COMPUTER ROLE-PLAYING GAMES: PLAYER MOTIVATIONS, PREFERENCES, AND BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT. In recent years, computer role-playing games have changed the way we spend our free time. Traditional games have been increasingly replaced by digitized productions, and technology has made it easier to access videogames on multiples devices. Online games bring users together in a fantasy world in which they design avatars, manifesting their creativity and employing gaming strategies.

This study analyzed Romanian gamers' behaviors and perceptions of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (henceforth MMORPGs); by employing focus groups and a survey, the authors aimed to map preferences and habits of users in terms of gender. We found that users are not likely to engage in stereotypical activities in creating and using their avatars within the games, nor do they design female avatars solely for visual pleasure, but rather for opportunistic reasons. Moreover, the research subjects did not think of choosing female avatars as a safeguard for advancing through in-game levels, but rather consider other variables, such as hard work, skills, or strategy, as important to succeed.

Keywords: role-playing games, gaming behavior, gamer preferences, gender-swapping, avatar gender.

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Introduction

In recent years, computer games have changed the way we spend our free time. Due to the availability of new consoles, platforms, and technologies, traditional games have been increasingly replaced by digitized versions. As mobile games, they are part of the basic configuration of any smartphone or tablet; as social games, they are conveniently available through a browser or accessible through social networking sites such as Facebook. And as online games, they usually bring young users together in a communal fantasy world.

What is more, increasing interest has been offered to gender dimensions of the gaming industry, from gender differences in gaming (De Castell, Larios, & Jenson, 2019; Jenson & de Castell, 2010) to gender construction in videogames (Heritage, 2021). Developers have tackled the increasing usage of gaming products by women by including behavior specificities of female players in gender-aware designs (Innholt, 2009). In 2020, women made 46% of gamers, yet only 16% of executives in the gaming industry (20-first, 2020), whereas the proportion of female game developers has increased from 22% in 2014 to 30% in 2021, so about 1 in 3 game developers worldwide are women (Clement, 2021).

In general, all games are classified as computer games that require a computer to run. This way, a digitally generated visual representation is used to display the game statistics (video or video screen games). Players must perform their actions on the computer using a suitable input device (Schirra & Carl-McGrath, 2002, p. 2). Computer games are programs in which a player interacts with a virtual game environment. Although computer games are mainly for entertainment and fun, they can also improve hand-eye coordination and problem-solving skills, for example. Each game features unique strategy, action, and imagination.

Game genre provides an established classification of entertainment games that is a useful method for identifying commonalities between games. There is no universally accepted taxonomy of genre, but Herz's (1997, as cited in Connolly et al., 2012) system is similar to the game industry classification. Herz distinguishes action, adventure, combat, puzzle, role-playing, simulation, sports, and strategy games. However, this classification entails a rather fluid concept, as many games are hybrids that fall into more than one class. We will further focus especially on the game genres that have an imaginative world with interaction between avatars. In specialized literature, this type of game is called *online role-playing games*.

MMORPG games

The roots of online role-playing games reside in pen-and-paper role-playing games (RPGs) on the one hand, and text-based computer games (MUDs) on the other. In pen-and-paper role-playing games, participants sit together with a game master at the game board. As in all role-playing games, players embody a character whose development is recorded on a sheet of paper. Closely related to these pen-and-paper role-playing games are MUDs, where the computer is the game master and does the documentation of the game's events for the players. "These relatively primitive online games eventually evolved into the first modern online role-playing games, since then called MMORPGs, as the Internet spread *en masse* in the 1990s" (Cypra, 2005, p. 9).

The term *MMORPG* – Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game – is used to define a role-playing game played on the internet, characterized by two main features: it can only be played on the internet, and thousands of players can participate in it simultaneously. The most famous

example is World of Warcraft (WoW), with millions of subscribers, which is the largest base of all MMORPGs. MMORPGs are basically defined as cooperative games in which a difficult task, also known as a quest, is solved only with the help of other fellow players. "For this reason, many players here join together in communities called either guilds, clans, or player associations, depending on the program" (Cypra, 2005, p. 4). Guilds have a code that commits them to certain common activities. Another peculiarity of online role-playing games becomes apparent before the game starts. Players must create a character where gender, race, occupation are voluntarily chosen. "With this alter ego, they are henceforth part of a virtual world characterized by rules and behaviors, institutions, geographical enclosure" (Cypra, 2005, p. 4).

