ABSTRACT

Purpose — To examine the potential for including forums in an online ethnography that draws on data from multiple online sites.

Methodology/approach — Taking a broadly post-structuralist approach to identity and embodiment online, the research drew on three sources of data: asynchronous email interviews, in-game participant observation and six months of forum observation.

Findings — The community in question was socially located around multiple field sites online and forums remain an integral part of the social lives of online gamers. The practice and ethics for examining forums from a qualitative perspective are outlined and how this can fit into an ethnographic account. Some of the data is then presented from this strand of the research to illustrate how researching a forum as a ‘lurker’ can complement theoretical trajectories and analyses from other parts of the dataset.
This research details a novel way of examining forums qualitatively as part of a larger dataset. Furthermore, the chapter posits how relatively unobtrusive methods of observation can bring to the fore the ways in which prejudice still structures online social interaction.

**Keywords:** Forums; online gaming; online ethics; heteronormativity

**INTRODUCTION**

Forums have long been an important part of the internet, with the earliest forerunners, bulletin boards, having been in existence since the early 1980s (Rheingold, 1994). Despite the growth of social media, forums on a variety of topics still play an important role in online social interaction (Bryson, 2004; Hine, 2008; Jones, 1998; Kaigo & Watanabe, 2007; Kivits, 2004; Williams, 2006). In my study of the enactment of identity and the social norms in an online game, forums still featured heavily in the social lives of players who were looking to connect with others to talk about the game. As part of an ethnographic study of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) Final Fantasy XIV, I spent nearly six months conducting a qualitative observation of the game’s official forum, which was set up by the development company Square Enix. An examination of players talking about the game was highly revealing of their social attitudes and the framing of how they can enact identity in the game and its related spaces. This chapter initially examines some of the benefits and pitfalls of studying forums, for example the potential for qualitative studies of forums and how they can be established. It is also important to examine the ethics of studying forums since they can seem to be easy pickings for the novice social researcher looking to quickly grab data for a project, but also locate the study of forums in an ethical framework that respects users. The next section examines how to conduct a qualitative study of a forum, with examples of my own practices in the study, such as the approach to sampling and the use of NVivo to code forum data with other data from the study. Finally, the chapter concludes with some examples of forum discussions that were used in relation to the players’ attitudes towards gender and sexual norms.
THE BENEFITS AND DISADVANTAGES OF STUDYING A FORUM

Forums are attractive to social science researchers for a number of reasons. It is possible to easily view forums with little prior experience of using the internet or specialist equipment (Hine, 2008). In many cases, it is possible to view a forum without signing up to become a member as they are often publicly viewable. Forums will also have membership options to sign up in different ways, often by selecting a username and password and entering minimal personal details. Typically, only forum users can write messages on threads, which are lists of different users’ responses to each other. On some forums, there are also sections that are only visible to registered users. Threads are normally moderated according to a code of conduct set out in the forum’s rules by a group of users called either administrators or moderators. This code often revolves around maintaining polite and respectful language when interacting with other users and the avoidance of causing offence through ‘flaming’ or deliberately making abusive or inflammatory remarks.

In most cases, forums are thus relatively straightforward to access even for those with little experience of the internet. Hine (2008) also points out that this ease also poses a risk to users, where it can seem easy for researchers to systematically harvest data from a forum in one fell swoop without users knowing. Rather, Hine (2008) posits that much more can be learned from a forum by spending time participating as a user, or even as ‘lurkers’, who are users or casual visitors who only read a forum rather than interact. Orgad (2009) defines the career of a forum user in an interesting fashion. She puts forward how many users initially act as ‘lurkers’ on a website and may spend time reading a forum before starting to join in. At this stage, they may not even fully sign up as a user but browse any publicly available material to see if it is interesting, or if the community is convivial. After some time, they may start to engage with the forum by writing messages on threads and finding their feet. This user trajectory is helpful for understanding the ways in which internet users utilise forums and how social researchers can also navigate them. ‘Lurkers’ are often deemed difficult to capture in forum-based research since they remain silent and do not leave any traces (Williams, 2007). This does not necessarily mean that they are not participating, and may even feel they are part of the community even by frequently reading threads. Similarly, Hine (2008) suggests that an online ethnography of a forum necessitates regular visits to the forum to
experience how discussions unfold, and where appropriate, participate by writing posts. Social researchers can thus involve themselves in a forum in various ways other than just taking data, with degrees of participation that can be developed over time.

