

Queer Youth Communities and Online Gender Performance

by danah boyd

If you will practice being fictional for a while, you will understand that fictional characters are sometimes more real than people with bodies and heartbeats. (Bach, p. 135)

Introduction

When I was 14 years old, my brother paid a company called Prodigy to have his computer connected to other computers through the phone line; I thought that this was an absurd waste of money. My brother already spent every waking hour fiddling with his computer, installing software and making the software do different things for him; I saw no purpose in these activities. Then, one night, I walked in to his room and asked what he was doing and he told me that he was talking with someone from another country about a problem he was having on the computer. Suddenly, that big pile of metal and wires piqued my interest. Shortly later, I gave up on my penpals and started talking to a people through the computer, realizing the potential.

It didn't take long until I was online during every waking hour, as well as most of the hours that I pretended to be asleep. I was not interested in programming, but I was intrigued by the community that existed between the wires. It was how I learned that I was not the only geek trapped in a backward town. I found people that understood my sexual desires, understood why I loved learning, people who understood where I came from. I was able create male identities and interact with people using them. I was able to live out fantasy characters and behave as I imagined I would, given different circumstances. I believed that the online world gave disenfranchised individuals an opportunity to survive.

Now, four years after consciously¹ leaving the cybercommunities that I attribute to my sanity in high school, I have decided to re-explore those communities and find where the next generation of disenfranchised youth goes to find happiness. In particular, I am interested in exploring how the online world affects ones identity and image of himself.

Goal

This paper serves to give an overview of what is known about gender performance online, with a specific focus on how it applies to queer youth. Much to my dismay, most research indicates that in its current state, online communities only server to deepen the differences perceived about the two socially constructed genders. By examining what communities exist and what research exists about gender performance in these communities, I am hoping to develop an understanding with which to work on breaking down the reproduced social constructions.

Identity and methodology check

In order to write this paper, I spent approximately 2 hours a day throughout the month of October online, surfing the Internet for signs of queer life. I followed links to a variety of queer youth related websites, including sites belonging to queer teens and online resources for queer youth. I subscribed to approximately 20 eGroups mailing lists, 15 MSN community groups and about 40 different chatrooms/MOOs/MUDs/IRC channels. I explored approximately 20 different Usenet newsgroups and contacted individuals directly using AIM, ICQ and PlanetOut's chat interface. I posted a request for queer youth to many of these spaces and talked with 14 queer teens in depth via email. I also spoke with the webmasters of two large sites dedicated to helping queer youth. In total, I probably talked with over 100 unique individuals, mostly queer women between the reported ages of 14 and 23. The methodology of these conversations was sporadic and mostly intended to get an understanding of what social spaces are currently like for queer youth. Most of my chatroom participation occurred between the hours of 11PM and 3AM, hours where older teens and college students appear online to converse/procrastinate.

Throughout my conversations, I presented myself as a 22-year-old queer grll researcher, using the handle 'zedyke'. I did not post my picture to any of the sites and I used an email alias that I created for this project. When asked, I gave real life identity information and in two incidents ended up 'sitting down' with two queer girls

¹ In 1996, I was forced to leave the online communities after a late night of IRC conversation resurrected my carpal tunnel and left me unable to grasp my fingers together for over a month.

who were having extreme identity issues. In both of these situations, I acted as a counselor and gave both girls my RL email address. Although propositioned, I never engaged in cybersex under this identity.

In addition to the conversations, I did some basic numerical analysis of the most easily available social dataset – Usenet.

Why queer and disenfranchised youth?

Although it appears as though most Americans are online today, their reasons and what they get out of being online differ tremendously. Queer and disenfranchised youth represent a section of the population who have the potential to dramatically benefit from the online world. Unlike most sections of the population, this section of youth frequently doesn't know anyone like them in real life (RL). They are the loners and the outcasts. Finding an appropriate RL community is difficult, if not impossible, for most of them since they tend to come from unsupportive communities or rural sections of the US. Queer youth who come from cities tend to have a larger support network and are often more equipped to handle the coming out process. The result of disenfranchisement is traumatic, if not deadly.