A typical MMORPG features a large-scale setting that supports storylines based on science fiction, fantasy, martial arts, or war themes of the realm. Many narratives are rooted in novels, movies (including animations), and comic books. Players navigate and interact in multi-layered game maps consisting of continents, countries, districts, cities, roads, and buildings. Most games contain "magic portals" for dungeons, where a limited number of players can enjoy more concentrated gameplay experiences. Basically, all games use non-player characters (NPCs). This is especially true for quests where non-player characters train in special skills, trade goods and currency, and combat. In some cases, NPCs serve only as background characters to create impressions of vivid and complex worlds. The player's sense of immersion relies in part on narratives involving NPCs – that is, maintaining the story that tells the legacy of past RPGs. New game releases usually contain updated or entirely new forms of game scenarios, NPCs, and objects. The longer the history of a game's world, the more diverse and varied its landscapes and displays tend to be (Lin & Sun, 2015).

The global characteristic of MMORPG is expressed in the form of routine and daily economic and social activities. Avatars need food to survive

or heal. They need tools or materials to repair damaged equipment. Therefore, players need to have a constant income in the game. Real or virtual currency can be used to buy decorative items like new hairstyles or clothes. To earn money, players can complete quests that reset daily. In return, they receive gold coins, which provide a base salary guaranteed by the system. One can also visit certain areas to collect raw materials (such as minerals, herbs, or leather) to sell at markets, or make various products from raw materials (using recipes or instructions provided by the system) that they can exchange with the gaming system or with other players in exchange for virtual or real money. Some players focus on making a range of increasingly lucrative deals to build wealth, either through game-supported auction mechanisms or through private channels that are not approved by game companies (Lin & Sun, 2015).

Modern MMORPGs are characterized by a wide variety of ways to customize the game: in addition to solving quests and fighting enemies of various kinds, players can work as craftsmen, create their own role-playing scenarios, trade, or even compete against other games. Some players also make it their mission to equip their character with the best possible gear. This variety of different ways to play often makes MMORPGs a very time-consuming leisure pursuit.

Bartle (1996, as cited in Xue Qiang, 2008) analyzed the motivation to play MUDs, and classified players into four types: Killers, Achievers, Explorers, and Socializers. Yee (*ibid.*) divided the motivational factors for playing MMORPGs into three categories: the achievement component, the social component, and the immersion component. Some players feel more secure and powerful in the game than in real life. They can gain power, advance quickly, and accumulate symbols of wealth or status in the game. They can also analyze the underlying rules to optimize character performance. In addition, they can challenge and compete with others. All of this can fulfill the human desire to gain achievement. The achievement component is defined

by the above-mentioned traits. Socializing is the defining trait of human nature. Since MMORPGs have the features of computer-based communication, players may be interested in helping other players and chatting with them. This can build long-term meaningful relationships with others. Also, to complete a task, they need to build a team and being part of a team can also increase satisfaction.

Immersing oneself into the game by role-playing a different identity and escaping from reality also constitute motivations that attract people. For example, some players like to create an avatar with a backstory and to interact with other players to create an improvised story. Some players are interested in customizing their character's appearance. Other players enjoy exploring the cards in the game to find something they like. Most other players do not know anything about it, or some players like to use the online environment to avoid thinking about real-life problems.

Gender swapping in videogames

Scholar's attention to the computer games industry has increased massively in recent years. Computer games have been perceived as a new medium of entertainment, especially by the younger generation. This is also one of the reasons behind researchers' increasing interest in topics related to games. Consumption patterns of games and their effects are the focus of researchers all over the world. Nevertheless, there is little research on other game-related topics, such as the aspects of interaction, gender differences in players, or reasons for gender-switching online.

Addiction to online role-playing games is one of the most discussed aspects of recent cyberpsychology, primarily because of its potentially negative impact on young people's social lives. One study focused on some

aspects of addiction in adolescent MMORPG players, namely the connections between players and their game characters and whether and in what ways players' relationships with their game characters influence potential addiction. Players' attitudes towards their characters seem to be relevant, as players often wish to be like their characters in real life. The study also reiterated that younger players are generally more prone to addiction (Smahel et al., 2008).

