

# Simulating Marriage: Gender Roles and Emerging Intimacy in an Online Game

Guo Freeman

Indiana University  
Bloomington, IN

guozhang@indiana.edu

Jeffrey Bardzell

Indiana University  
Bloomington, IN

jbardzel@indiana.edu

Shaowen Bardzell

Indiana University  
Bloomington, IN

selu@indiana.edu

Susan C. Herring

Indiana University  
Bloomington, IN

herring@indiana.edu

## ABSTRACT

Virtual marriage is a complex social activity in virtual worlds, yet it has received relatively little research attention. What happens when an important relationship such as marriage is transformed into gameplay? In this paper we present an empirical study of how players perceive, experience, and interpret their in-game marriages, especially with regard to representations of gender and sexuality, in an online game (*Audition*) where a ludological simulation of marriage is centrally embedded in gameplay. Findings reveal that marriage-as-ludic-rule-system and marriage-as-significant-sociocultural-institution provide a double set of gameplay/social/psychosexual resources that players collaboratively learn and perform, and that this negotiation is a source of pleasure, frustration, and meaning in the game. These findings can contribute to understanding the specificity and heterogeneity of players' gender representation in virtual worlds and inform the design of mixed reality games that simulate important life events for learning.

## Author Keywords

Intimacy, intimate interaction, gender, sexuality, in-game marriage, emergence, free-to-play monetization

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.1.2 [User/Machine Systems]: Human factors

## General Terms

Human Factors; Design

## INTRODUCTION

Virtual marriage is an interesting but often overlooked topic in research on collaborative systems. Many popular online games that have been routinely studied throughout the history of massively multiplayer games have explicitly incorporated virtual marriage into their broader game systems (e.g., *Final Fantasy*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, *Everquest*), or they at least allow add-ons for role-playing wedding ceremonies and crafting wedding rings (e.g., *World of*

*Warcraft*). Yet in-game marriage, as a social activity intertwined with gender, sexuality, intimacy, sociability and game culture itself, has received relatively little research attention. The juxtaposition of the social meanings of marriage with the implementation of marriage as a game mechanic (inscribed with its own ideologies) raises interesting questions about players' experiences of in-game marriage.

In this paper we explore how players perceive, experience, and interpret their in-game marriages, especially with regard to representations of gender and sexuality, in an online game where traditional gender roles are deeply embedded in a ludological simulation of marriage ("ludological" ties back to [10]'s concept of *ludus*, which "captures playing structured by rules and competitive strife toward goals." [13], p.11). Specifically, we use *Audition*, a dance battle Multiplayer Online Game (MOG), and its implementation of marriage as our study site. *Audition* was chosen for this study for two reasons. First, it is a prominent example of a MOG in which in-game marriage is centrally embedded in gameplay. "Marriage" in *Audition* is a simulated game feature that is rule-bound and goal-oriented within the broader system of the game. Whereas marriage in other MOGs does not necessitate leveling-up, in *Audition* marriage is tied directly to progress or achievements in the game, allowing it to seamlessly meld (or confuse) gameplay for utility and gameplay for intimacy. Second, because *Audition* is a non-fantasy/sci-fi, non-adventure based role-playing game, its addition to the empirical research on MOGs can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of player experiences.

Methodologically, we draw on players' self-reports on public forums, interviews, and in-game observations to study their in-game marriage experiences. Inspired by phenomenology and using a Grounded Theory approach [17], we sought out first-person, subjective, narrative accounts of players' intimacy/marriage experiences and coded them thematically. To support and contextualize our in-depth qualitative analysis of user data, we also interpret *Audition's* implementation of marriage using players' own accounts, especially with regard to gender roles.

We argue that it is important to study the dense social meanings of in-game marriage and players' reflections on them, not only for game designers, but for all researchers concerned with digital sociability. First, as [14] notes, "while online games are significantly different from more traditional, offline environments, there are still ways to

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for components of this work owned by others than ACM must be honored. Abstracting with credit is permitted. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee. Request permissions from [Permissions@acm.org](mailto:Permissions@acm.org).

CSCW '15, March 14 - 18, 2015, Vancouver, BC, Canada.

Copyright 2015 ACM 978-1-4503-2922-4/15/03\$15.00.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2675133.2675192>

draw interesting parallels between the two provided one carefully considers the diverse factors contributing to the observed behaviors" (pp. 143-144). The key to design mixed-reality games is simulation: Traditional goal directed, structured play experiences are not fully contained by virtual or physical worlds, but mixed reality MOGs can transform existing technologies, relationships, and places into platforms for gameplay [7]. What happens, then, when a traditionally gendered relationship such as marriage is transformed into gameplay, especially as a ludological simulation in a game world? Our study addresses this question.

Second, since social norms of gender and sexuality are deeply embedded in marriage, this study contributes to a growing social scientific literature in HCI and CSCW on gender and sexuality representation in virtual worlds, including [14][21][24][27][30][31]. Digital environments such as MOGs allow players to choose and customize their digital representation of gendered selves by creating one or more avatars [26][30]. Marriage between avatars, as a simulation of a culturally dense real-life institution and set of rituals that embodies values regarding gender and sexuality, provides a novel lens through which to explore the players' gender representations -- as both *chosen* by players and *shaped* by their sociocultural background and *constrained* by the affordances of the specific game environment.

In a broader sense, this study continues and builds on earlier CSCW research by studying interpersonal dynamics forged around technological objects in digital environments. It contributes to the core research question of "how people really work and live in groups, organizations, communities, and other forms of collective life" ([1], p. 199), by shedding light on how ordinary people find emotional fulfillment in online social spaces, and what the relationships are between technology and "some of the deepest and most meaningful dimensions of human experience" ([5], p. 11).

### GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN GAMEPLAY

It is impossible to study in-game marriage without taking gender and sexuality in gameplay into consideration. In MOGs, gender becomes a choice, as a player can "choose" to create a female or male avatar when he or she enters the game. Players can adopt different strategies of femininity and of masculinity in virtual worlds based on their own beliefs of gender and sexuality. [30] found that gender differences were socially constructed, and that gender is reproduced in MOGs such as *WoW*. MOGs also allow for gender performance and cross-gender play. [18] reported that homosexual *EverQuest* players gender swapped (i.e., a difference between the offline gender reported by the player and the gender of the player's main character in the game) more often than straight players in gameplay. [14] found that *WoW* female players can (re)create themselves as gendered and sexual beings in the virtual world by creation of an avatar and ideological negotiation with the game rules. Focusing on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender perspectives (LGBT), [9] found that male sexual dominance

and female sexual passivity are effectively propagated as the "natural" state of sexual difference in *Second Life*, and LGBT users comply with the heteronormative demand to keep their practices private, even in the virtual world.

These previous studies looked at avatar choice in relation to gender, as one aspect of player behavior. They found that players take advantage of the freedom in virtual worlds to (re)create their gendered and sexualized identities and explore human relationships mediated via these sociotechnical systems. One of our goals is to investigate the deeper socio-cultural contexts in which gender and sexuality representation may occur, in the simulation of a real life sociocultural practice – marriage – in a game world.

### MARRIAGE ONLINE AND OFFLINE

Marriage in everyday life is "a long-term mating arrangement that is socially sanctioned and that typically involves economic, social and reproductive cooperation between the partners" ([23], p. 181). Marriage is supposed to be a legitimated commitment (involving a legal license, a ceremony, and vows) to a stable and responsible intimate relationship (involving faith, trust, and care). This definition includes the intimacy and commitment components in [25]'s triangle model of love, but the passion component (love and affection) is optional.

Only a few studies have investigated marriage in virtual spaces; these show that online marriage takes on various meanings. An archaic example of in-game marriage is text-based cyber marriage in MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons/Domains). [12] found that couples usually first met in the MUD and then started a real-life relationship, even though they might be geographically distant. In-game marriage is also characterized by some researchers as part of a "playful" game experience, since games can be designed to encourage in-game marriage and may offer special benefits to married couples. For example, in a study of in-game marriage in Chinese fantasy based MOGs, [29] found that most players listed "having fun" as a main reason to get married in games. Among all types of "fun," one of the most important aspects is gender performance involving "switched gender" in the words of [20], which "shake [up] binary gender roles" ([29], p. 87).

This small body of prior work does not provide a homogeneous picture of online marriage. Not only do players interpret the significance and implied commitments of online marriage in diverse ways [3], the research also shows that the meaning of online marriage varies by platform. Moreover, marriage is optional to players in the environments studied. In *Audition*, in contrast, marriage is central to gameplay.

### MARRIAGE IN AUDITION: AN OVERVIEW

*Audition* was released in South Korea in 2004, launched in the U.S. in 2008, and now attracts more than 300 million players worldwide. *Audition* is a non-violent, non-fantasy

MOG with a popular marriage system that mediates and facilitates couple-related collaborative behaviors (e.g., dancing as a couple to compete with other couples). An online poll posted to the official forum for *Audition* in the U.S. shows that more than 80% of players have gotten married at least once in the game. *Audition* has a balanced gender distribution among its players. According to Redbana.com (the company that runs, maintains, and manages *Audition* in North America), 48.6% of *Audition* players are female, while 48.1% are male and 3.3% are unknown.

The in-game marriage system in *Audition* is a simulation of offline marriage: marriage is a one-to-one relationship between two players. If a married player wants to marry another player, he or she has to “divorce” his or her current partner first. In *Audition*, players can form an ad hoc couple when they join a “couple mode” battle in the “room.” However, to pursue long-term collaborative relationships, players tend to use the marriage system. This includes using matching cards to search for potential “dance partners,” a date planner to schedule and accomplish missions with partners everyday, and a wedding party to officially become a couple with a love license and a ring.

Once an in-game couple decides to commit to a marriage, they find that the game simulates key aspects of offline marriage. The wedding party, as a virtual wedding ritual, and the love license, as a virtual marriage certificate, constitute an analog of how marital commitments are socially legitimated in everyday life. For example, the couples-to-be usually announce their weddings on public forums and invite guests and friends to witness their wedding dance and to attend a “reception,” so as to celebrate their marriage. This routine, as a public affirmation [11], is very similar to how new couples publicize their marriage in the offline world.

The *Audition* marriage system is also a sophisticated and strict rule-based system. In order to get married, players must follow well-defined “quantified” rules, including time investment, in-game skills, and purchases with real-life money. The latter is key, because *Audition* is a free-to-play online game whose business model depends on players making micro-transactions to improve their game experience. The dynamic of the *Audition* marriage system is designed such that once players identify a dance partner, they can both go to the lobby of the Dancing Hall and send each other “kisses.” They are only allowed to send one kiss per day, however. Once they get five kisses, they are eligible to purchase a wedding ticket that costs 5600 Bana cash (\$1USD=1000 Bana cash). With this ticket, there is an option to create a wedding room. In this room, the couple will have three chances to accomplish the dance task in a wedding party. All wedding party dance tasks use the same song: *Audition - Wedding Day* (130 beats per minute) in Couple Dance mode. The two players have to coordinate with each other in pressing keys to get at least 12 Perfects, 3 Synchro Perfects, and a score of 160,000, which is a very

difficult task. The couple may need to spend more time practicing together and may need to purchase more than one wedding ticket (more than three tries) to accomplish the task. Once they accomplish the wedding party dance task, they will officially be married and will get a love license and a ring.

