



## Does Online Gender Masking Work?

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This paper looks at a particular freedom that appears to be offered by online communication: the freedom to carry out multi-person social interaction without revealing whether one is a man or a woman. This paper investigates whether online gender masking works, in two senses: Do users with masked gender succeed in keeping their gender ambiguous to their interlocutors? And do they (and others) benefit from the gender masking? Interviews with 51 gender-masking members of two online communities suggest the answer to the second question can be "yes" even when the first is "no". My interviewees said that although their offline genders do not usually remain ambiguous, nevertheless gender masking does provide them some protection from harassment, it gives a sign that sexual stereotyping may not apply, it can open up possibilities for people with non-standard offline genders, and above all it provides an opportunity for light-hearted creative personal expression.

# *Does Online Gender Masking Work?*

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This paper looks at a particular freedom that appears to be offered by online communication: the freedom to carry out multi-person social interaction without revealing whether one is a man or a woman.

Several authors, notably (Jaffe et al 1995) have discussed the choice, by both men and women but particularly women, of online identities that do not reveal their gender. This gender masking follows a long tradition of writers who chose *noms de plume* such as Currer Bell or A S Byatt in order to sidestep readers' gender-related prejudices and stereotypes. However, Internet communication technologies appear to offer a new possibility, that of informal, multi-person, real-time social interaction in which gender masking can be achieved without enormous effort.

This paper investigates whether online gender masking works, in two senses: first, do users with masked gender succeed in keeping their gender ambiguous to their interlocutors? And second, do they (and others) benefit from the gender masking?

After a discussion of some practicalities and difficulties of online gender masking, I will present a theoretical case that the answer to the second question might be "yes" even when the first is "no". Gender masking, even when it does not entirely conceal the user's gender, might still lead to greater freedom from harassment and from stereotyping. It might stimulate user's creativity and increase their freedom of artistic expression. Also, the theory (Butler 1990/1999) of "gender as performance" suggests that the experience of interacting with gender-masked characters might increase users' acceptance of people whose (offline) genders do not correspond to standard norms, and hence increase these people's freedom to express their non-standard genders.

I will then report some primary research I carried out in two online communities, LambdaMOO and Little Italy, which appears to support this theoretical case. Some of the results reported here concerning Little Italy were reported earlier, in (Mowbray 2000). All the results for LambdaMOO are new. Members of these two online communities explicitly declare their online gender, which does not have to be "male" or "female". I interviewed 51 members of these communities with an online gender other than "male" and "female". In general they had not succeeded in keeping their gender ambiguous, but nevertheless reported benefits from their online gender choice. I deliberately chose two online communities that differ from each other linguistically and culturally. In discussing these interviews I will mention some differences in the responses I received from members of these two communities, and suggest culture-based reasons why they might have arisen.

## PRACTICALITIES OF ONLINE GENDER MASKING

### Pronouns

A minor practicality of gender masking is the choice of suitable pronouns. Gender-ambiguous personal pronouns have been in use for centuries (I am thinking of the West Country "ur"), and MOO use by researchers has popularised the use of the Spivak pronoun ("e" in nominative, "em" in accusative, etc.) in papers on online gender. In this paper I refer to gender-masked online characters using the pronouns that they use when referring to

themselves. If I refer to an online character as “she”, this implies that the character refers to herself as “she”, but does not imply anything about the gender of the user controlling that character.

#### Gender-inflected language

It is not difficult to keep up a friendly correspondence in standard English over a long timescale and avoid using a phrase (for example, “I’m her sister/I’m her brother”) which implies the sex of the person who wrote it. In gender-inflected languages this is not so easy to do. For example, speakers of Italian who apply adjectives to describe themselves or others, or use the past perfect tense, are likely to mark themselves and the other people they describe as male or as female. It is quite difficult to have a friendly conversation in Italian for long without using linguistic constructions that imply what your own sex is and what you consider the sex of your interlocutor to be. Moreover, if you try to avoid these constructions, it is generally obvious that you are trying to avoid them. Gender masking in standard written English not only requires less concentration, it can be done without being obvious; the mask looks like a human face of as-yet-undetermined gender, rather than a disguise.

