

Queer(ed) Avatars: Exploring Visual Identity Construction in *Final Fantasy XIV Online* Gaymers

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journals.sagepub.com/home/gac**Karl van Heerden**¹ 

Abstract

I explore gaymers' use of virtual photography to construct their avatar persona in *Final Fantasy XIV Online*. The study of game photography is a field that has seen relatively sparse engagement from scholars in the past decade. In this article, I discuss virtual photography's potential in gaymers' visual construction of avatar personas in massively multiplayer online role-playing games. I focus on "gaymers" as they seek alternative identity affordances, expressing dissatisfaction with the narrow range of possibilities in games. In contextualizing the phenomenon, I engage with theories on virtual photography, persona studies, and social networking. I apply this theoretical framework to a series of Instagram accounts dedicated to *FFXIV Online* avatars. I incorporate a queer methodology in my research to expose how gaymers resist heteronormativity in games. My findings indicate that gaymers queer *FFXIV Online*'s mechanics and visuals through modding and shaders to visually co-construct a digital self.

Keywords

avatar studies, gaymers, identity construction, virtual photography, *Final Fantasy XIV Online*

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Introduction

In her book *Life on the Screen* (1995), 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, p. 11). Turkle argues, “as players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction” (1995, p. 12). Most academic work on virtual worlds as a site of social interaction is on three massively multiplayer role-playing games (MMORPGs): *EverQuest* (Daybreak Game Company et al., 1999), *World of Warcraft* (WoW) (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), and *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003). While significant ethnographic work has been undertaken to study paidiaic¹ “sandboxes” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 99) such as *Second Life*, this article shifts attention towards *Final Fantasy XIV Online* (FFXIV Online) (Square Enix, 2010) as a game that favors the ludic-oriented systems originated by *WoW* and *EverQuest*.

What motivates me to select *FFXIV Online* as the focus of my research activity is the combination of characteristics in the game that distinguish it from its predecessors. These 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 modding 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*. Instead, their unique combination has delineated the boundaries of a phenomenon worthy of in-depth analysis. This article explores points five and six, avatar modding and their portraits on Instagram, emphasizing the role gamers play in constructing and disseminating visual texts on social media.

FFXIV Online is the 14th instalment in the venerated *Final Fantasy* series of role-playing games. From the description provided on the game’s homepage, *FFXIV Online* is an MMORPG set in the fictional world of *Hydaelyn* (Square Enix, 2024). The page also advertises character creation, customization, and a community of over thirty million individuals as prominent features (Square Enix, 2024). Within the game, the story, mechanics, and dialogue encourage players to think of themselves and their avatars—the “Warrior of Light”—as the same individual. This way of engaging the player in *FFXIV Online* is effective; they carefully choose names, select outfits—known in the community as *glamours*—and post screenshots of their avatars to social media. Players often choose depictions of their Warriors of Light above their self-portraits for online profiles, associating their constructed selves with “actions, messages, chats, status updates, and posts” (Moore, 2014, p. 147), framing the player’s avatar as an extension of their personality and character.

The question of what to call the images created by players and posted on social media is disputed among game scholars. Poremba (2007, p. 50) and Möring and de Mutiis (2019, p. 69) refer to them as *screenshots*, a common term used to describe still images from games. Moore refers to these artefacts as “virtual photographs” (2014, p. 141), while Patti prefers “digital portraits” (2017, p. 180). I will use the term *virtual photograph* to acknowledge the practice’s technical (virtual) and cultural (photographic) modes of production (Poremba, 2007, p. 50). Poremba claims that virtual photographs serve to “co-opt the visual language of the photograph” (2007, p. 53). For example, players use virtual photographs to appropriate creative control in an otherwise predetermined game space (Poremba, 2007, p. 52). Virtual photographs are used to affirm experiences (Moore, 2014, p. 146) and memorable events (Poremba, 2007, p. 50), to create narratives (Möring & de Mutiis, 2019, p. 71), or to memorialize social connections (Moore, 2014, p. 145). Möring and de Mutiis (2019, p. 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 this article, I aim to demonstrate how visual identity construction occurs through customization, role-play, and the documentation of the avatar through virtual photography.

Central to this topic is Shaw’s use of the term “gaymer” (2012, p. 69). The moniker is representative of a “queer sensibility” (Shaw, 2012, p. 69), used not to describe a player’s sexual orientation but their cultural and social orientation concerning dominant patriarchal, heteronormative cultures in games. In other words, individuals may identify as gaymers regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, whether or not they belong to the LGBTQ+ community (Shaw, 2012, p. 71). Reframing the term as a perspective on identity in games, rather than a sub-categorization of sexual identity, is vital to understanding the gaymers in my research. Shaw further notes that such an approach builds on the work by Bronski in *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (1984). In the book, Bronski describes gay sensibility as an “expression of powerless people” (1984, p. 41), in other words, a means to express their identity in a culture that sought to erase or deny alternate ways of being. A vital characteristic of gay sensibility is “the re-imagining of the material world into ways and forms which transform and comment upon the original” (1984, p. 42). As Shaw (2012, p. 82) comments, gaymer communities likewise reimagine ways of being to resist, comment, or transform the largely heteronormative gaming community. She elaborates that gaymers work to carve spaces in a heteronormative game culture that is representative of their lived experiences yet are suspicious of corporate interests that seek to profit from the tokenization of marginalized identities in the media. Instead, gaymers craft their experiences and communities through online private social networks, modding, and role-play.

Consequently, I investigate gaymer visual identity construction through virtual photographs posted on Instagram. My research involved a case study analysis of the Instagram accounts of *FFXIV Online* gaymers. These accounts were either utterly dedicated to their avatars or—in one case—were initially personal profiles that turned into

“ffxiv” accounts. I unpack the literature on virtual photography, persona studies, and social networking sites—hereafter “social media.” Then, I discuss insight derived from the posts on Instagram. The findings presented depict a complex network of interactions between gaymer, community, image, and text. This article builds on previous work in the field to further explore the role virtual photography plays in gaymers’ online personas. From the research, I conclude that gaymers engage in a collaborative identity-building process with others through their photographs and role-play to experiment and ideate new versions of their character and, subsequently, themselves.

