THE PLAYER BEHIND THE AVATAR
A Social Role Theory Perspective on Perceptions of Agency and Communion in Videogames
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INTRODUCTION

• According to Social Role Theory, repeatedly observing people in roles leads to inferring trait information based on the roles taken.¹
• Social roles affect perceptions of an individual’s communion (associated with femininity) and agency traits (associated with masculinity). In videogames, roles can be chosen freely, unrestricted by physical or economical factors.²
• Do assumed roles in videogames lead to trait associations to the player?

METHOD

• In a pilot study, we charted common archetypes in online fantasy games. The role most associated with communion was the healer archetype, and the one most associated with agency was the warrior archetype.
• 226 participants read “Tom”/“David’s” (counterbalanced) biography repeatedly mentioning they play a healer/warrior and watched a 30 sec video of a healer/warrior playing in popular MMORPG World of Warcraft.
• They then rated the person they read about on measures of communion and agency.²

RESULTS

• Reading about and seeing “Tom”/“David” play a warrior led to higher ratings of agency than communion.
• Reading about and seeing “Tom”/“David” play a healer led to higher levels of communion than agency.

CONCLUSIONS

• Fictional roles in MMORPGs are associated with different levels of communion/femininity and agency/masculinity.
• This role information informs judgments of players in these roles, even in a digital environment where people are unrestricted in choosing this role.
• Future directions How do digital social roles interact with gender? Can this interaction reinforce stereotypes in online gaming?


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