



**Celia Pearce** is a game designer, artist, teacher and writer. She is the designer of the award-winning virtual reality attraction *Virtual Adventures: The Loch Ness Expedition*, and the author of *The Interactive Book: A Guide to the Interactive Revolution* (Macmillan, 1997) as well as numerous essays on game design and interactivity.

Past conversations:

**Will Wright** - *Sims*, *BattleBots*, *Cellular Automata* *God and Go*

**Louis Castle** - *The Player with Many Faces*

**Tim Schafer** - *Game Noir*

Author homepage:  
[www.cpandfriends.com](http://www.cpandfriends.com)

## A Conversation with Raph Koster

Conducted in a Hallway at the San Jose Convention Center. March 22, 2004

by Celia Pearce

**Celia Pearce:** You've been on quite an adventure the last few years between *Ultima Online* and *Star Wars Galaxies*. What's that been like to go from *Ultima* to *Star Wars*? It's almost like an evolutionary leap from one to the other.

**Raph Koster:** I think the first thing that strikes me is that there are some similarities, and then there are some differences. The big similarity is both are well-loved universes, and working within the boundaries of that. In that sense, *Star Wars* is familiar—it felt very similar, bigger in scope, in detail and so on...but it's still similar in that way. I think one of the big contrasts for me, one of the things to compare between the two, is that *Ultima*

*Online* from early on was kind of a garage project in a sense... a very small group.

CP: How many people were there when you started?

RK: Five, six... A pretty small group that only later, had many people added on to it. So *Ultima Online* was one of those things that probably could have gone away at any moment. Although most of us were new to the industry—we didn't have any awareness of that.

CP: What were you doing before you got involved in *Ultima*?

RK: Actually, I finished up my MFA in creative writing at the University of Alabama.

CP: Ah... another writer.

RK: Yeah, I went straight from there into the game industry. With *Star Wars*, from the get-go, it was a big deal, and I think that certainly is a big contrast between the two, a big change to adapt to. What else do you want to know about the journey?

CP: I'm curious about what you learned from the *Ultima* experience that changed your approach to the *Star Wars* experience.

RK: I think the biggest lesson I learned, and I've said this

before, was about listening to the players, and about how much they know about the game that you don't, and about how easy it is for you to get caught in an Ivory Tower and not understand the player experience. That very much informed how we proceeded with *Star Wars Galaxies* in the way in which we very early on opened up a community website, brought in people, posted our design documents publicly to get feedback, and all of that kind of stuff. Ironically, these days a lot of people blame that for some of what they see as shortcomings in the game. They say, oh, we brought in too many people, and conceded to —“and pick your favourite opposing group”—“oh you conceded to the ‘care bears,’ you conceded to the ‘pk’ers,’ you conceded to the ‘crafters,’ you conceded to the ‘power gamers.’” Whichever group you’re unhappy about, they say you conceded to. And I don’t know... I still really value the process that we went through there, that collaborative design effort. I think it was really fruitful.

CP: I think it’s hard to make a world from a property that’s got a well-established fan base. I mean they did that with the Hobbit movies, and they had a fan liaison throughout the entire process.

RK: It is really challenging because what you find, of course, is that not everybody even sees it the same way. So there was actually a really vocal segment of that early fan base that didn’t want us to be making *Star Wars Galaxies*. They wanted us to be making *Star Wars Battlefield 1942*. And we’d say to them, well, this is going to be a subscription-based thing, and it’s an RPG, and you

know, that's its *nature*. And it didn't matter. They still wanted that other game. Which is now being made, so I'm sure they're happy.

CP: You kind of quickly rattled off a bunch of player types of the fan base. What are those? Can you enumerate?

RK: Some are derogatory slang terms that people use for one another. So, people who aren't interested in player vs. player combat, the people who do enjoy PVP call them "care bears." So that was one.

