large, underscoring the complexities surrounding social media use and community engagement among queer individuals.

8.5 Research question 3

The study explores the significance of avatar appearance as a means of self-expression, focusing on the implications for gamers' sense of identity. A key finding from the literature is that the

customization of an avatar's appearance, primarily through clothing or armour, plays a crucial role beyond mere aesthetics. It serves as a cultural signifier and an identity marker, enabling individuals to align with specific archetypes or groups within the game. Additionally, avatar attire can exert a psychological influence, encouraging individuals to express themselves creatively.

The primary research conducted throughout this study supports these insights and introduces an additional dimension regarding the role of avatar attire. Avatar clothing and appearance transcend visual differentiation; they enable gamers to construct intricate and personal narratives for their avatars. Clothing becomes a medium for articulating the gamer's identity and developing the avatar's persona. Furthermore, avatar appearance is practical in delineating various activities within the game. Characters adopt different appearances to signify engagement in role-play or involvement in more casual in-game activities, highlighting the multifaceted role of avatar appearance in expressing identity, facilitating storytelling, and marking social and functional distinctions within virtual environments.

The literature reviewed in this thesis examines gender identity from various perspectives. It explores how gamers engage with gender norms to create characters and how stereotypes are embedded within the game environment, influencing the interactions between gamers and their avatars and with the avatars of others. Through case study analysis and interviews, the prevalence of gender stereotypes has been observed, revealing a gamer's conscious or subconscious awareness of these norms during gameplay. Notably, while gamers may not always be explicitly aware of gender stereotypes in their interactions, this awareness becomes more pronounced during scenarios with erotic framing. The research conducted also suggests that *FFXIV Online*, traditionally entrenched in Western fantasy's gender stereotypes, has been moving towards dismantling these norms, aiming to create a more gender-fluid playing environment. This shift, although not directly addressed within the game's narrative, is evident in the game's evolving environment, signalling a broader trend towards inclusivity and the challenging of traditional gender norms in virtual spaces.

The literature reviewed in this study encompasses the concept of gender fluidity within virtual play spaces, mainly focusing on gamers' capacity to explore gender identities different from their own. A notable insight from interviews and case studies is that gamers frequently explore multiple genders using distinct avatars or by leveraging a feature of *FFXIV Online* that permits them to alter the gender of their existing avatars. Consequently, gender experimentation in *FFXIV Online* goes beyond merely exploring a single alternate gender. Instead, it allows

gaymers to navigate through multiple gender identities, often concurrently within various contexts, thereby expanding the understanding and engagement with gender fluidity in virtual environments.

The literature review and the ethnographic research for this study unanimously indicate that virtual environments can provide secure spaces for gaymers to explore their gender and sexual identities. Respondents' testimonies corroborate this finding and reaffirm the insights gained from the examined scholarly material. Individuals questioning their gender or sexuality find virtual worlds conducive to exploring these aspects of their identity safely and anonymously. However, the interviews have illuminated an additional dimension to this exploration. Beyond merely understanding oneself, gaymers have reported the opportunity to investigate new sexual preferences or 'kinks' through their avatars. Furthermore, some gaymers who experience no sexual attraction to others in the physical world find that they can safely engage in role-played sexual activities within these virtual environments. This extension of virtual spaces as arenas for broader sexual exploration spotlights the complex role these environments play in the personal development and self-discovery of individuals.

8.6 Research question 4

The research conducted throughout this study reveals a noteworthy connection between virtual photography and traditional analogue photography. Despite the distinct nature of these two approaches, photographic techniques are remediated in virtual environments. Furthermore, the study finds that gaymers employ virtual photography for identity construction and self-expression. This conclusion is supported by interviews with participants, who collectively view virtual photography as a natural extension of traditional photographic practice, employing similar terminology and methodologies across both mediums. This perspective is particularly pronounced among those with a background in traditional photography, who recognize and appreciate the parallels between the two forms. For these individuals, virtual photography is as integral to their self-expression as other avatar-related activities, such as role-playing or backstory development, underscoring the multifaceted role of virtual photography in the digital expression of identity.

The literature review conducted for this study, while comprehensive in its exploration of virtual photography, did not thoroughly investigate the function of virtual photographs as aids in role-playing storytelling. My research has significantly addressed this overlooked dimension of virtual photography's contribution to avatar studies. According to the findings from interviews and

the case study analysis of Instagram posts, virtual photography is a pivotal element of the role-playing experience. It transcends documentation of gaymer experiences, serving instead as a conduit for crafting the avatar's persona in conjunction with textual elements.