One problem with researching forums that follows is the perception of privacy versus the actual level of privacy afforded by the site set-up. This issue will be returned to in fuller detail in the ethics section, however for now it is important to note that forums and blogs are often viewed as a space intended for a particular audience (Moinian, 2006). Unlike many forums, the official Final Fantasy XIV forum can be read in its entirety without a login, hence the moderators kept reminding users that their posts could be read. Above, I noted the different ways that presence can be interpreted on a forum. Hine (2008) holds that studies of forums need the researcher to experience the forum as a full participant, rather than simply taking data. By necessity, I had to be a ‘lurker’ observer, but engaged with the forum by visiting it over the course of the day, on an almost daily basis, for nearly six months and looking over the most popular threads and ongoing conversations. These issues will be addressed more fully in the later ethics section.

It is also important to discern the different voices on a forum, where certain users become more vocal and tend to dominate conversation, or how the tone of a community can change over time or in response to particular events. A study of the large Japanese forum Channel 2 (‘ni-channeru’) suggested that the tone of a forum can change (Kaigo & Watanabe, 2007). Channel 2 is known for its disruptive, aggressive nature, which is often associated with the anonymous nature of interaction since users are not obliged to set up a username to take part and there are no moderators. Nevertheless, certain users became prominent voices on the forum regardless. In response to the circulation of graphic videos of the execution of a Japanese man taken hostage in Iraq in 2004, the tone of the forum changed and moderated itself by removing the offending images and videos from the forum. Certain users also took charge of this process and actively deleted the offending posts and videos. This study was successful since the authors had spent time on the forum and noted the change in interaction, which may not have been so pronounced to someone who had merely taken forum threads for analysis. Additionally, a simple ‘harvest’ of threads may have even missed such a thread altogether. Spending time on a forum also enables a researcher to effectively map the forum as part of a study, for example the potential to view it as part of an ethnographic project. The remainder of this section sets out how a study of a forum can
form an interesting and vivid part of an online ethnography that takes in multiple sites.

Online ethnography still needs to clearly define the field site, which may be less straightforward. Traditionally, ethnography requires time spent in a particular bounded location while undertaking the study (Hine, 2000). In offline ethnography, one must still decide on the field site, which tends to be driven more by a particular location, such as a school, or an interesting group (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Further negotiation may be needed after starting fieldwork to further refine the field site, such as access to a particular class (Delamont, 2002). With online ethnography, the field site is less bounded by a geographical location, though certain examples exist, such as Silver’s (2000) study of internet use in Blacksburg, Virginia, where Virginia Tech and the local authorities both contributed to infrastructure improvements to bring the city online at a much faster rate than elsewhere. Another approach can be identified, through the recognition of the researcher’s involvement in co-constructing the field site through engagement with respondents and the community being studied.

Boellstorff (2009) makes the claim that online ethnography involves creating a field site by reflexively engaging with respondents within a community and through participant observation. Markham (2005) also points to the need for online research to actively map a field site, which does not exist prior to (or outside of) the research process. This entails the researcher paying attention to her own actions, such as the search terms and search engines used to find the site, as well as examining how respondents construct boundaries in field sites (Markham, 2005). As a result, online ethnography involves an active participation in bounding the field site. Most ethnographic accounts of online games and worlds concern multiple, linked spaces. Taylor (2006) refers to EverQuest and related websites for guilds, databases, and forums for example, noting the ‘distributed social sphere’ (p. 51) around gaming, as players extend the social space of the game. Pearce and Artemesia (2009) followed the Uru group around different online worlds, such as There.com and Second Life, as well as other websites used by the group.

As part of my study into Final Fantasy XIV, I not only spent time in the game itself and interviewing other players, but also mapped the other types of websites they visited, including YouTube to watch videos of others playing, wiki pages to learn about the game, and multiple modes of interacting with other players. These included social media, blogs, as well as forums for the game. In a broad sense, the field of Final Fantasy XIV and its English-speaking players was thus large. Given the size, I tended to
focus on the more popular means for players to interact with each other, and forums remain a key part of the online gaming experience (Williams, 2007). For my study, it was therefore important to incorporate them in some way. The following section considers my approach to the forum in practical terms, as well as how I coded the data.

RESEARCH METHOD AND PLANNING

The research on the forum was intended to be complementary to the rest of the dataset. Initially, I started with three months of participant observation in the game Final Fantasy XIV and mapped the different sites visited by the community, such as forums, blogs, wiki pages, YouTube videos and so on. The next phase included 36 asynchronous online interviews, mostly conducted either over email or private messaging through two popular forums. Some of these were also image elicitation whereby I asked players for images of their avatar to discuss in the course of interviews. In the final phase, I decided to study the official forum for the game, which is run by the development company behind the game, Square Enix.