CP: That would be me. (Both laugh)

RK: Then there's the player killers... actually the people who enjoy PVP... not all of them are player killers, in the sense of people who murder people. Some of them enjoy team vs. team sport, essentially. You know, there are the people who are interested in virtual crafting and building, versus the people who are interested primarily in combat, you know, and player vs. creature combat, traditional RPG-style. And you know, there are many competing tensions. The crafters want to be able to make the coolest stuff so that they have a market. And the power gamers and the RPG'ers want to *loot* the best stuff from the monsters they kill. So you end up having to reconcile all those different impulses.

CP: Of those... you might call them... personalized objectives, or the player style, let's say, where do you see

synergies and where do you see conflicts? Some of those things can complement each other, and some of them can actually undo each other, or make the other person's experience less fulfilling. Is there any way to resolve that?

RK: A lot of what *Star Wars Galaxies* was about was trying to resolve that.

CP: So, give me some examples of some of the things you might have done to address those issues.

RK: A lot of it, for example, with the game economy. Minimizing the amount of loot, that is stuff you might want directly as a finished product, but instead making loot that is ingredients so that you can take the ingredients to the crafter-type. The crafter still gets to make the best things, but you still get rewarding loot. So there are lots of strategies.

CP: So does the crafter in a sense perform a service for the looter? The looter brings the raw materials to the crafter, and then the crafter makes the desired object?

RK: Yes.

CP: So that's an interesting approach, because usually, I think, the crafter might make things for themselves typically.

RK: Oh, well no. That's one of the things that I'm really big on at this point, is more player-driven economies and what I call large-scope group interactions. You know, we always talk about the small group interaction, which is, in a fight, we want these three or four roles and they need to work together—teamwork. And that is incredibly important, but I've become increasingly interested in large-scale interactions, in how play styles fit together, in their interdependencies. And so here we are at this convention hall, and we have academics, we have press, we have game designers, we have money people, we have the mobile people, we have the conference organizations, we have the people who keep the place clean, we have the caterers. And there's this complex interesting web of interdependencies where if you removed one of these groups, some chunk of the conference would fall apart. And that's how the world works. And we don't tend to think of the telephone sanitizers or whoever—and there's people out there doing very important things. Somebody's out there monitoring the traffic lights to make sure the traffic works, and nobody ever thinks of that poor guy. And no doubt his job is pretty interesting if we decided to go look at it. So MMOs that are just about, "hey, let's go kill monsters and get loot" have a very simple web there. There's not much to them. I've been increasingly interested in seeing how the different groups interact, in part because so many of them dislike each other. (Both laugh.) For me, MMO design isn't just about putting together a game, although obviously that's critical. But it's also about learning a little about that kind of thing. I mean, there's an opportunity there for us to learn about

ourselves and learn about others. So having an environment where, in *Ultima Online*, it became clear, crafters were important. And everybody said "Oh, wow! Crafters!" This is a viable major part of these games, and now there's a little bit of an ecology going, right? In *Star Wars*, a big deal was we wanted to add *the arts* as an additional point on the thing... and so we added this. It wasn't just arts, it was what we called *social* professions. Professions that are essentially social lubricants in one way or another. So we have politicians and dancers and musicians, and even image designers, which are essentially makeup artists and hair stylists. And we put these in and consciously gave them a place in the ecology so that they'd *matter* to people.

CP: How did that work out? Are you happy with the results?

RK: Yeah. Because early on, we had all kinds of people, like hardcore player-killer types, who would end up saying, "Oh, I've never been a good dancer???" give me a break." I think back to *Ultima Online* when some of the competitors actually ran ads like "You don't play these games to bake *bread*." They were wrong! A ton of people turned out that actually they did. A similar thing happened with *Star Wars*. We had these hard-core player killer types, who are like, "no, I'm an imperial officer, and I want to play a storm trooper or whatever, and then they found that they actually kind of enjoyed dancing in the cantina..."

CP: Just like a *real* army officer...

RK: Yeah, sure. You know, some of it was forced. I mean we just forced it. We introduced a stat that could only be healed in the cantina by watching entertainers.