#### Style and behaviour

Despite the issues I have just outlined, I do not believe that language is the major problem in the construction of online genders other than male or female. The idea that it might be reminds me of Douglas Adams’ joke (Adams 1980:79) that the major problem of time travel is the lack of suitable grammatical tenses. Susan Herring (Herring 1994) has demonstrated that men and women have recognizably different online communication styles, and that this is not hidden by the adoption of ambiguous pseudonyms. It is common (in MOOs at least) for users’ genders to be judged by their style and behaviour even when this conflicts with grammatical indications. For example, if a “female” character on a MOO talks repeatedly about her enormous boobs, most experienced MOO users will assume that the user controlling this character is male.

#### Mental categories

Butler points out the fact that freedom of gender construction is limited by the social environment. It is difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to achieve a specific social gender identity if the concept of that identity is not available to those who interact with the person involved. “Gender ontologies always operate within established political contexts as normative injunctions, determining what qualifies as intelligible sex” (Butler 1990/1999: 189). This reflects the way that the human brain works. When I encounter a new object, I mentally assign it to what appears to be the closest pre-existing mental categories. If I encounter an object which does not fit in easily with existing mental categories, I feel uneasy, and curious to find out more features of the object which might imply its membership of one or other of the categories. The same applies for the categorization of people. All though it is clear that everyone is an individual, we do rely on existing categories to decide how to interact socially, particularly on first acquaintance. The result of the standard male/female categorization is that it is difficult to sustain a gender other than simple “male” or simple “female” socially. As O’Brien says, “When persons confront instances of gender stretching they tend to snap them back into the conventional physical sex dichotomy. ‘Is it really a man or a woman?’” (O’Brien 1999: 78).

Before I had experienced MOOs, I had thought that I was able to communicate without problems with a person of ambiguous male/female gender, and I also thought that I did not behave noticeably differently towards men and women on first acquaintance. What I actually found at my first encounter with a Spivak-gendered character in a MOO was that I was not only uncomfortable, but at loss for words. I just did not know how to behave towards em.

Amy Bruckman (Bruckman 1993: Section 1) also reports having felt unease on her first meeting with a gender-masked character – and unease about her unease.

After a while things got easier, and I had many friendly conversations with the Spivak character. Some time after we had first met online, the user controlling the character told me (through the character) that she was a woman. I felt a distinct mental jolt at this news. I realised that this sensation was because I had unconsciously assigned the composite person consisting of this character and the user controlling em to the mental category “male” (or possibly “male-Spivak”). The fact that I had grown comfortable in online social interaction with this character was not, as I had imagined, because I had developed a mental model of social behaviour for interaction with a Spivak: rather, I had got used to behaving towards this Spivak as though e were male.

I observed the same phenomenon in LambdaMOO while interviewing a gender-masked character. Another character, controlled by a user who had been friends on the MOO for years with the first, was present (at the invitation of the interviewee) in the virtual room in which the interview took place. The user controlling the gender-masked character told me that he was male, and the second character responded with marked surprise and curiosity, and gave the impression of having had a sudden discontinuity in perception.

### Deception

Some very strong reactions to women pretending to be men online and men pretending to be women online are reported in (O’Brien 1999: 88-91). O’Brien goes on to show, by comparison with examples in which there were not negative reactions, that it was the intention to deceive rather than the gender-switching in itself which caused the negative reactions. One advantage of masked characters is that they potentially allow shielding from harassment without resorting to deception. It should be clear that you do not really intend to fool anyone if your online character is, say, a neuter-gendered piece of toast. However, to ensure their interlocutors do not feel deceived, gender-masking users may have to take care that they are not read as the “wrong” gender. For example, if another user consistently addresses a gender-masked online character controlled by a male user in a way that implies that the character (or the user controlling the character) is female, it may be necessary to challenge this implication.

## POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF “UNSUCCESSFUL” ONLINE GENDER MASKING

### Freedom from harassment

One motivation for gender masking by women is to avoid online harassment. For a report giving an idea of current levels of online harassment, based on an international survey of over 10,000 young Internet users, see (Ipsos-Reid 2000).

I believe that gender masking may be useful as a strategy for protecting against online harassment even if does not succeed in completely concealing a user’s offline gender. A general property of online communication is the ability to construct subtly graded levels of privacy or anonymity which are difficult to sustain offline or via other communications media. As Bakardjieva and Feenberg point out, “Online communications media allow individuals and groups to control what is revealed about them to a degree difficult to attain in face-to-face situations. As a result of this control, online communities can experiment with extremely subtle gradations in the level of privacy.” (Bakardjieva et al 2001: 202).

It is easier to control a gender construction online than offline, and it may be possible to construct a gender-masked character in such a way that the user’s offline gender is hidden

from at least some other users of the online community, even if it is difficult or impossible to hide from close online friends. In order for gender masking to afford protection from harassment, the user's gender does not have to be hidden from everyone – just from harassers. Online harassers tend to go for easy pickings, and so are likely to harass the nearest person who is “obviously” female, rather than taking the trouble to find out whether a masked character is controlled by a female user.

#### Freedom from stereotyping

Another possible benefit of having an online character with a gender other than male or female is as a signal that you do not see yourself as conforming to sexual stereotypes. People who see this signal may be more cautious about treating you in a stereotyped way. This benefit still holds (indeed, is more useful) if your offline gender is not hidden. If your character's gender is “witch”, for example, other users of the online community may guess that you do not want to be treated like a sensitive flower.

#### Creative freedom

A sex-change operation for a MOO character is trivial in programming terms, requiring the user just to type a single line. In contrast, offline sex changes are only for the extremely dedicated. In an environment in which gender can potentially be assigned and changed very easily, what phenomena might be expected? Theoretically, one would expect to see genders chosen for temporary or frivolous reasons, or as a private joke between friends. Another possibility is that they could take on the task of expressing aspects of identity other than gender that were not so easy to programme. They could also be adopted for artistic purposes not directly related to the user's offline identity.

#### Freedom for expression of non-standard genders

Rasheed Araeen is quoted in (Sardar et al 1999: 125) as saying  
“I can say I'm Asian, Indian, Pakistani, British, European, Muslim, Oriental, secular, modernist, postmodernist... Do they define my identity? Can I accept all of them as part of my life, or must I choose one thing or another according to someone else's notion about my identity? I have no problem in saying that I'm all of these things, and perhaps none of these things at the same time.”

Just as it is possible for a single person to have multiple, conflicting and ambivalent ethnic identities, it should theoretically be possible for a single person to have multiple, conflicting, and ambivalent gender identities. However, gender constructions outside standard norms often meet with social intolerance and incomprehension. Judith Butler's work suggests that benefit from gender-masked characters might accrue not only to the users with these characters, but to other users of the MOO who have non-standard genders, and indeed to non-standard-gendered members of the offline societies in which users of the MOO live. The theme of Butler's “Gender Trouble” is, briefly, that gender is a performance, and as such need not conform to the standard heterosexual-male or heterosexual-female norms; and that by “making gender trouble” through complex gender performances it should be possible to demonstrate the contingency, instability, and lack of necessity of the standard gender performances as well; thus opening up possibilities in society for other gender options. Butler says in the introduction to the 1999 edition of “Gender Trouble”,  
“One might wonder what use ‘opening up possibilities’ finally is, but no one who has understood what it is to live in the social world as what is ‘impossible,’ illegible, unrealizable, unreal, and illegitimate is likely to pose that question.” (Butler 1990/1999: viii).  
The possibility of non-standard online gender performances may give users whose genders do not conform to the standard norms an increased chance of expressing these genders – in this

case the function of this possibility is not to mask, but to reveal. Paccagnella (Paccagnella 2001: 381) describes how some Internet communities act as safe and tolerant environments in which a non-heterosexual adolescent can first “come out”.

