

Confessions of an MMORPG Cross-Dresser

By Bruce Sterling Woodcock

Hello, my name is Bruce, and I like to play female characters in online games.

It wasn't always this way. My first exposure to the internet gaming occurred in 1989 while I was attending Purdue University. Oh, I had been playing computer and video games for years before then, and I had even done my share of time in the BBS scene, but the revelation that the internet allowed me to connect, in real time, with complete strangers thousands of miles away, **for free**, was truly staggering. My discovery of the various tools of early net communication progressed rapidly, from email to Usenet news to finger to talk. By 1990, I had fully immersed myself in the growing phenomenon of TinyMUDs, an offshoot of the original line of Multi-User Dungeons that had started back in 1978 with Richard Bartle and Roy Trubshaw. We didn't care that we were limited to just text. We were making virtual worlds! We were engaged in a cyberspace revolution!

My early characters were universally male and, perhaps out of ego, usually looked just like myself, albeit an idealized and empowered version of the computer geek I actually was. But like many nerds of that era, I was a social outcast even among my peers, and lacked the adequate social skills to communicate effectively in the real world, let alone a virtual one. But in those virtual worlds were **girls, real girls**, and they actually wanted to **talk** to me. At least, they did until I fell into the hidden, precarious traps of social communication, the plethora of unknown and unavoidable *faux pas* that inevitably led to

making a bad first impression. Still, I muddled through, and actually did manage to make some friends, and even find romance, in the wild whirlwind of those early days. Soon I had even become involved in the practice of TinySex, a TinyMUD version of what later internet generations would call “cybering.”

But there was one woman, in a virtual world named Islandia, who enchanted me more than any other. Her character went by the name Faerie, and she was everything a man could want: mystery, beauty, charm, intelligence, and a devastatingly sharp wit. And if the rumors were true, she was the best of the best when it came to TinySex. I was completely smitten with her, but due to my earlier social fumbling, she would have nothing to do with me. She had many other friends on the MUD, though, including a few from real life who went to the same college, and one of them had recently changed his character’s in-game gender from male to female. I was partly to blame for it; since MUDs were text-based, when you entered a room of people all you saw was a list of names, not each individual description of each character, and I had kept mistaking him for female since he had a very feminine-sounding name. We all had a good laugh, and he adopted the female persona in game as his “sister.”

Faerie, as it turned out, actually preferred the company of the fairer sex, and with my recent exposure to the idea that **men** could actually pretend to be **women** in the game, I began to hatch a plan. I would create a new, female character, one that would not have the historical baggage my male character had. I would carefully craft her to behave and act like just the sort of woman Faerie would lust after. She was designed, specifically, to

seduce Faerie, and to allow me to experience a new social relationship I would never have otherwise been able to enjoy. I decided, for the sake of ethics, that I would not lie about my new character's player; I would simply say I preferred to keep it a secret.

And thus, Lorianna was born, and in due time she and Faerie had become quite the item, just as I had planned. We were both enjoying each other's company, and Lorianna had become quite popular MUD-wide. But I was not prepared for how those virtual experiences were becoming increasingly substantive. Could I actually turn our virtual relationship into a real one? What if she had a boyfriend? Would she still accept me once I told her my terrible secret? What chance would a long distance relationship between two teenagers have, anyway? I had to find out more about who Faerie really was.

I put my newly acquired internet-fu to work. I knew that Faerie's real life friends and fellow MUDders went to Berkeley, and so I began my search there. Back in those early days, the UNIX finger command could be used to see who was logged into a machine, even from across the internet. I got the names of a few undergraduate machines at Berkeley and began monitoring them. Whenever Faerie would log into the MUD, I would see what accounts were logged in on the servers, paying close attention to which ones that had just recently done so. When Faerie would log out, I would check the list of accounts again, looking for who was logging out. After only a couple of nights, I had narrowed the list of potential candidate logins to just one: **Trip**.

