

# Playing Dress-Up: Costumes, roleplay and imagination

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## Ludica

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## Abstract

In their canonical texts of game studies, both Huizinga and Caillois, each in and of his respective time, relegate dress-up dismissively to the sphere of girls' play. Little has been written to-date on the subject; in this paper, we survey the literature on analog and digital dress-up. We argue for a deeper examination and legitimization of dress-up play as a means to infuse greater gender balance into both game studies and game design. In the West, adults are typically discouraged from playing dress-up, except in relegated and sanctioned contexts, such as Mardi Gras or masquerade parties. Practices such as Japanese "cosplay," renaissance fairs, Live-Action Role-Playing games (LARPs), and co-performative events such as the Star Trek Conventions, DragonCon and Burning Man suggest a growing pattern of cultural practices around adult costume play. In the digital sphere, while massively multiplayer games tend to focus on team-based combat, players pay equal attention to clothing and fashion (often masked by the more masculine terminology of "gear"). The design and acquisition of virtual fashion is among the most popular activities in metaverse-type social worlds, such as *Second Life* and *There.com*. Cultural precedents for dress-up have been studied by performance anthropologists such as Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, who examined how the costume in ritual and theater create an embodied alternate persona for the wearer. We also see precedents of today's MMOG gender transgression dress-up play in historical movements, from 18<sup>th</sup> Century court culture to notorious cross-dressing Dadaists Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. In social and cultural contexts, dress-up not only provides an opportunity for expression, but also occupies a unique intersubjective domain as players, whether physically or virtually costumed, can together create alternative worlds simply by "putting them on." Dress-up also provides the opportunity for transformative play, for in dressing up and taking on new roles, we learn more about ourselves.

*When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass.*

Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen* (1995)

### Overview

In this paper, we discuss the importance of dress-up play, as both a formative childhood play pattern, and a growing and increasingly important form of adult play, in both physical and digital cultural practices. With a few notable exceptions, dress-up play has scarcely been acknowledged, let alone explored within the rubric of game studies, even though it is a growing dimension of digital games. Even pre-digital scholars of play have all but ignored this vital play form. Johan Huizinga's now-classic exhaustive study of the play element in culture, *Homo Ludens*, is primarily concerned with domains of play and culture dominated by males—sports, competition, warfare, legal and political structures, etc. In one section he describes the use of costumes in the context of ritual, where they helped bring the wearer into a playful state of ...

*...Dionysian ecstasy and dithyrambic rapture. The player, withdrawn from the ordinary world by the mask he wore, felt himself transformed into another ego which he did not so much represent as incarnate and actualize. (Huizinga, p.145)*

This is a fitting description of the modern concept of the “avatar,” a term based on the Sanscrit word for a god's embodiment on Earth, and adapted by Chip Morningstar to reference a player's representation in a multiplayer world. (Damer 1998, pp.484-485) Huizinga sees the “...almost instinctive, spontaneous need to decorate things...” (presumably this includes oneself) as constituting a “play-function.” Ironically, he describes fashion as primarily a male domain of play, reaching its height during the Baroque period and exemplified by the periwig, which, he asserts, was then appropriated by women. (p.183) He follows this by describing the return to a more naturalist orientation indicated by the reappearance in portraiture of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century of *men* with natural, long hair. (p. 184) Outside of the context of ritual, Huizinga apparently sees fashion as a predominately male enterprise. In fact, he makes no mention of female dress-up play throughout his exhaustive study.

While certainly progressing the cause of girls' play further than Huizinga, Caillois sets the stage for a somewhat skewed vision of female play culture. After enumerating a litany of exciting roles that boys may play, from policeman, to cowboy, to aviator, to jockey, girls are relegated to the roleplay of motherhood afforded by dolls. (Caillois 1958, p. 62). In the literature of both analog and digital play, in fact, very little is written about costume play, even in the sphere of child development. Developmental scholar Jean Piaget makes only brief and passing mention to it in the context of “make-believe” play among children. (Piaget 1951) Although Sutton-Smith devotes an entire chapter to Rhetorics of Identity in play, he alludes only briefly to costume-play in the context of festivals (although he never explicitly calls it out by name), and to fashion not at all. (Sutton-Smith 1997, pp.91-110)

More fruitful is the work of his fellow anthropologists in the study of ritual and performance, which we will discuss in more detail shortly, that addresses some of the complexities of roleplay in the context of ritual and theater (Turner, Van Gennep, Bell, Schechner, etc.), as well as research in the sociology of fashion, which also has bearing on this subject. In this paper, we will argue that dress-up is a central play pattern that has deep roots in human culture, and which, with the rise of multiplayer digital games and virtual worlds, is playing an increasingly prominent role in both digital and non-digital play practices.

One reason for these oversights may lie in the preoccupation among game scholars of what Caillois defined as “*ludus*” over “*paidia*” play activities. Caillois defines these terms on a continuum:

At one extreme an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety...that can be designated by the term *paidia*. At the opposite extreme, this frolicsome and impulsive exuberance is almost entirely absorbed or disciplined by a complementary, and in some respects inverse, tendency to its anarchic and capricious nature: there is a growing tendency to bind it with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions...I call this second component *ludus*. (Caillois, 1958, p.13)

The roots of this ludic bias in game studies are largely a product of its bias within the subject matter. Video games, on the whole, tend to be organized around game structures and mechanics that are more *ludus* than *paidia*. This may be due in part to the inherent nature of programming code, which demands logical structure and therefore lends itself to strict rule sets; it may also be due to the prevalence of male designers in the field who may tend to favor more ludic, goal-oriented forms of play. As a result of these factors, as well as the historical absence of dress-up play from formative analog games research, with a few notable exceptions, dress-up has been largely ignored in the scholarly study of digital play.

From a feminist perspective, we can look at dress-up, which has historically been associated with female play, as fulcrum for the creation of more gender-inclusive games, as well as a bridge to more gender-balanced approaches to game studies. Dress-up and fashion have served as an entry-point for women and girls into computer games, dating back to the “pink” game movement of the mid-1990s, as epitomized by the enormously successful *Barbie Fashion Designer*, and more recently by games such as *The Sims*, massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) such as *EverQuest* and *City of Heroes*, and metaverses such as *Second Life*, in which dress-up and fashion play a significant role. Some of our research suggests that the computer may also serve as an entry-point for men into dress-up, for whom its convergence with technology may dispel some of its more feminine connotations. In this paper, we will explore the various social practices of dress-up play, both digital and non-digital, in attempt to open this as a topic for deeper exploration. This paper serves as a birds-eye view, and it is our hope that the questions posed here will be seen as a jumping off point for more detailed explorations of this topic by other designers and researchers.