Gender differences in online gaming constitute a relatively under-researched yet increasing body of knowledge. Griffiths et al. (2004) found that more and more women are gaming online. The increase in female gamers could be attributed to the fact that online games tend to appeal to a broad audience by allowing players to develop their own characters (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008). Alternatively, it could be that online games are moving away from traditional video game content that focuses on stereotypical representations of women and men. Yee (2005, cited in Hussain & Griffiths, 2008) found that men were more likely to play MMORPGs for the achievement and manipulation functions, while women played to build supportive social networks. Research examining the experiences and attitudes of male and female gamers is needed. The phenomenon of *gender swapping* is a common online practice. Griffiths et al. (2004) reported that 60% of their sample of online gamers had played a different gendered character online and argued that the introduction of game icons such as Lara Croft in Tomb Raider meant that it had become normal for men to play female characters. Huh and Williams (2009) argued that women playing male characters tend to display hyper-masculine behaviors. Chou et al. (2014) found that players use gender-swapped avatars to experience *increased enjoyment*. Moreover, Tseng et al. (2018) showed that gender swapping can lead to relational switching costs and online gamer loyalty. Further research delving into reasons for gender swapping and its impact on video game stimulation constitutes an interesting area of research.

Several other studies found similar gender differences in motivation, play style, and player type. Lou et al. (2013) showed that male players play longer sessions and reach a higher level. Cole and Griffiths (2007) found that males were motivated by elements of curiosity, surprise, and discovery, while most females played games for their therapeutic function. In a comprehensive study on *League of Legends* avatars, Ratan et al. (2019) showed that women hold stronger preferences for gender-consistent avatars than men, supporting the idea that women experience more pressure to perform their gender identities.

Videogames studies in Romania

Research on online gaming is a relatively new feature of Romanian scholarship. However, the phenomenon of video games is very popular among young people, who grew up with and alongside technology. A considerable number of young people have a YouTube or live streaming channel where they mostly talk about the games or demonstrate their gaming skills while live streaming. Very few videogame studies have been conducted to date.

In Romania, the focus was more on the impact of violent video games on aggressive behavior. Călin and Cernat (2016) explored the strengths and weaknesses regarding the impact videogames bear upon youth development, proposing a set of best practices in managing access to young children. In a study of prosocial behavior related to videogames, Nicola (2020) argued that online cooperation can translate into prosocial behavior among adolescents in everyday life. Ghirvu (2013) focused on consumer attitudes, discovering that online video advertising usually generates superficial attitudes, influenced by aspects of game design and characteristics of the online environment such as interactivity. Ghirvu also identified differences in perceptions of these elements based on demographic factors such as gender or age group of the consumer.

In studying voice communication usage, Gheţău (2021) found that, among videogames enthusiasts, higher use of voice communication negatively correlates with perceived anonymity. Moreover, Gheţău and Iovu (2021) discussed an increase in the number of women playing videogames and found evidence that voice communication facilitates social capital – namely bonding and bridging. Investigating multiple voices on the influence of videogames upon behavior, Drugaş and Ciordaş (2017) emphasized gamers' motivations of entertainment and educational purpose associated with videogames.

Methodology

This research is based on behavioral differences between male and female users of a MMORPG and the impact of these differences on player performance and motivation and aims to tackle two research questions and subsequent hypotheses. Based on previous research and the aim of the present study, the following research questions and hypotheses were formulated:

RQ1: How do preferences and habits of male and female MMORPG players differ?

H1: Men are more likely to play MMORPG than women.
H2: Female players deem narrative as the most important aspect of a game.
H3: Male players are more likely to choose a female game character.
H4: Male gamers are more oriented towards winning during a game.
H5: Female gamers are more oriented towards socializing during a game.

RQ2: Why do users swap genders for their avatars and does this have an impact upon the game?

H6: Men choose a female avatar only for visual pleasure.
H7: Female avatars secure a higher level of play than male avatars.

To address these research questions and hypotheses, two methods were employed. First, two focus groups were designed and carried out to map gaming habits and gamers' perspectives on gender-swapping. Participants were divided into two subcategories: male gamers aged between 19 and 27 years old and female gamers aged between 18 and 25 years old, five for each group. Both groups were selected via a snowballing method, and the focus groups were conducted via Skype, to keep them in the environment in which the behavior is studied. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the results from the focus groups, and MMORPG elements such as plot, strategy, avatar creation, social interaction, player progression were studied. A Romanian-language survey was then designed and distributed during May – June 2020 on Facebook groups and Reddit, addressing gamers, to be able to draft a profile for the Romanian MMORPG gamer. The results were entered and analyzed using Google Forms, and the survey gathered 243 participants.

