I'll give you a word and you'll tell me the first image that pops into your head. Ready? Computer gamer. Alright, so what was your first thought?

If you have been at all influenced by the media of today (how can anyone avoid it) you probably pictured a lone kid sitting in the dark while never taking his eyes off the screen and shunning all company from family and friends. While this might be the case with some game genres, it is not true about the most popular: MMORPGs.

MMORPG stands for Massive Multi-player Online Role-Playing Game. It is a type of video game that can be played on a PC with an internet connection. When you log-on to the game you are connecting to servers which bridge the gap between players from all over the world by placing you into the same virtual environment.

The specific MMO I will be talking about is World of Warcraft (WoW) by the company Blizzard which is the most popular on the market right now. There are currently over seven million accounts on the game.

First of all you need to understand that this is a world. The concept behind websites like Facebook and MySpace might seem similar (get a bunch of people together to communicate by doing the same thing) but with MMO’s there is purpose behind the communication. MySpace et al consist of creating a pretty one-dimensional profile of yourself with pictures, thoughts, etc and looking at the profiles of others. The communication is there but through MMOs it’s tweaked a little. Instead of just looking at other people and not really interacting with them (beyond perhaps commenting on their page and such), MMOs create a goal to reach for. Working with others in WoW is a requirement if you wish to move forward. Your profile is your avatar (a graphical image that represents you in the game), but it would be pretty boring to just sit around on your character and looking at other characters in turn.

So what attracts these people? The main appeal seems to be the achievement you can find in getting as far as you can in the game, the actual story of the world you play in and how it affects your character, the mechanics of the technical side of the game, the competition with people you work with and against, and of course the abundant social interaction. There are father/son, mother/daughter teams as well as siblings playing with and against each other, husbands and wives winding down after the workday, and
couples using it as a way to connect. And don’t forget that this game is available in all countries. You aren’t just talking to your next-door neighbor anymore.

Relationships are built in so many different ways in WoW. If relatives are playing it could strengthen their bond, friends can have fun together, romances can bloom, and (of course) enemies can be found. The interesting thing about the way friends are made through MMOs is that they are built opposite to how your day-to-day relationships are made. In the game you generally get to know people more intimately (trust-worthy, work ethic, etc.) before you know them casually. Whether this makes them stronger or more volatile is debatable.

The first and most important facet of any kind of communication is language, with the mode in which it is used coming in at a close second. The mode in WoW is the chat panel which sits on the bottom left hand of your screen. There are several channels you can use: Looking for Group (for getting people together for instances), Trade (for buying and selling items), Guild (for chatting with your guildies which will be explained later), and Whisper (a private message that only you and the recipient can see) just to name a few. As for the language used, well, it can get complicated if you are looking at it for the first time.

In WoW, acronyms are used in almost every sentence since typing actual words out just takes way too much time (insert sarcasm). Though this is a sign that language skills are going down the drain, it is very useful when you are trying to get your point across without crowding up everyone’s chat screen. Let me show you what I mean. Here is a typical message you might see in the “looking for group” channel: LF2M ZF, need dps and tank, have mallet, PST. Makes absolutely no sense to you right? The translation is: Looking for two members for Zul’Farrak (an instance), they need someone who can deal high damage-per-second to enemies (Rouge or Hunter class) and someone who can take most of the damage in fights (Warrior class), they have the mallet (an object which summons the final boss in that particular instance), please send tell (a private message to ask to join them). Once you get the hang of it there is a sense that you understand what no one else does, except for your fellow players. Like a private joke without the punch-line. Some people even put sayings like the one above on
shirts so they can show off that they know something that most of the people around them don’t. Kind of arrogant, but the sense of belonging to a larger group is there.