In addition, Butler’s theory would imply that non-standard online gender performances could promote greater acceptance of people whose genders do not conform to the standard norms. One mechanism by which this might take place could be the construction of new mental gender categories in the minds of users who socialize with characters with non-standard genders. Another could be, more simply, that encountering characters with genders other than “male” and “female,” and having the freedom to assume such online genders themselves, might stimulate users to think about gender and question their previous assumptions on its construction and limitations.

### THE TWO ONLINE COMMUNITIES

The two online communities from which I collected data are two MOOs, Little Italy and LambdaMOO. (Little Italy, like all MOOs, is built on the software developed by Pavel Curtis for LambdaMOO.) The language of Little Italy is Italian, and almost all of its users are resident in Italy. Conversations in LambdaMOO are generally (but not always) in English, and a majority of LambdaMOO users are US residents, although a sizeable minority are not. To access these communities, telnet to `kame.usr.dsi.unimi.it` port 4444 for Little Italy, or `lambda.moo.mud.org` port 8888 for LambdaMOO, and type *connect guest*.

Members of these communities explicitly declare their online gender. They can either choose a gender from a limited set of options - including “male”, “female”, “Spivak”, and a default option - which are suggested by the system, or can choose a customized gender, specified by themselves, which can be any string of characters. The default gender is “neuter” on LambdaMOO and “neutral” on Little Italy, and this gender is assigned to characters whose owners have not yet chosen a gender. In each of the communities, at least 13% of the active community members that I sampled declared online genders other than “male”, “female”, and the default gender. (And at least 18% had online genders other than “male” and “female”.)

### METHODOLOGY

A staff member of Little Italy provided me with a list of the characters who had logged on during a particular month. Once guest characters (which do not have a single human controller but are available for anyone to use), and robots (characters controlled by pieces of software rather than directly by users) were excluded, there were exactly 400 left. I sampled characters on LambdaMOO just by collecting the character names of the 164 characters (again, excluding guests and robots) logged on at a particular instant, using the *@users* command. I recorded the characters’ online genders using the *@s #.gender* command on Little Italy and the *@crowd* command on LambdaMOO.

In LambdaMOO, of the sample of 164 characters 52% were “male”, 29% were “female”, 5% had the default gender and 13% had a gender other than male, female, or the default. In Little Italy, 45% of the sample of 400 characters were “male”, 26% “female”, 11% had the default gender and 18% had gender other than “male”, “female” or the default.

For both of the communities I contacted characters with gender other than male, female or the default gender who had been present in my samples and were still active on the MOO (I contacted users some months after taking the original samples, and not all the characters originally present were still active). I made this contact in real-time in the MOO in the cases when I happened to be logged in simultaneously with a character I was looking for. I left MOO messages for the characters I did not meet. I got ten responses in LambdaMOO (a response rate of 45%) and 14 in Little Italy (a response rate of 48%). In addition, I interviewed other characters with gender other than male and female who were present in the

MOOs while I was collecting data on the sampled characters. There were 14 of these in Little Italy and 13 in LambdaMOO; none of the characters I approached in this way refused me an interview, although a few interviewees asked me not to quote part or all of the interview. This makes a total of 51 responses from the two communities. The interview responses from the characters that were not in the original samples are similar to the responses from the characters that were.

There is inevitably a bias in the responses, because I was more likely to get responses from people who are not shy about answering such questions, and who are present often in the MOOs. The data is qualitative apart from the answers to some yes/no questions. As with all qualitative data, interpretation is necessary, and there is a possibility that my interpretations are incorrect.

Quotations are given with the explicit permission of the person quoted. I have translated them from the Italian where appropriate. Where I cite a character name, this is either because it is relevant to the online gender, in which case I have permission from the person quoted, or because my interviewee asked me to cite the character name. I explicitly offered this option: there is a tension here between online privacy on the one hand, and users' right to acknowledgement for their creations on the other, which in my opinion can only be resolved by asking the user.

## INTERVIEW RESULTS

In this section I discuss the interviews. Most of my interviewees did feel they had gained benefit from having a masked character.