Literature Review

Virtual photography is an umbrella term describing different approaches and methods to document virtual worlds. First, researchers Möring and de Mutiis note that virtual photographs are used for different purposes, resulting in multiple “in-game photographs” (2019, p. 71). According to the authors, 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” (Möring & de Mutiis, 2019, p. 74). These photography forms differ in their approaches in how “photographic and ludic elements interact and overlap” (Möring & de Mutiis, 2019, p. 71). It is important to note that the authors stress that virtual photographs are not actual photographs but that there are enough “characteristics of the photographic tradition” (Möring & de Mutiis, 2019, p. 71) present in these virtual images to study them using similar modalities.

One of these four paradigms, artistic screenshooting, encompasses more deliberately crafted images. In these instances, players apply a thoughtful photographic approach, evident in their careful consideration of framing, focal lengths, and lighting effects. While Möring and de Mutiis prefer this term (2019, p. 82), Urban uses “aesthetic tokens” (2023, p. 14). These images demonstrate a higher degree of intentionality and artistic insight as players meticulously work to present their characters in a particular light, with Urban noting how virtual photographs “provide a glimpse at a game’s themes, motifs, tropes, and other ambient qualities” (Urban, 2023, p. 15). Möring, de Mutiis (2019, p. 74), and Poremba (2007, p. 51) 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. Players’ fixation with virtual photography is not inferred from the Instagram images alone. Their passion for photography is also reflected in-game or on platforms like the *Gposers* website and magazine, which showcase fan-made clothing ensembles of in-game outfits (2022). Such platforms dedicate themselves to the art of virtual photography within *FFXIV Online*, highlighting the seriousness with which players approach this aspect of the game. Klastrup and Tosca observe that the images in magazines such as *Gposers*² are “used as inspiration, discussed as consumption, and as objects of desire” (2009, p. 12).

The term “avatar” refers to a broad range of virtual representations. Fox and Ahn note that avatars can encapsulate many forms of representation in virtual spaces, such as “names, online profiles, and dolls [3D avatars]” (2013, p. 255). Avatars are also a form of experimentation regarding an individual’s sense of self by allowing players to explore new aspects of identity expression. Fox and Ahn (2013, p. 256) highlight the fluidity of representation afforded to players in virtual worlds. They are free to alter the race, sex, gender, or even species of their avatar with relative ease. This kind of freedom is not possible with the player’s physical body, where their sense of self is tied to traits not easily altered. The transient nature of the avatar body opens new ways of conceptualizing identity as something that can be tailored to specific instances. Wood and Szymanski (2020, p. 125) echo this argument. Furthermore, the researchers note that avatars do not have to be “closely aligned with” (Wood & Szymanski, 2020, p. 125) the player.

Studying sexuality in the context of MMORPGs and games is a relatively new field. Sundén and Sveningsson (2012, p. 3) note several authors of interest concerning sexuality in video games: Consalvo (2003a, 2003b), 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” (Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012, p. 3). A more recent study by McKenna and Chughtai notes that “gender minorities are virtually absent in the literature” (2020, p. 7), leading to a common perception that video games are primarily made for heterosexual white males. 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, p. 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, p. 6).

Increasingly, identity formation for young people occurs online. Cover highlights that identity was “performed, engaged with, or represented differently online from offline” (2016, p. X) when comparing the internet’s early development to more contemporary contexts. Cover (2016, p. X) shows that there has been a change in how people conceive of their online identities, from the advent of the internet to the widespread adoption of social media. In Turkle’s earlier work, for example, she perceives online identities as an additional layer of the self alongside the offline person as a “new self” (1995, p. 12). In contrast, Cover (2016, p. X) points out that the individual’s primary identity is now online. Later, Turkle (2011, pp. 192–193) 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” (2011, p. 195) from the physical world to the virtual.

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, p. 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. \(2021, p. 2\)](#) 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 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 ([Craig et al., 2021, p. 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.

Virtual photographs have a specific function when posted on social media sites. People document their activities in games to memorialize their encounters with others, preserve essential experiences, or document their travels through the virtual space ([Poremba, 2007, p. 50](#)). Virtual photographs allow players to curate the context of their online experiences. 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, p. 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.

Research Methods

The research conducted for this article centered on images and text collected from 17 identified profiles on Instagram. In total, 2,018 posts from between 2017 and 2021 were analyzed. The most active account posted 516 times between 2019 and 2021, while the least active account posted four times. Of the 17 accounts, followers ranged between 1,414 and 50, with an average of 262.7 followers per account. The accounts were selected using “snowball sampling” to utilize “friendship networks” ([Turner et al., 2010, p. 473](#)) as an opportunity to find additional samples. While less desirable than other sampling methods to achieve broad insight, snowball sampling is more suitable “to trace social networks rather than artificially isolate members of a culture through randomization” ([Boellstorff, 2008, p. 76](#)). As such, this study does not make claims about the community as a whole, but makes observations of the social networks uncovered through the course of the research.

The primary focus was on images shared by gaymers, depicting either their avatars or those belonging to others. The textual component extracted from Instagram encompassed captions, hashtags, and individual descriptions on their profiles. User

kakyoin.ffxiv—the most popular account analyzed—featured an average of 103.3 likes and 10 comments per post. The Instagram images selected for analysis were chosen based on their content. Particular emphasis was placed on discerning the presence of a “queer sensibility” (Shaw, 2012, p. 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 (Shaw, 2012, p. 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 Sadowski and Lomanowska, where “avatar poses were classified as *intimate* when they allowed for physical contact between avatars” (2018, p. 3).