*Audition* thus uses explicitly designed, ludic rules to simulate and signify offline qualities of marriage: a couple’s compatibility and commitment to one another are quantified as point-based couple levels and ring levels in *Audition*. Designers intentionally divide the 60 couple levels into 14 relationship phases, and assign each phase a suggestive name indicating increasing degrees of intimacy. For example, Level 1 to 5 is “Puppy Love” while Level 46 to 50 is “True Love.” Designers also add a semiotic layer (i.e., virtual rings) to represent degrees of intimacy. The higher the couple level, the more attractive the ring is. The highest level of rings is “Max ring.” Thus the quantification of intimacy is explicit: dancing coordination, game levels, and ring levels are calibrated together to assert that the higher couple level and ring level a couple achieves, the stronger the connection they will have.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

### Data Collection

We collected data in three ways. First, we collected online documents from the two most active public English-language forums for *Audition*: the Redbana Forum (forums.redbana.com), which is the official forum for *Audition* in the U.S.; and Tgforums (<http://forums.jordanrudgett.com>), a popular gaming community started in January 2013 by gamers. Documents available online that we consulted include the guides and manuals for *Audition* provided by the company, which describe the design, technical, and system features of the game and its marriage system, as well as players’ self-reports regarding their game-related communication and behavior.

In addition to these publicly available data, the first author interviewed 35 *Audition* players. In January 2014, she posted a message on the above-mentioned two forums to recruit *Audition* players who had used the marriage system and were willing to be interviewed. Whether they had been in romantically intimate relationships with their in-game marriage partner was not a criterion for recruitment. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted via text chat in Skype (which participants preferred over voice or video chat) in order to investigate the implicit psychological and social reasons for players to get married in *Audition*. Interview questions include players’ backgrounds and daily lives (e.g., school, family, friendship) to get a context of their gameplay and other open-ended questions such as “What does your *Audition* marriage mean to you?” (no definition of marriage was provided so as to encourage participants to

describe their feelings, attitudes, and emotions of *Audition* marriage in their own way).

All *Audition* players who responded to the recruitment post by February 2014 were interviewed – 35 players in total (25 females, 10 males). Of these, 16 were aged 14-17 (46%), and 19 were aged 18-22 (54%); the average age was 17.5 (SD = 1.9). The age distribution of our interviewees is consistent with the general age distribution information provided by Redbana (13-17: 42.4%; 18-24: 46.2%). In terms of race, participants encompassed four different ethnicities (white, Asian, black, and mixed), but our findings did not focus on a particular ethnicity. Five interviewees (14%) identified themselves as homosexual or bisexual. Most of them (N=31) were located in North America (U.S. and Canada). Regarding their gaming experience, 49% of all interviewees (N=17) had played *Audition* for 6 to 8 years, 46% (N=16) had played for 3 to 5 years, while only 6% (N=2) had played for 1 to 2 years. We concluded that the interviewees were serious, veteran players of *Audition*. The interviews lasted for 90 minutes on average, with a median word count of 3822.4 words (Max. = 12773 words).

Three limitations of the interview data should be noted. First, the interview participant pool is predominantly female (71%), suggesting that male players' view of "marriage" may be underrepresented. Second, according to the interviewees' preferences, interviews were conducted using text chat. Although interviewees used many emoticons in the chat logs to express their feelings, text-chat-only interviews did not account for the non-verbal cues (e.g., body language and tone of voice) when participants described their in-game marriage experience. In addition, all interviewees were volunteers recruited from online forums. There is a potential bias in a self-selected convenience sample. At the same time, despite these limitations, the interview population represents demographic diversity and experience with the game and can provide valuable insights.

Additionally, the first author is an experienced *Audition* player, with more than five years experience playing *Audition* in Mandarin on an East Asian server. As a supplement, she also logged into *Audition* from a North American server. In several months during the data collection phase of this study, she observed and video recorded game behavior as well as players' chat logs that were visible on the public chat channel in different dancing rooms at different times every day for one hour, in order to collect data from a larger and more diverse player population.

### Analytical Procedures

Our analysis involved two levels. First, we identified the gender and sexual ideologies that the marriage system implies, by reading through the game guides, manuals, and players' self-reports on online forums, and by experiencing the game world directly. We drew on quotes from players' own accounts to support our interpretations.

Inspired by phenomenology and using a Grounded Theory approach [17], for the second level of analysis we sought first-person, subjective, narrative accounts of players' intimacy/marriage experiences in the interviews and the forum self-reports, and we coded them thematically. We focused on what players actually make of the marriage system, including a deep qualitative interpretation of their own accounts.

The coding and interpretation procedures followed for the second level of analysis were: 1) All authors closely read through players' narratives (as derived from forum threads, transcripts of interviews, and chat logs from observations); 2) All authors examined the thematic topics in a text, identified a set of narrative themes emerging in *Audition* players' in-game marriage; 3) All authors collaborated in an iterative coding process to discuss, combine, and refine themes to generate a rich description, then synthesized these themes to summarize the fundamental aspects of players' in-game marriage experiences.

### FROM MARRIAGE RULE SYSTEM TO INTIMACY EXPERIENCES

Using quotes from players' own accounts, in this section we present our interpretation of the cultural gender roles that the *Audition* marriage system implies, along with an in-depth investigation of how *Audition* players use, interpret, and experience the in-game marriage system.

#### Marriage in *Audition*: A Traditionalist Ideology

Researchers often claim that cyberspace offers a "liberatory perspective" which grants Internet users agency to explore and refigure gender norms and sexual roles [9]. This optimistic picture is countered by the regressive gender and sexual norms in many games, including *Audition*. The *Audition* marriage system legislates binary gender options, a hetero-normative view of marriage, and masculine dominance, all of which are mainstream social values especially in East Asia, where the game originated, but among conservatives in the West as well.