### What is Dress-Up?

What exactly do we mean by “playing dress-up?” How, precisely, do we play dress-up? What, in effect, are the mechanics of dress-up and how do they fit into traditional ideas about game design?

In its purest form, the childhood engagement in costumed roleplay, ‘dress-up’ is clearly a form of open-ended, *paidia*-style play, and also falls into the category of what Caillois would call *mimicry*,’ defined as “...a diverse series of manifestations, the common element of which is that the subject makes believe or make others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another.” (Caillois, 1958, p.19) Further, as Caillois specifies, “Many games do not imply rules. No fixed or rigid rules exist for playing with dolls, for playing soldiers, cops and robbers, horses, locomotives and airplanes—games, in general, which presuppose free improvisation, and the chief attraction of which lies in the pleasure of playing as a role, of acting *as if* one were someone or something else, a machine for example.” (p.8) According to Caillois, both *ludus* and *paidia* are compatible with *mimicry* (pp.30-31), thus dress-up can occupy different realms depending on the level of structure imposed on the activity.

Caillois also points out that “...acts of *mimicry* tend to cross the border between childhood and adulthood. The pleasure lies in being or passing for another...the mask disguises the conventional self and liberates the personality” (p.21) and epitomizes “the pleasure in secrecy, make-believe or disguise.” (p.65) Therefore, we see a wide variety of costume and dress-up in adult spheres of play, and these may operate within varying degrees of structured social contracts. These rules may be considered “*ludic*” in some sense, but they do not necessarily contain the traditional rubric of “contest” or “winning.” For

instance, there are certainly “rules” or at least “parameters” to the American ritual of Halloween, and these have evolved over time. On this one day each year, people of all ages are permitted to appear publicly in costume:

*In cities across America, the Halloween costume parade (or mass gathering) has become an annual urban tradition, comparable to the Mardi Gras celebration in New Orleans. Although perhaps having grown out of a homosexual tradition, the idea is related to much older mumming practices, and participant observation has determined that today these events involve whole families and people of various ages, sexes and races.*

*Oftentimes, the costumes are topical, so that we find Rubik’s Cubes, Tylenol Packages, Prince Charles and Princess Diana. Figures from popular culture are frequently drawn upon: E.T., Ms. Piggy, Superman. Virtually anything imaginable is realized, and costumes are quite elaborate. People sometimes dress in groups, as a six-pack of beer, for instance, or as a face, where one person is a nose, two are eyes, and two are ears. (Santino 1983, p.3)*

The Halloween ritual entails modifying the regular rules of public engagement to allow dress-up in public places for a single day annually. In earlier eras, the theme was more narrowly construed: it was a night of ghosts and goblins, the “eve” of All Saints Day, and tied to practices that have evolved from “pagan” rituals, such as the Mexican Day of the Dead. Over time, Halloween has evolved into a modern rite of both creativity and consumerism, with some practitioners spending months and considerable sums to produce or obtain elaborate costumes.

The first and most prevalent feature of costume play, whether digital or analog, is the establishment of a theme. The theme dictates the aesthetic of dress, whether it be Halloween, Mardi Gras, Renaissance Fair, or Burning Man. Within a particular thematic context, certain rules may prevail. For instance, participation in one of the Renaissance Fairs in the UK requires exclusive use of historically authentic technologies: zippers, snaps and buttons are forbidden, as are modern electronics such as phones and cameras, and anyone found in violation of this constraint is automatically evicted. Yet these strictures, though much more ludic than the more paidia-style Halloween festival, still do not contain goals, or entail a state of “winning,” characteristics of more ludic activities. Conversely, practices such as historical Civil War reenactments, paintball, or Live-Action Role-Playing Games (LARPs) integrate dress-up within a more goal-oriented structure. Thus the costume theme can function as its own “layer” that is “worn” on top of or integrated within other mechanics. Some of these mechanics may function independently of the dress-up play element, while others may be integral to the core mechanic of the game or activity.

What distinguishes digital dress-up from its analog counterpart is that it exists within the context of software. Thus the decision to include a dress-up component is a very conscious choice made by designers, and the extent to which players engage with dress-up play patterns is a direct result of the design of its associated “game mechanic.” In order to clarify what we mean by this, we provide few examples of software features within games or virtual worlds that could be described as “dress-up” mechanics. These are not comprehensive, but they provide some insight into the ways in which digital dress-up is actualized through software design:

### **Modes of Dress-Up**

First, we define, as examples, two distinct modes of dress-up play. These have to do with the relationship between the player, the costume, and the game character. Both entail what Holopainen and Meyers describe as “somatic displacement,” the ability to project yourself into an entity *other* than yourself, which can be anything from a doll to an automobile, in this case a game character. (Holopainen & Meyers 2000) The two modes of dress up play are:

- Doll-Play:** In this mechanic, the player is dressing up a character that is distinctly not herself, but over which she has (often god-like) agency. In analog form, this manifests in the form of physical dolls and paper dolls, or the boy-variant “action figures.” Digital variations of this mechanic include *Barbie Fashion Designer*, mentioned earlier, a hybrid form which broke new ground by allowing girls to design fashions, then print out the results on special printable fabric to outfit their actual Barbie dolls. (Figure 1) *The Sims* series can also be seen as a variation of the doll-play mode. (Figure 2) One of the authors of this paper has created an analog game entitled *Fashionistas* that translates this into a board game mechanic in which players have to find lost wardrobe items for members of a glamorous girl-band. (Fron 2004) In each of these contexts, the player does not inhabit the character, but merely exercises agency upon it.

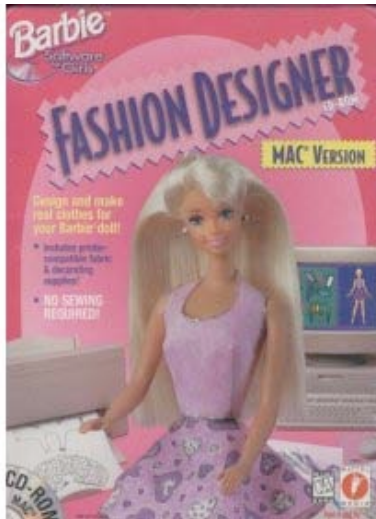


Figure 1: *Barbie Fashion Designer* allowed girls to make real clothing for their Barbie dolls.