While many profiles in this study self-identified as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, it was not assumed that a player’s gender identity or sexual orientation mimicked that of their avatar. Instead, following Shaw’s (2012, p. 69) deployment of *gaymer* as a performance and attitude towards games, rather than a description of sexual orientation, this article uses the term to refer to individuals who re-enact queer themes through their avatars regardless of their offline gender or sexuality. The most common elements shared among the selected accounts are that individuals identify as male in their profile and range in age between 18 and 30. Eight out of 17 accounts 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 labeling their images. Of these accounts, most do not list their offline gender, but 15 out of 17 chose the in-game male *Miqo’te* race³ for their avatar.

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 utilize 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 data analysis procedure for this article entailed five steps suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018, pp. 268–269), which are to organize the data, examine, and review the data, initiate a coding of the data, generate descriptions and themes, and finally to represent the data. The data were organized through a careful and systematic gathering of visual and textual information from all case studies. The data gathered include profile names and biographies, avatar biographies, posting behavior, hashtags, post descriptions, and comments by other users on posts. The data were then examined and coded with initial themes. During the process, expected codes were developed such

as the significance of self-expression, queer themes, and incongruities between online and offline gender. Surprising codes included the importance of role-play and the ubiquity of modding. These codes were structured into the general themes, *Virtual Photography and Identity Articulation* and *Gaymers and Modding*, presented in the section below.

Findings

Virtual Photography and Identity Articulation

Photographing avatars is so prominent in the *FFXIV Online* community that people who do so regularly are referred to as “Gposers,” the origin of the eponymous website mentioned previously. Beyond community-made platforms, gaymers 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. Often, “avatar customization” refers to altering features such as the avatar’s race, gender, height, and face shape (Vasalou & Joinson, 2009, p. 511). However, customization may also refer to personalization post-character creation in the form of clothing or accessories that the avatar can wear (Fron et al., 2007, p. 9). New or rare outfits—*glamours*—are often the subject of the photographs players take of their avatars.

In *FFXIV Online*, customization in the form of clothing and accessories is “unexpected ways of making statements about identity” (Klastrup & Tosca, 2009, p. 4). Players, such as those depicted in Figure 1, have invested substantial time in curating

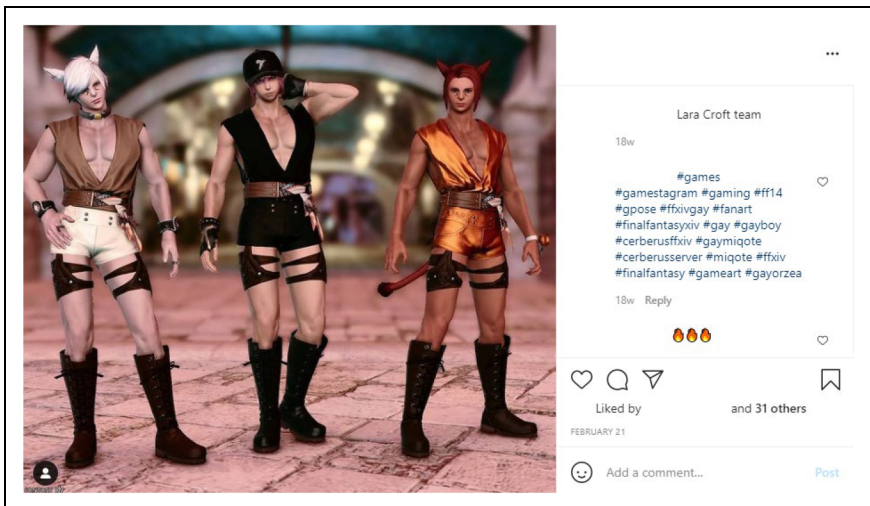


Figure 1. Screenshot of user post on Instagram, 2021⁸.

their avatars' aesthetics. These players' emphasis on outfit design and matching attire reflects a significant aspect of the game's culture, demonstrated by the community's sentiment that fashion is the true "endgame." Certain fashion items, such as the tops worn by the avatars in [Figure 1](#), are revered in the game due to difficult or time-intensive requirements to acquire, which other research has indicated are important factors in determining their value ([Korkeila & Hamari, 2020](#), p. 19). The act of acquiring these items, often publicly, also cements these gamers as veteran players in the eyes of others ([Nardi, 2010](#), p. 40). Furthermore, players utilize clothing to mark their status and "encourage role-play and interaction with other players" ([Klastrup & Tosca, 2009](#), p. 8). Often, the completion of difficult challenges or the acquisition of rare items is followed by commemorating the event with virtual photographs.

Virtual photography in *FFXIV Online* serves a multitude of functions in the articulation of the self. [Figure 2](#), for example, exemplifies self-gratification and self-actualization, imitating the act of self-portraiture common in other social media posts. Such a simulated "selfie" is a "highly gestural action" ([Moore, 2014](#), p. 151), situating the practice within the contexts of "the will to action and the capacity for self-expression through the products of play" ([Moore, 2014](#), p. 150). In other words, virtual photographs such as the example are evidence of the twin processes of actualization and idealization that occur in forming an online persona ([Mancini & Sibilla, 2017](#),