CP: What was the stat?

RK: We called it battle fatigue.

CP: Oh great! I was thinking about that actually when I was playing *Lineage* a few months ago, because I noticed that when you med, you don't really have to be around, and there's all these restaurants and stuff you can go in, but there's no benefit to being around other people.

RK: They're always empty.

CP: Yeah, and I was thinking it would be great if somehow there was a social bonus, so that if you're doing that with other people it's now accelerated.

RK: It was kind of traditional in the MUDs that everybody would always build taverns, and the taverns would always be empty. Usually the way that people tried fix it was to make it so that drinking alcohol healed you faster.

CP: That's kind of odd.

RK: Yeah, it was kind of an odd thing. But looked at as a

design mechanic, it kind of makes sense. But the alcohol was portable. So it didn't really matter. In *Ultima Online* we went to great lengths—we actually implemented chess boards and cards and things you could pull out. We didn't enforce the rules, you could just play chess, darts, things like that. And it didn't matter. There was an initial surge, and then they emptied out. Now players *did* go to the *player-run* taverns. They went to the places where players had built a building, called it a tavern, roleplayed, provided entertainment, that sort of thing. And that's kind of where the impetus came from... It was, "Wow, what I'd like to do is find a way to reward the people who are that kind of community builder."

CP: So do those people get some types of experience points as well?

RK: That's why we made it a character class, because that is the reward mechanic in these games.

CP: So you actually level up?

RK: You actually level up as a dancer, or whatever. Because what I wanted to do was give them a pat on the head that they were doing good work. Traditionally, the game was oblivious to this important stuff that they were doing.

CP: Yeah, and I'm always curious too, I wonder if those social dynamics, or what I would consider sort of

emergent behaviours, behaviours that are outside of the game's roles, to what extent they either support or detract from the primary game mechanic. I notice that in some games, socializing is actually a detraction because you don't really get any points for it. But one of the things I always liked about the demos that I've seen of *Star Wars Galaxies* was that they were sort of accommodating a variety of player types.

RK: It literally was to give it a feedback channel, and make it so that socializing wasn't just a neutral activity. It used to be passively punished, in that you couldn't advance while you were doing it. So by letting you actually advance in it, or actively rewarding you, if that's a path you want, and it became recognized: "hey, somebody put in all the effort of making Master Musician, you know, that's something significant." And there's also the factor of people just feeling rewarded for it. You know one of things that had become crystal clear in MMO design was that people will do the thing they're rewarded for, not necessarily the thing that is fun. So players will gladly short circuit the fun out of the game system in order to get the rewards. Which is exploiting, it's cheating, it's cheat codes. People will find ways to bypass the fun in order to advance and get rewarded quickly. So I see that as a problem. It short-circuits out all of these things that are slower-paced.

I tend to think of it as a social architecture thing, or creating opportunities for the interaction. There are emergent behaviours that will happen in the game, but the thing is, they only arise if there are avenues and

channels for them. And these games aren't really complete enough simulations in a lot of ways, especially economically... Like all the examples I gave you earlier, essentially all economic interactions, in one way or another, exchanges of information, exchanges of money, and exchanges of goods, in some cases, like this place, exchanges of jobs, like in this place—it happens a lot. But if those constructs don't exist within the context of the game, then that kind of interaction will never happen. So if you leave out crafting, you won't interact with tradesmen because there simply won't *be* any, because there's no call for it, it's not simulated.

CP: Also the role of money is kind of interesting, because although it isn't an explicit goal in a game to get money, there are things you can do *with* money that help you achieve the goal.