After logging into *Audition*, players can create their avatars. They can choose basic attributes including nickname, gender, and skin color (as an implication of ethnicity). Thus gender is a choice in this game, but only a binary one: male or female. Moreover, after creating an avatar, players cannot change the basic attributes of the avatar, so they will have a consistent gendered identity throughout the game. A forum moderator (Redbana employee, Female, Asian, age unknown) explains the game designers' perspective: "*You chose to be what you chose. It's not like you didn't have a choice like in real life. You just have to stick with the choices you've made from the start.*"

Some *Audition* players are unhappy with the binary gender choices and feel "locked" into a gender. One player (female, black, age unknown) initiated a discussion about a gender change option on the *Redbana* forum:

*Wouldn't it be nice if you could change your gender for x amount of cash? O\_O I'm sure it could be done and I'm sure people would like to change their gender from time to time.*

Many players supported this idea: *"I really don't see what's wrong with this. It's just something silly like changing your skin color, and it will bring in more income (in theory)."* For these players, gender in *Audition* is a performance (*"like changing your skin color"*), a fluid attribute (*"would like to change their gender from time to time"*), and a playful feature (*"silly"*). The players' understanding of gender fluidity diverges from the original establishment of a conventional heterosexual game world that is divided up into male and female.

This divergence is more obvious when the in-game marriage system also forces players to enact hetero-normative marriages: marriage can only happen between a male avatar and a female avatar. This reflects a traditional ideology of marriage and rejects more contemporary notions that are open to, for example, gay marriage. LGBT players strongly reject the heterosexual marriage norm in the game because it conflicts with their own sexual experiences. We found many threads on the forums requesting same-gender marriage, which players considered a sign of freedom and equality. One player (male, black, age unknown) posted:

*To those of you saying that "This is a bad idea" or "OMG No You're teaching little kids how to be gay and that is not right", I say that it's not doing anything bad. Since when was freedom of expression banned? If I want to couple a guy I'll couple a guy.*

He received many supportive replies such as, *"I'm standing up for the gay community and requesting gay marriage on Audition. On the forum it even states equality, why not equality in game as well?"* For these players, same-gender marriage in the virtual world has the same political resonances as in the offline society (*"freedom of expression"* and *"equality"*), and they protested against the inequality like the LGBT community would do offline: *"How in any way is a homosexual relationship any less than a heterosexual relationship? That's just ridiculous. Have you yet to hear, love is love? Where is the equality among all sexualities when it comes to marriage?"*

Moreover, male avatars have more power in *Audition*. In spite of the game's traditionally feminine features (e.g., colorful background, cute avatars, pop music), one player observes, *"Music, rhythm and dressing up in cool clothing do not make the game girly. It still follows all those guys' rules"* (Female, Asian, age unknown). In *Audition*, male avatars take the lead in almost all couple-related activities. Only male avatars can buy wedding tickets and create a wedding room so a couple can officially get married; only males can buy love party tickets so a couple can upgrade their rings and love licenses. The only capability a female avatar has is to write some words on the love license. If a

female player chooses a gender-consistent avatar, she is completely dependent on her male partner's moves in marriage-related activities. A female player (Asian, 17) posted on the forum to express how women's value is limited (*"Women are inferior to men"*), how their autonomy is weakened in *Audition* marriage (*"Women must depend on men"*), and how ideologically dangerous it is that this biased norm has become a natural part of the game world (*"brainwashing the younger generation"*):

*I find this offensive because seriously, what does this say about society's view on females and gender roles? Women must depend on men? Women are inferior to men? And because this is just a 'game,' it sadden[s me] to know how it's viewed as the 'normal' way of life in addition to brainwashing the younger generation. Just because something is viewed as normal, doesn't make it normal. The normal could be crazy, and the crazy can be normal.*

For a game that caters to female players, and given the importance of in-game marriage in achieving certain ludic goals, the regressive ideology of the marriage system creates a set of both practical and ideological tensions that players have to negotiate.

#### **Marriage as a Gendered Avatar-Mediated Experience**

In response to the ludic-ideological tensions that *Audition* stages, players' in-game marriage is a gendered experience. For some, this involves cross-gender play and account sharing, which are closely related to the players' in-game goal-oriented behaviors and gendered self-expression. Though gender representation (especially cross-gender play) and account sharing are not new in gameplay, *Audition*, being a non-fantasy, non-science fiction, non-adventure based role-playing space, demands of its players different suspensions of disbelief – with different implications for gendered self-representation, compared to fantasy games such as *WoW*, *EverQuest* and *Guild Wars* [14][18][24][27][28][30]. In addition, as we will show, *Audition* players' cross-gender play and account sharing are often highly instrumental strategies to cope with the specificities of in-game marriage as a rule system (and have, in many situations, little to no intended role play aspect).

#### **Cross-gender Play**

In *Audition* marriage, cross-gender play allows players to work around the game's strict rules of one-time binary gender choice. Different player groups show different patterns of cross-gender play: Some players create multiple secondary accounts to be able to play as both genders, while others create an opposite gender avatar at the outset. Their purposes also vary: Some players express aesthetic preferences through gender selection, while others take advantage of the rules that favor masculine dominance, and still others reflectively explore their sexual identities.

Most of the straight players (both male and female) we encountered in this study show the first pattern. They chose a

same-gender avatar as their main account simply because they considered themselves female or male in the offline world. Then they played both a main account and an “alternative” account of the opposite gender as a compromise. For these players, cross-gender play is usually not an attempt to reconstruct their gender identity but rather an experimental way to seek novel and fun experiences from the opposite gender's perspective.