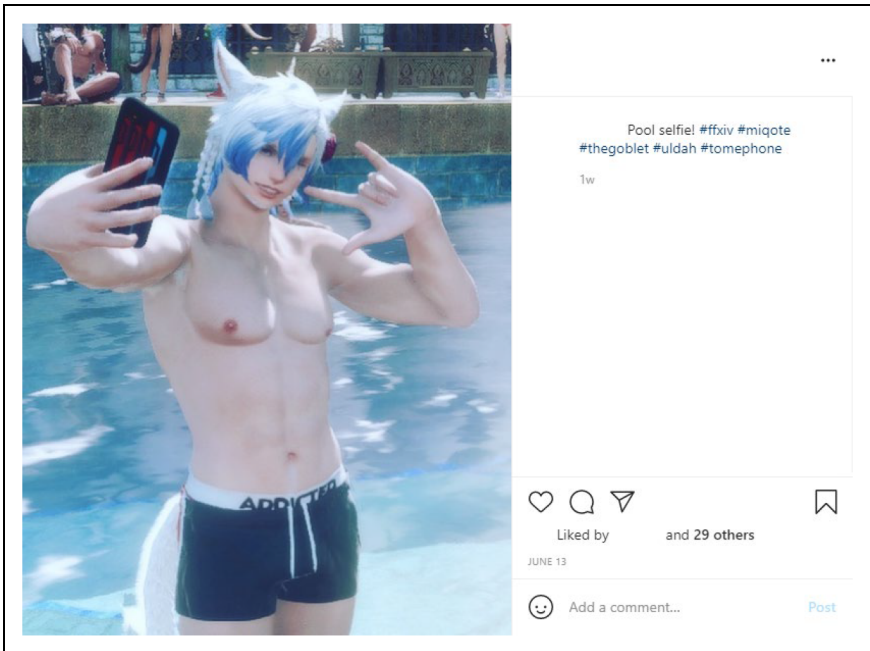


Figure 2. Screenshot of user post on Instagram, 2021.

p. 276). This photographic practice also significantly impacts viewers, fostering visible social connections among diverse groups and preserving avatars' memories. Gamers validate their self-expression online with the currencies of “votes, favorites, or comments” (Moore, 2014, p. 147). By posting their image to social media, the gaymer transforms the practice of virtual photography from a personalized experience into a participatory exercise whereby the comments and “likes” of others regulate and maintain an individual’s artistic expression.

These images, therefore, not only chronicle individual experiences but also reinforce the collective identity of the gaymer community. Such practices on social media evoke “clusters, or communities” (Moore, 2014, p. 143) to form a micro-public, something “similar to the notion of a personal public... that takes into account the practices of social media” (Moore et al., 2017, p. 6). In this way, Instagram crystallizes the identities formed by gamers through association with—and public interaction as—their in-game avatars. For example, many gamers in *FFXIV Online* have Instagram accounts in the name of their in-game personas, often signaling their association with the game by including the initialisms “ffxiv” in their account names. Networks of “ffxiv” Instagram accounts are linked through shared hashtags and mutual friends, forming shared networks. These connections increase profiles’ visibility to others on the platform, allowing gamers to identify inclusive communities (Acosta et al., 2017, p. 82).

As exemplified in Figures 1 and 3, the gamers of *FFXIV Online* make use of hashtags such as #ffxivgaymer, #ffxivgay, and #gaymiqote as lodestones by which to navigate social networks on Instagram. For these gamers, like many other users of social

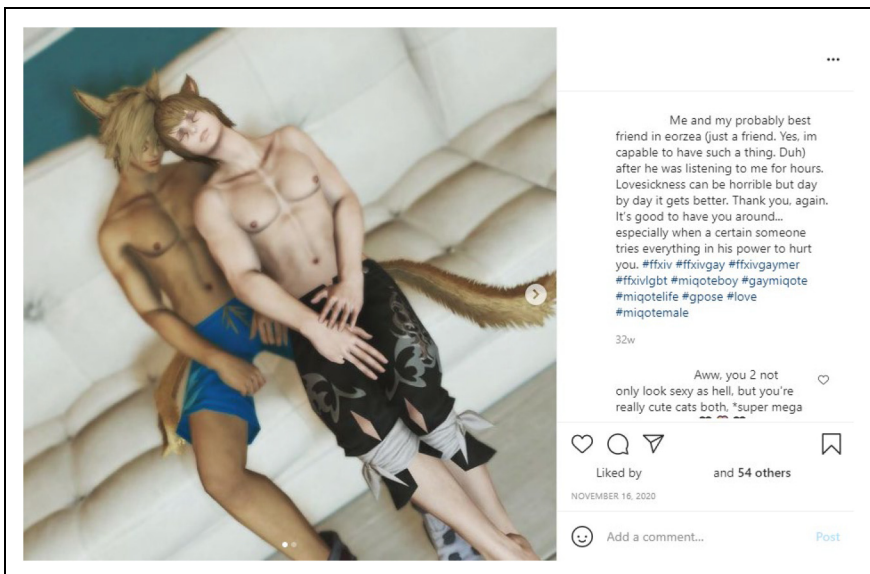


Figure 3. Screenshot of user post on Instagram, 2020.

media, hashtags have “made the keyword a central element in the organization of knowledge” (Bernard, 2019, p. 28). Hashtags are ways users on social media organize their information and make sense of the virtual world around them (Verhoven, 2014, p. 214). Hashtags are thus crucial for these gamers as they facilitate a “coherent performance of a unified identity/subjectivity” (2012, p. 187). In other words, gamers tag their images to organize the various performances and expressions of a digital self in a way that is meaningful, but simultaneously exposes these performances to a broader public. Often, gamers will employ hashtags alongside their images to “[explain] to that user’s existing audience the context and content of the media shared” (Leaver & Highfield, 2018, p. 5), forming the basis of their persona in how they “[negotiate] between the individual and the collective” (Moore, 2020, p. 2). In particular, the hashtags relating to sexual orientation guard against moments where the user “is persistently countered by the comments *about* that person” (Cover, 2012, p. 187). Regardless of their sexuality offline, hashtags disclose the orientation of the gamer-as-avatar and permit access to a broader queer gaming community.