Results

Focus groups

a. Storyline

The first variable in the focus group referred to the background story of an MMORPG. The minority of female players deemed a good story to contribute to a better gaming experience, doubled by the variety of plots:

> *"To me, the storyline is very important, because I pick new games based on the story. They need to have a different story than those played before. I don't like doing repetitive things and have no patience to play the same thing for a long time. So, I frequently move towards new games."* (Player 1, female, 18 years

old); "*I would say that a good story about the world in which you are playing can add great value to an MMORPG. Explaining things such as why the world is what it is and the way in which various parts see each other based on past interactions helps create a certain in-game atmosphere*" (Player 2, female, 20 years old)

On the other hand, some players must ignore the storyline completely, as most of the team play is based on a quick eye to hand reaction, and the story is not as significant, while clearly established rules and an intense experience seem to be more important than the actual plot.

"*I usually play alone and then I can enjoy the story. But when I play on a team, I cannot focus on the story, because everyone clicks a hundred times and hits combinations of keys and especially if we talk via headsets, everyone makes comments and shouts. This way you can't really enjoy the story.*" (Player 3, female, 19); "*I don't think MMORPG needs a story or NPCs. The game needs good rules for multiplayer gameplay and an immersive experience for RPG. And RPG does not mean playing solo.*" (Player 4, female, 24); "*I am not very interested in the story of a game. I rather focus on gameplay and the missions. I don't even think the story has a more important role, because my actions do not always coincide with the narrative.*" (Player 5, female, 25)

Regarding male players, the plot is considered equally important; players hold some standards about the quality of the game, which are not always met by game developers. The variety of plots was also a reason why men prefer role-playing games.

"*For me the storyline is very important, because I do not even play games that share the same story. I'd rather refine a certain game and then pick up another one with a different story and other quest types.*" (Player 6, male, 20); "*I do not play MMORPGs that don't have a really good story. The problem with modern*

MMORPGs is that stories are generally awful. Full of cliches (that sometimes can work, don't get me wrong), the story in most MMORPGs is not made for reading, even if you are interested in understanding the idea behind. Also, I should stress that we, as players, have come a long way, and our standards for a good story have increased a lot since WoW, for instance." (Player 7, male, 25)

In contrast, some players decide as a team which games they want to try. Regardless of the story, their main goal is to have fun and enjoy team play.

"We talk on Discord and consult each other which game we want to play. This also applies to when one of us finds a new game and wants to play as a team. It's better this way, as none knows how it works and what we should do. We are not really interested in the story, as long as we can all play as a team and, at the same time, develop our own characters." (Player 8, male, 19)

Some participants deem the stories pointless, as they do not follow the players' actions. The story has a certain course of action, but players' actions can create a different plot, that disrupts continuity.

"I don't really like stories in MMORPGs. A story can be great but may not match my actions as a player. I have the story telling me one thing, and my actions telling me a different one. This invalidates the story and makes me waste my time." (Player 9, male, 27); *"I am not really interested in the story. I go in to play, I am not interested in developing the story or creating a new one."* (Player 10, male, 20)

Thus, it can be argued that male and female gamers do not consider narrative fundamental to a game. Narrative is important when choosing a new game or understanding the backstory, but game developers find it difficult to meet these expectations, as gamers also look for well-designed game graphics and logical game designs.

b. Strategy and interaction

On whether the players are win- or interaction-oriented, female players preferred a winning-based game strategy – whether playing alone or as a team. One player even stated her goal was to become one of the best players of World of Warcraft.

> *"[…] when playing on a team, everyone talks at the same time, and we don't have a well-defined strategy. However, all team members are win-oriented, and we look for various methods to make it."* (Player 3, female, 19); *"Just like the story, the way you play is very important. It is true that these games are meant for entertainment, and it is nice to interact with people and exchange objects within the game. Though, winning comes first for me, I aim to reach far and be one of the top WoW players."* (Player 2, female, 20)

Interaction with other participants plays an important role in addition to success, as it sometimes creates friendships outside of MMORPGs: *"I mostly play to win and take my character far, but I don't ignore the interaction with other players. I've actually made friends through games, and we usually make a good team, but we also talk outside of the game"* (Player 4, female, 24).

Sometimes, the interaction is the most valuable thing about this type of game, and participants take on roles requiring contact with others: *"I like these games because you can easily interact with other gamers. I usually take on roles involving many interactions with other players. Anyway, I am not very good at fighting, so I probably wouldn't win too often"* (Player 5, female, 25).