Figure 2: Fashion and furnishings extension pack for *The Sims 2*.

- Identity/Avatar/Costume:** This is the mechanic in which the player is appearing *as* the character. In the real world, this manifests as a costume, and can take a variety of forms. In open-ended metaverses, the identity is primarily a form of personal expression, but does not have points or gameplay associated with it per se. On the other hand, in most role-playing games, the player must begin by selecting a race, class and gender, as well as a name that serves as her marker of persistent identity. These are almost always fixed and determine the player’s appearance, what he or she can wear, and how the appearance and skills of her character can evolve over time. This mechanic is tied to the Armor/Instrumental costume play mechanic described below.

It should also be noted that these two modes are not always absolute. There are many cases where the player relationship to the character is ambiguously balanced somewhere between these extremes.

### Dress-up Mechanics

The following half-dozen sample dress-up mechanics primarily relate to the second mode described above, that in which the player actually takes the role of the game character:

- Armor/Instrumental:** In traditional MMOGs, especially those with medieval fantasy themes, dress-up is not merely a form of self-expression, but also an instrumental part of gameplay, deeply tied to your character’s performance. These games attach elaborate “Armor Class” values to various modular armor elements, each of which is assigned a “slot” that correlates to a body part, such as shoulders, chest, legs, etc. In addition to its aesthetic appearance, each piece of

armor also has an Armor Class, or AC, statistics that are weighed along with a number of other numerical signifiers. (Figure 3) These statistics are calculated in relation to the stats of your enemies, combined with a digital die roll, to determine the outcome of battles, your characters skills and experience. When you are being attacked, the level to which you take damage is partially determined by your armor class. In the context of this type of mechanic, many players engage in a strategy that could be characterized as “dress-up by the numbers.” They keep detailed track of the values of various armor items, seek out high-AC items, and treat the costume as a statistic more than a decoration or form of personal expression. Other players typically combine the statistical and aesthetic features of armor to help construct their game identity and combat performance, which are integrally intertwined. It is also interesting to note that in this context, expression is sometimes at-odds with performance, and as a result, players might be conflicted between “gear” (as it is typically referred to) they like aesthetically vs. gear with higher stats.



Figure 3: Armor stats in *World of Warcraft*. (Image: Pearce)

A radically different example of instrumental costume play takes place in the Nintendo 64 game *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (2000). In this single-player game, the main character, Link, collects a series of masks, each of which imbues the wearer with a magical power, sometimes an entirely new physical form. They serve as animal totems, and as Link obtains them, he can use them strategically for the skills they endow.

- **Acquiring/Trying Clothes:** The specific mechanism by which players acquire clothing in games has significant impact on play patterns. In *The Sims*, for instance, players can buy clothing for their Sims either in-game or via fan-made web sites; clothing acquisition takes place “out of world” so that players are not obtaining clothes in-character per se. In *There.com*, players purchase virtual merchandise from an auction web site *within* the game’s browser, but outside of

the 3D world. In addition, players may “try on” clothing items prior to purchase, critically, *for others to see*. Conversely, in *Second Life*, all virtual merchandise is purchased in-world at specific sites. Designers generally acquire real estate (the main revenue source for the world’s operators) and set up stores, where players can purchase items viewed via 2D screenshots, and allowing players to try on garments before purchase is at the seller’s discretion. All clothing in *Second Life* is player-created, and while many designers sell their fashions for virtual currency, there is also an extensive practice of clothing give-aways, which allows players to obtain an order of magnitude or two more clothing than in *There.com*, where all clothing must be purchased with virtual currency. In *World of Warcraft*, where dress-up is more instrumentalized, clothing items are obtained either as booty from combat or quests (known colloquially as “drops”) or purchased from non-player merchant bots or other players via auction. Clothing can also be “crafted,” but this entails gathering enough resources (such as linen or silk) to create a standard item, rather than the original designs afforded by worlds such as *There.com* and *Second Life*. *There.com*, which arguably has the most extensive mechanic around dress-up play, is the only virtual world we are aware of that actually awards points for dress-up. While this social “metaverse” is not a linear goal-based game in the traditional sense, it does have the ability to “level” in various categories, such as Explorer, Hoverboarder, Socializer, and of course, Fashionista, towards which players are awarded points every time they try on, change or purchase clothes. A related mechanic in *Second Life* allows players, for a small fee in virtual currency, to award other avatars points for “appearance,” making the point system more social. Because of the expense of obtaining such points, players take great pride in a high appearance score.



Figure 4: A wedding party in *There.com*, with women’s slacks substituting for skirts. (Image: Pearce)

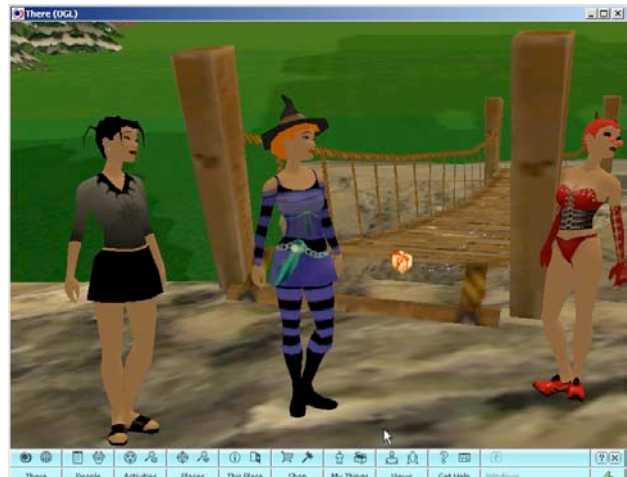


Figure 5: Twinking in *There.com* is represented with a gift box animation. (Image: Pearce)

- Twinking/Gifting/Trading:** Twinking is the popular MMOG practice of giving items away to lower-level players. Though not a game-mechanic per se, it is a pervasive play pattern that can only take place in a context where the trading or giving away of items is integrated as a design feature. In *World of Warcraft*, the mechanic is one of trading, although players often give away things in exchange for nothing. In both *Second Life* and *There.com*, there is a gifting mechanism, and in the latter, giving a gift is accompanied by an animation (visible to all) of a wrapped gift passing from one avatar to the next. Players can both give and loan clothing items to each other in this fashion, which can also serve as a kluge for a try-on mechanic when the game does not possess one already. Needless to say, twinkling has significantly different ramifications in games with instrumental dress-up play versus more paidia/expression-oriented environments. A very small number of games provide actual rewards for twinkling, such as the now-defunct *Game*

*Neverending* (Ludicorp 2002-2004; Sugarbaker 2003), which rewarded gifting with “karma points.”

