

# Revision of Queer Bodies: Modifications of Sexual Affordances in *World of Warcraft*

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Avatars, affordances, World of Warcraft, queer, embodiment, identity.

## INTRODUCTION

In queering gameplay, cues of sexuality concentrate the possibilities of action communicated by (avatar) design. However, many games such as Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) ensure the erasure of queerness by “correcting” threats on heteronormative gameplay – updating the *queer bugs* which permit the player to embody queerness. Centering a discussion of gaming as an embodied experience through avatar design, this paper explores how scripted values may constrain online performance, allowing a player to express queerness in *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. Notably, this paper explores the alterations invested in avatar bodies and how they influence sexual affordances for players, compromising queer gameplay when the game is patched, or as new expansions are released.

*WoW* is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game which has been active for 14 years as of November 2017. The player base has fluctuated, but reached 12 million active players in 2010 (Nardi 2010). Like many role-playing games, *WoW* allows the player to create an avatar, which is required for the player to participate with the virtual world and communicate with other players world-wide. Avatars are visually customized by the player via user interfaces, and players are able to choose between sex, race, and class – “class” referring to possible archetypal roles or careers for the avatar. There are also multiple cosmetic customization options, variant to each playable race, such as “markings”, “horns”, “piercings”, etc. Since the initial release, *WoW* has had six major expansions (with a seventh announced: “*World of Warcraft: Battle for Azeroth*”, but no current release date has been confirmed) as well as hundreds of patches, made available as frequently as once every month.

Each game expansion and major patch has either added new playable races, or has updated the appearances and actions of the already available models. Although each playable race is restricted to select a gender between a binary, low level design choices, which are scripted by the affordances (i.e. actions and appearances), are unique to each race, allowing the emergence of a pluralism of gender performances.

Sundén describes the difference in experience according to avatar models in digital games. Sundén further expresses how bodies take shape through game play in the interactions with both objects and subjects (Sundén 2010), i.e. through the availability of actions and an ongoing validation of appearances. Playable races, like male Blood

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Elves and female Orcs, which perform male femininity and female masculinity (although in a more tongue-in-cheek manner), are highly cherished amongst queer players.

[t]he design of avatars – how they look, move, feel, fight, jump, speak, laugh, flirt, dance etc. – speaks volumes about social and cultural perceptions of sexed bodies (Sundén 2009)

Yet, through revising avatar body design, Blizzard asserts a force which polices the social appearance of gender, creating regulatory regimes (Butler 1990) which continue to perpetuate a heteronormative standard of (avatar) bodies and a problematic representation and mediation of sex/gender. This is largely discernible from the history of increasing the sexual dimorphism between character models in addition to the prescriptions of what it means to have a masculine or feminine frame.

Observing Figure 1 (Rubenstein 2007), Rubenstein provides a side-by-side comparison between two of the playable races in *WoW*. In the alpha version, the degree of sexual dimorphism, the phenotypic or observable difference between the two sexes is minimal. In this version, common types of dimorphism are: observable differences in size, colour, or ornamentation. Yet, in the commercial release version of the game, racial ornamentation for the playable races, such as Tauren horns (top of Figure 1) or Troll tusks (bottom of Figure 1) are significantly smaller, almost nonexistent, on the female counterparts (McArthur 2014). The changes from the alpha were supplemented by the significant amount of feedback that the alpha testers imposed; extensively advocating for the typical sexualization and implantation of Western beauty standards to the female avatar design.



**Figure 1:** Rubenstein’s comparison of two races from the alpha release and the current versions of 2007. Above: Tauren, below: Trolls.

To Sundén, queer players have taken advantage of Blizzard’s attempts at enforcing regulatory regimes. Sundén describes that the *straightening devices* which are used by games like *WoW* sometimes fail to regulate gameplay into being heterosexual, since queer play *reorients* the desires of queer players (Sundén 2009). Yet, Butler indicates that through the definition of asymmetrical values of what it means to be “masculine” and “feminine”, the “Other” identities, which are not described by (exclusively) *either or*, are non-existent.

The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between “feminine” and “masculine,” where these are understood as expressive attributes of “male” and “female.” The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of “identities” cannot “exist” - that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not “follow” from either sex or gender. (Butler 1990).



**Figure 2:** A screenshot of the avatar models for the Tauren race as of the *Warlords of Draenor* (Blizzard 2014) expansion.

In Figure 2, the Tauren race (as seen previously in Figure 1) are displayed with their newest character model updates (as of 2014). The male character model had already portrayed a hyper-masculine frame in the previous update, thus in this edition mostly received a texture change to further accentuate its masculine features. However, the female character model design changes are much more prominent. The posture and proportions are akin to those of other female models for different races, the gaze has been softened, and the markings give the impression of a thinner body with narrower shoulders. Similar changes are implemented for other character models, such as the female Orc model. Kotaku published an article which outlined these changes (Fahey 2014), where users who commented on the article provided ample validation of the feminized changes – primarily led by straight male players announcing that the models now possessed sexual appeal<sup>1</sup>. As female characters served for the gaze of other males (Yee 2005; DiGiuseppe 2007), Blizzard’s design decisions clearly promoted a common appearance for female character models. Notably, playable races, such as

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<sup>1</sup> These types of validations are visible throughout many other blog posting websites and articles.

Night Elves and Blood Elves predominantly occupied the game servers, while other appearances were rarely seen (Nardi 2010).

While scripted low-level design choices allow the emergence of gender performativity, Blizzard continues widening the gap between the binary genders to create more abrupt sexual dimorphisms between sexualized character models, erasing any possible affordances for queer performativity. Given that Blizzard will continue the trajectory which has been shown in the paper, queer bugs will be unable to subvert the heteronormative narrative of *World of Warcraft*.

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