In March 2011, my original plan had been to spend some time with a group known as a Linkshell. These are informal groups of friends and acquaintances who spend time together in the game. On 8 March 2011, an official forum was finally launched by the developer Square Enix. The above-mentioned forums are independent of the company that develops the game, but there had been nothing officially run by the developers. The forum was launched to enable greater levels of communication between the development team and the fans, following its poor reception in the gaming media, with the game’s producer Naoki Yoshida regularly reading both the Japanese and English language forums, though he only posted messages on the Japanese section. The forum proved popular with players very quickly, especially since they believed their thoughts on the game would influence the developers. Following the Tohoku Earthquake on 11 March 2011, the company decided within a day to take the game offline due to the power problems that were affecting Japan. As a result, there were practical considerations in deciding to examine the forum.

During the time when the servers were offline, the new forum became very popular, partly as a way for players to express their condolences about the disaster in Japan, and for players to talk about the future direction of the game. Initially I looked at the forum perhaps as a way of gaining more
interviews as I had gained interview respondents via messages posted on other forums. I had originally messaged the moderators on two forums to find out if I could post my message on their forums to look for interviewees and the users stated that they were pleased that I had approached the administrators in this fashion. However, it became apparent that this would not be possible on the new official forum for the game. The forum has a strict policy preventing users from revealing their ‘true’ identities. Users were constantly reminded that the forum is a public space, since it can be viewed without logging in. If a player mentioned where they were from, or went into too much detail about their life, a moderator would often interject and delete such material from their post. Moderators would also often post messages in threads reminding users to not reveal personal details. This meant that I was unable to reveal myself as a researcher, nor contact moderators separately in the way that I had done before as there was no email address for them. I suspected that without permission from a moderator, my request may be viewed with some suspicion by the other forum users, following my experience with the other forums where players approved of my contact with the administrators, but also that the moderators would probably remove my request as it would be revealing too much about myself.

In order to get a feel for the forum, I read the majority of the threads posted in the first two weeks to see what players were discussing. After a while, it became apparent that so many threads were being posted that it was not possible to either keep up with them, nor would it have been practical to analyse all of them. I decided it would be best to focus on the longer threads, as well as regularly skimming others which would be the most useful for my study. The idea was to flesh out some of the meanings attributed to avatars and parts of their creation, such as online race and gender, following the themes of the interviews. Moreover, the data offered greater insight into the opinions and values held by the players. Official forums for such games are often slightly different compared to those run by fans. Fan-run forums tend to be stricter about politeness and etiquette, but fairly relaxed about users revealing a degree of personal information about themselves. The official forum took a different line where only swearing was an outright problem and arguments were allowed to continue for a longer period of time than on a fan forum. Users were actively prevented from talking about their personal lives as moderators would interject and remove anything deemed too personal from posts. These differences led to variations in the tone of interactions as well as the content especially in regard to homophobia and gender norms. It quickly became apparent that
an undercurrent of homophobia pervaded certain types of posts, which gave insight into the values of the players.

I focused on a section called ‘General Discussion’. The forum has 50 separate sections for each language area (Japanese, English, French and German), mostly concerned with specific elements of the game. General Discussion was the most-viewed section during this time, and comprised a wide range of topics relating to the game. I visited this section on a daily basis during the observation period and saved the most relevant threads. These were selected partly on the basis of popularity, in terms of page views and number of replies, which were listed next to the title of the thread, and how close the subject matter was to the research questions. Hundreds were saved locally on my computer, but only the most relevant 33 forum threads were included in the dataset.

Coding began during the first phase of interviews, and became a continual process during fieldwork. All of the interviews were saved into Word files then imported into NVivo for coding. Later, forum threads were imported in the same fashion, after being saved locally on my computer then formatted in Word. The speed with which coding can start is one of the benefits of conducting online research in this manner, as the interviews essentially transcribe themselves when conducted via email. Online research thus lends itself readily to using Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) for coding purposes. CAQDAS is often associated with grounded theory methods of coding, where the researcher examines the data, building concepts until theoretical saturation is reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, Coffey, Rendd, Dicks, Soyinka, and Mason (2006) suggest that such software can be used to expose how analysis is not a linear process, but can demonstrate hypertextual links within data for example. Though research is expected to be written up into a narrative, the messy nature of much research, and the continuous nature of analysis needs to be recognised (Baym & Markham, 2009). This messiness can be revealed through the use of CAQDAS with larger datasets that encourage the use of technology in coding, especially where different types of data, such as written and visual, can be juxtaposed and linked together in interesting ways.