For example, I9 (male, Asian, 15) said, *“I've only had two accounts, my main guy account, and my secondary girl account. I used it because girl clothes were cute and I'm curious to try them, but never went further than that.”* Similarly, I11 (female, Asian, 15) wrote, *“It's fun playing guy account because I get to look at guy stuffs, and dress as a guy with my own style. Many guys have terrible tastes for clothes,”* and I24 (female, Asian, 19) wrote, *“I tend to like guy pixels over girl pixels.”* These players had no problem making an “either-or” gender choice when they entered the game world, since it did not conflict with their offline gender. But they used cross-gender play to satisfy their curiosity about the opposite gender (*“I'm curious to try them”*) and express their fashion sensibilities (*“dress as a guy with my own style”*) and aesthetics (*“girl clothes were cute,” “many guys have terrible tastes for clothes”*). For these players, playing an opposite gender avatar is a way to appreciate the “beauty” or “cuteness” of the opposite gender.

Some other straight female players used cross-gender play to subvert masculine dominance in *Audition*. For these players, playing a male avatar has nothing to do with sexuality but is rather a way to seek equality and power, which contributes to the “fun” gaming experience. I18 (female, Asian, 18) said, *“I created a guy account before to dick around with the benefits of being a dude. I always notice guys get better treatment and have more power than girls [in Audition]. It feels good to enjoy guys' power as a girl.”* Similarly, I10 (female, Asian, 18) said, *“It's deffinitely] fun when I pretend to be a guy and play jokes/troll around a bit. Sometimes I feel I'm a 'troller/prankster' but I think people are more tolerant of a guy troller than a girl troller. Anyway it can be fun playing a guy, but it's just as fun playing a girl.”* Both female players used same-gender avatars as their main accounts and had no intention of sticking to their alternative male accounts (*“it's just as fun playing a girl”*). But they were well aware of male avatars' privileges (*“get better treatment and have more power,” “people are more tolerant of guy troller”*) in the seemingly female-player-friendly game environment, and used gender swapping to *“enjoy guys' power as a girl.”* In so doing, they experienced fun by temporarily role-playing a guy, and they resisted the traditional gender stereotypes built into the game.

Players of all sexual orientations used cross-gender play to subvert the game's implied hetero-normative view of marriage. Some straight female players created secondary male accounts in order to marry their friends, who were also straight female players using female avatars as their main

accounts. I22 (female, 19, Asian) said, *“I have a guy account that I made to marry my friend on it because she didn't want to find a couple.”* She had no emotional or identity-related connections to her male avatar. For her, playing as a male was just an instrumental strategy to allow two straight female players to get married in the game and enjoy its couple-related features and benefits.

LGBT players expressed an ideology-related and identity-related connection to their avatar choices. If they wanted to do cross-gender play, gay players usually created main avatars of the opposite gender at the very beginning. A gay teenager (I33, male, Asian/white, 15) told us, *“I play a girl account as my main. I just feel I want to be a girl, not a guy. Also I can marry guys in this way.”* In a deeper sense, cross-gender play is not merely a compromise to allow same-gender marriage in *Audition*, but it is also a vehicle and a tool to experiment and explore one's real-life sexual identity at no risk. A lesbian player (I34, female, black, 16) said,

*In all my Audi marriages, it was me who created and played the male account. Most of my Audi-playing career, I've enjoyed playing as male than as a female. On a male account, I felt free to be whoever I wanted to be and say whatever I wanted to say. I'm more confident to be myself than before.*

For both I33 and I34, performing as an opposite gender avatar liberated them from the mismatched expectations the game placed on their gender identity (*“I want to be a girl, not a guy;” “I felt free to be whoever I wanted to be”*). This performance helps clarify their beliefs about gender and facilitates the construction of self-identities (*“I'm more confident to be myself than before”*).

Interestingly, the *Audition* marriage system, although it prohibits same-gender marriage, offers an unexpected way for LGBT players to explore and construct their sexual identities. Some players who did not want to play opposite gender avatars would buy clothes and hair in the in-game mall to dress up their avatars as transgendered. This is not so much a feature of the game design as users creatively co-opting the resources of the designed world to express non-traditional and non-binary gender identities.

#### Account Sharing

*Audition* designers usually consider account sharing to be a rule-breaking behavior. A forum moderator (Redbana employee, Female, Asian, age unknown) posted, *“Account sharing is extremely bad and has extremely destructive effects. Our community should stop this behavior.”* But for many female players, account sharing is an effective way to reject the masculine dominance built into the game.

Account sharing is especially common among straight female players who use female avatars and want to marry male avatars. An interesting thread on the forum describes how a female player (Asian, age unknown) who wanted to

propose in the game finally worked through the obstacles the game placed in her path. Her original post asked for help:

*I am a female and my couple is a male (obviously). However, I'm the only one out of the two of us who can buy bana cash. We want to get married but I can't gift him a wedding ticket, and only the guy can start the wedding. Is there a way to get around this? I'd think it really lame if we can't get married because I, a female, cannot propose to him, a male.*

From her post, she was very familiar with masculine dominance in *Audition* (“only the guy can start the wedding”) and tried to solve this marriage issue in a normal way (“gift him a wedding ticket”), although the game did not allow it. The rule that “only men can propose” undercut her gaming experience (“really lame”). She was actually the more financially powerful party in the couple (*I'm the only one out of the two of us who can buy bana cash*), and her male partner depended on her for any marriage-related activities. When responding to her post, many players suggested account sharing, such as “Just log into his account and buy some bana cash for your baby.” Later she accepted this suggestion and posted an invitation to her wedding party.

In this example, it was still her male partner who proposed in the game, but she took the dominant role from the very beginning: She wanted to marry him, sought help on the forum, got access to his account and login password, paid for the wedding tickets, and posted the wedding invitation. The male partner was quiet and was characterized in the thread by other players as being in a powerless and submissive role (“your baby”). For these female players, account sharing is not a destructive behavior but a practical way to take the lead in marriage-related activities.