RK: The basics of economics *always* show up. You always get something getting defined as a currency, either whatever the designers provided or something else. If they didn't provide anything, somebody will make some object in the game into currency. That part's *easy*. What's hard is then getting a rich and diverse ecology of people doing different things. And that's where we as designers choose to include or not include different kinds of activities, and the richness of the interaction, of the culture within the game, is going to depend on what you include in the simulation. So if you leave out, say, the service economy, by and large MMOs don't have a service economy. Retail jobs kind of suck in the real world... so

being the cashier in a grocery store probably isn't likely to show up as a role in an MMO. But *running* the grocery store *has*. And so there's this chunk of the economy – like the service economy – that has huge ramifications. In the real world, all kinds of interesting things arise out of that. It's just not in these games. Because we don't tend to have anybody waiting tables in the MMO. So if we don't provide for it, we'll never get any of the things that might arise from it. Now, I don't know that there's any interesting gameplay in waiting tables, but I could be dead wrong. So to me it was a matter to me of, let's pick some things that I think do have gameplay and put them in the game.

CP: That would be fun in and of itself but would also provide some tangible outcome.

RK: Yeah. And see what new things come up.

CP: Have you read any of Ted Castronova's writings?

RK: All of it. (Laughs) I've read all of it. I've hung out with him.

CP: I'm curious what your thoughts are about that. I'm really curious as to how much of the academic writing that's done is actually read by game designers. And I know some of you do read it. Has it given you any new ideas or thoughts about how to go about this in the future? Or do you disagree or agree with any of it?

RK: I do read a lot of that, I hang out on the Terra Nova blog a lot, Ted and for that matter, Dan Hunter, all of that crowd there. Some of it, like in Ted's case, was revelatory to people who weren't immersed in it already. I think most of us who are already working on it knew about the extent of the phenomenon. One thing he certainly contributed has been hard numbers. That wasn't something that even the industry had looked at that closely.

A lot of the legal stuff that people keep coming up with is very novel and interesting. That's something I've been following a lot, because that's opening up new—I don't know if I'd call them new vistas, maybe new minefields—for online games. Other academic areas as well.

CP: Have you read T.L. Taylor's writings?

RK: Read T.L. Taylor's stuff. I try to keep up with all the main online game research. Actually I get invited to Scandinavia at least three times a year. Whether Finland, or Copenhagen or something. I tend to pay attention to that. And I think game designers who are slightly more academic like me are more likely to get asked to go to those things. But I think there's a lot of value in that kind of work. Even if—like on Terra Nova, there's a lot of ribbing of the guys because they haven't read the full MUDDEV Archives, and so they are rereading old ground. And you know, some of the designers on there are kind of frustrated. They'll actually reply to a post saying "Good, so now you've reached MUDDEV Archives, Third Quarter

1996. Here's the thread, come back after you read it."

CP: Yeah, I probably shouldn't say this, but I get a little frustrated with the historical amnesia because I think a lot of people come to this stuff as if no-one has come to it before in one form or another. I'm always appalled at how many people studying online communities even know about ActiveWorlds, or OnLive, or any of those environments. I mean people have been getting married online in those worlds for over a decade already. And it's not that big of a deal.

RK: You can't say a decade anymore, you have to say two decades now. It's 2004 already. People were getting married in the mid-eighties. That's the thing—I just read an article in a Chinese newspaper that the government is freaking out over online marriages in China because they take marriage more seriously than we do here. And so there are some major freak-outs over there. There's been talk of banning it, or legally considering it adultery. All kinds of stuff like that.

So in a sense, you know, I don't really fault these guys for not having been on MUDDEV since 1996. I'm a Johnny-come-lately to it. Anytime I sit and talk with Randy Farmer, or John Taylor, or Richard Bartle, I'm the young pup among them. You know, there's always a lot to learn. I think the base problem is how little of it's been codified, has been collected, and really kind of analyzed. But at the same time, for every T.L. Taylor, there's an Elizabeth Reid that nobody remembers. And that's not to mock T.L.

Taylor. And everybody remembers Sherry Turkle, but not quite as many remember Amy Bruckman. It's not even a question of remembering things—these people are still actively doing work. It is a little bit odd.

