

THE CYBORG SEARCH FATAL ERROR The Images of MU Online

Kim Homer C. Garcia

Abstract

This essay aims to investigate the possibility of a post-gender world, as posited by D. Haraway, and of the possibility of freedom for women within cyberspace, as proposed by S. Plant, by analyzing the dynamics of online gaming. It asserts that the cyberspace is a male-created and dominated world that does not allow for the emergence of the cyborg.

The image of the cyborg, the hybrid of machine and organism as constructed in the imagination of Donna Haraway (1991), postulates the possibilities of hypothesizing a post-gender world within the confines and complexities of the cyberspace. The idea of post-gender posits an epistemological construct that liberates individuals from biological determinism, Symbolic Order, and the masculine history.

The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity (Haraway, 1991: 150).

In computer operations, the cyborg hybridism may occur in the unity of the hardware, software, and user—projected into cyberspace as one entity. In this projection, there is a possibility of creating a new identity or plural identities in this new techno-reality that can escape our reality. In this

respect, identity becomes a pervasive theme in cyberspace discourses.

In an essay by Kevin Robin, he expounds on this complex notion of identity. He adds:

In cyberspace, subjectivity is dispersed throughout the cybernetic circuit... the boundaries of self are defined less by the skin than by the feedback loops connecting body and simulation in a techno-bio-integrated circuit. In this accommodating reality, the self is reconstituted as a fluid and polymorphous entity. Identities can be selected or discarded almost at will, as in a game or a fiction (Featherstone, 1995: 138).

In the different elements of the cyberspace, gaming seems to be an appropriate reality, which could possibly postulate the ideals of Harraway's cyborg and the transfiguration of identity. In this regard, analyzing the construction of reality within one of these games could serve as a challenge opposite the notion of post-gender. In simple terms, this is a search for the cyberspace vehicle for a cyborg identity. To make this analysis possible, the game must be perceived as a discourse between the gamer and the designer, therefore taking the game as a text of complex construction of meanings—configuring developers as author and gamers as reader.

Among the game genres available for Filipinos, the Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games or MMORPGs are the most popular. To establish its popularity, an analysis of the market is needed, where the four leading Philippines-based online gaming companies are reviewed: Mobius Games (by Digital Media Exchange, Inc.), Amped (by ABS-CBN Multimedia), Level-Up! Games Philippines (Level-Up, Inc.), and e-Games Philippines. Between these four companies, servers are kept up for 33 different online games; where 17 of them are MMORPGs, 12 are Multiplayer Games, and four are puzzle games.

In the list of the MMORPGs, two have kept the most resilient existence in the market since their original release: *Ragnarok Online* in 2001 and *MU Online* in 2003. These two MMORPGs have survived the fast emergence of more advanced games over the years by continuously evolving and reinventing the game experience, i.e. introducing new features, new maps, and new characters. In fact, various servers that cater to these two games emerged in numbers over the years. Determining the exact numbers

of servers online worldwide or just in the Philippines would seem impossible due to the instability of many of these servers.

Between the two computer games, *MU Online* is a better preference for the purpose of textual analysis due to its three-dimensional imaging compared to the crude two-dimensional design of *Ragnarok*. This is not to suggest the invalidity of a discourse on *Ragnarok*, but rather the hope that this particular textual analysis on *MU Online* will have a relative bearing with regards to the persistent nature of tri-dimensional imaging amongst the emerging games in the market.

“MU Online: Continent of Legends” or simply *MU Online* is a product of the collective work of the game development team of Webzen Games Inc., a South Korean-based company. Webzen’s construction of the fantasy world of MU is rooted on a narrative of conflict driven by greed, which brings forth the rebirth of an ancient evil, and this is where the journey of the new heroes begins.