**ETHICS ONLINE**

Ethics codes of professional bodies, such as those of the British Sociological Association (BSA) and Economic and Social Research
Council (ESRC), tend to overly problematise online research. Both suggest that online research warrants close exploration of ethics, due to its relatively recent development. Orton-Johnson (2010) holds that online research is overly scrutinised in these ethics codes, with neither differentiating between the internet as a culture, or a methodological tool. By declaring that all research involving an online component warrants a full review of ethics also equates such research with research ‘involving more than minimal risk’ (ESRC, 2010, §1.2.3). This list includes research with vulnerable groups, covert research, or research which could endanger the researcher and/or respondents, as well as ‘[r]esearch involving respondents through the internet, in particular where visual images are used, and where sensitive issues are discussed’ (ESRC, 2010, §1.2.3).

Orton-Johnson (2010) prefers the Association of Internet Researchers’ (AoIR) code of ethics, which takes a more nuanced view of internet research. It encourages the researcher to consider different aspects of online cultures and how ethical frameworks vary between countries, which is important where online cultures can be international (AoIR, 2002). For example, the American perspective tends to consider the utilitarian approach of risk versus cost and liability for the institution, whereas European countries are concerned with the welfare of respondents. This ethical framework also considers how respondents are subjects of the research (thus under the remit of human subjects research), and/or authors of texts that are being researched (e.g. bloggers, journalists, forum users). As a result, the debate over public and private spaces online can become complicated. In a recent update to its ethics statement, the AoIR has established a section of their website where case studies can be published for researchers to refer to, as a way of creating a practice-based approach to ethics as new methods and types of website are created (AoIR, 2012). My research concerns both an online culture, and using the internet as a research tool.

Research into online forums, as well as other textual material drawn from the internet, has been considered problematic. Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder (2008) hold that the main issue is how the internet offers ‘privacy in public’ (p. 27). The AoIR (2002) also suggests that researchers need to consider how their respondents view their online contributions – do they perceive their forum posts or blogs as for private audiences only? Svenningsson Elm (2009) clarifies the problem further, by positing notions of public and private online as a continuum. She borrows from Gold’s notion of the different types of participant observation (from full observer to full participant, and variations along the way), and characterises...
different levels of public and private: public; semi-public (accessible to anyone but requires registration); semi-private (requires membership dictated by formal requirements); and private. This list is by no means exhaustive, but provides a useful starting point. Svenningsson Elm (2009) also puts forward the idea of ‘fuzzy boundaries’, which leave users in a potentially precarious position, where they may not realise how public their communication is (p. 77). These ideas also complicate researchers’ attempts to garner informed consent. With forums, the questions revolve around the fuzzy boundary, and the audience that the user believes she is writing for.

So, how can forums be approached ethically as a research site? Anyone can view the official Final Fantasy XIV forum, however only players with active accounts could post messages. Moderators constantly reminded users not to reveal personal information about themselves for this reason. Yet, this did not seem to prevent users posting personal material. Moinian (2006) suggests that bloggers believe their audience will be sympathetic towards their posts, and the same could be said of forums. Even where a forum is publicly available, users may assume that only people who are sympathetic will read the forum, especially if it caters towards a particular interest. The perception of privacy (and anonymity) leads to a degree of disinhibition on forums too. Consequently, the material from the forum also needs to be handled sensitively, and usernames are removed. The next section gives some examples of discussions from the forum around the theme of heteronormativity. Part of the study’s aims included examining the role of heteronormativity, or the assumption of heterosexuality and gender norms in gaming communities, and the rules of the forum permitted discussion of topics that are often deemed potentially inflammatory elsewhere.

HETERONORMATIVITY AND THE OFFICIAL FORUM

The study pursued a series of questions relating to the intersections of the avatar’s identity and embodiment. At the outset of such games, players are expected to create an avatar from a series of options including gender, which is often presented in a binary fashion. In the course of interviews, it had become apparent that many players still relied on heteronormativity to make sense of gender online, whereby biological sex and gender were perceived to match, even between player and avatar. For the most part, players assumed that the gender of the avatar and the sex of the player
were congruent, with a few exceptions where self-defined male players switched gender with the avatar. This was sometimes defined in terms of a female avatar as being ‘nicer’ to look at, which is a long-held stereotype among online gamers (Huh & Williams, 2010). This particular point will be returned to in the next section. When I started to study the official forum, I wanted to continue with this theme by searching for threads that concerned gender and sexuality. One of the noticeable qualities of the official forum is that moderators do not necessarily prevent particular types of discussion taking place. Many forums for online gaming actively prevent players talking about sexuality. Following a series of arguments around erotic roleplay (ERP) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) guilds in World of Warcraft (Sundén, 2009), many online game forums banned certain search terms, such as ‘gay’, ‘ERP’ and others, which are covered by their filters (Kaolian, 2010). The official forum for Final Fantasy XIV does not include such measures, which represented an important opportunity for research into this area.