CP: I mean from an academic perspective, I get a little bent out of shape about it because academics are supposed to do their homework. I mean if a random game designer doesn't know this stuff, that doesn't bother me at all.

RK: It bothers me!

CP: But it bequeaths those of us who are supposed to be answerable to a certain level of rigour. Part of the problem too is that most people who are at it are so young, and we don't quite know what academic really means yet. And a lot of us are trying to maintain a bridge between practitioners and theorists and scholars in a way that other media haven't. Clearly there's been a real breach in the film side. A lot of us have been trying to have that avoid that happening here.

RK: It's certainly been interesting to see that kind of question of that breach of dialogue. Because take for example MUDDEV itself. Within the designer community, MUDDEV is about as close to a research institution as you can get. As a result of that, there's actually a pretty real discussion between MUDDEV and many of the working game designers. MUDDEV has one of the highest poster-

to-lurker ratios I've ever heard of. The number of people who post is miniscule, and the number of lurkers is in the thousands. The list-owner uses the metaphor of "it's having a quiet conversation on couches in the living room with bull horns and the windows open." And yet there are some gamers who don't participate because it's too academic and too theoretical. To have a second order breach... well do the academics read MUDDEV, much less talk to individual people who are in the trenches. By and large academics are still making contacts with Cory Ondrejka, and they're making contacts with me, and they're making contact with Richard Bartle. But they're not making contacts with people like Brad McQuaid or the people who are working on the E2 Live expansions and don't have time for all this theoretical nonsense. And yet, I do believe that there's a lot of value there. So a lot of it is just a question of people being able to be bridges across the worlds.

CP: That's the whole intent of this column. Since you brought Cory's name up, I'd be interested to see if you've spent any time in *Second Life*, or *There*, these "next generation" virtual community environments, and what your thoughts are from the perspective of someone who's dealt with some of the more traditional games... what are some of the differences in the experience.

RK: MUDDEV has a name for that. GOP MUDS and non-GOP MUDS mode—goal-oriented play. To me, *Second Life* is really recapitulating MOO, and *There*, to me, is recapitulating a lot of MUSHes, more the topic style of

MUSHes, but basically MUSHes. I mean they're obviously impressive technical achievements. But to me, from a design perspective, their primary innovation is adding graphics, and adding how to deal with the graphics. I think they're both really interesting. I was hard-core hooked on *There* for about two months. The reason why was because I found myself very involved in playing the game of making money as a fashion designer in the game. And once I made a quarter million *Therebucks*, I lost interest, because I'd felt like I'd won. And there weren't enough other things for me to do. I'd played all the Buffy trivia games I was going to play. I'd rode around on all the hover board courses I was going, and I played avatar pinball, and thrown myself off of flying platforms. And I'd done all of that, and so I ran out of things to do.

In *Second Life*, and this has always been a sort of MOO vs. MUSH kind of issue—MUSHes are often easier to get into because there's a greater sense of consistency. The two platforms are extremely similar in terms of their capabilities. I think the biggest difference is whether or not they allow common end-users to make use of the tools, or whether they restrict them. And MOOs traditionally—well, everybody can do anything. Which usually leads to "crazy jumble world." And of course the challenges are finding the gems amidst the junk. If I had to change one thing about *Second Life*—and I've said this to Phillip and Cory—it would be the barrier to entry for making stuff is just astronomically high. It's essentially 3D Studio Max embedded in the client, and that's just really tough to use. I applaud what they're doing, and I applaud

what *There* is doing. I think both of those are very valuable avenues to pursue. God, this is an argument I had five years ago. It takes an embedded game to get these things to really gather the large numbers. You end up needing that central hook for people to participate.

CP: What kind of numbers are you getting with *Star Wars Galaxies* these days? [March 2004, ed.]

RK: So we don't give you the subscriber numbers. But there were some numbers thrown around on Gamespy that we're the top MMO by more than half. Our impression is we're number two in the North American territory. It's getting hard to measure that because so many games are multiple territory, and you don't know whether the numbers include Japan or Europe. It's getting hard to tell.