- **Inspecting:** Inspecting is a mechanic unique to games with instrumental/armor style mechanics; it is simply a feature that allows a player to view another player’s armor statistics. This usually requires permission from the player being inspected, but is a common prelude to provisional grouping, and can also be a means for more experienced players to mentor lower-level players on armor optimization. This mechanic is unnecessary in games where clothing has no instrumental or statistical value.
- **Fashion Design/Creation:** *Barbie Fashion Designer*, mentioned above, was a watershed for fashion design in games, which co-designer Bernie DeKoven felt was significant because it:

*...wasn't a game, but a utility—a tool that allowed girls to design and produce their very own fashion statements. In many ways, it was like a tool that adult fashion designers use...a vehicle for the imagination—one that respected the creativity of children and supported the aspirational fantasies of girlhood.*

(Ludica Interview with Bernie DeKoven, 2006)

In terms of the doll-play mode described above, no single computer game has done more to advance the cause of digital dress-up than *The Sims* (2000) and its sequels. Its skinning feature ultimately mushroomed into a worldwide phenomenon. (Pearce 2002; Poremba 2003) Fan sites such as [www.simgrrl.com](http://www.simgrrl.com), which sell player-designed fashions for Sim characters, are testimony to the effectiveness of this game mechanic in reaching a vast female audience. Subsequent extension packs of the original game include *Celebrity Sims*, which allows players to create their favorite movie and rock stars, a play pattern that was originally pioneered by skinning players themselves. As the best-selling PC game to-date, *The Sims* has demonstrated not only the appeal of dress-up in games, but also its marketability across the gender divide. Unlike *Barbie Fashion Designer*, which had a decidedly girls-only ethos, *The Sims* creates a context where both males and females can derive enjoyment from the design aspects of dress-up play.

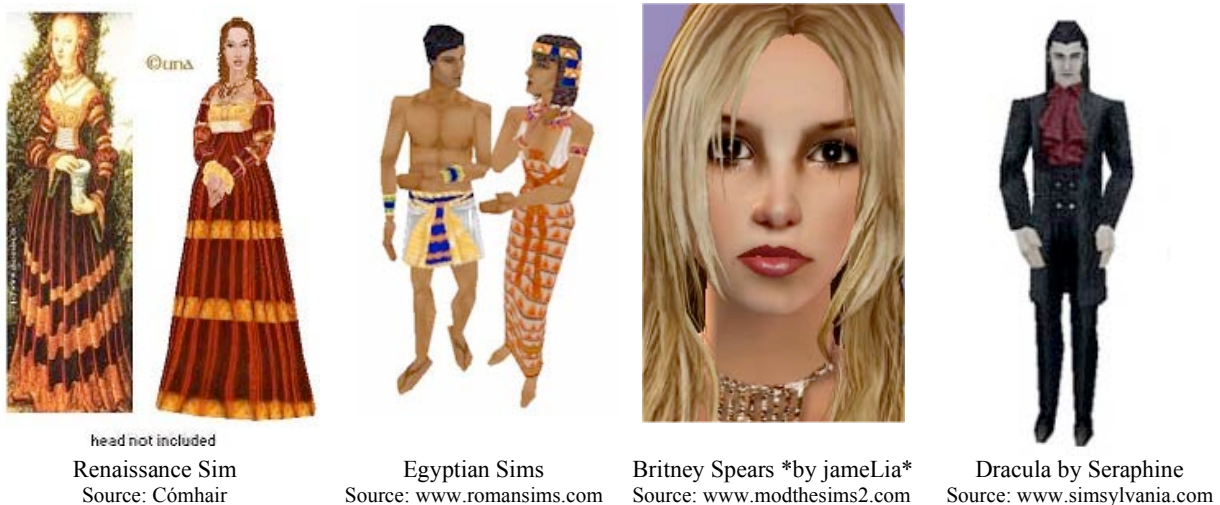


Figure 6: Examples of player-made Sim skins from a variety of sources.

The fashion design mechanic falls into the category of what Pearce terms “productive play” (Pearce 2006A) and appears in different forms, depending on the affordances of the game. In its



most simplistic manifestation, players of *World of Warcraft* and other medieval-themed MMOG's can adopt the tailoring craft, creating pre-designed "armor" based on supplies (collecting the requisite fabrics and dyes) and patterns. In *There.com*, player "developers" can download templates that allow them to design their own fashion items within a set of constraints, and must pay to put their merchandise up for sale on *There.com*'s in-game auction site. In *Second Life*, players can customize their avatar dress on-the-fly, or design fantastical costumes that include elaborate geometries. While a great deal has been made of the buying and selling of virtual real estate, little research has been done on the economic ramifications of the virtual fashion industry. A notable exception is Chung's research which shows that players are more likely to buy embellishments, behaviors and fashion items if they have a positive attitude towards their avatars (Chung 2005); thus the problem noted by Taylor (2003A) of women feeling less identification with their avatars could ultimately have economic repercussions if the player is less willing to invest in an avatar about which they have ambivalent feelings. Even in games like *EverQuest*, players are known to buy and sell valuable armor items on eBay and black market web sites. Fashion is possibly the sleeping giant of game economics.

While games like *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* tend to control what players can do, where they can go, and what they can wear, by contrast, the creators of *Second Life* chose to create a world in which players create their own content and even retain the intellectual property to their work. The ultimate expression of the paidia side of dress-up, this has led to perhaps the most extensive and wide-ranging examples of digital dress-up in a variety of forms, especially in the fashion design mechanic. *Second Life* has built in tools for avatar customization; however, enterprising residents have discovered alternative methods, often through sheer inventiveness, to design their desired personas. Attachments, such as horns, tails, elaborate hair, extra limbs and facial parts, have resulted in fantastical new species, perhaps drawn from some deep primordial source. Further, methods have been found to radically alter the basic avatar skeleton, folding it upon itself to create very small creatures, such as butterflies, and what seems to be an entire race of foot high "Furries" who cluster in their own communities. Several designers also create elaborate avatar clothing that would be physically impossible the real world, often accompanied by animations, special effects, and shiny or illuminated features known colloquially as "bling."



Figure 7: Creative avatars from *Second Life* (Images: Morie)



Figure 8: Two *There.com* players in hoverpack hoop skirts duke it out with paint guns. (Image: Pearce)



Figure 9: A diving helmet hoverpack in *There.com*.