The heteronormative approach to gender emphasises its relationship to sexuality (Butler, 1990), with the heterosexual ideal structuring how gender continues in a binary fashion such as men needing to be masculine and women feminine. Valkyrie (2011) holds that heteronormativity emphasises authenticity and honesty in intimate relationships online, and in turn leads to scrutiny of the player’s ‘true’ gender to avoid homosexual encounters. This formed part of his research into cybersexual encounters in MMORPGs, where players enact sexual behaviour through the avatar. On the Final Fantasy XIV forum, one post offered the following example, which illustrates how heteronormativity can be discerned online:

I knew a guy (lets call him Mr. X) in FFXI who was hitting on this girl which was really a guy and myself and other guys knew that ... just for fun we told our friend (the guy who played the female char[acter]) to play along. 2–3 month Mr. X thought he was going out with her [in-game] ... and we found on vent it was actually a guy ... Mr. X never showed up again since then ... lol [laugh out loud].

In FFXIV [Final Fantasy XIV] we have another guy who thought he was going out with a girl but actually was a guy ... it last 4 month lol at least this guy didn’t quite the game lol he changed LS [Linkshell: a social group in the game] and never talks to her (him) now lolol. (Posted on 29 July 2011)

This example divided players replying to this thread, with some finding it funny, whereas others disliked the level of deception. Both of the apparently male players believed that they were engaged in ‘real’ relationships with ‘real’ women, but were publicly humiliated by others who were ‘in on the joke’. The players concerned were so humiliated that they felt
compelled to shun their social circle. Such behaviour also makes players seek some form of ‘proof’ of gender. Valkyrie (2011) originally wondered if sexuality would become more pliable online, with less focus on ‘true’ gender, with the avatar providing an alternate focal point for sexual encounters rather than the body of the player. However, his findings suggested that this was not the case where heteronormative sexuality remains in place. Nevertheless, the link between offline and online norms can be seen, especially in terms of constraining sexuality, and a continuing emphasis on authenticity to avoid duplicity. This can be seen further in another thread.

When New York passed a law allowing same-sex marriage in July 2011, coincidentally, a thread suggested the addition of a wedding service to the game. Many online games offer a form of wedding service, including World of Warcraft and Second Life. In Final Fantasy XI, weddings were only possible between two avatars that were not of the same gender. The opening post of the thread proposed adding weddings, but only if an avatar could marry anyone they wished. Players do not always have an avatar whose gender matches their offline sex, thus potentially, weddings are less straightforward, such as an online marriage between a male player and female player with two male avatars, or two female players with two female avatars and so on. However, the thread quickly became argumentative as can be seen in the following post:

I can see it now gay parade in ul'dah [a town in the game]:/its just all wrong in my view. [ ... ]

My father brought me up to be if you say anti-gay and his father did the same. And i'll bring up my kids the same way, its just the way my family is. (Posted on 14 July 2011)

This player conflates a same-gender avatar marriage with the offline version. Despite the potential for more flexible attitudes towards gender and sexuality (Valkyrie, 2011), heteronormative approaches to both remain in online games and their forums, hence any type of marriage is subject to the same norms in the minds of players.

Such outright homophobic attitudes have come under scrutiny in the gaming media (e.g. Scimeca, 2012), yet academic research has neglected this problem. For example, despite being called ‘fag’ and ‘homo’ by other players while researching World of Warcraft, which was visible in the chatlogs he published, Bainbridge (2010) did not comment about the casual homophobia present in these remarks. One of the few examples can be found in Sundén’s (2009) discussion of the debate around the advertisement
of an LGBT World of Warcraft guild, and its developers’ initially hostile reaction, though this was later retracted. Overall sexuality and sexual norms have been examined far less than gender in relation to gaming (Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012). The threads drawn from this forum thus represent an important means of studying this issue in greater depth. One further example demonstrates how levels of homophobia increased in this thread and how players seek to emphasise the game as a separate space to everyday life.

One player voiced their objection in a rather strange fashion. In a lengthy post, C. claimed that homosexuality is the result of promiscuity, childhood trauma caused by family breakdown and hormone problems. After a lengthy conservative, homophobic diatribe, the post closes with the following:

For myself personally, I would rather not have to deal with homosexual issues while playing a game that I’m trying to relax and have fun with. Putting my practicality aside and going to my personal feelings, the very thought turns my stomach. If there is constant stomach turning by various players of various personal thoughts on the issue, there’s always a chance it won’t keep them playing long.

Now I know you could say, ‘well maybe heterosexuality turns mine’, but the reality is that heterosexuality is the normal way of things. For the sake of humanity, it had better stay that way. I know it sounds mean, but it is the truth. (Posted on 15 July 2011)

Many players posted replies that can be divided into two broad themes. The first is that other players may not perceive game marriage as having the same meaning as offline marriage, so this player should not be so angry. The second stemmed from gay players attempting to debunk the post while expressing outrage. However, C. later replied by restating a belief in homosexuality as a genetic mutation, and denied the existence of evolution. Other players were quick to point out the existence of gay players on all servers regardless.