CP: And also you find a lot of players end up having multiple subscriptions eventually if they're really hard core.

RK: Not even hard core anymore. Often, even casual people. I think that speaks to the fact that, frankly, we messed up with *Ultima Online*. There's a lot more tolerance for the monthly fee than people thought.

CP: It's an interesting economic question because with a monthly fee, you can spend as much time as you want in the world without having to pay any extra money. And so there is a perception of it being a bargain in that respect.

RK: But most market research shows that to be a barrier, despite the fact that it's a bargain. People really balk at the idea of doing that, and even though it's the best entertainment on the market period bar none. I mean there's no question. It's so much cheaper per hour of entertainment than...

CP: Cable television?

RK: Anything! It's cheaper than cable, it's cheaper than movies. I guess books... I mean that's heavily dependent on how fast you read. Yeah, it's incredibly cheap, and yet, people really balk. The idea of a fee really turns them off, right off the bat. It's the biggest barrier.

CP: Now with *Star Wars Galaxies*, do you have a disk or do you just download it?

RK: No it's a disk. (Laugh) It fits three disks.

CP: Because I know that that, for me anyway, if there's not a disk, it's an easier sell for me, rather than having to buy something and then paying a monthly fee.

RK: So *Lineage* experimented with that here in the United States, because you know the Asian model is entirely based on that, and found that in the US people have the perception that it's worth what you pay for. So there's this

automatic tendency to regard free download games as being of poorer quality. We're incredibly symbiotic with that retail channel still. There's a real tight relationship there, price and marketing are driven by retail. You don't get the press attention for a downloadable thing. That's still a difficult challenge, right? That CD is still important, in many boring, practical ways. And that's sad, because it is a higher barrier of entry. I mean we don't get very many older people or women into those game stores where those CDs are sold.

CP: That brings up another question I wanted to ask. What kind of a gender split are you getting with *Star Wars Galaxies*? Do you have any sense about that?

RK: You know I haven't run stats any time recently. I think *Star Wars* is in an interesting position. The license is not necessarily the most appealing to females, but I think the gameplay of it is. Every woman that I've every demoed *Star Wars* to has ended up subscribing to it. You know, I'm trying to remember the last stats we heard. I want to say that we're 10 to 15 percent range. The things that we did have a lot of success with in *Star Wars* – one of them was lowering the time it takes to play a given play session. We were pretty successful at that. We managed to cut that time in half.

CP: Which is what, like an hour or so?

RK: Yes for *Star Wars* it's about an hour. But in many

other games, it takes like two hours just to get the group together. So that actually opens up the possibility of play to a lot of people who otherwise wouldn't be able to play. Because, you know, I don't have four hours in an evening.

CP: Yeah, that's sort of the zone between the casual and the hard core. I've always felt that there's a market there that really hasn't been approached.

RK: Yes, we were successful in tapping that. One of the interesting things was that the level of hard core demand for it was so enormous that in practice, we ended up getting a hard core audience for it.

CP: It built up a big head of steam before it even went online. In the *Avatars Offline* film, and I've heard you say this before, you mentioned that with *Ultima Online*, you thought that age wouldn't matter, you thought that race wouldn't matter, and you thought that gender wouldn't matter, and you were right about everything but gender. I'd love to hear you talk about why? What is it that makes that an immutable aspect?

RK: Age doesn't matter because once you remove physical interaction, and it primarily becomes writing ability – ability to write coherently and express your thoughts in text. We've all known 12 year olds who are fantastic at it and 30 year olds who are terrible at it. That's why that one turns out not to matter. That one's actually really liberating. Finding out "wow, my Guild is run by a 14-year

old kid who somehow is a better project leader for a team of 200 than I am.” That kind of thing. I’ve heard so many stories about things like that happening.

Race... very similar. Typically what happens is that it will be social cues that give it away – things like shared experiences, cultural things, music or whatever.

CP: Sometimes language.