At the start of the gaming experience, there is a prompt to choose from a list of characters that promises different escapes from the real world and opens up a journey towards a time that does not exist. Choices run through the Dark Knight, Magic Gladiator, Elf, Dark Wizard, Summoner, and Dark Lord, four of which are male characters. In the game, these six characters are treated as different classes or races that unite to vanquish the evil. In this reality, every race is constructed as one gender of the two opposing entities of the binary: all Dark Knights, all Magic Gladiators, all Dark Wizards, and all Dark Lords are male; while all Elves and all Summoners are female. When the new online identity is created and logged-on into the game, all the male characters are warped into the town of Lorencia, the Elves into the town of Noria, and the Summoners into the town of Elbeland. From the start, the two female characters are bound to have a different journey from the male characters and, moreover, from each other.

From the onset of the gaming experience, the female figures are already treated as the “other” with respect to the four male characters. They are excluded from the man’s journey and held detached from each other’s journey. In Simone de Beauvoir’s words, “Woman is seen as different from man, not man as different from woman. She represents the inessential in relation to the essential. He is Subject, the Absolute; she is the Other” (Yates, 2003). But the metaphysical is transformed into physical in this techno-

reality, where the existence of the female figure becomes the very force that “others” her.

MU Online is a level-up game where the objective of every character is to gain experience as a variable to obtain points that increase and boost attribute stats, such as vitality, agility, energy, and strength . These stats are values that dictate a character’s growth in different aspects of being a warrior. As they go through the different phases of development, every character gains different skills. These skills range from physical combat, magical offense, summon skills, offensive enhancement skills, and defensive enhancement skills. Their development also requires the change in armors and weapons to fit the challenges posed by the monsters and enemies they have to slay.

The armors that are available for the female characters would not suffice for an actual battle. In fact, their design would render them vulnerable to their opponents since vital parts of the body are exposed. On the other hand, the male characters are well armored and well protected from head to toe. The exposed body parts are a clear indication of the sexualized female characters, foregrounding sexualization over the logic of battle.

Along the way, every character would have to progress in their class type: where a Fairy Elf transforms into a Muse Elf in the second class and to High Elf in the third class; the Summoner transforms to a Bloody Summoner then to a Vicious Summoner; Dark Knight to a Blade Knight then to a Blade Master; and Dark Wizard to a Soul Master then to a Grand Master; while the other characters go through two phases, the Magic Gladiator to Duel Master and Dark Lord to Lord Emperor. In these different stages of metamorphoses, the upgrades in the levels for the male characters connote a virtuous ascent towards the fulfillment of the mastery of skills and knowledge. For them, the journey is a form of enlightenment, from darkness to mastery or royalty for the Lord Emperor. The transformation for the Elf is an ascent towards the fulfillment of her purity; the innocent “Fairy” Elf, the inspiring “Muse” Elf, and the unreachable “High” Elf. Meanwhile, the other female character, the Summoner, transfigures herself into a creature that contextualizes malice as a “Vicious” Summoner. By juxtaposing the defining terms utilized to construct the male and female identity, there is a discernable tilt towards the masculine virtuosity.

The males’ virtual ascent is not limited within this oral or written language but even more implicitly defined in the visual elements. The male

characters' formal presentation is generally a projection of their rising power and strength, while the Elf remains dainty and vulnerable and the Summoner, gloomy.

The Elf is a long-range warrior that uses a bow for a weapon. She is half-naked at the beginning of her journey, exposing her cleavage, her abdominals, and the lower part of her buttocks; while her upper body is covered by a delicate scrap of white cloth and a piece of leather for the torso area, and crowned by her blonde hair. Among the skills given to an Elf are the enhancement skills that serve as support skills for other characters, healing, greater strength, and greater defense. These skills are purported to nurture the other characters in battle.

Elves are an asset to any party as energy elves or as agility elves. Energy elves have “buffing” spells (or enhancement skills) that can increase defense, offense or heal party members. Her summons can turn the tides of battle. Agility elves are amazing ranged fighters and their quick attacks and high flee rates make them excellent tankers (MU Online Guide, 2001).