Although it is unusual, players also share accounts to marry themselves, e.g., because they do not want to be controlled by the coupling rules. For example, I18 (Female, 18, Asian) revealed, “You are forced to be nice to your partner even he turned out to be a jerk, in order to keep a stable ring. When I marry myself, I always have a stable ring and I'm not forced to do anything.” Marrying oneself is impossible and even absurd in the real world, but it is appealing in the *Audition*, since couple and ring levels communicate a player's reputation in the game. The higher the couple level and ring level a player can achieve, the more successful he or she is perceived to be, and the more respect he or she receives from other players. Players who want to enjoy reputation and respect without being “forced” to marry someone usually create two avatars. When they need to get married, or to upgrade couple and ring levels, they share one account with a friend in order to complete couple-related tasks. As I1 (female, white, 17) explained, “Right now I'm technically just married to myself. I asked a friend to help me. And I'm cool with that. I can control the whole thing. Isn't this great?” Using account sharing, these players can enjoy couple-related features, reputation, and respect, and at the

same time feel self-governing (“I can control the whole thing”) and self-sufficient (“have a stable ring”).

### Marriage as Emerging Intimacy

As we have described, in-game marriage in *Audition* is a ludological construct, a straightforward scoring mechanism designed to attract more players, keep them playing longer, and encourage them to spend more money in the game by making micro-transactions. The designers' goals presumably did not include fostering genuine intimate relationships. Many players, however, establish strong emotional connections to their partners over time, and as they do so, their attitude changes from viewing *Audition* merely as a game and *Audition* marriage merely as a feature of the game, to viewing *Audition* as a platform for sociable intimacy. These players interpret their in-game marriages as opportunities to learn from others, grow, and gain friendships, emotional support, and someone to talk to – in general, to satisfy their social and emotional needs. Interviewees often referred to their re-interpretation as an emergent process. For example:

*Honestly, I didn't really take game marriage seriously since it was just a game. But after meeting my current partner, I began to take it seriously because our relationship isn't just about rings. We do other things together besides audition as a couple and have emotional attachment like lovers do. (I4, female, Asian, 17)*

*I did not expect a relationship from online marriage. It was just a fun game. But the feeling just came naturally. (I20, female, Asian, 20)*

*It just happened. I never used the game as a form of finding romance. I just chill in game and end up finding someone who shares the same interests as I do. And one thing leads to another. (I21, male, Latino/white, 19)*

Seeking emotionally significant connections was not a pre-existing goal for these *Audition* players. An instrumental goal of acquiring pretty rings and leveling up may have been the driving motivation for coupling, but their subjective experiences gradually diverged from the original motivations as they grew close to another, and “the feeling just came naturally.” They started to reflect on their gameplay experience and redefine what in-game marriage meant for them, associating *Audition* marriage with deeper social meanings such as intimacy, warmth, and love (“have emotional attachment like lovers do”). The players themselves were surprised at this gradual change and how genuine connections emerged, as this typical love story shows:

*Just like all of you, we don't expect to meet our someone on Audition. At least for us we didn't. We started off as friends during winter break of 2011 and we coupled only as friends. We are on the opposite sides of the United States so we definitely didn't want a long distance relationship. We became best friends, partners in crime, then lovers. We've had a lot of struggles as the days go by, but we still love each other. (posted on the Redbana forum by two Asian*

*players who developed their in-game marriage into a serious relationship offline, age unknown)*

Especially for some ethnic minority players (e.g., Asians) who were first or second generation immigrants in the U.S., *Audition* marriage helped them get through difficult moments in the offline world. For example:

*I use it [Audition marriage] all the time [to seek romance] because my family overprotects me and doesn't let me talk to boys until just a year ago actually. You know, very typical Asian parents. It [Audition marriage] helped me through all the difficulties in my life that my family has caused. I had a really tough childhood coz I couldn't make any friends. White kids did not understand my family or me. (I12, female, Asian, 17)*

*I moved to the U.S. from Vietnam 5 years ago. He is the first [Audition] partner I met in real life. I don't have family in the U.S., so I was alone by myself. Life was so hard, language, culture, everything. So when I came to visit him, his family asked me to stay. And we have been living together for 6 months. (I20, female, Asian, 21)*

These examples show that some ethnic minority players struggle to balance different cultures in their offline lives. I12's parents raised her with traditional Asian values, such as academic excellence, modesty, obedience, and chastity ("overprotect," "doesn't let me talk to boys"), while her non-Asian American peers appeared to enjoy a more independent and liberal culture. She was in an awkward situation, trying to satisfy both cultures, which led to exhaustion ("really tough childhood") and isolation ("couldn't make any friends"). As an adult immigrant, I20 suffered cultural conflicts in a new environment ("life was so hard"), which made her crave emotional support. In-game marriage in *Audition* offers these players an opportunity to meet other first or second generation Asian immigrants in the U.S. who have similar lifeworld experiences, thus affording a specific kind of *Audition*-enabled intimacy. As I20 noted, such intimacy can even develop into offline support ("we have been living together for 6 months").

Another intriguing finding is how players re-interpret *Audition* marriage as a learning process in which they experienced life lessons. I7 (male, Asian, 19) said, "I'm learning about other people, realizing their routines in life, the society they are exposed to and how they are different from mine. They are actual people that are divided from a screen. It has allowed me in a way to seek romance and learn each time a heart is broken." Similarly, I15 (Male, white, 19) described his experience as follows:

*You learn so much through so many experiences about relationships. I learn from the bad times, rather than mourn over them. If I didn't have these experiences I wouldn't be who I am today. The thing about Audition is through every avatar, there is a person behind that monitor. These are all real people with real emotions. When two people begin to like each other, it's real. It doesn't matter if it's on a game*

*because it's 2 individual people. From my experience, I've learned many things through the relationships I've had with people through this game, and it's real as it gets. The things I've learned about relationships through the women I've been with online can easily be applied to real life. And that's why it [Audition marriage] is not a game.*

Both I7 and I15 told us that they had multiple serious relationships in *Audition*, but they all ended badly. For them, *Audition* marriage is not about rings, scores, or levels but all about people – how to know them ("their routines in life"), how to appreciate their differences ("the society they are exposed to and how they are different from mine"), how to learn from both good and bad relationships ("learn each time a heart is broken," "learn from the bad times"), how to grow from such experiences ("I wouldn't be who I am today"), and how to use such experiences to improve offline lives ("can easily be applied to real life"). For these players, the importance of *Audition* marriage is not in experiencing the game mechanics, but rather in learning and experiencing what genuine emotional connections are, knowledge that they bring back to the offline world.