The majority of the thread continued in this manner, with a handful of players objecting to the inclusion of weddings, and the rest mostly in favour. Yet, only a few made posts like these:

Though in [Final Fantasy] XI it’s for opposite sex partners only and it pretty much sux. I’d hate to see them pull a bigoted move like that again, especially since [Final Fantasy] XIV is full of sexual references everywhere, straight or gay, and some of them are quite racy may I add >_< I’d rather have no marriage at all than witnessing this all over again.

It screws over the whole community as people roleplaying an opposite sex of their real life get cut out too. (Posted on 16 July 2011)
However, the attitudes of players like C. on the forum encourage the reproduction of particular heteronormative opinions about sexuality from offline life in relation to the game. In Sundén’s ethnographic study of an LGBT guild, which are social groups in the game, she notes the confusion of other players when told the guild was LGBT only (Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012). Other players who wanted to join could not see why LGBT players were trying to set themselves apart. Though Sundén felt the guild itself was constraining, such as how other members pressured her to define her sexuality away from being queer, she also noted that the guild enabled its LGBT players to interact in different ways, without so much heteronormative pressure. She suggests that such guilds can act as a safe haven for LGBT players in online games, in the face of the type of criticism outlined above (ibid.).

By looking at how views of sexuality are expressed on forums, the effect of heteronormativity online can be more clearly perceived. Where online games are framed as a form of immersive escapism separate to everyday life, such ‘real’ life matters are excluded discursively by players. Healy (1997) posited that online communities were not necessarily so diverse as their offline counterparts because users could easily walk away from a group if they disagreed with other users’ views. However, Nardi (2010) stated that she was surprised at how many different backgrounds were represented among World of Warcraft players—indeed she doubted that she would have met them in any other situation. I suggest that the difference with this type of community is the game, which brings players together through shared enjoyment.

At times on the official forum especially with discussions around sexuality, the players put forward the notion that fantasy and gaming should not feature ‘real’ life considerations and debates. Grosz (2001) has noted a similar tension in discourses around virtual reality, which involves a user wearing a headset that projects a space directly into their field of vision. Furthering her earlier work on the relationship between mind and body (Grosz, 1994), Grosz (2001) later developed an approach towards virtual reality, emphasising the masculine approach towards embodiment enshrined in virtual reality research. She notes the way in which a masculine, liberal discourse promotes the separation of the mind from the body, with virtual reality enabling an escape from the messy, physical everyday. In effect, virtual reality and online games create a control fantasy for participants, which make them believe these spaces can be more easily controlled in comparison to their everyday lives. The online gamers who
sought to exclude discussions of homosexuality are pursuing a similar agenda. In promoting gaming as a way of escaping the everyday, these online gamers feel able to try to control the game and discussions around it. However, this study has shown how this gap does not actually exist beyond the discursive efforts made by players to prevent such discussions from taking place. These tensions can be seen further in the ‘missing genders’ thread.

THE ‘MISSING GENDERS’ THREAD: HETERONORMATIVITY AND THE EMBODIED AVATAR

Cloud participated in the first round of interviews in January 2011. At this point, he mentioned his campaign to persuade the development team to add the so-called ‘missing’ genders prior to the game’s release. He had also tried this in Final Fantasy XI, as well as other online games that had races with a single gender. Race is part of avatar creation and denotes a range of different types of humanoid appearances — indeed species could be just as applicable (Galloway, 2012). In an interview, Cloud mentioned having posted this request on as many fan forums as possible, so it was probably inevitable that he would do the same when the official, developer-run forum launched in March 2011. The missing genders thread became popular very quickly. Many players were supportive with many players posting supportive messages including the one below:

I, too, would love to see male miquotes and female roegadyns in game. I’ve never understood the mentality of providing only one gender, unless if the race itself only has one gender. However, as you state it’s right there in the lore, that both genders exist. (Posted on 8 March 2011)

Many posts mentioned lore, which is written by authors in the development team as part of the game narrative, and alludes to the existence of female Roegadyn and male Miqo’te, but they never appear in the game. Cloud often referred to the lore argument suggesting it was odd that these races were mentioned, but absent. In Final Fantasy XI, Cloud was thwarted in his campaign since the lore claimed the Galka (the Roegadyn predecessor) were mono-gendered, and reincarnated instead of reproducing.
Similarly, the male Mithra (the Miqo’te equivalent) were said to be solitary and lived elsewhere. Yet, players who had spent a long time in Final Fantasy XI often conflated the narrative of both games in voicing their objections to Cloud’s plan, along the lines of the following post:

If a male Miqote is written into lore as a very rare thing, then I am against the addition of a male Miqote as a playable race/gender. It would make the lore seem very silly indeed. If it doesn’t mention this, then I don’t mind either way. If it means less gender-swapping in the game then I’m all for that as it’s annoying to talk to a Miqote and then discover they’re a guy. First impressions and all that — you go by what you see!