Disenfranchised youth: on suicide, murder and the Internet

Although it is heavily debated (LaBarbera, 1994), research suggests that LGBT youth represent 30% of all teen suicides (Remafedi, 1991) and are 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight peers (Gibson, 1989). Not surprisingly, most youth suicide attempts come students who are the outcasts of their class and queer kids rarely fit in to the social structure of high school. Why do LGBT youth kill themselves? None of the reasons should be shocking. Poor self esteem, isolation and harassment are considered to be the leading causes (Bayker, 1999).

On the other end of the spectrum, the Columbine killings² made many aware of the actions that some youth take in response to their feelings of not belonging. In "Voices from the Hellmouth" and the well-received follow-ups, Jon Katz documented the stories of thousands of disenfranchised youth, usually geeks, sometimes queer, whose empathy with the two young Columbine killers gave schools the ability to expel the students and gave the parents a reason to pull the plug on kids' access to the Internet (Katz, 1999). While Katz was reporting on how disenfranchised youth were affected by Columbine, the mass media focused on violent video games and the Internet as the primary causes; Congress sanctioned the placement of the Ten Commandments in schools as their solution.

While Columbine and other murders committed by disenfranchised youth indicate the pain that these youth feel, suicide is a much more common action than violence. As Kate Bornstein explains, "Kids at this age are usually not killing the freaks, but they definitely know how to make the freaks kill themselves" (Bornstein, 2000).

Disenfranchised youth are taking leading roles in suicides and murders and the public is focusing on the violence in media and lack of religion as the primary causes, all the while trying to eliminate one of the few safe spaces that these youth have found – the Internet.

Why is the Internet a safe space?

Many queer people, in particular youth, feel as though the Internet gives them the opportunity to be themselves, when that true self is in danger in real life. Most queer youth that I spoke with openly discussed that one of the advantages of being online is that they could safely explore their identity. Although most of them felt they were portraying themselves accurately in chatrooms, they felt that they were not constrained by what people thought of them based purely on pictures, although quite a few of them put their picture online. Their responses were equivalent to expressing that 1) they were given a fresh start online and 2) they were allowed to express themselves more accurately.

In addition, for the youth from areas where there are not a lot of people like them, the Internet allows them to meet others and to feel less alone. While the Internet allows for people to meet each other regardless of physical geography, many use it to meet neighbors. Many of the youth that I spoke with enjoyed the opportunity to meet potential lovers and friends. I was humored to learn that various forms of the classic question age?sex?location? is still alive and popular.

² On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold entered Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado and shot at a wide variety of students that they felt had treated them poorly, focusing on 'jocks' and the popular kids. They killed 12 students, 1 teacher and themselves. They wounded over 180 students.

What types of communities exist?³

Before we can analyze the types of conversations that happen online, it's important to know what types of communities exist and how they are used. There is quite a variety in the style and intention of the various types of online communities. The following are some of the more popular types, with an emphasis on how they might impact queer youth.

With few exceptions, most communities converse through text. Some are graphical and it is not uncommon for people to pass images to one another, but it is very rare for people to use their voice to communicate through the network.

Asynchronous communities

Asynchronous communities allow users to post messages to the forum where other users can read at their leisure. Sometimes the messages created by the community are archived and stored for an extended period of time. This is typically true of pull communities such as Usenet and Message Boards. Push communities that are based on email such as mailing lists are less frequently archived.

Usenet

Usenet is one of the oldest communities online, created in 1979 at Duke University. Usenet consists of thousands of differing newsgroups, ranging in topics. A user connects to a NNTP server with hir browser (i.e., graphical - Netscape News, textual - tin). S/he then sees a list of newsgroups, organized partially by their subject and basic organizational hierarchies (i.e., 'alt' for alternative topics, 'rec' for recreational topics, etc.). Using traditional browsers, the user selects a newsgroup and then views lists of subjects of current threads. A user can either post a response to a current thread or start a new thread.