One player even showed a lack of interest in winning a game or interacting with players: *"I get bored easily and if I don't manage to win after a few attempts I give up. I don't interact much with people because I don't spend much time within a game, but I don't want to level up my character either. I play to pass time."* (Player 1, female, 19).

Most MMORPG players focus on winning and succeeding in a mission, quest, or task. By looking for tips and tricks, they can achieve their goals, some of which entail reaching a higher level in the game world and gaining new skills.

"I'd rather spend time with methods helping me win and I don't like to waste my time socializing. I mostly play solo and don't need to communicate with others about strategies and improving skills" (Player 7, male, 25); *"I've started to invest more time and interest in these games, and I would like to get as far as possible. For now, I try to experience levels and earn as many points as possible, while customizing my avatar and help it to develop skills."* (Player 6, male, 20)

Nevertheless, there are some factors that might prevent gamers from achieving their goals. MMORPGs are sometimes populated by children who do not know the rules and disturb experienced players. There are not always options to pick game partners. Therefore, some players choose to play with friends in guilds or in single missions.

"I feel like there are too many children playing randomly and really disrupting your missions. This is why I have my own team with whom I play all the time and we can really get along and interact well. Our goal is winning." (Player 8, male, 19); *"Unfortunately, MMORPGs are full of children who cannot play well. You lose your mood to play and your motivation when you have no one to get across with. Interacting with them is difficult and I'd rather mind my own business and make sure that I achieve my goals."* (Player 9, male, 27)

For one of the gamers interviewed, interaction is more important than winning. The key to progressing through levels are players with different skills. Good communication must be maintained by both sides, and players must be fair to one another: *"Interaction is the most important, and it is good to know people with different skills who can help you advance. This also applies reversely if others need my help"* (Player 10, male, 20).

In terms of game strategy, both men and women are highly motivated to win and advance through levels; this strategy can be contributed to by an entire team or by players sharing methods of solving missions on game forums. Socialization is inherent, especially when players work as a team, and it usually involves real-life friendship.

c. Avatar creation

Avatar creation is a mandatory step in an MMORPG, and it gives users the opportunity to experiment with gender, race, outfits, appearance, and traits. Players usually opt for female avatars, but in certain circumstances they must select the opposite gender. In most cases, female avatars are sexualized by other players, thus it is safer to create a male avatar.

> *"In general, my avatars are female, but I've created male ones when I got tired of men hitting on my female avatar. It's absolutely ridiculous, annoying, and this is one of the reasons why I'd give up such games."* (Player 1, female, 18); *"I've never had a female avatar, because people do not offer the same level of trust and respect to a female avatar. I have friends playing MMORPGs and I know how they reach when coming across a female avatar. They act like behind them there's a girl that they can impress. I bet that most times there are boys behind those avatars."* (Player 3, female, 19)

Some female players create male avatars because virtual identities might not always match reality:

> *"I've created a male avatar out of pure curiosity and fun, and to see if I'd feel differently."* (Player 2, female, 20); *"I mostly play with female avatars, but sometimes I create a male character without disclosing my real identity. It is interesting to see how other players treat you when you have a male avatar. They give you a sneak peak of their minds."* (Player 4, female, 24); *"I love customizing my game avatar*

in all sorts of ways. I always choose something I don't find in my reality, and this sometimes implies the avatar's gender. I often waste a lot of time creating the avatar, and don't feel like actually playing." (Player 5, female, 25)

Players are more biased when it comes to avatar creation; their mixed responses show that they can take advantage of opportunities from the opposite sex but are also less interested in how their avatar is perceived.

"A female avatar gives you many advantages because you get help from all parts. I did an experiment and I saw players treating me differently when I play a female avatar. I played exactly like I always do, I've just made my avatar more appealing to males." (Player 9, male, 27); *"If you play with a female avatar and know what most players want, you know how to approach them, odds are high you'll get free in-game stuff. Sometimes I pass these things over to other friend players."* (Player 8, male, 19); *"People tend to treat you differently when you have a female avatar. But I think this is the charm, you get to be in girls' shoes and probably see how misogynistic some boys can be."* (Player 7, male, 25)

One of the players deems it an advantage to be able to experiment with the avatar. The goal is not necessarily to achieve something, but to interact with different features of a female avatar. This would not be easy to achieve in real life: *"It allows me to play with different parts of my character, which are not easy to experience in real life"* (Player 10, male, 20).