Same thing for female Roegadyn. If the lore allows for it, great, if it’s a reincarnation lore that says there are only males, no thanks.

I don’t think the world suffers from the lack of these gender/race options if there is lore to explain it, basically. (Posted on 19 March 2011)

Since the races look similar in both games, the players confuse the narratives, which is unsurprising as some of my respondents had played Final Fantasy XI for nearly ten years. The game’s narrative can become a stronger reference point for players depending on the situation at different times. In Pearce and Artemesia’s (2009) study of players from the defunct Myst online game, the players remained very attached to the narrative after the original game was closed. The Myst group had also played the offline games in the series in the past, which left a significant cultural contribution for them to consider. The lore of a game and any predecessors becomes internalised by the players who devote hours to it, over long periods of time. Consequently, the game’s culture can have a similar effect to that of the culture the players have grown up in. The potential for change in the game itself is measured according to what the existing game culture permits.

Interestingly, the above post also discusses gender switching, which is a prevalent topic of discussion in much research around gender and gaming (Huh & Williams, 2010; Hussain & Griffiths, 2008). One of the most popular stereotypes in online gaming relates to self-defined heterosexual male players who have female avatars because they are ‘nicer to look at’ (ibid.). In some online games, there are certain races with curvaceous appearances, such as the female Night Elves in World of Warcraft, which are so associated with male players that anyone using them is perceived to be male (Nardi, 2010). Gender switching is generally deemed to be problematic and dishonest by other players, but continues regardless. Other players also believed that adding the missing genders could ‘discourage’ gender switching, especially with the Miqo’te, which were associated with self-defined
male players. Yet, judging by many self-defined female supporters, this seems unlikely, as can be seen in the below post:

I’d love to play as a male miqo’te, even though it doesn’t reflect my gender [in real life]. I just wouldn't be able to resist the cuteness. The idea of it just makes me smile, especially if they end up being more boyish that RRRRGRGH GRUFF MANLY MAN type of models. It would be a hard decision between male miqo’te and female roe [gadyn], especially if both of them are done well. (Posted on 16 March 2011)

Some self-defined female players writing in this thread were keen to play as male Miqo’te. Overall, the male Miqo’te is perceived as potentially more androgynous, so if anything, the addition of male Miqo’te could increase gender switching. Moreover, the male Miqo’te was often framed in a similar way to the female, with an underlying theme of self-defined female players objectifying a male Miqo’te. This perpetuates the notion of the Miqo’te as more sexual and attractive than other races. In the thread, some self-defined female players posted along the following lines:

I am gonna make a harem of catboys for myself! yay for female gamers who finally have their objects of desires! (Posted on 14 April 2011)

Others countered this notion, rejecting a sexual aspect in favour of a more restrained version concerning a cute male Miqo’te instead.

It’s not that I have a "problem" with yaoi or cat boys, it’s the attitude. The reason most people stay away from the idea of manthra [male Mithra/Miqo'te] is because of the "LOL ANIME FANGURLZ" [fangirls] who pretty much just want to fetishize them/make them make out with each other.

The reason I want the missing genders is equality and to play something that suits my personality better, not so I can stare at my model for hours and write terrible slash fan fiction about him. (Posted on 11 April 2011)

Yaoi is a particular form of hentai, or erotic comics, and involves two young men either embarking on a romantic affair, or having a sexual encounter (McLelland, 2006). These comics tend to be produced for and by young heterosexual female consumers, but they are denigrated in Japan through the nickname Fujoshi (‘rotten women’) leading to the concealment of Fujoshi identity unless amongst others (Okabe & Ishida, 2012). McLelland (2006) also notes a link with so-called slash fiction, written by fans of shows about sexual relationships between male characters, such as Kirk and Spock in the original Star Trek series. He also points out that such comics have spread online into English-speaking cultures, much like other forms of anime and manga. Final Fantasy players are often framed as fans of such cultures (Consalvo, 2012), which leads them to evoke such
ideas. For some self-defined female heterosexual players, the male Miqo’te potentially represented as much of a sexualised avatar as the female Miqo’te for the self-defined male heterosexual players, yet the community framed such behaviour in different ways. Given the relatively common occurrence of self-defined male players who use female avatars, their behaviour was more readily associated with secure heterosexuality, even if they were also positioned as disrespectful, lonely, nerdy men. In this particular game, the relationship with Japanese culture meant that these self-defined female players were associated with yaoi, and a comparatively worse position than the self-defined male players. Excessive heterosexual desire in female players is portrayed as problematic. Valkyrie’s (2011) study of cybersexual relationships in online games heavily suggested that prevailing norms around women’s sexual behaviour were maintained where players perceived to be women would be stigmatised for participating in sexual behaviour with others. The expression of sexual desire was thus supposed to be contained and potentially shameful for female players, and this is perpetuated in regard to the avatar.