I was shocked. Was Islandia's most renowned femme fatale actually a guy? It was almost inconceivable. Sure, the high frequency of virtual cross-dressing had become an accepted fact on TinyMUDs by then, but **Faerie**? After days of nervous tension, I couldn't take it anymore – I had to tell Faerie the truth, and the whole truth. That night, we had a long talk online, wherein I revealed to her who really was, and what I had done, and how I had discovered who she really was, too. And then she told me about her player, Trip, and how he enjoyed playing female characters, and how this sort of virtual gender bending was just another exercise in roleplaying.

Trip and I remained friends, both online and off, for many years thereafter, and I even got him a job where I worked. But as a result of that early experience, I began to play female characters more and more frequently, and my male ones less and less. With the rise of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games in 1996 and 1997, virtual worlds had finally become graphical, and once again I dived right in. But I soon found that there were noticeable differences in how male and female characters were treated in online games, even when everyone knew there was a good chance the female's player was really a guy.

Female characters are often given free stuff, either from males looking to impress them, or from females looking to help out their own. They're more likely to receive help and assistance in game when they ask, and less likely to get ganked by fellow players. Male characters, on the other hand, are often viewed with more suspicion by females, and as a competitive threat by their fellow males. And there are other forms of more subtle

gender discrimination. The true extent of these elements in virtual worlds, and their psychological origins, are a subject of frequent debate. I can only speak for myself when I have found them to be generally true in my experience.

But there are other, far more visible reasons for males to play female characters in modern graphical MMORPGs. Let's be blunt – female video game characters are frequently **hot**, and a sexy girl on the cover of your retail box can help sell your videogame. And it's not just games like Tomb Raider and Dead or Alive – look at the box covers for the MMORPGs EverQuest, Lineage II, Guild Wars, and World of Warcraft, not to mention those notorious Anarchy Online ads. Who doesn't want their character to look good? As one fellow player once put it to me, "If I have to stare at an ass in game for hours and hours every day, it might as well be a female ass." And don't the game developers know it. This year at E3, while playing the upcoming MMORPG title *Soul of the Ultimate Nation* from Webzen, I was positively giddy to discover that the half-skirt on the female Elementalist character actually **flips up** when she jumps into the air, exposing her shiny panties underneath. Talk about your fan service!

Of course, playing a female character in an MMORPG is not without its drawbacks. Sometimes I have to fend off the clumsy, amorous desires of young males with no social skills – the very same sort of people I once was, so many years before. More frequently, though, I have to deal with the accusation by a fellow player that I'm really male. How to handle such situations? Trying to take the high road and claim you want to keep your real life private or that real life shouldn't matter only makes your status even more

questionable. A protest of innocence and a little white lie about one's true gender can work in some situations, but is it ethical? Often requests for proof can escalate, from questions about bra size to solicitations of pictures to requests for phone calls. And a straight-up admittance of the truth can just as frequently lead to jibes, insults, and bruised emotions.

And virtual cross-dressing is becoming ever more difficult. Many guilds now use third-party voice software to coordinate and communicate during their raids, and an increasing number of MMORPGs are shipping with integrated voice chat. Will fellow players accept the busty dark elf babe who sounds like Pee-Wee Herman? For how long will the response "Uh, I don't have a microphone" be an acceptable excuse? Perhaps I can lie and claim I'm a mute. Some people have pointed to voice masking as the answer, but unless voice masking is mandatory, people can still request that you turn it off for proof of real gender. Not to mention the fact that a lot of voice masking makes it difficult to understand what the other person is actually saying.

But still, I soldier on, playing my female characters and enjoying every minute of it. Oh, sometimes I like to switch things up and play a studly male Paladin, but more often than not, I'm watching the virtual world from behind a shapely feminine form. And I am not ashamed. But the next time you wonder if that girl in your party is really hot *irl*, do everyone a big favor and don't ask.

Just sit back and enjoy the view.

Bruce Sterling Woodcock is a computer and video games industry analyst, researcher, consultant, and author, focusing on Massively Multiplayer Online Games. He is best known for his ongoing tracking and analysis of MMOG subscription numbers on his web site, MMOGCHART.COM. He enjoys going to the mall, cuddling, and long walks along virtual beaches.