While examining Instagram posts related to *FFXIV Online*, it is apparent that erotic content, such as Figure 4, is scarce, possibly due to the platform’s censorship policies restricting such material. Valkyrie (2011, pp. 86–88) offers another possible explanation, observing that homophobia, policing of avatar gender vs. offline gender, and harassment by others are common occurrences for those who engage in erotic role-play. Therefore, while it is likely that moderation on social media plays a part in the relative scarcity of erotic content on Instagram, concerns over harassment from

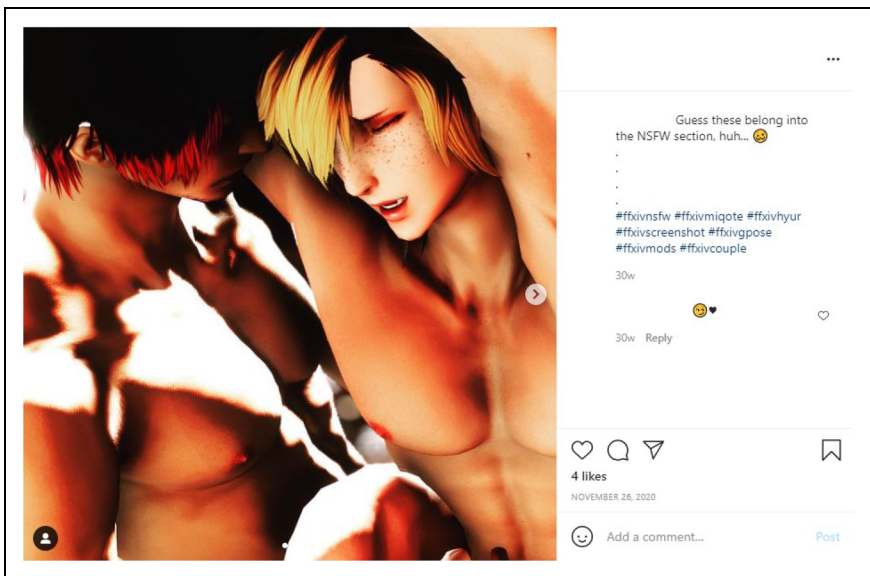


Figure 4. Screenshot of user post on Instagram, 2020.

others are also possible. Even so, numerous images, such as [Figure 4](#), hint at romantic or erotically themed scenarios, skirting the boundaries of erotic role-play. 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. Valkyrie astutely notes, “cybersex is subjugated to the sewers, abandoned inns, and less populated areas” (2011, p. 92). These observations reinforce the idea that sexuality is a prominent aspect of virtual world interactions, persisting despite attempts at censorship.

In my research, I delved into the practice among *FFXIV Online* players of creating multiple iterations of the same character, each tailored for distinct purposes. [Figure 5](#) showcases various avatars originated by the same individual, each catering to varying gameplay needs or scenarios. Sometimes referred to as “mules” (Valkyrie, 2011, p. 83), in *FFXIV Online*, they are dubbed “alts,” a shortening of “alternate.” Korkeila and Hamari note alts are a rare occurrence in *FFXIV Online* “as the game allows for leveling up multiple classes and jobs on the same character” (2020, p. 17). However, there are economic reasons for maintaining multiple avatars, as in-game marketplaces limit interactions per avatar and not per account (Kafai et al., 2010, p. 35). In addition to these more pragmatic concerns, further rationales include “disguising oneself from one’s friends or experimenting with gender” (Kafai et al., 2010, p. 35). The case for the Instagram user in [Figure 5](#) is quite different. As illustrated in [Figure 6](#), detailed avatar biographies on *Carrd*⁵ reveal that each character is presented as a distinct archetype; some avatars are portrayed as emotionally

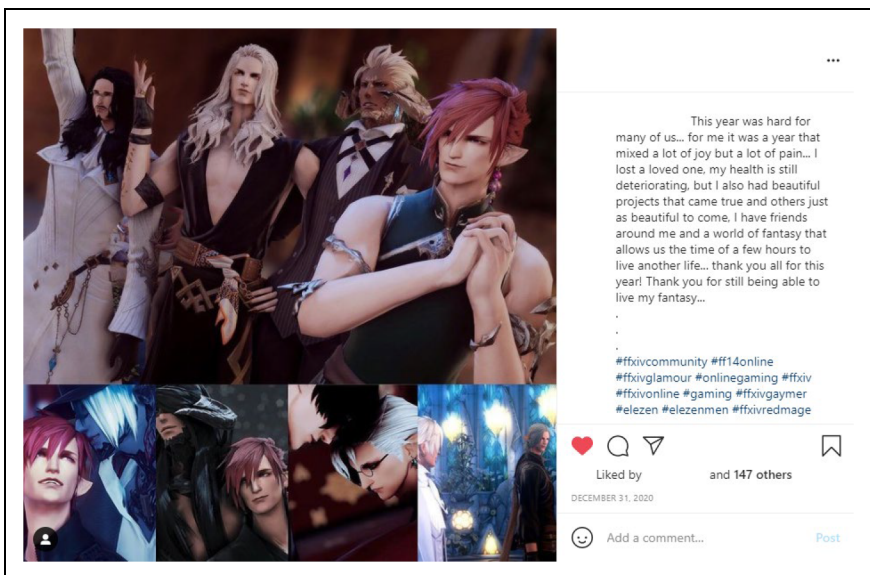


Figure 5. Screenshot of user post on Instagram, 2020.