By the characteristics given to them by their creator, Elves are weak creatures that need to stay distant from close range battle; otherwise they would die so easily. This is the reason why they are given a high flee rate. Their nurturing skills become their major value during battle, which make their job even more complicated since they have to extend support and care to the other characters while they try to avoid dangers that would get them effortlessly killed. The Elf is then connoted as the domesticated figure in the game.

The Summoner, on the other hand, is a mysterious being. In a guide provided by Global MU (2008) under the entry of description, they are described: “From the far Kingdom of Elbeland. The summoner has awaken(ed)!” The image of the Summoner in the game presents a much sexualized female—her nipples protrude behind her very skimpy purple and relatively sophisticated clothing. The lack of character background leaves space for imagination to wonder. All the skills given to them are magical attack skills that even expound the imagination because unlike the Elf, the Summoner's skills are beyond the physical as opposed to using a mere bow.

The Elf and the Summoner are juxtaposed against each other in

this formation of cyber female images, creating the dualism of femininity that diverts to the two far ends of men's libidinal fantasy. In Huyssen's (1986) deconstruction of the film *Metropolis*, he calls these two ends as the two traditional sexualized images of femininity—the virgin and the vamp. Regarded by Sylvia Bovenschen as male-imagined *ideal types*, “they are built up from a real core of social, physiological, and psychological traits specific to women and should be dismissed simply as yet another form of false consciousness.”

But in the cyberspace, this form of false consciousness is elevated into the physical state in this techno-reality, transforming masculine fantasy into real entity. The Elf is the virgin and the Summoner is the vamp. The Elf projects the purity and virginal impression behind that much sexualized imagery being the High Elf, the figure that is unreachable; while on the other end of the spectrum is the very aggressive and malicious Summoner, completing the vamp image in her realization of the Vicious Summoner.

The interface of the game presents a perspective in which the character is a detached entity from the perspective on the screen, where the character is seen from a third person point-of-view, and not through the eyes of the character or the first person. The game's perspective then is a gaze. The unification of the biological aspect and the machine projected into the reality of *MU Online* is not fully accomplished, since the gaze detaches the two from one another and becomes a form of puppetry. The gaze is intensified into control over the characters' existence, which is a further enhancement of the masculine fantasy.

The male fantasy is elevated beyond this libidinal satisfaction, since the game caters to what Sadie Plant calls the “ultimate fulfillment of the patriarchal dream,” and the male characters' virtuosity is just a prologue to this fulfillment. Among the male characters, the Lord Emperor is the best embodiment of this pursuit, the powerful and wise leader who has the skills to command beasts, bestow additional power to other characters such as an offensive enhancement skill, and battle toe to toe with any character. He achieves royalty and dominion over the other characters as he completes his transformation. The Blade Master, on the other hand, uses all the brute force that he can muster to be an excellent fighter in a battle. He primarily engages in a physical melee while he is brandishing a sword or two. He has the skill to double his health points (HP), which makes him highly difficult to contest with. Interestingly, the Blade Master becomes even stronger when

he is wielding two swords; perhaps this can signify that two phallic symbols mean more power. While the Grand Master climbs the level ladder, he attains different magic skills that enable him to outsmart his adversaries. He is able to master skills ranging from different natural elemental forces, which require great intelligence but affect the limits of his physical power. The Duel Master, on the other hand, is the best looking character among all the male characters; he refuses to wear a helm so as not to ruin the form of his hair. He has the combination of the Wizard's magical skills and the Knight's physical skills. He has power, intelligence, leadership, and good looks—possibly the traits that are necessary in leading a righteous path and accomplishing the patriarchal dream.

Plant (1993) explains that cyberspace is a venue to fulfill a patriarchal dream. She explains that physical boundaries are eliminated in this complex intersection of realities, leaving the physical behind and entering cyber reality. But she hypothesizes that the man's continuous journey in cyberspace will render him lost in the complexity of the interconnection, destroying his conceptions of reality and identity, and along with it, patriarchy.