In *There.com*, players have managed to get around some of the design constraints presented by the template systems. Before skirts were introduced as a fashion template, players tried to manufacture them in various ways. The most common was to design pants whose legs would blend together when standing still, creating the appearance of a skirt or dress. (Figure 4) Another was to paint bare legs and socks on pant legs. Players also created hoop skirts out of hoverpacks. (Figure 8) Once skirts were introduced by management, they were among the most highly coveted and expensive fashion items, and are now available in a variety of lengths. Players have also created unusual costumes using similar kluges, such as a diving helmet hoverpack. (Figure 9)

These examples allow us to better understand the mechanics of costume play in digital games and virtual worlds. In the next section, we will discuss various cultural practices of costume and dress-up play and their implications in the digital sphere.

### Childhood and Adulthood/Play and Ritual

*To be myself ... I need the illumination of other people's eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is my self.*

—Bernard from Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931)

One of the most notable shifts in the practice of costume play is its increasing popularity, in both analog and digital form, among adults in the U.S. While an integral part of many nonwestern rituals, the pleasures of dress-up have typically been barred to adults in modern Western culture, except in a small handful of explicitly approved situations such as Halloween, masquerade balls and historical reenactments. The situation differs in Japan, where “cosplay”—a contraction of the words costume and play—has become a popular and socially acceptable pastime. (Figure 10) It is not unusual to see Japanese young adults dressed in outfits derived from anime and manga characters, elaborate gothic Lollitas, and more recently subjects from fantasy film, television and video games. Mizuki Ito, who studies children and popular culture in Japan, describes the situation there: “In more recent years, cyberspace and inner space has come to occupy a similar role in the imaginary of Japanese popular culture.” (Ito, 2005, p.1) Further, she asks, “How do marginal and fantastic imaginaries function as sites of alternative cultural

production and performance?” (p.2) In the sphere of childhood, “play is [now] cloistered in the domestic space of the home, controlled by the institution of the family. And yet, particularly since the advent of the television, and more so with the advent of the Internet, kids are also getting ‘out’ more, into virtual and imaginary spaces produced through media networks.” (p.3) These children’s cultural practices have gradually spilled into the adults’ sphere. As Ito sees it: “The symbolic separation of childhood as a unique cultural and subjective space is a cultural obsession in Japan as elsewhere, even as it is being challenged by the practical intersections between adult and children’s worlds.” An example is the spread of otaku culture, a somewhat subversive adult play practices around trading cards such as *Pokémon* (Tajiri 1995) and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* (Takahashi 1998); another the mass adoption of “cuteness” among children and adults of both sexes. Ito argues that “...adults are increasingly not only mobilizing tropes of childhood in political and personal arenas, but are also consuming childhood as an alternative identity formation.” (p.12) Ito sees children’s media as

*...a site of resistance to adult values of labor, discipline, and diligence, as well as a site for alternative forms of symbolic value and economic exchange. It becomes a receptacle for our dissatisfactions about rationalized labor, educational achievement, stabilized economic value, and mainstream status hierarchies. For adults, these images of childhood are a colorful escape from the dulling rhythms of salaried work and household labor. (p.12)*



Figure 10: Typical Japanese cosplay.  
Wikimedia Commons/©1998 Mike Chachich

While in Japan such relief is found in cute, childlike characters and games predominately designed for children, a distinct set of cultural practices has emerged in the U.S. to provide relief from the constraints of everyday life. They run the gamut from Star Trek Fan (aka Trekkie) Conventions (Jenkins 1992), to period festivals such as the Renaissance Fair to historical reenactments, including those of famous battles (a decidedly male manifestation of costume play), as well as Live Action Role Playing Games, fantasy and fairy balls, and DragonCon (an all-purpose fan fest that embraces a wide range of fantasy themes and hosts over 20,000 participants annually), and even Furies, a sub-culture of adult fans who like to dress up as anthropomorphic cartoon animals.



Figure 11: A Dragon Rider (left) and assorted costumers (center) and a fairy (right) at The Labyrinth Of Jareth Fantasy Masquerade Ball, Los Angeles, 2006. (Images: Morie)

Historic reenactments are of particular interest because they provide some useful insights into the ways in which men and women construe dress-up. In an attempt to unpack these differences, textile and fashion researcher Kimberly Miller conducted an ethnographic study of reenactment practices, combing qualitative and quantitative methods. (1998) In her study of adult costume play, she formulated a theory from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, which states that the self is established through communication. (Miller 1998) Referencing its originator, Mead (1934), as well as Goffman (1959) and Blumer (1969), who developed his ideas further, Miller posits two theoretical frameworks for understanding dress-up play. The first is Eicher’s theory of dress as a communication of the self, and the concept of the “three selves” that are expressed through dress: Public—ones presentation in public sphere; Private—when engaged with family and friends; and Secret—when by oneself, when the bulk of fantasy play takes place. (1981) Miller combines this with Stone’s notion of “fantastic socialization,” (1965) the playing of roles that can never be realized in reality (as opposed to “anticipatory socialization,” the playing of fantasy roles in preparation for real-life situations.) The result is a hybrid model of what could be describe as “the three selves of fantastic socialization”: Public, costumes worn in a public context, such as a festival or holiday which are not anonymous; Private, costumes worn among friends or in the context of family/childhood play; Secret, which could include both activities that are solitary or intimate (such as sex play) and those which are public and anonymous. (Miller 1998) Games would appear to blend the first category with the third, as they provide an avenue to bring the private self into a public arena.



Figure 12: Denizens of American Renaissance Faires sporting a variety of elaborate costumes. Note the small child with the kilted man at right. (Image: Nicole Fullerton; Courtesy of Pendragon Costumes)

Miller's research and theoretical work on gender and costume play posits some interesting findings and theories. In a questionnaire on fantasy dress of 216 respondents, men more frequently cited "historical reenactment" as a motivation for dress-up, while women's first choice in motivation was "opportunity to assume a different role," which was cited by men as the second most frequent motivation. In qualitative research, Miller found that some men tended to veer away from the terms "costume," and "fantasy," which may be associated with female activities. She also hypothesizes that costume play may afford men more opportunity for creative expression than everyday dress, as well as the opportunity to wear weapons in public, a decidedly masculine-associated activity. The qualitative aspect of her research also revealed that many women considered real-world dress a form of costuming, and made less of a distinction between fantasy and real-world dress. (Miller 1998)

These findings suggest an interesting implication for digital dress up: Perhaps the conflation of the "masculine" space of the computer, combined with the notion of "gear" (armor and weapons) actually reorders costume play in more masculine direction. What this suggests is that while costume play on computers may be creating more female-friendly play opportunities, conversely, it may also be opening up more avenues of dress-up for men.