Since most of the newsgroups are unmoderated, anyone can post any message to any group. In moderated groups, the moderator reads the message before it is posted. Aside from advertisers and porn peddlers, most people tend to post topics that are of interest to the members of that community. For example, queer groups will get into discussion about the US presidential election, but usually as it relates to being queer.

Queer newsgroups range in topic and purpose from 'soc.support.youth.gay-lesbian-bi', a moderated newsgroup dedicated to giving support to queer youth to 'alt.homosexual.lesbian' which primarily consists of advertisements of lesbian porn directed at straight men. When I first got involved with Usenet in 1993, many of these communities were involved with support and emotional discussions about being queer. Although many more people have since joined the Internet, it appears as though these groups have suffered from the plethora of junk. As a result, they are no longer thriving communities, or at least not in the way they were originally.

While numbers don't clearly represent the style of the group, they give a basic understanding of some of the differences. Below is a numerical representation⁴ of a large subsection number of the common English-speaking queer groups (mostly lesbian/bi/trans) whose purpose is supposed to be discussion, not sharing pictures or porn. This is a representation of the month of October, with each group's number of posts, number of threads, average thread length, maximum thread length, average size of post in lines, max size of post in lines, number of unique people, average post per person, and maximum post per person.

Newsgroup name	#posts	#threads	avg thr	max thr	avg size	max size	# peop	avg ppp	max ppp
alt.homosexual.lesbian	190	181	1.0497	2	43	1443	117	1.6239	25
alt.lesbian.feminist.poetry	33	30	1.1	2	52	301	28	1.1786	4
alt.politics.homosexuality	1374	272	5.0515	11	48	952	308	4.461	120
alt.religion.gay-les-bi-tran	107	56	1.9107	4	61	348	41	2.6098	17
alt.sex.trans	325	262	1.2405	2	40	1266	153	2.1242	25
alt.support.intergendered	42	7	6	1	31	86	10	4.2	7
alt.teens.lesbian	64	44	1.4545	5	16	194	50	1.28	5
alt.transgendered	173	124	1.3952	3	49	973	115	1.5043	11
aus.culture.lesbigay	120	109	1.1009	2	19	248	101	1.1881	7
soc.support.youth.gay-lesbian-bi	361	102	3.5392	14	56	490	117	3.0855	24
soc.women.lesbian-and-bi	170	28	6.0714	6	34	439	70	2.4286	14
uk.gay-lesbian-bi	865	55	15.7273	8	25	945	125	6.92	60

³ As part of her Ph.D. generals, Karrie Karahalios presents an in-depth discussion of what types of online communities are available; her work motivates this section. This information is available at: [<http://www.media.mit.edu/~kkarahal/generals/communication/>].

⁴ The data was collected by Jonathan Goler and danah boyd as a part of the Loom2 Usenet Project. The numbers represent data collected from Oct. 1-Nov. 1, 2000.

Looking at the aforementioned groups, we can see that 'soc.support.youth.gay-lesbian-bi' has a much larger average thread length than 'alt.homosexual.lesbian' indicating that people have a tendency to respond to the original posts, as though a discussion is forming. Also, the average post per person is higher, indicating that those who are a part of the community keep coming back to participate.

Unfortunately, even this basic information that indicates whether or not a community is active and alive does not exist on the current browsers. The primary information one can get from a browser is how many posts are in a given group. After that, s/he must start exploring the newsgroup to get a feel for what kind of community exists. In addition, since anyone can post to these groups, there is often spam and junk information, making it difficult to wade through the garbage to get to the jewels of the community. The advantages of moderated newsgroups have been so strong that more commonly moderated communities such as archived mailing lists have taken over Usenet as a primary asynchronous tool.

Mailing lists

A mailing list is an email address that redirects to a wider list of other email addresses. Some of the mailing lists have moderated subscription rules; some moderate all mail sent to the group.