RK: Language, right. But since it tends to be a cultural thing, you’ll also find it crossing race barriers anytime a culture crosses race barriers. Which actually happens all the time, right? And so that one kind of falls away.

And then there’s gender. And what we find with gender is that we do have gender representation in the game. I mean we have age in the game, since it’s really based on how well you type, you expect to see the young kid looking old and vice versa, and nobody cares. And we do have race in the game, but everybody knows that they’re going to make whatever they want to look like, and so, nobody really thinks about it.

CP: And, at least in the medieval roleplaying games, the races don’t quite map to human races one to one – they sort of loosely do.

RK: Yeah, so you get the fantasy races, which are really like species – elves, and dwarves and so on, lizard people, and all that. And you also get, usually within the human, that there will be enough variation. What tends to happen

though is that people tend to go for races and classes that are kind of personality archetypes – the big dumb troll – or whatever, that kind of expresses something about themselves. And people see that as being a mapping, rather than saying, “oh, you’re black, right?”

Now gender is a different beast. When people put on the gender identity within the game it’s an explicit choice that maps more strongly than age and race. What we’ve seen over and over again is people take for granted what the presented gender is. Often, even if they know that statistically it’s very likely that the person behind that female avatar is a guy, even if they know it *is* a guy, they will still interact with that character as if it were a female person.

CP: Although it’s interesting because a lot of my friends that I play *EverQuest* and *Lineage* with will talk about whether someone really is the gender that they’re presenting as. And sometimes by behaviour, you can tell. My sense is that it’s more important to women if they feel like a man is impersonating a woman, than the other way around?

RK: No. Not even close. So... in kind of the male culture, that sets off so many homophobia triggers. Anytime the subject comes up, what you get is a small percentage of guys who say “I do it, but only because I like staring at her butt.” And a small percentage of guys who say “Well, I do it for the roleplaying, and why are we are talking about this?” A fairly large number of guys who go “I don’t get it. That’s gross. Ooh you’re a pansy,” whatever.

CP: But you also hear things like, other players are nicer to you if you present as female and you get more gifts, you get twinked more.

RK: And that's not anecdotal. That's verifiable. That is true. Again, that's what I mean about gender presentation. That happens whether or not it's a guy playing a female, or a female playing a female. It's just something that happens to female characters.

And it's interesting. I've played female characters for years. And for me, it's that I actually prefer interacting with the culture of the female characters. Because I'm sick of dealing with 14 year old boys. There's a cultural thing there... what kinds of things tend to get talked about, what movies are people discussing. It's everything about it. So just as when you're in a cocktail party, and you see, oh, over there are the people with the pocket protectors and the glasses; over here are the people wearing tank top T-shirts, who do I want to talk to?

CP: Which may not map to what they would be like in a real cocktail party.

RK: But to a degree, gender serves that purpose in the games. When you look at the proportion of genders playing classes, females play healers, way disproportionately. And it's female presenting characters. We don't know if they are female players.

I mean, gender politics is a minefield. But there is clearly

some form of identification there that people say, I want to be in a healing role, and I'm going to present female. There's a linkage there that people make. Whether it's a justified linkage is a whole other question. They make the linkage.

Similarly, I know that I'm going to tend to get more intelligent conversations in *Star Wars*, for example, if I go to the Cantina and talk to the woman dancers and the women roleplayers inside. I also know that a disproportionate portion of the town leaders is going to be women, rather than men. Regardless of what they're presenting, it will be women behind the scenes. And so there are a lot of things like that. They're empirical realities about how gender seems to operate within these contexts that in a lot of ways are kind of eye-opening. It's not so much reinforcing stereotypes, but just an acknowledgement of that this is how things are working, so now let's explore the roots of it.

I find it a fascinating area. But it's a tricky area to talk about. Because people have real flash points when it comes to it, in many different ways.