The Burning Man festival, with its 30,000 plus attendees, is another contemporary example of the role of costume play in contemporary American culture. Burning Man, which takes place annually in the Nevada desert over a weeklong period, presents a particularly compelling example of what Robert Kozinets refers to as an "anti-market" event that supports communality, disparages market logics, offer alternative exchange practices, and supports personal expression as a form of both production and consumption. (Kozinets, 2002, p.1) Because of the harsh physical environment, it combines the realities of survival with the performative qualities of a masquerade ball, resulting in a high level of ingenuity. (For more on Burning Man, see Gilmore et al. 2005.)



Figure 13: "Burners" in various personas, Burning Man 2004. (Images: Morie)

Along with its position as subversive cultural practice, Burning Man also exemplifies the role that creativity and preparation ritual plays in costume and dress-up play. As with the Mardi Gras, many participants spend the entire year planning for this event, producing art works and elaborate costumes which run the gamut from three-piece suits (including shoes) made entirely out of money to colorfully painted (but otherwise naked) bodies. In this "clothing optional" atmosphere, participants can don elaborate costumes or appear in only in their aesthetic metals piercings, which would not be visible in

everyday life. Part of the pleasure of such adult costume-play is the ingenuity and artistry that goes into creating one's persona and costume for such an event; another is in the co-performative act, what co-author Pearce calls "seeing and being seen," (Pearce 2006C) a sense of personal validation that can take place in the context of what William Gibson called a "consensual hallucination." (Gibson 1984) In this context, participants create a communal identity for which the majority of "Burners" adopt a unique and descriptive "playa name" (referring to the ancient seabed in the Nevada desert on which the Burning Man event is staged). Burning Man elevates the dress-up experience to a high art form, and both organized fashion shows as well as more casual strolling along the central esplanade offer ample opportunities for seeing and being seen. (Figure 13)

Despite their prevalence, these activities are often marginalized by the popular media as subversive or abnormal behaviors of escapist who need to "get a life." Yet these practices take on a much richer and more multidimensional meaning when viewed through the lens of ritual and performance. Anthropologist Victor Turner provides us with the notion of liminal space, the traditional context outside of ordinary life in which religious rituals in and with alternative universes is enacted. The modern-day equivalent is Turner's "liminoid," which he defines as arising out of the secular, post-industrial emergence of leisure time. Adult costume play, whether digital or analog, may fall somewhere between these two, providing potentially transformative and sublime experiences in the context of what might be viewed by outsiders as merely "entertainment." (Turner 1982).

Catherine Bell lends some insight to this process via sociologist Erving Goffman:

*...it appears that formalized activities can communicate complex socio-cultural messages very economically, particularly messages about social classification, hierarchical relationships, and the negotiation of identity and position in the social nexus. For Goffman, human interchange is a matter of ordered sequences of symbolic communication, which he calls "interaction rituals" or "ritual games." The limited and highly patterned nature of these interactions serves the purpose of creating a self that can be constructed only with the cooperative help of some and the contrasting foil provided by others. In effect, Goffman suggests, one constructs one identity, or "face," as a type of sacred object constituted by the ritual of social exchange. The social construction of self-images and their relations with other self-images generates a total "ritual order," he argues, that is a system of communication that deals not with facts but with understandings and interpretations... (Bell 1997, p. 141)*

In interviews with women for our article in the forthcoming book *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (Ludica 2007; Kafai et al, Eds.), we found that dress-up play was a pivotal aspect of their formative play experiences. The following quotes reflect the "indigenous" nature of dress-up to girls play:

*Games, toys, storytelling, tea parties, dress-up, these were all part of my childhood. All of my experiences with games and play started at home, with my parents and grandparents. We all enjoyed playing together. My earliest role-playing experience was inspired in part by fairy tales my grandmother would read to me when I was a toddler, my favorite character being the princess on the pea.*

*When I was a kid, I pretty much lived in an alternate universe. I tended to live in other eras, usually historically based, but sometimes fantastical. I read stuff like Alice in Wonderland and The Chronicles of Narnia, and was also obsessed with Vikings, Queen Elizabeth I, and the 1920's. The better part of my 'tween' years I wanted to be a flapper when I grew up. I had a lot of costumes, partially because my grandmother was a seamstress and had been a costumer at MGM. So for me dressing up was a very integral part of this fantasy life. I used to go to my mom's party in a flapper dress with Ruby Keeler shoes and a cloche hat holding a cigarette holder and talking in an English accent.*

*In terms of play, I was an avid collector of dollhouse miniatures, Barbies, etc. I liked all the typical girl stuff (and had a lot of it). I actually played with it until an embarrassingly late age. I also liked to play make-believe and dress-up. Being the oldest, and having read far too many Louisa May Alcott stories, I liked to get my siblings dressed up and acting out plays whenever possible. Later, I caught the filmmaking bug and made them act in front of the camera.*

### Digital Dress-Up

In the digital sphere, dress-up is a rapidly expanding play genre, but one which appears to be understudied. In our literature search, we were able to find very little about the role of dress-up in digital play, with the notable exception was T.L. Taylor's foundational paper "Multiple Pleasures: Women and Online Gaming" (2003A) in which she suggests a more complex analysis of women in gaming than simply the "pink games" approach. Although the average participation in role-playing MMOG's is estimated to remain at about 10%-20% female, Taylor points out that many women play these games *despite* their design, which often actively disenfranchises the female player. (Taylor 2003A, p.22) Taylor's emphasis that the nuance of player roles, which are dictated in large-part by the "putting on of a character class" provides an opportunity for complex social interactions in which players strategically organize around their strengths and weaknesses. While many women opt for warrior or battle-oriented roles, others choices that allow for healing or spell-casting, or non-combat skills such as tailoring and herb gathering, provide women with the opportunity explore roles and experiment with a range of personality types within a context of social interdependency. These roles, which allow players to take on not only a "class" or profession, but also a "race," such as elf, gnome, dwarf, or human, provide players with a costume which they can inhabit as they explore different aspects of their personalities. In the same way that a costume ball, Mardi Gras, or Burning Man gives players a way to explore different aspects of their personalities, these opportunities afford freedom to step out of stereotyped roles. Although it is clear that this is not a singularly female pleasure, women can and do experience distinct pleasures from it. Indeed, women who may be reticent to appear powerful in real-life may find themselves becoming more assertive and bold in the context of a game. (Taylor 2003A) Interestingly, men who suffer from shyness and social phobias can also find online games highly empowering in this regard. (Pearce 2006B)