Her ideas are symptomatic of Robin's complex notion of identity in cyberspace (Featherstone 1995). But this possibility of the destruction of the conception of reality and identity is a very difficult consideration in the reality created in *MU Online*, wherein the patriarchal fantasy and masculine libidinal fantasy are realized.

The difficulty emerges due to the fact that the images created for the game are clear evidence of the hope of the designers to appeal to the male gamers; so the characters are constructed in favor of the male fantasy, notwithstanding the fact that there might be potential female gamers. Or possibly, this is an apparent confirmation of a male-dominated gaming industry. The image formation is based on the very epistemology of the social construct of our reality that oppresses female identity, thus the images of vamp and virgin are generated. Furthermore, their images are mere digitization of the dominance of patriarchy and the proliferation of female oppression even online. The complexity of identities is flattened out by the adaptation of our realities into cyberspace, silencing all possibilities. All the characters are designed to follow predestined metamorphoses and the only customizations left available to the gamers are with regards to their characters' names, armors, and weapons.

Hence, Robin's idea of complex identities cyberspace (Featherstone 1995) would never be found in this reality called *MU Online* and the formation of the cyborg would never occur. Gender is bound to be as oppressive as it is in our reality, or maybe even more repressive and domineering since the limitation can never be exceeded in any aspect of this cyber world.

Here, women would still have to compromise their position in the gender discourse. They will have to compromise their womanity to achieve the primal power, because the female characters in the game do not offer this well-sought opportunity. They would have to turn into men to be able to find the possibility of satisfying their frustrations in our reality. In a sense, the combination of a female consciousness and a male cyber character becomes an oppressive image because the cyber character subjugates the identity of the female consciousness; therefore they are seen as females assuming male characters and not as women.

In the tail end of our search for the cyborg within the reality of *MU Online*, a system warning has been received— Fatal Error! Haraway's cyborg is lost in the circuits of this game because the images are encoded for the purpose of satisfying the male fantasy; consequently, the reality reverberating here is the reflection of the masculine construction of the dichotomized female images and the proliferation of the pursuit of the patriarchal dream. The post-gender as she imagined in cyberspace continues to be just a vision because the dominant ideology with regards to gender and sexuality transcends our reality into this cyber-reality. The efforts of the programmers to create a cyber fantasy world only impede the emergence of a cyber gender revolution which would introduce the post-gender. In this game, the cyborg would never emerge in view of the fact that this game is an extension of our male dominated reality—encoded for and by men.

Story

In a millennium's time, the Land of MU has advanced and developed the empire in great bounding strides. However, as foretold in the Great Prophecy, Secromicon, the Continent of MU fell into overwhelming chaos. Great leaders who had once controlled the MU Continent now have fallen low, and the central government; due to the internal strife and warfare amongst power hungry feudal lords, have brought the kingdom asunder and thus the empire crumbled. The millennium of peace and bounty is now a mere memory and dark stains of blood now cover the land. The ravages of war have laid waste to the once beautiful land and the shedding of blood still knows no end. Even now, petty feudal lords endlessly build up their machines of war and futilely attempt to re-establish what once was.

And it was during this time of endless blood letting that the Gates of Hell were thrown open as the blind ambitions of a foolish man had been led far astray.

Antonias a foolish Lord, blinded by ambition, deceived by the evil Sorceress Lemulia, unknowingly let loose upon the world, Kundun, the Devil of Darkness, a demon difficultly confined by the Seal of Etramu.

“Now this land shall be mine again. I have banished Peace for all time... the Sun will no longer shine. This earth shall be mine, and cunning men will be my slaves and cattle.”