CP: It's also interesting, especially because you're in an environment where you can choose what you want to present as. Both Nick Yee and T.L. Taylor have data about a disproportionately high number of women being guild officers, for example, those kinds of things.

The other thing that's interesting I've noticed in *There*, which I describe as a virtual club med –it's kind of like an hour-long vacation.

RK: I completely agree.

CP: But I notice that there's a lot more direct and obvious flirtation that goes on in *There*, whereas in the roleplaying, medieval or themed games, it tends to be more played out as chivalry, or a different type of manifestation. Whereas, guys will just come up and hit on you in there, just like they would in a real game.

RK: *There* was a game with a severe gender split. So it had a very evenly balanced number of male and female players. And we're talking a virtually 50/ 50 division. And huge cultural gaps between the male and female players, is what I noticed. There only gives you one avatar. The vast majority of the fashion market is female clothing. If you want to be successful in making clothing, you have to make female clothing. If you want to make clothing successfully, you have to be able to look at it in the game, via hacking your client. And all the fashion designers do this. They find ways to replace the default clothing with the new custom clothing, and that way they can look at the clothing within the game and see whether or not it's working. Ergo, to be a successful fashion designer, you have to be female-presenting.

CP: Because otherwise you can't try the clothes on.

RK: Because otherwise you can't try the clothes on and see them. And you only get one avatar. The interesting

thing there was, my typical experience in *There*, as a fashion designer—female presenting because otherwise I couldn't make a living—was encountering housewives, which in and of itself, was refreshing and different. By and large they tended to be housewives who had 200 gigs worth of MP3s at home and ripped movies off DVDs, and there were the CIA translators I met and other people that just made clothes – they were just housewives and just stayed home. One of the most aggressive flirts I ever met on *There* was a happily-married housewife, whose husband also played. But they had a deal; it's a form of open marriage, on the virtual side only. A truly amazing number of names that involved cat or kitty of some type. Huge amount of goth-type stuff going on. But to me the interesting thing is, since I was hanging out with that crowd, I would hear horror stories about the guys running over people with their buggies, "oh yeah, the big hover board championship is happening, and da da da." It was a whole other world. It was so disconnected from the fashion balls, you know. Completely divergent. And so, you know, we always speak in the real world, well, there's divergent male and female worlds there, talk about differences in how people interact in bathrooms and so on. And certainly this whole housewife world that working guys don't get to, and and so on. *There* really brought that into high relief for me because there really was a huge division. I wasn't really interested in talking to the people that just drove buggies for 12 hours. The interesting conversations were happening around the Buffy trivia games. That's where they were.

CP: So you had a female character in the game. Very interesting. I've just been playing *There* for a couple weeks now. I was in the Beta briefly, but I've been playing fairly regularly.

RK: Almost all my friends are gone.

CP: They just stopped playing after a while?

RK: One of the things about the gender presentation thing —and I guarantee, I'll lay money, I will get ribbed about this later, because oh, yeah, we talked about playing girl characters. In fact, I got needled about it not an hour ago on the other side of this hall.

CP: You talked about it at USC too.

RK: I actually think that all guys should go through the experience.

CP: I think so too.

RK: And vice versa.

CP: Of course I've never played a male character in a game.

RK: You should go do it. You should try it. I just think it's an eye-opening thing. The thing that I've always noticed is

that you can usually spot the guys playing women because they are overly sexualized, they flirt too much, they basically have the flirting skills of a twelve year old. And, so, you know, they make missteps that probably fulfil their fantasies, I don't know. It's really a very different experience from when you interact with somebody who's a roleplayer who's really there in order to play that character, for whom gender might be incidental. They approach it very differently. You can usually tell the ones who are there for a thrill ride versus those who are just trying to try on a different identity. If somebody's expert at it, you often can't catch them at all.

I was telling somebody that if you really want to test whether or not a given female avatar is played by a female, ask them what brand tampon they use, because it will be then that it will all fall apart.

CP: (Laughs). That's a good tip to close with. Thanks much for taking the time to talk to me Raph.