Taylor highlights some specific pleasures that female gamers identified in her study, and a number of these are relevant to dress-up play. (Taylor 2003A) Many of these qualities are supported by author Pearce's ethnographic research (Pearce 2006B) in online games and seem to transcend specific games or genres. We elaborate on these here in terms of dress-up play:

- **Community and socialization:** Pearce's research supported Taylor's findings that female players enjoy not only the "chat" aspect of socializing, but also the more instrumental aspects of social interaction, such as raid planning (in more formal, goal-oriented games such as *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft*) and activities around organizing events and communities (*There.com*, *Uru*). In addition, creativity and commerce was also a strong motivation. Women are among the top designers, especially of fashion, in the open-ended metaverses *Second Life* and *There.com* and Pearce's findings suggest that motivation for creative production is highly social. (Pearce, 2006A)
- **Identity Play** "MMORPGs give the user (in varying degrees) an opportunity to engage in various identity performances and corresponding forms of play. Both because of the explicit nature of the space (role play) and the engagement with avatars, users can construct identities which may or may not correlate to their offline persona... Through the early decisions players make about their race and class they begin to fashion of themselves unique identities in the gamespace." (Taylor 2003, p. 27) Costumes, garb, attire, gear, fashion—in short, dress-up—provide players with a means to "put on" these identities and explore the avenues they open. In *Second Life* a single player can have many avatars, allowing exploration of diverse facets of his or her personality. It

is not unusual for players to maintain inventories of dozens of distinct avatar personas, as easy to put on as a new outfit. (As an example, one of this paper's authors has nearly 2 dozen, including twins, whom she plays on two computers simultaneously. Another has multiple variants of the same trans-ludic character, which moves between different games and virtual worlds.)

- Mastery and Status:** Taylor points out the different ways that women represent mastery and status; in many of the more structured "ludic" MMOGs, these qualities are indicated in large part by armor. In *EverQuest*, for instance, "newbie" players appear scantily clad. As players advance in the game, they don progressively more clothing, so that the measure of a player's level of advancement is often a product not only of the type but also of the *amount* of clothing they wear. As mentioned in the discussion of armor/instrumental dress-up mechanics, armor expresses not only character but also status: the "inspection" mechanic allows players to view the statistical values of others' "gear." In more open-ended worlds such as *There.com* and *Second Life*, possessing fashion items is a sign of status (such as leveling in the "Fashionista" category in *There.com*) as well as income. In addition, players who design fashions, the vast majority of whom are female, receive a high level of social and economic status in virtual worlds.



Figure 14: A scantily clad "newbie" Level 1 Warrior (right) and a decked out Level 60 Dark Elf in *World of Warcraft*. (Images: Pearce)

- Exploration:** We are currently working on another paper that addresses exploration in terms of games and gender, but it is also relevant to dress-up in some game contexts. As mentioned earlier, some dress-up is site- and context-specific. In *Second Life*, where one must travel (virtually) to shops in order to purchase items, display of clothing is a creative activity in and of itself. Owning real estate also permits one to erect stores and display merchandise for sale, often widely distributed across the entire world space, so "shopping" actually requires exploratory activity. This differs from *There.com*'s in-game auction system, mentioned earlier. And in the more ludic contexts of *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft*, because "gear" is often the result of quest "drops" (spoils of war, as it were) highly coveted items can often be associated with having *been* to a certain place. In both *Second Life* and *There.com*, the variety of role-playing and other opportunities create context-specific dress-up scenarios, some of which might even be tied to the exploration mechanic. For instance, players in *There.com* who are part of an aviator club will often don special uniforms to perform air acrobatics. In *Second Life*, the ease of changing avatars



and clothing allows players to literally “dress for the occasion,” possibly even changing their entire form for a specific locale or theme.

- **Team Sport and Combat:** Both Taylor and Pearce’s research support a rich nuance of competitive play among women and girls, which will be explored further in another paper. However, what bears mentioning in the context of costume play is the pleasure of not only being strong, but also of *appearing* strong. In other words, though “gear” is a masculine framing of fashion, women can also enjoy fashion as “gear.”

Taylor also identifies creative production as a pleasure of gaming, which she illustrates with examples of fan art created by female *EverQuest* players, primarily self-portraits of their avatars. Creativity within *EverQuest*, however, is quite limited, so this is not really enumerated as a game mechanic. (Taylor 2003A)

### Playing with—And Against—Gender

While an entire book could be devoted to the subject of gender dress-up in games, a subject that is equally under-studied, this paper would not be complete without at least touching on this complex theme. We know very little about this topic, but what we *do* know about gender play in games and virtual worlds is that it has an entirely different social function than real-world transgender play, although it may resemble some earlier cultural practices of costume-play. We will touch on a few aspects of gender-play here, but this subject warrants much more extensive study.

One affordance that games provide is a framework for experimentation – trying out various gender roles in specific social contexts. As Brunner et al elucidate in the influential book on games and gender, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*:

*One of the functions of playing games, as Henry Jenkins (this volume) notes, is to rehearse and explore what it means to have a gender. Games provide a safe place to explore issues of femininity and masculinity. Game playing can deliberately expand our sense of who we are. The appeal of role-playing games among both children and adults is testimony to this fact.* (Brunner et al 1998, p. 81)

There are many examples of gender play in art and literature. Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray were notorious for their playful female avatars, and Frida Kahlo appears in men’s clothing in a number of her self-portraits. (Smith 1997) A number of women authors, including George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans), George Sand (Amandine-Lucile-Aurore Dupin), and Jane Bowls cross-dressed and posed for photographs in men’s clothes. Virginia Woolf, though not a cross-dresser, explores gender swapping in depth in her novel *Orlando* (later adapted for film by Sally Potter). This intriguing “mockumentary” follows the history of a fictional character who lives through multiple generations and switches genders halfway through his/her 400-year lifespan. Woolf observes that “clothes make the woman” in describing Orlando’s transition from male to female:

*...clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world’s view of us [ . . . ] So, having now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando [...]. If we compare the picture of Orlando as a man with that of Orlando as a woman we shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the same person, there are certain changes. The man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders.* (Woolf 1928, p. 132)

As Judith Butler points out “Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed...There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results.” (Butler 1990, p.25)