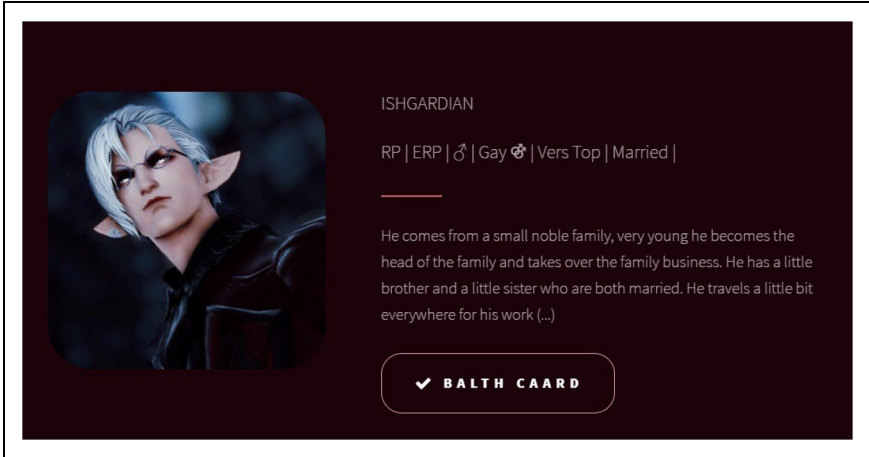


Figure 6. Screenshot of avatar profile on Carrd, 2021.

sensitive, others as dark and brooding. Each avatar offers the user an opportunity to explore a particular aspect of identity in isolation through role-play.

While pivotal, virtual photography alone is not sufficient to explain the identity construction at work on Instagram. Rather, gamers make use of their account names and hashtags to form small communities that revolve around their specific interests. In the case of erotic content, virtual photography plays a prominent role in expressing romantic or sexual themes but is shaped by the content policies on the platforms gamers use. Lastly, gamers make use of multiple avatars, either for practical benefit or to craft specific personas for role-play purposes. While visual expression remains the impetus and primary vehicle for identity construction by gamers, it is from the full use of the affordances of social media that their persona emerges. Next, I turn to the construction of the visual image itself and how modding and other techniques are used by gamers in crafting their portraits.

Gamers and Modding

The term modding refers to “packages of edited code from video games that alter gameplay” (Lauteria, 2012, p. 17). Mods have significance to gamers in their capacity to disrupt heteronormative contexts and practices during play, carving a space for queer interpretations and experiences in otherwise exclusively heterosexual games (Thompson, 2018, p. 186). Furthermore, games can be modded in various ways, from altering the appearance of in-game models, textures, and animations, to manipulating the rendered image through shaders (Sotamaa, 2003, p. 5). Shaders, in particular, are crucial in defining the aesthetic of virtual photographs 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 gamer using them. However, once a photograph is taken, the shaders are applied to the resulting image, rendering the gamer's interpretation of the world public. In defining a personal aesthetic, players are free to reinterpret the contexts of the game world to suit their needs. For example, shaders can be used to apply stylistic effects to images to emulate analogue photographic techniques, such as the collodion process (Urban, 2023, p. 13).

While Figure 7 presents a dramatic example, the extent to which gamers use shaders varies. Some may adjust color contrast, while others incorporate more advanced effects like screen space reflections, ambient occlusion, or real-time ray tracing. Figure 7 demonstrates the impact of several shaders⁶ by modifying colors, and adding ambient occlusion and depth-of-field to the image. The impact of shaders on the game's appearance depends entirely on the gamer's preference. When taking photographs, gamers utilize shaders and remove or minimize what Švelch refers to as "circumstantial details" (2021, p. 8), such as character names, icons, or other "game-like" elements. Shaders are gamers' attempts "to create something more than a basic screen capture" (Švelch, 2021, p. 9). They use shaders to create art and "expose the diverse aesthetic and social experiences that define online identification and interactivity" (Patti, 2017, p. 191). For gamers, shaders are instrumental in enhancing their creative expression, particularly in the context of virtual photography for platforms like Instagram.

The use of shaders has become almost ubiquitous and is widely accepted as a norm for enhancing the visual experience in *FFXIV Online*. To illustrate this point, Figures 1–8 in this article have all made use of shaders in one form or another, as does the vast majority of images in the dataset. Using shaders 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, p. 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, but there is no record of a player's account suspension due to using shaders. However, *FFXIV Online*'s approach of a silent tolerance for graphical mods is not universal. Nardi (2010, p. 149) recounts how Blizzard Entertainment was originally openly hostile to player modifications. Only later did the developers change their stance and officially support many types of mods in *WoW*, going so far as to integrate some into the official game code.

In *FFXIV Online*, gamers frequently utilize external programs in addition to shaders to enhance the game's visual appeal, such as *FFXIV TexTools* (TexTools GitHub Group, 2024). These tools are widely adopted across the community. The most common modifications are downloaded assets that alter characters' physical appearances or in-game outfits. Lauteria argues that mods have "the capacity to do politically [and] create new spaces for resistant play" (2012, p. 18), meaning modding is a means for gamers to resist—and change—the heteronormative



Figure 7. The author’s avatar with (left) and without (right) shaders, screenshots by author, 2025.

conventions embedded within a virtual world. While these changes are typically visible only to the individual, there are methods to synchronize these modifications with others.

Another mod for *FFXIV Online*, *Mare Synchronos*, enables the sharing of asset modifications, allowing gamers to share their customized visual experiences in real time (Penumbra-Sync, 2024). 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 an 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, p. 196). For example, in his study of queer mods, Thompson found that overwhelmingly players privileged normative standards of beauty such as “muscularity, able-bodiedness, and large penis size” (2018, p. 197).

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 utilize community-generated assets to realize their idealized avatars. In their research, Kafai et al. describe a community-driven marketplace for character customizations, or “face parts” (2010, p. 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 (Kafai et al., 2010, p. 36). This tension is also evident in the community of *FFXIV Online*, where gamers commission 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. Nevertheless, gamers appear undeterred in sharing images featuring modifications, indicating a strong desire to express their unique sense of self. These individuals continue to post content that may violate the terms of service of either *FFXIV Online* or Instagram to resist dominant heteronarratives, or in attempts at “destabilizing the very notion of a mainstream” (Ruberg, 2020, p. 29).