### Did interviewees successfully hide their offline gender?

One way of interpreting the question "does gender masking work?" is: Do users with masked characters manage to conceal their offline gender from the other users in the MOO? The answer to this for the users I interviewed is "in general, no". My interviewees in both LambdaMOO and Little Italy generally told me that their online friends knew their offline gender - or correctly guessed it from their online behaviour - and reacted to their characters as though the characters were of that gender. But in fact, a majority of users in both LambdaMOO and Little Italy did not attempt to hide their gender even from casual acquaintances online. For these users, their choice of online gender was not an attempt at concealment, but an artistic, aesthetic or philosophical choice.

More of my LambdaMOO interviewees than my Little Italy interviewees succeeded in hiding their gender. Language was a factor in this. The language of Little Italy MOO is Italian, and only two of my interviewees in Little Italy habitually avoided gendered grammatical constructions.

### Creative gender choice

The most common reason my interviewees chose a gender other than male or female was for creative purposes. Eleven out of my 23 LambdaMOO interviewees, and twenty out of my 28 Little Italy interviewees, chose a gender other than male or female for artistic or creative reasons. These reasons were often frivolous and light-hearted, sometimes referring to an in-joke amongst friends. Genders in LambdaMOO include animal names such as "shark", "mule", and "pet cat", and also genders designed to complement the character name, such as Drunken-Sot's gender "scotch", and the wonderful combination of character name "nrrd" with gender "grrl". Trees of LambdaMOO has gender "foliage" and has designed a special set of pronouns just for Trimself. Tower has gender "edifice", because "An edifice is, according to one online dictionary, a building, especially 'a large or massive structure.' Irl, I am big, although not massive, as my description notes". Another LambdaMOO character has

five different aliases, mostly inspired by song titles, and these aliases have appropriate genders – for example, one is a princess who has gender “egotistical”.

In Little Italy, creative genders include “peperone”, “Giuro niente sesso, solo un po’” (which means “I swear no sex, just a little”, and is from a song lyric), “diablo” (which means devil), “FOLLEtoide” (a play on words – the character is an elf, or “folletto” in Italian, follettoide means elvish and FOLLE means CRAZY), “\V/amp!” (this character is a vampire and the gender contains a visual reference to Dracula’s high collar) and “. . .nothing like the sun” (the ellipsis is part of the online gender: this an indirect quotation of the Shakespeare sonnet via an album by Sting.) Some Little Italians chose online genders that reflect some important non-gender-related aspect of the user’s offline personality, such as “rebel”, or “Angelo”: “I chose ‘angel’ because I help everyone who asks me – and some who don’t ask – let’s say I like being a guardian angel ;) and because my name is Michelangelo”.

Wittig declares that there are “as many sexes as there are individuals” (Wittig 1979: 119). CiQu of Little Italy reflects this theory by having gender “CiQu”. The creative online genders are often one-offs, applying to one character only.

In my opinion what is happening here is a form of folk art, comparable to tattoos, graffiti, and bumper stickers. Online gender is being used by these individuals as a creative ornamentation of their personal online space, sometimes as a means of expressing identity (not necessarily gender-related aspects of identity), sometimes simply as a joke to share with others. A similar phenomenon in online communication can be seen in the design of personal signature lines for email messages.

#### Freedom from stereotyping and acceptance of non-standard gender

Eight of my 23 LambdaMOO interviewees say that they chose genders other than “male” or “female” because they do not subscribe to gender stereotypes. Only three of my 28 Little Italy interviewees say this. Sexual stereotypes are stronger in general in Little Italy than in LambdaMOO. I suspect that this reflects the offline society in which the users live: sexual stereotyping tends to be more rigid in Italy than in the US. It is also possible that the higher number of LambdaMOOers giving this as the reason for their gender choice may be related to the curious fact that five of the eight LambdaMOOers who gave this reason were involved in women’s studies or gender studies. None of my Little Italy interviewees said they were involved in these subjects, and indeed such courses are relatively uncommon in Italy.