In online games, in particular, gender becomes a site of performance and play, with both males and females experimenting with its manifestations and extremes. This form of play is not typically associated with gender dysphoria or homosexuality; in fact, quite the contrary, it is most prevalent among heterosexual males. Even before fantasy games migrated to the computer, trans gender play has long been a staple of role-playing games, back to the days of *Dungeons & Dragons*. It is estimated that while around 50% of game characters are female in a typical role-playing MMOG, only 10%-20% of players are, suggesting that about half of the female characters are being played by males. (Yee 2003; Seay et al 2004) Male-to-female trans-gender play is by far the most common, and while prevalent in all age groups, is particularly high among men between the ages of 22 and 35. While finding reasons for gender-bending is obviously more difficult than tracking its existence, Yee, who has done the most extensive study on this topic to-date, posits a few theories that are relevant to dress-up play practices:

- *Social gender boundaries are more stringent in real-life for men, and in an anonymous space, men are more likely to explore gender roles.*
- *Female avatars receive more “freebies” and are treated “better” than male avatars.*
- *Male gender-bending is another form of dominating the female body.*
- *In PvP [player vs. player] games, female avatars are perceived to be weaker and this might give the player a psychological edge against unsuspecting chauvinistic players.* (Yee 2003)

In fact, the most common reason for playing a female avatar cited by male players is that they prefer the way they look.

One thing is certain, however. Males derive equal enjoyment from dress-up play as women, and the digital context may in fact make dress-up more socially acceptable for men. In games with an instrumental/armor mechanic, males display a high level of concern with both the statistical value of their garments, and their physical appearance, although couched in that male term of “gear.” In more paidia-oriented worlds, fashion is “out of the closet” so to speak, and males have a great deal more freedom to explore a wide range of dress-up opportunities. In *There.com*, for instance, men will costume themselves for particular occasions, or even for no occasion at all. Cowboys, pilot garb, renaissance, or science fiction attire are all common (Star Trek uniforms being particularly ubiquitous.) Some male players also have as their primary or secondary character a female avatar, with which they may explore their “Fashionista” side to a greater degree due to the much more extensive repertoire of female fashions. These female-presenting men often tend to develop a singular fashion style that would not be afforded while presenting in their male avatars. Thus the cross-gender play opens up new avenues of personal expression. A common social activity afforded by *There.com*’s public “try-it” feature is the often-spontaneous dress-up party. Male players will regularly engage in this activity with their female avatars, both modeling and critiquing the designs along with the female players present.

*There.com* possesses a somewhat unique mechanic that also influences gender play. Unlike most other MMOG’s and virtual worlds, which use text chat as their primary communication mode, *There.com* uses voice. In her ethnographic research, Pearce observed only one case of a male player adopting a female voice, while typical male players inhabiting female avatars speak in their natural, male voices. In this context, it is not at all uncommon to hear a male voice issue forth from a female avatar. (Pearce 2006B) This creates a level of transparency that is not present in other game worlds, and has also created a unique culture of gender play in *There.com*.

Avatar representation is an issue in all these contexts. Particularly in role-playing games, Taylor remarks on “the impoverished view of online embodiment most designers seem to be operating with,” especially where female representation is concerned, noting that many women in her study were forced to bracket or ignore their discomfort with their avatar appearance. As one of Taylor’s subjects put it: “Who would go into battle wearing a chain bikini.” (Taylor 2003A pp.37-38) Co-author Pearce has referred to such hypersexualized battle-garb as “kombat lingerie” noting that it reveals a male fantasy about watching women in battle, rather than a female fantasy of empowerment. (Figure 15) Taylor has also written eloquently about the power structures of representation in games, a matter that is crying out for further critique. (Taylor 2003B)

Sara Bryant, *Virtua Fighter 4*Lara Croft, *Tomb Raider*Sophitia, *Soul Calibur*Orchid, *Killer Instinct*

Figure 15: Examples of Kombat Lingerie

In both *Second Life* and *There.com*, where clothes are not tied to a race, class or armor stats, fashion functions primarily as a mode of both individual expression and an intersubjective space in which to explore social identity. Some female players in *There.com* complain of the “Barbie-doll” style avatar, but relish the opportunity to have some moderate control over their bust-size, weight, and even age. (Pearce 2006B) This differs from the traditional MMOG in that these fashions and representations are freely chosen and even designed by the players. With this choice it might be expected that women would veer away from highly sexualized representations. Conversely, women players and designers in both of these metaverses frequently lean towards much sexier clothing than they would wear in real life, taking advantage of the freedoms and anonymity afforded in a virtual world, as well as the opportunity to inhabit a “perfect” body (which can highly appealing to those who may feel marginalized in their real bodies). *There.com* designers have developed elaborate techniques for rendering cleavage, and women in *Second Life* frequently present as young, sexy and busty.

Perhaps the difference is that women prefer to express the sexual dimensions of their appearance on their own terms: how would *I* like to look, rather than, what would this male game designer like to look at? It is often painfully obvious when a male has designed a female avatar, as these tend towards highly exaggerated female characteristics. At the same time, online worlds offer women the opportunity to express their sexuality in a “safe” environment with both less judgment, and less direct physical risk. This supports Taylor’s finding that women may feel safe in a virtual world where they are on equal terms with men in terms of physical risk. (Taylor 2003A)

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to explore the implications of dress-up play as a means to create more gender-balance in both present and future game culture. By conjoining the act of dressing-up, which has high appeal and cultural resonance for women, with the instrumental and technical aspects of computer gaming, dress-up and roleplay seem to form a bridge which can cross many of the gender boundaries and stratifications that seem to prevail in contemporary game culture. Additional attention to dress-up can also help the game studies community to move in a more gender-balanced position with respect to future research directions.

Regardless of gender, dress-up play seems to feed a deep instinctive need for humans to find pathways for expression of diverse aspects of their personalities. In the past, this was accomplished through rituals and societal obligations, with an occasional festival thrown in for release. In more modern times, especially in the Western world, many of these pathways are no longer viable. In fact, in the U.S., such role-playing is not viewed as consistent with our puritan ancestry, and this has led to a marginalization of such play in adult society. The rise of role-playing video games and open-ended metaverses that allow for individual expression and creativity are providing acceptable outlets for this innate human need. They offer a means for the expression of imagination that is not always possible in everyday life, and they do so without the scrutiny that today’s social mores tend to impose. This has grand implications both in terms of play and in terms of gender roles. This phenomenon, which we have presented here, poses a complex range of questions that necessitate and deserve further study. We hope that this paper sparks a continuing dialogue on the important and transformative role of dress-up in both game studies and contemporary life.

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