Such assertions regarding the Miqo’te as a sexualised race also point to how gender and sexuality cannot be viewed separately, thus researchers who suggest that sexuality should not be part of studies of online games are mistaken (e.g. Bainbridge, 2010). This point is further developed if the objections to the additions of the missing genders are included, which were homophobic in some instances due to the potential embodiment of these avatars, such as the below quotation:

Female Rog [Roegadyn] no sorry against it

Male cats nope sorry not like the manthras [men who use Miqo’te avatars, or Mithra previously] that play will change to males anyways they play kitties for a reason >>

Female Highlanders say what???? so yall wanna see big giant muscle woman running around? Jhmmmmm no thx [thanks] leave em the way they are. (Posted on 11 March 2011)

One of the main objections to the female versions of these races concerned size. Muscular female avatars were perceived as repellent. Other users went as far as stating they did not think such a ‘manly’ female avatar would be very popular. In terms of the avatar’s embodiment, many players believe female avatars should correspond to particular embodied norms. Slender female avatars are normative, and larger, more muscular female avatars are framed as unintelligible within a heteronormative environment. This echoes the treatment of female bodybuilders, who are accused of being
too masculine in seeking to build muscle, and unattractive to heterosexual men (Shilling & Bunsell, 2011). Similar judgements are applied to larger female avatars in games.

However, there are other notions at work here that still need to be unpacked:

First off, having male mi’qote are a BAD IDEA. You’d be stealing the gay race from elezens. Not to mention, it would gay up the whole server something fierce. I’m talking pride parades, rainbow-colored trees etc., And no, I’m not against homosexuality, I just don’t think it fits for this type of setting.

And don’t go telling me I’m wrong, because you know, deep down, that I’m right.

The only reason anyone would play male cat person like the ones in this game is because they’re a flaming homosexual who wants to look *CUTE* for all his friends. My post might get deleted because some sensitive person will contact the mods and claim it’s discriminatory, but I just want a game without rainbow trees and bass-beat dance bars. Is that wrong of me to ask? Really? (Posted on 15 March 2011)

This post is probably one of the more extreme objections and shows more blatant homophobia. The game is posited as a space where particular aspects of life ought to be excluded, much like the wedding service thread discussed above. Muscular ‘masculine’ female avatars and ‘feminine’ male avatars remain subject to heteronormativity, even online. Though players try to resist such norms, gender norms are constantly reinscribed. Gender still needs to be embodied along particular lines by the avatar itself. This thread illustrates how heteronormativity and homophobia operate in the game and its related spaces via players and their prejudices. In this way, particular dialogues around gender are foreclosed as players emphasise normative ways of both performing and embodying gender in online games.

**CONCLUSION**

This chapter has examined the process of studying a forum qualitatively over a period of time and how it can be incorporated into a larger dataset. Following the careful mapping of an online community, it is possible to learn much about the social values and norms that its users bring online. In my research, the forum complemented the interview data where it further illustrates the role of heteronormativity in the regulation of gender and sexuality. By necessity, the researcher may need to become a ‘lurker’ as a form of engagement with a forum and visit regularly to form a deep
understanding of the group. While forums can seem straightforward to study given how unobtrusively one can ‘harvest’ data, it is much more beneficial to regularly visit a forum over a period of time. In this sense, a study of a forum can comprise an interesting part of an online ethnography. Nevertheless, there are some issues with the ethics of studying a forum that need to be addressed. One important ethical theme is the way in which users perceive the audience for their posts as automatically sympathetic without the expectation that a researcher is taking their posts. Such material ought to be handled sensitively by researchers, yet this does not mean that forums need to be excluded from research. Forums remain structured according to social norms and are very amenable to qualitative studies of social interaction. This chapter has shown how forum data can comprise an interesting and vivid part of an ethnographic study.

NOTES

1. Final Fantasy XI, the previous online game in the series.
2. Ventrilo, the Skype-like voice software for online games.
3. Miqo’te and Roegadyn are two of the five races in the game and were initially only available as single genders – female and male respectively.

REFERENCES