For a player, opting for a female avatar is more a visual preference and has nothing to do with strategy or a hidden agenda: *"I usually don't invest a lot in my game avatar, if I have an opposite-gender avatar is because I like their looks when moving within the game. It's strictly a visual preference and has nothing to do with game tactics or other aspects"* (Player 6, male, 20).

In terms of avatar design, perspectives are more clearly defined; on the one hand, female players feel it is an edge to have a male avatar to avoid unwanted behaviors from male players. Moreover, they can create a virtual

identity completely contrary to reality. Therefore, their male avatars are taken seriously by other players. On the other hand, men have discovered the edge of adopting female avatars; it can bring benefits in the form of gifts or useful in-game items. Therefore, some men opt for female avatars, when being profit-oriented and willing to resort to any methods to succeed, even gender-swapping.

d. Player progress

In terms of the relationship between avatar gender and game level increase, female players' perspectives were not clearly defined. Some claim not seeing a significant influence of gender on level performance, but that of good gameplay techniques and skills.

> *"I haven't tried to compare the two genders. As I only use make avatars, no one messes with me, and I mind my own business. I've observed that avatar gender does not especially influence advancing through levels."* (Player 3, female, 19); *"I do not think that avatar gender significantly contributes to level progress, but rather game technique and the game itself. Some games are designed to pass quickly through all missions, and you can't realize which factors led you to success"* (Player 2, female, 20).

Other players noticed advantages of female avatars; however, they have not actually tested gender differences in this regard:

> *"Even if when I have a female avatar I'm bothered by gamers' behavior towards me, there is an edge, that of receiving things that I need in the game and sometimes I don't have to buy them. I have not tested yet the same game with two opposite gender avatars, but I can say that I get faster to the top with a female avatar."* (Player 1, female, 18); *"I sort of have better luck when I have a*

female avatar, because I manage to win battles easier. Now there are many heroines in movies, books, or games, and probably it's just in my head. But it makes me feel good that not only boys play well, and I am not judged that harshly if I made a mistake" (Player 5, female, 25).

One player's goal is not necessarily to level up, but she emphasized that female players have more options in terms of appearance when designing the avatar. Still, this does not contribute to in-game progress: *"I don't think I've ever thought about it, because my goal is not necessarily to move through levels. What I've noticed is that when you create a female avatar, you have more options about looks, but I don't think it would influence level progression"* (Player 4, female, 24).

Most players expressed their views about gender not impacting upon level progression. Moreover, other aspects such as team play, accumulated knowledge, and experience are vital factors to reach an advanced level:

> *"I don't think avatar gender influences game level. What matters more is technique and whether you have the necessary knowledge to move through missions. There are other factors determining how far you can reach."* (Player 7, male, 25); *"It is more likely team play that helps you advance. Yes, you have solo missions where you don't need help from others, but also group games where every skill is welcome. I've played with both avatar genders, and I haven't noticed and difference."* (Player 9, male, 27); *"I can't say that I agree with the statement, although I've seen some advantages to having a female avatar. I've mentioned before that the odds to get free stuff and gifts from other players are rather high, but you have no guarantee that those skills or things are needed to advance"* (Player 8, male, 19).

One player added that a female avatar only holds a visual impact upon other players and gameplay. Also, what matters is how the game was designed by the developer. If designed as difficult to reach a high level,

gender cannot alleviate this. In addition, being the best player in a lesser game is not a top priority.

> *"I think that a female avatar strictly influences players visually. I've created a female avatar that I like, and it hasn't helped me to grow. I like how it moves through the game, but that doesn't mean that I'd play better if I created a male avatar."* (Player 6, male, 20); *"It matters a lot how the game was created. Regardless of the avatar, it is not always easy to move to the next level and get points. And you can play well and rank in top 10 at a game that is not so popular, but it won't matter to anyone"* (Player 10, male, 20).

In terms of avatar gender and its influence of game progress, participants did not observe significant changes, regardless of gender. Having a female avatar does not guarantee a higher level, but other factors such as game technique and experience and determination to reach a high score.