In the early days of online communities, mailing lists were difficult to create (you needed access to your own server), annoying to maintain and challenging to archive. As a result, they were used primarily for company related groups. Over the years, and particularly thanks to eGroups.com, creating and maintaining a mailing list is trivial. The eGroups system allows any user to create a mailing list for whatever purpose. As a result, individuals and groups with little digital power are able to create a forum to talk about important issues. Before eGroups merger with Yahoo! in May 2000, their press releases indicated that they had over 600,000 separate mailing lists. Combined with the personal server mailing lists, the company mailing lists, and mailing lists created by various popular sites (such as MSN), it is not unreasonable to say that there are millions of mailing lists that connect people via their email.

eGroups has allowed for a much larger variety of discussions than the <100 Usenet groups dedicated to queer issues. Certainly, there are groups dedicated to passing porn around, but there are also groups for gay male escorts seeking clients, for gays & lesbians with fetishes, for craftmakers who are gay and for gays & lesbians who are a part of Big Rig trucker culture. Queries for the following topics show the magnitude of groups:

Query request	# of groups
'gay'	8568
'lesbian'	2345
'queer'	398
'transgender'	375
'homosexual'	206
'transsexual'	100

There is no easy way to find an appropriate group, except by searching for desired topics. Gay groups also appear to range in size, from less than 5 members to well over 17,000. Since the groups are proprietary and I can only see groups where the moderators have allowed them into public directories, it is difficult to truly know what magnitude of communities actually exist.

The major advantage of current mailing lists is that they are free from spam, and frequently archived (most eGroups are). Often, you can get digests or read the messages online only. Some groups have moderated subscription and/or moderated posting; others are open. Some groups are publicly announced or the archive is publicly accessible; others aren't. You have an idea of how many people are lurking because as a member in a group, you can usually see the other members. In many ways, the current versions of mailing lists have replaced Usenet because of their simplicity and the ability to have more control over what types of communities you participate in.

Web forums / message boards

Web forums and message boards are posting systems that are site-specific and presented in a wide variety of manners. They have really come about with the emergence of the WWW. Their threading structure and layout is usually quite similar to the older newsgroups. The site's webmaster controls them and users read them by going to the specific website that hosts the forum. PlanetOut runs over 120 message boards, all dedicated to queer topics, ranging in topics from "My Top Ten Movies" to "Anti-Violence" to "Out at Work."

Synchronous communities

Synchronous communities allow for situations where multiple people are online at the same time and communicating through electronically mediated tools. They may see identical or different versions of the conversations, but they are conversing live.

Chatrooms, IRC, talk

Chat environments such as Prodigy & AOL's chatrooms, IRC, and UNIX talk were early spaces where people would come together to meet others. Usually, a user would log into a chat space with a title that interested hir. AOL, Prodigy and Internet Relay Chat (IRC) gave a central location to find a wide variety of chatrooms to choose from. Once signed on, the user could post messages that would either be printed to the other screens as each character was typed (such as in talk) or once a thought was finished and 'sent' (such as in IRC and most chatrooms).

Today, in addition to all of the traditional textual chat, there are also quite a few graphical chat environments (such as ChatCircles [chatcircles.media.mit.edu], the Palace [thepalace.com] and Comic Chat

[www.research.microsoft.com/SIGGRAPH96/96/ComicChat.htm]). In these, an individual chooses an avatar to represent them, either an image or an artistic representation. Also, while most groups used to be on a few servers, today's chatrooms are spread across the Internet, most frequently based off of all different websites. A very queer friendly series of text chatrooms is available at PlanetOut.

Chatrooms were (and still are) an ideal place for queer individuals to meet people to talk with. Unfortunately, from what various queer youth that I met online tell me, finding a good queer-friendly chatroom is rather challenging (this did use to be the case). One reason I believe this is true is because the original people online were educated geeks and college kids, a community that is typically more accepting than the general population. Today, everyone is online and thus, I am guessing that the ratio of homophobic to queer-friendly has gone up dramatically.