Virtual photography is critical in developing the avatar's personality, with gaymers extensively utilising visual communication to shape their self-identity. This process of visual identity construction parallels the practices observed on Instagram among individuals who do not engage with MMORPGs, highlighting the universal significance of visual mediums in articulating and manifesting personal identity across digital platforms.

The interviews and case studies corroborate the hypothesis found in the literature that virtual photography plays a crucial role in documenting and archiving experiences within virtual play spaces. Thus, virtual photography fulfils multiple roles in the daily activities of gaymers in *FFXIV Online*, acting both as an instrument for creation and a means of preservation. Virtual photography serves as the mechanism through which gaymers cement the permanence of ephemeral experiences in the virtual realm. Platforms like Instagram and Discord act as repositories for these digital memories, functioning like journals that safeguard these moments.

Finally, virtual photography serves as a vital tool for virtual ethnographic research. In this study, the documentation of gaymers within the virtual environment of *FFXIV Online* was extensively carried out for ethnographic research purposes. The established role of photography in offline ethnography is paralleled by the efficacy of virtual photography as an ethnographic instrument in virtual worlds. Through comprehensive documentation involving over 300 individuals, valuable data was amassed for analysis presented in Chapters 6 and 7. The insights derived from this analysis were instrumental in addressing the research questions posed by this study, highlighting the indispensable role of virtual photography in academic research within virtual spaces.

8.7 Limitations of the study

FFXIV Online was selected for this study as it represents one of the largest MMORPGs currently available on the market, yet it has remained largely unexplored from an academic standpoint. While extensive scholarly work has been dedicated to other popular MMORPGs like *WoW* and *EverQuest*, there has been a notable absence of academic research on *FFXIV Online* since this study was initiated. The decision to examine this MMORPG in the context of identity formation

and expression documents the inherently social nature of these processes, where the feedback and reactions of other gamers significantly influence an individual's self-perception.

MMORPGs are generally classified into two categories: theme park style and sandbox. *FFXIV Online* falls into the theme park category, characterised by a gameplay experience that guides gamers through a meticulously designed, linear narrative journey (Bartle 2016, 333). This study focuses on a theme park MMORPG, and explores how gamers' narratives are shaped within a game world whose parameters are defined mainly by its developers. The context of virtual world development means that the cultural and social norms deemed acceptable by the developers are pre-established, posing challenges for gamers who seek to venture beyond these confines.

Furthermore, *FFXIV Online*'s development in Japan for a global audience introduces an additional layer of complexity, as the game's social and cultural norms are presented through a perspective not universally shared by its player base. This distinctive amalgamation of widespread popularity, specific cultural context, and a narrowly tailored narrative fosters a unique dynamic between the gamer and their avatar. Unlike sandbox MMORPGs, which often grant players considerable freedom in character identification with minimal structural guidance, *FFXIV Online* offers a robust thematic and narrative foundation, significantly influencing gamers' perceptions and constructions of their avatars within this virtual environment.

Instagram was selected as the platform for this study primarily due to its widespread popularity among young individuals for sharing images. The platform's prominence as a visual medium made it an appealing choice for the analysis, particularly in light of the numerous *FFXIV Online* profiles already established on Instagram at the time of this research. However, Instagram's emphasis on visual content limited the feasibility of analysing text-based role-play or avatar construction. Additionally, the platform's content moderation policies restricted the exploration of erotic role-play as a form of visual expression. While alternative platforms and private servers hosting such content were accessible, the confidentiality of these spaces precluded the possibility of publishing their images in an academic context, thereby delineating the scope of this investigation.

This study specifically examines gamers of *FFXIV Online*, focusing on individuals from the community without explicitly categorising them by gender or sexual identity. However, the majority of interview participants were young gay men, which inherently narrows the scope of insights derived from these interviews. The case study analysis encompasses a broader

spectrum. However, the anonymous nature of Instagram complicates the ability to associate specific profiles with distinct gender and sexual identities, thereby obscuring the precise demographic breadth of the analysis.

Most accounts examined in the case study and the interviewees were predominantly between the ages of twenty and thirty. Consequently, extrapolating these findings to include middle-aged or older gaymer demographics poses a challenge. This challenge is exacerbated given the finding that older gaymers construct online identities and avatars for fundamentally different reasons than their younger counterparts. Additionally, all interviewed respondents were Caucasian and hailed from English-speaking countries, indicating a relatively homogeneous cultural and geographic background. This homogeneity suggests caution should be exercised when generalising these findings across more diverse gaymer communities.