For *FFXIV Online* gamers, playing “queer” is inexorably tied to their identity as individuals. Through modding, queering the gameplay mechanics, and introducing queer narratives for their avatars, gamers engage in an act of resistance. Indeed, “playing queer” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 19) in video games can be a form of self-expression, pleasure, and resistance for all players. However, queer play is particularly significant for individuals who live their lives as queer people, both within and beyond the context of virtual worlds. The concept of playing queer can be read in two ways. Playing queer 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” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 16), playing characters involved in same-sex relationships, even though they identify as heterosexual. The other reading of the term 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 (Ruberg, 2019, p. 15). Playing queer is distinct from how games are designed by their developers, suggesting that it is primarily brought to games by players who bring queer perspectives to the medium⁷ (Ruberg, 2019, p. 17). Queer play could include “playing to lose, playing to hurt, playing too fast or too slow” or adopting other “defiant, deviant, ecstatic, languid, silly, or absurd” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 17) approaches to playing the game. I extend this argument to include the queer identities on Instagram, as gamers use modding to create and explore characters or storylines that reflect their experiences or identities.

Within *FFXIV Online*, gamers adopt modding as a form of queer play. Modding allows them 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. For example, in Figure 8, custom poses, shaders, and outfits are combined to articulate a romantic scene between two avatars. These gamers engage in role-play and form communities around the activity of virtual photography. While this is facilitated in ways by the game itself, how gamers act out role-play within *FFXIV Online* fits Ruberg and Chang’s descriptions of playing queer. The relationship between queerness and video games is more complex than the addition of gay characters to the narrative (Chang, 2017, p. 19). Scholarly research indicates that there is a desire for a deeper level of self-expression and freedom within virtual worlds, a desire which is expressed by gamers in multiple ways.

From comments on Instagram, I have observed a pronounced awareness among gamers regarding the communicative power of their avatars’ appearance in *FFXIV Online*. One user asks, “So ive been told that my Characters looking especially gay

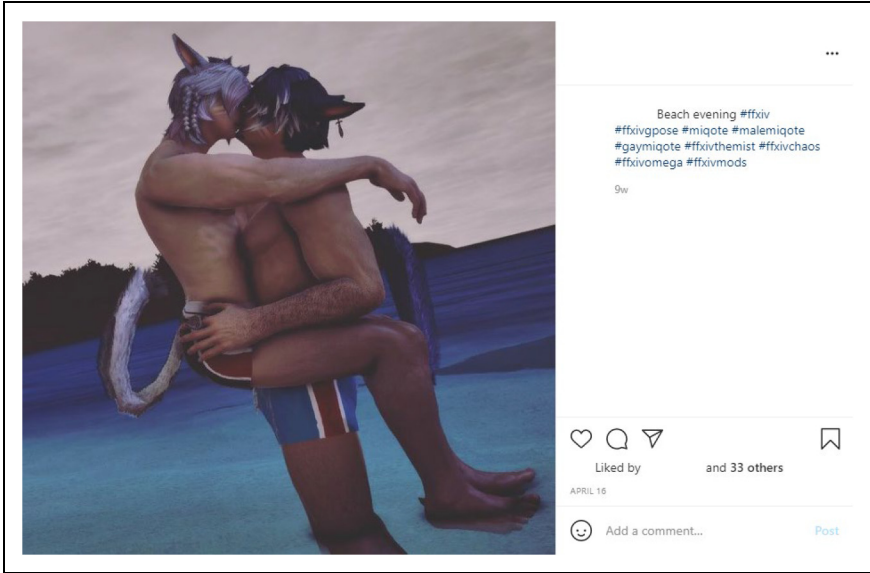


Figure 8. Screenshot of user post on Instagram, 2021.

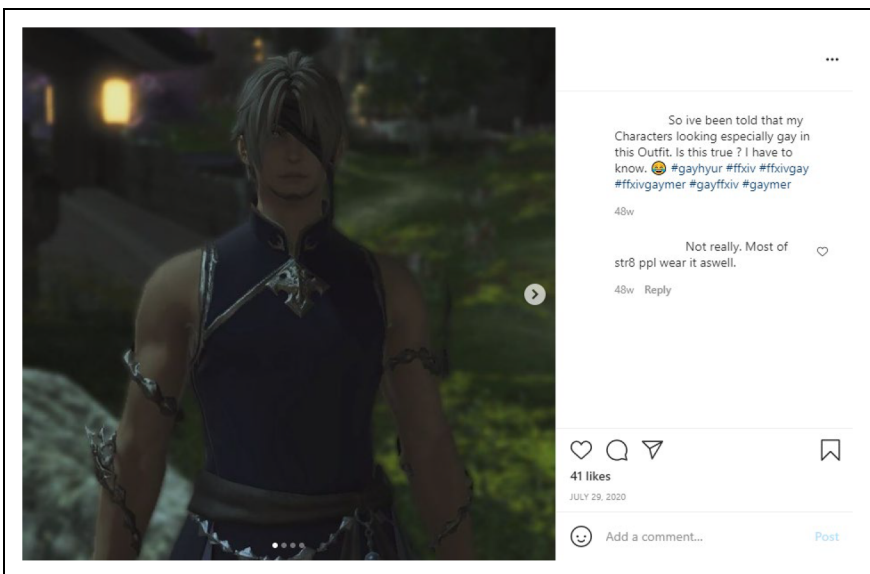


Figure 9. Screenshot of user post on Instagram, 2020.

in this Outfit [sic]. Is this true?” (Figure 9) demonstrating an understanding that they are intentionally—or unintentionally—conveying stereotypes regarding sexual orientation through their choice of dress. Evidently, gamers place significance on their avatars’ aesthetics, viewing them as a vital means of self-expression and narrative construction. Avatars in *FFXIV Online* are the interface between “individual agency” for gamers and their existing “social structures” (Kafai et al., 2010, p. 26), meaning avatars are the mechanisms through which gamers negotiate their intentions with the constraints of the broader social milieu. Furthermore, avatar design underpins the three aspects of self-representation: “resources, constraints, and agency” (2010, p. 26). In constructing these self-representations, gamers meticulously curate their avatars’ appearance, employing character design as a tool to shape narratives and project desired identities within the game’s universe. Self-representation for gamers is where “the queer body... [presses] up against a game” (Ruberg, 2019, p. 19) as a way of exploring the queer self in the medium of video games.