Most queer youth that I encountered have a few groups that they regularly attend. Often, kids find someone that's cool elsewhere and then invite him to participate in a members-only group, where they build up friends of friends. This creates a sort of protection from the general homophobia online.

MUDs & MOOs

A MUD is a multi-user dungeon/domain and a MOO is a MUD object oriented. These are chatrooms that have spatial mappings in them. Many MUDs are text-based, meaning that all physical objects are described using text. These communities evolved from the RL role-playing community, and thus most people involved spend a great deal of time constructing a character that may or may not represent their real character and maneuvering this character through the space. In addition to being able to describe your character, a user is able to manipulate elements of the space. MOOs made this attribute more accessible. One of the most popular longstanding MOOs is LambdaMOO [<http://www.ccs.neu.edu/home/eostrom/muds/lambdamoo.html>], created by Pavel Curtis at XeroxParc in 1990. MUDs and MOOs allow users to explore their personalities through developed characters that need not match the actual RL person. Unfortunately, while they were popular amongst geeks (primarily college students), they never caught on as a primary interaction tool as millions of users became digital.

Regardless of their current popularity, MUDs and MOOs give a unique perspective to digital culture. One of the most interesting scenarios created was an event in the LambdaMOO, usually titled "A Rape in Cyberspace" where a user took control of other characters and made them engage in acts that they had no control of. The community response to this 'rape' was intense and they eventually decided to 'murder' the 'rapist' [http://www.levity.com/julian/bungle_vv.html].

Instant Messaging

Instant messaging has become the most popular community tool, particularly amongst youth. As ethnographer Genevieve Bell of Intel observed, one of the first things that all teens in the households she studied did when they came home was log on, turn on AOL's Instant Messenger or ICQ and begin chatting with their friends from school, while checking the email that accrued while they were away. Instant messaging services such as AIM, ICQ and the more traditional zephyr allow users to connect to another individual directly. It is a form of instant chat, where there is no room that the people have to meet in. In addition, most instant messaging tools allow the users to create buddy lists so that they know when friends are online. The teens that I spoke with said it's not uncommon to have 100+ people on one's buddy list. In addition, many teens said they had different lists for when they wanted to talk with strangers versus when they wanted to talk to their close friends. Both AIM and ICQ allow users to create profiles and search other people's profiles, allowing individuals to meet other individuals for chatting.

Unfortunately, finding queer individuals in this medium is quite difficult. You can search for individuals based on age, sex and location (the class trio), but not on sexual preference. Also, individuals who emphasize their sexual preference make you wonder about reality. For example, one user put the following in his ICQ description: "i am a lesbian girls, like to talk and trade pics with only & only female. no guy please; only tlak with so pretty girls.** for this purpose you must show me yourself***". Maybe I am a cynic, but I question the validity of said lesbian.

Gender Performance Online

Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or a locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts (Butler, p. 140).

Butler's view of gender as performance seems to suggest that the online world would be a perfect forum for people to explore their true gender. As the classic New Yorker comic suggests, in cyberspace, what is written on the body is not a hindrance to the gender one imagines for himself. The forums previously discussed allow individuals



"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."

to present themselves as they see fit, by revealing what they deem important. Since the individual constructs most information about himself, cyberspace should be the ideal place to explore one's identity. The online world should give people the opportunity to let go of gender characteristics that are written on the body, theoretically freeing them from much of RL categorizations. Assuming that gender is performance, shouldn't one be able to push the boundaries of his imagination online?

Gender Identity in MUDs

In *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle explores the details of gender and gender-swapping in MUDs. Because of its role-playing element, she believes that MUDs are the ideal space in which individuals can explore gender, particularly because it is so common and discussed. Characters in MUDs have a wide variety of reasons that they participate in online cross-dressing, including curiosity, safety, to work out issues related to one's own sex/gender, fetishized sexual interaction, and feelings of a true self. As one player puts it,

You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. Whatever. You can just be whoever you want, really, whoever you have the capacity to be. You don't have to worry about the slots other people put you in as much. It's easier to change the way people perceive you, because all they've got is what you show them. They don't look at your body and make assumptions. (Turkle, p. 140)