8.8 Recommendations for future research

While this study makes a contribution to understanding gaymer identity formation within *FFXIV Online*, other MMORPGs offer the potential for further insights into this area. The emergence of the MMO-light genre, exemplified by games such as *Destiny 2* (Bungie Inc. 2017) and *Lost Ark* (Smilegate 2019), presents a departure from the deep avatar connections traditionally experienced by gaymers, often resulting in reduced or absent opportunities for identity expression. Future research could investigate how gaymers within these communities navigate identity expression and construction within these constrained environments. Additionally, examining traditional MMORPGs that do not prioritise character customization to the extent seen in *FFXIV Online*, like *Guild Wars 2* (ArenaNet 2012), could yield valuable understandings of identity formation in settings where customization options are limited.

The outcomes of this study suggest that future research could beneficially focus on smaller, more private community platforms that permit uncensored content and foster close-knit relationships among members. Platforms like Discord present an exemplary case study opportunity for subsequent investigations. Additionally, other platforms, such as Reddit, offer promising prospects for exploration. Public-facing social media platforms, including X and YouTube, also hold the potential for in-depth studies. X users often engage in narrative-driven role-play through their posts, and the platform provides a fertile ground for examining the impact of text-based narratives on avatar construction. Meanwhile, YouTube hosts numerous examples

of *machinima*—short, fan-made animations featuring avatars—which embody a compelling avenue for investigating fan-produced filmic storytelling and its significance in identity studies.

This study predominantly relies on the testimonies of young gay men within the queer community; however, it has not comprehensively explored other facets of the queer experience, notably the dynamics between cis-female and non-binary gamers and their avatars, which merit further investigation. Additionally, the experiences of other communities, such as those of colour or belonging to other minority groups, remain under-researched. These areas present valuable opportunities for future scholarly inquiry, aiming to broaden the understanding of diverse queer experiences within virtual environments.

8.9 Reflection on the research process

Engaging in virtual street photography within *Hydaelyn* has proven to be an enlightening experience for me as a researcher and an artist. Traversing various locales in the world and documenting the inhabitants I encountered has been insightful, offering a deeper understanding of the community's dynamics and the diverse appearances of its characters. Throughout this process, I explored numerous visual styles; some approaches were primarily portrait-oriented, focusing on the avatars, while others aimed to capture the intricate relationship between them and their surroundings. I found this interaction between the avatar and the environment particularly compelling. Often, there was a fascinating contrast between the avatars' locations and their appearances, illuminating how some individuals sought to harmonise with a thematic or environmental context.

In contrast, others aimed to cultivate a distinct personal aesthetic. This dynamic enabled a form of visual storytelling that narrated the story of the game's players and broader community rather than the in-game characters themselves. However, it is vital to acknowledge the inherent biases in my project. My ability to log in only at specific times inadvertently favoured those available during those periods, and my personal aesthetic preferences influenced the choice of subject, composition, and styling of the images, thereby affecting the viewer's perception of the avatars.

Selecting candidates for the Instagram case studies proved intriguing and time-intensive. Initially, identifying suitable profiles presented a considerable challenge. However, upon discovering specific pivotal profiles, their associated friend networks facilitated the identification of additional candidates. This approach, however, predominantly restricted the selection to

profiles that utilised the English language and those employing English language hashtags. Consequently, this methodology inadvertently prevented access to a significant segment of the European community, particularly among the German, French, and Japanese-speaking populations, thereby narrowing the scope of the research.

The interview process emerged as the most formidable challenge of this study, not due to the logistics of organising or conducting the interviews but rather the necessity of distancing myself from the game world. As a participant within the community, especially as a gaymer, I found it challenging to separate my personal experiences and inherent biases from my role as a researcher. Tackling my subjectivities entailed not taking certain information for granted or uncritically accepting specific perspectives and viewpoints as unequivocal truths. Overcoming these ideological biases and recognising my blind spots or cognitive biases proved a significant hurdle I continually addressed throughout the research process.

FFXIV Online was launched over 12 years ago, and its significant popularity and longevity make its relative lack of academic scrutiny all the more intriguing. The potential to unearth and analyse information from such an enduring video game presents a compelling opportunity for research. A particularly enlightening facet of this project has been enhancing documentative practices within virtual ethnography, notably through virtual photography as a principal research instrument. Employing these methodologies to examine communities, such as the queer role-playing community within the MMORPG, yields both fulfilment and enjoyment. As a gaymer of *FFXIV Online*, the exploration of these community dynamics has revealed new insights into the profound impact our avatars exert on our daily lives, our identities, and the cultivation of essential support networks for queer individuals.

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