Image analysis corroborates this finding, revealing that avatar design is instrumental in crafting and communicating gamer narratives. Figure 10, for example, is a carefully constructed image that evokes the spontaneity of offline gay club scenes. Video game portraits are significant, as they 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” (Patti, 2017, p. 181). In other words, digital portraits encapsulate the lived experiences of gamers, both within and outside the virtual environment. Furthermore, gamers

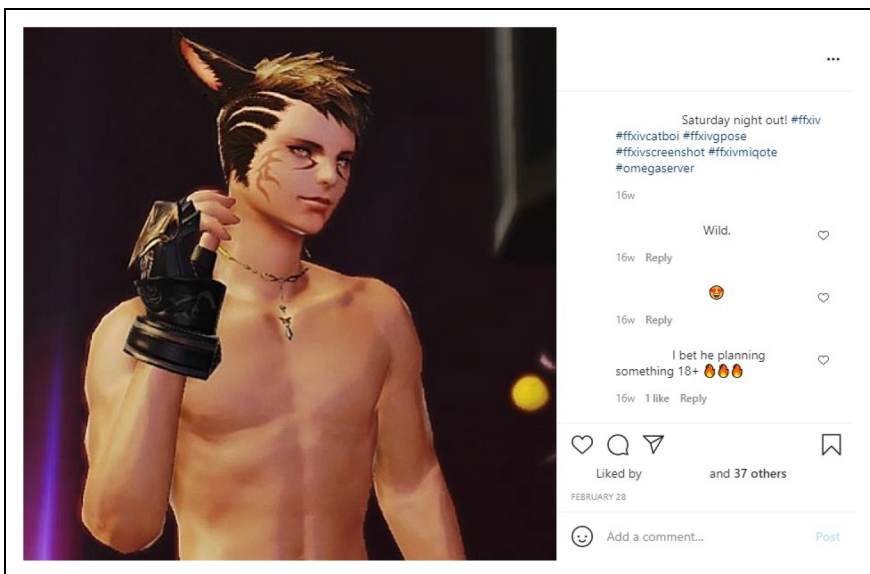


Figure 10. Screenshot of user post on Instagram, 2021.

strategically tailor their avatars' appearances to align with specific scenes or to embody specific narratives they wish to convey. [Deshane and Morton \(2018, p. 139\)](#) argue that while players engage in the "doing" of video games, they perform the work of identity construction. Likewise, the gamers in *FFXIV Online* re-enact various roles and activities as a means of further developing their online personas.

Conclusion

My primary objective in this article is to examine the construction of the visual identity of *FFXIV Online* players on Instagram. The investigation has revealed a nuanced interplay among gamers' existing self-perceptions, aspirational selves, and modes of narrative and artistic expression through text and image creation. This process involves gamers engaging in cooperative role-play activities to elaborate on their avatars' personas, facilitating a deeper exploration of identity. 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. This engagement underscores the significant role of avatars as extensions of the self within the digital environment, facilitating a unique form of identity exploration and presentation.

The outcomes of this article 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. Public-facing social media platforms, including X and YouTube, also hold the potential for in-depth studies. With its users often engaging in narrative-driven role-play through their posts, X 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.

Selecting candidates for the Instagram case studies proved to be 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 utilized the English language and those employing English language hashtags. Consequently, this methodology prevented access to a significant segment of the European community, particularly among the German and French-speaking populations, thereby narrowing the scope of the research.

FFXIV Online was launched over 12 years ago, and its significant popularity and longevity make its relative lack of academic scrutiny more intriguing. The potential to unearth and analyze information from such an enduring video game presents a

compelling opportunity for research. A particularly enlightening facet of this project has been the discovery of a robust community of role-playing gamers who use multiple online communities to co-construct their avatar personas. Employing these methodologies to examine communities yields both fulfilment and enjoyment. As a gaymer in *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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Ethical Considerations

This article anonymizes publicly available data from participants where consent could not be explicitly obtained.

Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

This article does not contain any studies with human or animal participants.

Consent to Participate

Data from human participants was gathered from publicly available sources. Images have been anonymized where explicit consent could not be obtained.

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Notes

1. Roger Caillois describes two forms of play occupying the ends of a spectrum. *Ludus* is a term Caillois refers to as a “game” (2001, p. 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 (Caillois, 2001, p. 13).
2. *Gposers* originates from the in-game text command “/gpose”, which initiates a dedicated screenshot mode within *FFXIV Online* (Square Enix, 2022a).
 3. As of writing, there are eight playable races for players to choose from during character creation: *Huur*, *Miqo'te*, *Elezen*, *Roegadyn*, *Lalafell*, *Au Ra*, *Hrothgar*, and *Viera* (Square Enix, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d).
 4. Discord is a computer application that offers private messaging, community communication platforms, and “link and media sharing” (Morris, 2020, p. 14). Discord was marketed specifically towards online gaming communities since the launch of the company (Morris, 2020, p. 15).
 5. *Carrd* is a free website builder and hosting tool, commonly used by members of the *FFXIV Online* community for character biographies and profiles.
 6. Note that the resulting change was achieved with post-process shaders only. No alterations to the geometry or textures of the game’s assets were made.
 7. This is related to Edmond Y. Chang’s notion of “queergaming,” which is characterized by the queering of gameplay norms and the “radical potential of failure” (2017, p. 17). There is overlap in how gamers engage in “queer remediation,” or how they “refashion and reimagine not only content and play but their very own relationship to ostensibly non-queer games and communities” (Chang, 2017, p. 17).
 8. Permission to publish cannot be obtained for the Instagram images in this article, as the user profiles are no longer active. Images have been anonymized instead.

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