Since characters are entirely up to the player – “You are what you pretend to be... you are what you play” – MUDs afford individuals the opportunity to play roles outside of the physically possible (Turkle, p. 192). For example, one can play a neuter character, something not physically possible in real life. But is it actually possible online? One player suggests that it is just not that simple – “I also think the neuter characters [in MUDs] are good. When I play one, I realize how hard it is not to be either a man or a woman” (Turkle, p. 212). Gender does not just exist in reality; it exists in speech, manner, and interpretation of experience, making it difficult to give up. Even if there were not obvious characteristics to indicate a player's RL sex, the other players would be attempting to figure it out. As best illustrated in Saturday Night Live's Pat sketches, gender ambiguity brings our desire to categorize everyone into binary categories to the forefront of our mind. Kate Bornstein suggests that we ignore gender so long as everyone is playing by the socially ascribed roles given to them at birth. By creating neutral characters, players encourage the other players to figure out the true identity of the player.

If a MUD is a perfect place to explore identity because a player is constantly role-playing, why is it so difficult to maintain an ungendered image?

Gender Identity in Chatrooms

Unlike MUDs, character creation is not a primary goal of most individuals in chatrooms. Instead, most people are seeking to meet others based on the assumption that what they are presenting is (mostly) accurate. For this reason, members are frequently upset and disturbed when they learn that online acquaintances are presenting false information regarding their identity.

In one well-reported case, a male psychologist presented himself as a disabled female psychologist named Joan on a CompuServe chatroom in the late 1980s. His logic was that, by being a female character, he could better understand the female psyche through his interactions with other women, who are notorious for trusting women over men. He became more and more involved in his character (and more and more absorbed in the chatroom). He also brought on board a character closer to his identity, named Alex, who was a good friend of Joan's. His male persona had a much harder time getting involved in the community, but eventually began to know people because of the strong friendships that Joan had with members of the community. Eventually, as it was becoming more difficult to fake the Joan character because people wanted to meet her, the psychologist tried to kill Joan, but the response from the community was so strong that he couldn't go through with it. Eventually, the inconsistencies in his story, and the fact that no one had met Joan made people wonder and eventually, the truth came out. The original response was shock and outrage. Eventually, people tried to get to know the male persona since they had adored Joan so much, but they had difficulty relating to him (Van Gelder, Stone).

For trans individuals, online gender performance allows them the opportunity to portray their gender as they perceive it, rather than as constructed by surgeons and hormones. In early 1995, I met my first transsexual online, a male-to-female living somewhere in the Midwest, named “Kathy”. She was the first person who truly made me think about gender as performance. Kathy let me ask her anything I wanted, about her surgeries, about how she lived and who she slept with. I met her in an IRC chatroom and I think she spotted me as a

queer kid in confusion. Our long conversations in email and IRC turned me into a transactivist early on. I never met Kathy, but I am guessing that, like most older MtFs, she never completely passed in RL. She always told me that the online world allowed her the opportunity to present herself in the way that even surgery hadn't succeeded, as a passable woman. She was able to have sexual interactions (cybersex) with straight men without being questioned. As is very common for MtFs (even in RL), Kathy presented herself as ultra-feminine. Yet, unlike men who were trying to be women online, Kathy knew a great deal about how to *be* female, or at least how to be the stereotype of female. In her experience, most people read her online presence as female, unless she was in a queer space where she was usually spotted as a transsexual.

Kathy's experience raises the question of what is fact and what is fiction? Kate Bornstein asks "What is a real male? What is a real female?" Since the binary exists online, what makes one passable?

What does cross-dressing mean?

Although there are pre-op and post-op transsexuals who are trying to feel more accepted as a woman by going online, there are far more self-described men who go online as female characters. Online females get a lot of attention by both the men and the other women in the space, partially because there are rarely as many women as men in an online environment. For many men, this attention is intriguing and a good reason to try out a female character. If men as women are looking for cybersex with other men, they usually have little difficulty finding it. In addition, young questioning gay men are often more comfortable engaging in sexual play with men as females than as a gay man.