Most *Audition* players we encountered in this study considered their *Audition* marriage experiences to be "positive." But their evaluations have nothing to do with the marriage system as a game mechanism. Players had positive experiences because their attitudes towards the marriage system changed and they experienced real emotional benefits, including trust ("My partner reminds me why I play Audition, and also knows that at least one person in the game appreciates who I am and how I act." I6, female, Asian, 16); learning ("It had taught me a lot about life, and opened my heart to what may have been the truth of love." I9, male, Asian, 15); closeness ("I have someone close to me mentally and emotionally." I14, female, 19, Asian); support ("Parents are proud of me and happy for me that I found someone who they can trust to be with me and to interact with." I27, male, Asian, 18); and courage ("Honestly, because of an incident a few years back, I stopped loving. She's the one who brought me back into this world. She is the one who made me brave." I30, male, Asian, 16).

In sum, although marriage is implemented in *Audition* as a rule-based system constrained by traditional gender roles and designed to encourage continued play and in-game purchases, players worked around that constraints of the system to meet their needs for less conventional gender expression, and reinterpreted *Audition* marriage as not merely game mechanics but rather as a means to achieve genuine intimacy.

## DISCUSSION

As [14] (pp. 143-144) points out, "[online games] are societies in their own right, capable of evolving their own norms and cultures. Some (but not all) of this indigenous culture will be influenced by the way the software is architected, which permits certain actions and prevents others." In this



study our goal was not to offer a design assessment of *Audition*'s marriage system, nor to offer an ideological critique of its embedded gender and sexuality norms. Instead, we have argued that marriage-as-ludic-rule-system and marriage-as-significant-sociocultural-institution provide a double set of gameplay/social/psychosexual resources that players collaboratively learn and perform, and that this negotiation is a source of pleasure, frustration, and meaning in the game, and hence an important part of the collaborative experience. Thus, even if we might offer reasons why a given design choice in the game is bad from a ludic or ideological perspective, it is clear nonetheless that the game supports—perhaps even in spite of its design—meaningful intimacy.

Why did this happen? To offer an interpretation it is necessary to take into account the broader socio-cultural context in which the game is developed, played, and interpreted. A game is a cultural object that involves semiotic systems – “material and perceptual qualities as well as [...] broader situatedness in visual languages and culture” ([4], p. 604). It can embody political, socio-cultural, and ethical values [16] which players perceive and adopt, and which shape the play of the game [6]. Moreover, similar to other cultural artifacts, a game represents designers' struggles “between their own values, those of users and other stakeholders, and those of the surrounding culture” ([16], p. 751). *Audition* represents multiple sets of values: cultural gender roles, marriage as a micro-transaction-business-model, and players' beliefs of gender, sexuality, and intimacy. How players negotiate and balance these sets of values leads to their interpretation of in-game marriage and the ways in which they incorporate “marriage” into their gendered and intimate experience.

Our findings also highlight the component of “collaborative learning” that takes place through players' gender representation, especially “learning” how to develop gender/sexuality identity and seek intimacy. Besides negotiating the marriage system, *Audition* users, who are often teenage females, are also negotiating values of teenhood – an awkward period “between childhood and adulthood, dependence and independence” ([8], p. 17). Players mentioned that they loved their parents but that they wanted to escape from their “boring” family lives; they craved friendships but struggled to find “true friends” in school; they looked forward to love and romance but were afraid of responsibilities; they expected to grow up but were scared of the “cold” adult world. All these struggles are reflected in how they represent their gendered selves and experience the in-game marriage system. For them, in-game marriage is “learning,” a workshop in which they test, construct, and (re)define their realistic or unrealistic expectations regarding gender, sexuality, friendship, and love. Experiencing intimacy in the game thus becomes part of these players' transition from teenhood into adulthood.

This learning process suggests a new research frontier for open, mixed-reality game based learning [2]. MOGs are

creative playgrounds that blur “the boundaries between real and virtual, everyday life and imagination, work and play” ([22], p. 6). Intimate experiences and relationships have penetrated and mediate virtual worlds. It follows that online-game-simulated cultural institutions (e.g., birth, adolescent development, courtship, weddings, breakups, funerals) could be used to teach players, especially teenagers, useful life lessons. These institutions and rituals represent important serious moments and phases in the human experience, which are critical for people's psychological well-being. How players interpret and experience the simulations of these solemn institutions and rituals in games, and to what degree they apply social experiences from games to their offline lives, suggest further avenues of research in HCI and CSCW to explore mundane human experience through games.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have presented an empirical study of *Audition* players' gendered and intimate experiences that occur in the ludological simulation of a culturally dense real-life institution, marriage. Our study finds that many members of the player community changed their perceptions and interpretation of in-game marriage by resisting and subverting the traditional gender roles inscribed in the game, and through this, experiences that players themselves characterize as “intimate” were able to emerge. Thus, players experience their in-game marriage via a complex navigation among an enterprise business model (e.g., free to play with in-game micro-transactions), cultural gender roles (e.g., male-dominated marriage assumptions in East Asian culture; and the male-dominated game enterprise that designed a game targeted primarily at females), life stage (e.g., teenhood), sociocultural rituals and institutions (e.g., courtship and marriage), and, of course, online gamer culture itself. In addition, culturally regulated gender roles can blend with ludic rules, which means that who is allowed to marry and under what circumstances a marriage is recognized as legitimate intertwine with the sequence in which events must happen in order to get married in-game. This blend happens in both the game system itself, that is, rules stating that marriage can only be between one man and one woman, and in the phenomenologically felt experience of the game - in the case where the game system is felt to be patriarchal, unjust, and oppressive and therefore a site of public resistance.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful suggestions. We also thank Redbana for providing user information.