Generally your first interactions with other people are going to occur as you level up, or progress further into the game. You can go solo and do everything on your own at first but as you progress there will come a point when you need help to get any further, as in instances. Most people join Guilds pretty early on just so they have the option of asking for ready-made help. Guilds can be defined as a group of people who play with each other very often. Each guild has a specific name which is chosen by the creator, as well as a tabard which is a piece of clothing (for your character) created by the guild master and worn only by members. So if I see someone wearing a black tabard with a blue frog running around I will automatically know that they are a member of the guild “Delusions of Grandeur” without having to look. Members are supposed to help each other out and just generally have fun together. Guilds are an essential part of the higher end of WoW where there are instances that require 40 members to go through successfully, not to mention a high level of coordination. There are generally around 150+ members as well as the Guild Master and their contingency of Officers who are responsible for the high level of organization required to manage a successful guild, especially the rules and regulations which can warrant punishment as well as rewards.

Over time you get to know your fellow guildies pretty well. There are always the clowns, the pervs, the serious ones, etc., just like in any group of friends. Ventrilo, a program which allows you to talk to guildies by using microphones, especially helps in this regard. They become your in-game family who you help, tease, and sometimes have clashes with. When you are in-between bosses in the high-end instances there is often a lot of time spent just standing around getting ready for the next fight. During that time people will just start

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80% play with someone they know in real-life
Average age of player: 26
85% Male
25% Teens
36% Married
22% Have Children
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talking and, of course, relationships easily form from this contact. I have been involved in conversations about college football, how many gnomes could fit inside a dragon’s vagina, what the best way to propose marriage is (she said yes), and why Tauren Shamans should be wiped from the face of WoW. Sometimes people will get to know each other so well through guilds and such that they decide to meet in person.

For those players who prefer PvP action, though, guilds are not the best way to go because you do not need coordinated groups. They generally play solo, or join one of the few PvP guilds. But whether you love or hate PvP you have to deal with it because there is always the chance that you will come upon someone of the opposite faction as you move through the world. Sometimes you can just ignore each other, and rarely you might give or receive help, but not often. “Shoot on site” is the most apt phrase to use when describing cross-faction relations. The areas that you characters start in are exclusively for their faction, but as you progress the zones become more and more integrated. The first area where PvP becomes an issue is called Stranglethorn Vale, a mid-level area which should only take a day to get through but generally ends up taking much, much longer. Here some truly epic battles have taken place and lasted for hours. Often by the end one side is victorious while the other is just pissed because they did not get anything done since they were too busy getting killed every five minutes. The frustration can build so high that you eventually throw in the towel and surrender by logging off.

And then there is the biggest part of the game: The so-called Meta-Game. The Meta-Game consists of anything that is done outside of WoW proper but still concerns it. For example, visiting forums, making videos,
looking up items, etc. Forums are a huge part of the community. WoW has their own set on their website which includes class and realm boards. The realm forums are an essential part of each server’s community. Here everyone can get on and lodge complaints against people or guilds, make announcements about instance progression, or just talk in general about nothing in particular. This is where a lot of the cross-faction communication happens since you can’t talk to them in-game. Here people can express their grievances about getting camped (taken down over and over by the same player in the same location) or compliment each other on their battleground performances.

The biggest part of the Meta-Game is the player videos. They are made using video editing software and programs which can film what is happening on your screen while in-game. There are all sorts of genres: PvP battles, dramas and comedies with story lines, films of guilds taking down certain bosses, etc. The most famous of these is Leeroy Jenkins (http://www.leeroyjenkins.net/leeroy-jenkins-videos.htm). This is a video of a guild who is planning a strategy for a fight in an instance called Upper Blackrock Spire. The fight is actually pretty easy. In the room there are a bunch of eggs on the ground around the boss that pop when stepped on and produce baby dragons which attack. They are standing right outside of the room discussing a strategy when one of the guys stands up during explanation and on Ventilo yells: “Alright chums, let’s do this. Lleeeeroyyyyy Jeeeenynnnkiiinnnns.” He then precedes to run into the room, pop all of the eggs and kill the rest of the group (this was a 10 man). The phrase “pulling a Leeroy” is universally understood as doing something really stupid and is used outside of WoW in other MMO’s too.