While men may be interested in understanding the attention achieved by being a woman, Shaviro suggests that most straight men portray themselves as women to have a better chance with RL women.

Most straight men are assholes, and the mere opportunity for expanded gender play on the Net doesn't do anything to change that. A successful drag performance is harder to pull off than you think. Straight guys often pretend to be girls on the Net-- I've done it often myself-- thinking that the disguise will make it easier to score with 'actual' girls. But what goes around comes around: the girls these guys meet usually turn out to be other guys in virtual disguise. Face it, the information of which most straight men are composed is monotonously self-referential: it just turns round and round forever in the selfsame loop. (Shaviro)

For many men, an attempt at lesbianism is highly erotic; many men will go online as women and attempt to seduce other women. In high school, I greatly enjoyed watching my male friends go online for lesbian sex. They would fax or ftp images back and forth of their bodies or their 'tits'. The images sent and received were usually from pornographic magazines that presented women in the male-fantasy form. Their language was stereotypically male pretending to be female, as was that of their cybersex partner. The fantasy image of a lesbian was the erotic dream that they were attempting to live out, not the reality. As a result, I supposed that most of the 'lesbians' that my male friends were meeting were just like them: men pretending to be lesbians. I remember pointing out to one of my friends that he was probably having cybersex with another guy pretending to be a woman. He refused to believe me and actually asked, "Why would any guy pretend to be a lesbian?" I almost died of laughter.

Although sex and curiosity seem to be overwhelmingly popular reason for men to cross-dress, McRae suggests that many men cross-dress online as a "peculiarly '90s form of macho bravado, perhaps simply to see if they can succeed, to be better women than women" (McRae, 1995).

Women, on the other hand, often cross-dress in order to avoid the attention that they receive online as a female. They do so to be taken seriously or to see the differences in how people interact with them (O'Brien, 1999). Although some women may cross-dress for sexual purposes, it is not nearly as common as to be given social status.

The reasons why individuals cross dress online seem to indicate that the same social sex-typed hierarchies exist in the virtual world as do in RL. It even appears as though some of these social mores are magnified, forcing even stronger gender types than exist in RL.

Engaging in Queer Performance

Although RL queer individuals make up only a fraction of those who explore gender online, the need for this exploration is often stronger and more crucial for the individual. The ability to write her own gender gives Kathy the ability to break out of the constrictions of her physical body and present herself as she envisions herself.

In RL, there are serious consequences to not fitting into a gender norm that matches one's biological sex. O'Brien suggests that the online world gives queers tools with which they can explore identity safely.

For queers, the line between fact/fiction remains blurred among those who are continually writing themselves --in this case, writing the relationship between the experiences of the body and the (non) possibilities for self in a culture that denies the authenticity of these experiences. Whether enacted in RL or online, queer sexuality is rooted in and reflects the dialectic between existing cultural forms (as understood by the individual mind) and the desires of the body. ... Being queer is about desires that cannot be channeled through conventional scripts for self and body, whatever the bandwidth. ... Queer expression involves attempts to give form to otherwise unformed proclivities. The lines between authenticity/multiplicity, fact/fiction collapse. Change occurs at the margins, across spaces in which there are no conventional names for very physical and emotive experiences. When are our experiences likely to draw us beyond the boundaries of our own preconceptions? As queers, the dynamics of online interaction may not be different than non-queers, but it is possible that we will bring to the encounters a repertoire stretching customary boundaries. (O'Brien, 1996)

If the online world affords queer individuals the opportunity to explore other identities, why are queers mimicking the social mores that oppress them in RL by becoming the cultural ideals of beauty in their online identity? Ideally, the queer perspective would stretch the customary boundaries, but instead it appears as though the reverse is happening.

Can one pass?