One interviewee in LambdaMOO says “we have our masculine and our feminine sides. . . on moo it’s easier to just express without the visual of rl-gender to cast a shadow over your actions.” (Here “rl” is an abbreviation for “real-life”.) Another says, “this feels more me than a female character, because women are supposed to be like this and that – but I don’t think I fit into that schema”. A LambdaMOOer with gender “woofiegrrl” explains that this particular gender is

“a middle ground between binarism and non-binarism. I’m acknowledging that there are more than two genders, but I’m also providing a gender indication for those who can’t accept anything beyond male and female”.

In a couple of cases it is clear that users whose genders do not conform to the standard norms have been able to use the MOOs for gender self-expression. An interviewee in Little Italy says “I feel that here I can be what I’ve always wanted to be. . . despite being a man, I feel very feminine”, and Peri in LambdaMOO changes online gender randomly, using a special programme, and is “transgendered and inter-gendered, both on MOOs and in real life”.

The “gender as performance” theory would suggest that in addition, users of these MOOs might become more accepting towards non-standard genders. LambdaMOO is certainly tolerant towards these. It contains the following declaration for new users (to read the full declaration, type *help manners* while logged into the MOO):



“LambdaMOOers are generally very tolerant of all races, religions, sexual orientations, and just about whatever else you can think of. They do not tend to tolerate hatred based on such distinctions.”

Moreover, “outing”, or publicizing information about a user’s offline identity (such as the user’s offline gender) without the user’s consent, is strictly forbidden:

“...any grave incident of outing may be considered the worst form of unmannerly behavior and may result in swift, permanent expulsion from LambdaMOO.”

It is not clear that use of LambdaMOO results in users becoming more accepting of non-standard genders – it might just be that anyone less tolerant will find LambdaMOO an uncongenial environment, and will leave. In Little Italy, however, I came across one case in which a change in attitudes clearly did occur. A young man who had always considered himself heterosexual – indeed, he had been quite homophobic – accessed Little Italy MOO, and fell in love with another man via the MOO.

### Freedom from harassment

Three of my LambdaMOO interviewees and two of my Little Italy interviewees said that they had adopted gender masking principally as a protection against harassment (or, more mildly, as an indication that they were not particularly interested in online flirtation), and a few other interviewees indicated that this was a secondary reason or a pleasant side effect of their online gender choice. They agreed that although their online friends could see through the mask, this anti-harassment strategy had worked. There are commands within the MOOs that list the “female” characters currently logged in, and the simple fact of not appearing on these lists did reduce harassment levels. One LambdaMOOer (who also mentions other reasons for using an indeterminate gender) says “I was tired of receiving pages and propositions simply on the basis of my gender” and another LambdaMOOer says “when i first joined the moo, i noticed i got ‘talked’ or approached a lot cuz i was female. a lot of moosex going on at that time. i got hit on a lot, a lot of rude innuendo at times.”

A Little Italian says:

“before coming to LI I’d passed some time on the classic chats and I was shocked by the fact that if you have a female name heaps of men arrive trying to pick you up... whereas if on the other hand you describe yourself as male... the first woman you meet thinks that you want to take her to bed... so I said to myself... seeing that on LI I’m beginning from zero, why not avoid falling into this game and why not create a character where you can’t tell whether it’s a man or a woman.”

### SUMMARY

My answers to the question “does gender masking work?” given by my interviewees in Little Italy and LambdaMOO are that their offline genders are not in general concealed from the other community members, but nevertheless gender masking does provide some protection from harassment, it gives a sign at least that sexual stereotyping may not apply, and above all it provides an opportunity for light-hearted creative personal expression. There are also some indications that these online communities may open up possibilities for people with non-standard offline genders. These two communities, therefore, furnish concrete examples to support my theory that online gender masking can be beneficial even when it does not actually conceal a user’s offline gender.

Not all online communication spaces offer their users the freedom to choose an online gender other than “male” or “female”. Some require users to declare explicitly at the outset whether they are male or female, and do not allow any other options. The absence of this requirement appears to have contributed to the tolerance and creativity evident in the two MOOs I studied.

Introducing the freedom to choose online genders other than “male” or “female” into other online communications spaces might produce similar positive results.

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