Survey

The online questionnaire consisted of four parts: general information about MMORPG playing habits, gaming habits and preferences, more detailed data on MMORPG use and views on gender-swapping, as well as socio-demographic data. Of the 243 respondents, nearly 1 in 4 (24.6%) were female, and 75.4% were male. In terms of age distribution, most respondents fall within the 20-24 years old group (37.5%), closely followed by the 25-29 years old segment (33.9%). The age category 15-19 made up 18% of our population, and 31+ years old made up nearly 10%. Regarding occupation, about 38% of subjects were still in school, 44% university students, and 18% were employed in IT or customer service. In terms of their hobbies, most respondents named videogames, followed by sports, and walking outdoors; other subjects picked movies or series, music, or reading, and less popular choices included anime, travel, cooking, photography, illusionism, and dancing.

a. Habits of MMORPG players

Most respondents (58.7%) asserted they enjoyed playing role-playing games. The other 41.3% stated not having tried them; these respondents justified their answers diversely, arguing that younger players do not follow the rules of role-playing, that they prefer games where interaction is not mandatory, or that dynamic games seem more interesting.

In what concerns the frequency of gaming, over half (52.9%) of subjects play MMORPG daily, 19.6% only play 3 to 5 times a week, even less subjects play once or twice a week (13.7%) or once or twice a month (11.8%), and only 2% engage in this activity about once a year. These results show that subjects play these games regularly, which enables us to generate a gamer's profile based on the results.

b. Gaming habits and preferences

In terms of platforms used for role-playing games, most respondents (65.2%) use a gaming computer, followed by laptops (47.8%), gaming consoles (37%), and smartphones (34.8%). Among MMORPG players, nearly ¾ have user accounts on the Steam distribution platform, half have accounts on Xbox Live, and around one third are subscribed to Playstation Network. About subscriptions to specific game streaming channels on YouTube and Twitch, the most frequently mentioned gaming channels were PewDiePie, SovietWomble, Shroud, Videogamedunkey, GameGrumps, JackFrags, and Creative Monkeyz. Moreover, respondents also declared preferences for other types of games besides MMORPGs, such as adventure action style games (such as GTA, Assassin's Creed), or shooter games (like CS: Go, Battlefield), or racing games (Need for Speed).

Asked to rate the importance of game features such as gameplay, narrative, user interface, audio/ music, and level of customization, nearly half consider gameplay to be essential, followed by narrative, and graphics. Moreover, nearly 1 in 3 respondents deem user interface, artificial intelligence, and music to be important. The level of customization, however, was deemed important by only 1 in 4 gamers.

c. MMORPG use and gender-swapping

Aiming to map reasons for playing MMORPG games, respondents mostly named relaxation, boredom, and the ability to play with friends or acquaintances. Very few respondents considered this type of game useful in problem-solving or improving memory. Moreover, the most popular MMORPG games among respondents were World of Warcraft, Guild Wars 2, and The Elder Scrolls. Games such as Tera, Black Desert, Final Fantasy XIV, Eve, Blade and Soul, or RuneScape were less frequent among choices.

At the very beginning of a MMORPG, players must choose game roles for their avatars; there are several available roles, but the three categories relevant here are tank, healer, and damage dealer. Tanks deal damage to the party and protect others from attacks, and usually have good health and armor. Healers nurture others when injured, to keep players alive and tank enemies. Damage dealers eliminate the monsters (Tregel et al., 2017). These descriptions may sound somewhat simplistic, but it takes skill and know-how to deal damage without destroying the armor or causing the monsters to attack back. Among the subjects of this study, 83.8% prefer to play damage dealer roles, followed by a 76.8% preference to play tanks, and a 70.4% preference for a healing role (see *Figure 1*).
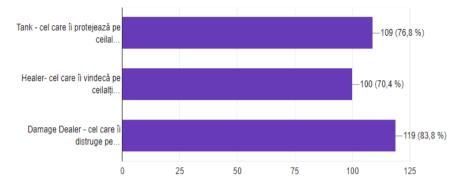
Figure 1. Classification of avatar roles among MMORPG players

What is more, nearly ¾ of gamers in this study prefer to play with friends, whereas the others prefer to play alone.

For evaluating views on gender-swapping, a scale of six statements was employed. In terms of their preference for creating avatars of the opposite sex, 56% of respondents gave a neutral answer. About game tactics being changed to match avatar gender, most responses varied between outright disapproval and neutral attitudes. In what concerns relying on gender stereotypes for communication when adopting an avatar of the opposite gender, nearly half of the respondents disagreed, while the other half remained neutral; no subject fully agreed on the topic. The following statement focused on relying on appearance stereotypes when adopting an avatar of the opposite gender, and the answers were nearly evenly divided between disagreement and neutrality. The last two statements asked participants to rate the success of their games in terms of gender, and most subjects disapproved of either avatar gender providing a higher level of gameplay than the other.