The Ancient Devil Kundun awake from its long sleepless slumber now walks amongst the living defiling the land with his touch. Amidst the chaos, the stars have lost their course and the stench of fear and blood pervades throughout. Kundun released upon the land his rage and vengeance for his long confinement. Quickly, the now forsaken land of MU has become home to Kundun's minions and for 2 long years the evil of his reign befouled all that was once pure. Nightmare's Day, a passage in the Great Prophecy, had come true and was no longer merely the words of days gone by. Wise men began their studies anew and hopefully and longingly referred to the ray of light mentioned within the writings of the prophecy. Their last remaining hope lay in the power of the seal of Etramu, the very seal that maintained Kundun's imprisonment. Into 8 pieces the seal has been scattered and only when the seal is made whole shall peace return to the land once more.

The King of Blood

Antonias, the Prince of the Black Knights, was nearing the realization of his foolish ambitions.

“MU shall be mine and mine only! Foolish, pitiful men, look upon my might as I break the Seal to my destiny.”

An evil sorcerer named Lemulia had warmed to the foolish Lord and seduced his mind with false hope for Antonias had become sickened and weary of the ceaseless battles between the feudal lords of MU. Lemulia spoke endlessly about a tale of a Great Lord, a Demon, the Devil of Darkness, Kundun who had existed 1000 years ago before the MU Empire was born. She spoke of how those who allayed themselves with the Dark Lord would be masters of the whole world and not merely an empire or a continent. Antonias, blinded by ambition fell easily into Lemulia’s ploy. Those who saw past Lemulia’s veil of deception, loyal and altruistic advisors were immediately put to death and all that remained was the naive Lord, the evil Witch and cruel, blood thirsty warriors.

The army of Antonias kept laying havoc to the land, conquering the Empire by force under Lemulia’s cunning tricks and sorcery, and within time, on the ominous day mentioned in the Prophecy of the Secromicon, the forces of Antonias gathered at Ketthotum. The ghastly, merciless soldiers of Antonias anxiously waited for the moment when Antonias and Lemulia would break the Seal. The wind fell silent and the air was filled with uncertainty as the moments trickled by.

The Shrine of Ketthotum undulated grotesquely. For a brief moment, a look of panic crossed Antonias’ eyes. “Is all well, Lemulia?” The Sorcerer Lemulia hidden in a black shadowy robe nodded her head. “Only for the King of Land! The moment is upon us.” Antonias’ confusion and uncertainty remained but was seemingly satisfied with her reply. Antonias then shouted, “This land shall remain mine for all time.” and attempted to touch the Seal of Etramu.

“Om Orakust, Hemiad, Kiratus. Le Al Hokbras, Ektua, Ho.”

An unknown incantation spewed from Lemulia’s mouth and at the same time a bluish protective curtain surrounded Antonias. At this very moment, the Sealing Stone started to shed light. While Lemulia’s incarnation got louder and bolder, a look of madness began to flow and dance in the eyes of Antonias as he stared betwixt upon the jewel. “A little more, a little more...” Antonias’ hands were trembling, as he approached the Sealing Stone. The light emanating from the stone began to spasm “just a little more.” - Clink! Before Lemulia’s incantation had finished, the Sealing Stone shattered. “The King, the King of Blood!!” In the midst of the din of the soldiers’ rapturous voices calling out to their master, the Devil of Darkness, Kundun had resurrected. Kundun who woke up from sleep fiercely stared Antonias and shouted, “Now the land is only my own! Only the blood and fear will fill up this land!” And the 8 pieces of the Sealing Stone scattered far and wide to each corner of the vast continent that is MU.

The Prophecy

The Heavens shall open again, the Stars will lose their way, and Fear descends upon the earth. A saint awakens and destroys the Seal of Chains. Ravenous teeth shall rape the land, the land! Tis cruel! Crimson Blood stains the ground.

Under the Sun, The 8 Jewels of Legend and Lore shall appear, and Satan will have arisen. . . Heed these words ye wise man! A day shall come upon which the soil shall 8 Stars be affixed, Nightmare's Day shall it be called when Heaven's Rays divide the sky and echoing wails ring in the Valley of Death, and a light will come down upon this land from the world once forgotten.

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