## REFERENCES

1. Ackerman, M. S. (2000). The intellectual challenge of CSCW: the gap between social requirements and technical feasibility. *Human-Computer Interaction*, 15(2-3), 179-203.

2. Asbell-Clarke, J., Rowe, E., & Sylvan, E. (2013). Assessment design for emergent game-based learning. In *Proc. of CHI'13*. New York: ACM, 679-684.
3. Bardzell, J., Bardzell, S., Zhang, G., & Pace, T. (2014). The lonely raccoon at the ball: Designing for intimacy, sociability, and selfhood. In *Proc. CHI'14*. New York: ACM, 3943-3952.
4. Bardzell, J. (2011). Interaction criticism: An introduction to the practice. *Interacting with Computers*, 23(6), 604-621.
5. Bardzell, J., & Bardzell, S. (2008). Intimate interactions: Online representation and software of the self. *Interactions*, 15(5), 11-15.
6. Barr, P., Noble, J., & Biddle, R. (2007). Video game values: Human-computer interaction and games. *Interacting with Computers*, 19(2), 180-195.
7. Bonsignore, E. M., Hansen, D. L., Toups, Z. O., Nacke, L. E., Salter, A., & Lutters, W. (2012). Mixed reality games. In *Proc. of CSCW'12*. New York: ACM, 7-8.
8. boyd, D. (2014). *It's complicated: The social lives of networked teens*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press
9. Brookey, R. A., & Cannon, K. L. (2009). Sex lives in second life. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 26(2), 145-164.
10. Caillois, R. (2001). *Man, play, and games*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
11. Cott, N. F. (2009). *Public vows: A history of marriage and the nation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
12. Curtis, P. (1997). Mudding: Social phenomena in text-based virtual realities. In S. Kiesler (Ed.), *Culture of the Internet* (pp. 121-142). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
13. Deterding, S., Dixon, D., Khaled, R., & Nacke, L. (2011). From game design elements to gamefulness: defining gamification. In *Proc. of MindTrek*. New York: ACM, 9-15.
14. Ducheneaut, N. (2010). Massively multiplayer online games as living laboratories: Opportunities and pitfalls. In *Online worlds: Convergence of the real and the virtual* (pp. 135-145). London: Springer.
15. Eklund, L. (2011). Doing gender in cyberspace: The performance of gender by female World of Warcraft players. *Convergence*, 17(3), 323-342.
16. Flanagan, M., Howe, D. C., & Nissenbaum, H. (2005). Values at play: Design tradeoffs in socially-oriented game design. In *Proc. of CHI'05*, ACM: New York, 751-760.
17. Glaser, B.G., & Strauss, A.L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
18. Huh, S., & Williams, D. (2010). Dude looks like a lady: Gender swapping in an online game. In *Online worlds: Convergence of the real and the virtual* (pp. 161-174). London: Springer.
19. Hussain, Z., & Griffiths, M. D. (2008). Gender swapping and socializing in cyberspace: An exploratory study. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 11(1), 47-53.
20. Li, N., Jackson, M., & Trees, A. (2008). Managing dialectical contradictions in massively multiplayer online role-playing game relationships. *Games and Culture*, 3(1), 76-97.
21. Nardi, B., & Harris, J. (2006). Strangers and friends: Collaborative play in World of Warcraft. In *Proc. CSCW'06*. New York: ACM, 149-158.
22. Pearce, C., Boellstorff, T., & Nardi, B. A. (2011). *Communities of play: Emergent cultures in multiplayer games and virtual worlds*. MIT Press.
23. Regan, P. (2003). *The mating game: A primer on love, sex, and marriage*. London: Sage.
24. Rosier, K., & Pearce, C. (2011). Doing gender versus playing gender in online worlds: Masculinity and femininity in Second Life and Guild Wars. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 3(2), 125-144.
25. Sternberg, R. J. (1986). A triangular theory of love. *Psychological Review*, 93(2), 119-135.
26. Taylor, T. L. (2009). *Play between worlds*. MIT Press.
27. Taylor, T. L. (2003). Multiple pleasures women and online gaming. *Convergence*, 9(1), 21-46.
28. Wong, N., Tang, A., Livingston, I., Gutwin, C., & Mandryk, R. (2009). Character sharing in World of Warcraft. In *ECSCW'09*. London: Springer, 343-362.
29. Wu, W., Fore, S., Wang, X., & Ho, P. S. Y. (2007). Beyond virtual carnival and masquerade in-game marriage on the Chinese Internet. *Games and Culture*, 2(1), 59-89.
30. Yee, N., Ducheneaut, N., Yao, M., & Nelson, L. (2011). Do men heal more when in drag?: Conflicting identity cues between user and avatar. In *Proc. CHI'11*. New York: ACM, 773-776.
31. Yee, N., Bailenson, J. N., Urbanek, M., Chang, F., & Merget, D. (2007). The unbearable likeness of being digital: The persistence of nonverbal social norms in online virtual environments. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 10(1), 115-121.
32. Yee, N. (2006). The demographics, motivations, and derived experiences of users of massively multi-user online graphical environments. *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, 15(3), 309-329.