Based on the survey results, we argue that answers were significantly less nuanced than those provided by the focus groups, and it is likely that respondents provided desirable answers to the gender-related questions.

Also based on these findings, we can draft a profile for female and male MMORPG players in Romania.

The Romanian gamer's profile

Thus, the typical Romanian female gamer is a young woman aged between 20 and 24 years old, who holds a steady job or is studying at the university. Besides playing videogames, the female Romanian gamer enjoys reading, traveling, and watching movies. She usually plays games about 2 to 5 times a week on her computer or laptop and has a Steam member account. She is not interested in game streaming accounts, but also likes racing, simulation, and strategy games besides MMORPGs. In the latter, she deems gameplay, narrative, graphics, and the level of customization to be important, and she likes to play out of curiosity, social aspects, relaxation, out of boredom, or due to her ability to multitask. The Romanian female gamer likes World of Warcraft, Eve Online, and Guild Wars, and oscillates between tank and healer, showing her orientation towards helping or supporting. She plays with friends in guilds or by herself, and when creating an avatar, she usually chooses male avatars, but maintains her tactics. She also communicates consistently and does not use gender stereotypes, nor does she think gender can affect in-game level progress.

The typical Romanian male gamer is a young man aged between 20 and 29 who holds a steady job or studies in a university. Besides games, he enjoys sports, musical instruments, fishing, or taking walks in nature. He plays videogames daily, on his computer, laptop, or game console, and has a Steam member account. He is interested in game streaming accounts and subscribes to several gaming channels, and prefers action/ adventure style, racing, or shooting games besides MMORPGs. In the latter, he considers all

aspects to be equally important, and he plays out of boredom, for multitasking, curiosity, relaxation, as well as to socialize. His favorite games include World of Warcraft, Guild Wars, Tera, and the Elder Scrolls. He usually varies between tank and damage dealers, as he enjoys eliminating monsters and helping other teammates. The Romanian player likes to play with friends and colleagues, and when creating an avatar, he usually chooses the same gender, but also considers switching his virtual gender. He tends to change game tactics when adopting a female avatar and does not have a clearly defined perspective on using stereotypes. He does not believe that gender can affect in-game level advancement either.

Discussion and conclusions

This research aimed to investigate gender-related differences among MMORPG players. Through focus groups and a survey, the Romanian gamers' profile was studied to analyze how and in what ways preferences and habits of male and female players are different, and how they perceive gender-swapping and its influence upon game performance. Although the subject samples were convenient and not large enough to clearly assess the hypotheses, there are still results that are relevant and need to be discussed. In what concerns RQ1 and the associated hypotheses, our results showed that men were indeed more likely than women to play MMORPG games, yet the difference in usage were not vast, and we can argue that these numbers will continuously change as more and more women engage in this activity. H2 concerning stereotypes could not be confirmed, as neither approach showed that female gamers were only interested in the narrative part of the game. Similarly to their male counterparts, they have certain expectations

from these games in terms of gameplay and design. While narrative is important to some users, it is not considered so by a vast or representative majority. Male users tend to notice positive aspects, they know how to leverage virtual identities to their benefit, even if it entails changing their virtual gender. They admitted that their winning strategies implied gender-swapping, yet this finding cannot be generalized either. The choice for an avatar of the opposite gender may also be based on visual preference or desire to experiment.

Results for H4 and H5 show that men are focused on winning and improving their performance when playing a MMORPG, yet female players display the same interest. Both genders acknowledged that playing with friends and acquaintances involves a deeper level of interactions; on the other hand, these games inevitably enable interaction with other users, this feature is inherent to massively multiplayer games of this sort. H6 discussing visual pleasure as a reason for men's choice for female avatars was invalidated by results showing a variety of other reasons. No clear answer can be offered in the case of H7, but a cause-and-effect relation between an avatar's gender and in-game advancement cannot be established in this study, as results show that progress is conditioned by hard work, techniques, game skills.

As any such endeavor, this research work has various sources of error and limitations, as it also reveals opportunities for further investigations. The sample used in the survey study is not a probabilistic, representative one, but it did allow us to design a profile based on the results. As the pool of female videogame users is expanding, future studies should focus on executives in the gaming industry and its gender dimensions.

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