Although the online world (and most notably MUDs) allow users to theoretically construct neutral characters, doing so rarely allows the user to actually maneuver through the online world without the impact of gender. In fact, as was mentioned earlier, a neutral character only encourages other people to figure out the identity behind the virtual mask. O'Brien suggests that even if a user is able to construct and maintain a genuinely neutral character, having meaningful interaction is practically impossible, since "categorization schemes provide scripts [for] interaction" (O'Brien, 1999). Because we rely on these scripts, most people are extremely uncomfortable when forced to interact with someone whose gender is unknown (Bruckman, 1993).

When individuals attempt to go online as a sex that they do not know, they usually present an extreme end of gendered performance. This is why it is not surprising that men pretending to be lesbians are likely to pick up other men pretending to be lesbians. While I would like to assume that only those attempting to cross-dress engage in extreme gender roles, it appears as though hyper-gendering is something that most people do. Since the goal for most individuals is to be socially accepted, they tend to construct an image that they perceive others would find appealing. As a result, everyone appears to be Cindy Crawford or Richard Gere (Katz, 1994).

Even though most people feel as though they can be their true selves online, the reality is that they are presenting themselves as the celebrity or popular individual they aspire to be. And in most cases, they are choosing to play one of the two socially accepted genders to the extreme form of culturally dominant beauty. Rather than moving beyond the social norms, it appears as though we duplicate them in cyberspace.

Youth and Gender

While most of the queer youth that I spoke with indicated that they don't switch genders online, it's likely that many of them express themselves as what they believe others want to see. Most often, their goal is to meet people and to feel accepted by finding a safe space, to get a fresh start in a place where people are welcoming. Although I doubt that most disenfranchised youth are attempting to construct a fake persona, I would bet that most are trying to overemphasize their good qualities and seem 'cooler' to the community they are participating in. This form of popularity is achieved through practice with an online space. It is not difficult to figure out what makes one popular in any given group. Unfortunately, as in any change of space, individuals do not actually reinvent themselves; instead, the baggage and personality of the user comes along to the new forum.

I wonder if the online world actually affords youth the opportunity to explore their self or if it only serves to emphasize the social norms that already exist. I look back to my early online days and I grimace at the realization that I, too, presented an ideal character, both in male and female form. As a female, I was attractive and smart, bubbly and popular. As a male, I was able to pick up women with ease and felt comfortable in sharing my knowledge with others as well as putting myself into situations where I learned from others. I always enjoyed playing a guy, particularly when I wanted to learn something, because I felt that I was more respected. In many ways, I probably was, because everyone was engaging in stereotypical gender roles, regardless of what games I thought I was playing.

A Conclusion

Unfortunately, in their current state, it seems as though the communities that are currently in existence only serve to magnify gender. While it would be ideal that queer and disenfranchised youth would find relief from the social hierarchy by going online, it appears as though that does not currently exist. And, even more unfortunate, most of the disenfranchised further the social norms by constructing their ideal character as a mirror of the images that oppress them.

While moderated forums and communities with a specific purpose are the best bet for queer youth to find people like them, they are still very likely to encounter extreme gender performance and socialized definitions of beauty.

Where to go from here

While working on this paper, I was able to start thinking about how online communities are constructed and how that construction affects people. I am particularly interested in one of the most disenfranchised groups – queer youth. Unfortunately, I feel as though I was barely able to touch the surface in understanding what issues exist for queer youth online. Instead, I have focused on giving a broad overview of what communities exist and what some of the issues that are going to impact the types of social interaction available. Ideally, I would like to continue this exploration so as to start to really understand how to make the online world a safe and appropriate place for queer youth to meet and work through their identities.

In particular, I believe that it is important to find a way of finding appropriate places for communication and interaction, based on the needs of the user. I also believe that some of the dynamics of interaction need to be analyzed and deconstructed, to better understand the social patterns that are evolving. What does the hyper-gendering of the online space say about RL culture other than "our imaginations are enthralled with the institutions that oppress us"? (Minnie Bruce Pratt, quote by Bornstein, 2000). Most important, how can we use the advantages of the online world to start attacking and deconstructing gender to the advantage of people using the systems?

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