So let’s go back to that first image you had of a typical gamer. Hopefully it has changed. Where once a socially challenged kid immediately popped into your mind, there will now be a normal kid making friends in a way that you had never dreamed possible. MMORPGs simply present another way of making new relationships that you otherwise would not have experienced. The image of the lone gamer definitely needs to be revamped.
Your character in the game is your virtual image that everyone else sees instead of your actual face. For instance, if you were playing Pacman, Mr. Pacman himself would be your avatar. Before you begin playing however each of the following must be selected.

Server. Each server has its own community of players, economy, guilds, etc. There can be 10,000 characters for each faction and there are hundreds of servers to choose from. High (close to full capacity) and low (below capacity) population servers can have an impact on how you interact with people. Example: Low pops have more people at the lower levels because they are generally new so you get to know people as you are leveling up whereas if you join a server that already has a high pop you will be coming into a community that has been established and already has its own cliques which will make it hard to go very far in the higher levels.

Faction. Your character is on one side of two hostile factions: Horde or Alliance. If you see someone of the opposite side then the policy of shooting first and asking questions later generally applies. There have been some serious feuds between faction members crop up because of this mentality.

Name. You can be known as anything from a fantasy-like name (Pyrhus) to a statement (WatchOut). This is how you are known to other players. Notice the italics there. You usually do not go by your real name within the game since no one sees that on their screens, though if you play with someone enough you might find out what it is.

Sex: Pretty self-explanatory: Male or Female. Since more than half of the players are male then you might expect more than half of the avatars to be male as well, but that is most definitely not true. Guys often play females simply to see a scantily clad character on their screen. It is always an interesting experience to play with a female character only to talk to them on Ventrilo later and find out that they are actually male.

Race: Each of the two factions have separate races which look very different to help differentiate between the two. Customization includes choosing how your hair, skin, face, and other attributes look. There are stigmas associated with every class. Night Elf females, for instance, are almost always played by young boys who just want to play the sexiest looking race so you generally want to stay away from them.

Alliance - Human, Gnome, Dwarf, Night Elf
Horde - Orc, Troll, Tauren, Undead

Class. Your class basically determines your job within the game, abilities/spells/talents, and your playing style. As with the races, there are stigmas with certain classes as well. Rogues and Hunters are both able to deal a lot of damage but they are also the easiest class to play so they are always around and almost never in demand. This is a pretty big point of contention between their community and the other classes because they are typically seen as inferior and not needed. Two examples of classes and their jobs are:

Priests - Needed to heal players during fights
Warrior - Should be taking all the damage in fights
ifty years ago, stay-at-home dads were pretty much unheard of, and pretty much a demeaning role for any man. Now, according to the 2004 survey done by the US Census Bureau, there are an estimated 105,000 stay-at-home dads, men who are not working so that they can care for their children while their wives work.

Could Ward Cleaver, father and breadwinner of the Cleaver family from the 1950s television show *Leave It to Beaver*, perform the same duties as today’s stay-at-home dad? I am not so sure that he would be able or even want to. I believe he would say that the husband should make the money and the wife should cook, clean, and take care of the kids. I don’t think that June Cleaver would dare not have dinner fixed and the house cleaned by the time Ward got home. Why? Well, that’s easy. In the 1950s, our society was strictly patriarchal and today the times are changing.

Basically, men have traditionally been the “breadwinners” of our society, working outside the home, and women have done the domestic work: cooking, cleaning, and raising the children. Even though we still live in a patriarchy, the roles of males and females have radically changed and the stay-at-home dad is becoming more common. What I would like to explore is how these roles are changing and basically try to verbally “strip” down the gender roles of our more lenient patriarchy today.

First of all, I would like to define patriarchy and go over our society’s more traditional gender characteristics. Men in our society are considered to be dominant, hence the word patriarchy. The *Encarta Dictionary* defines the word patriarchy as follows: “a social system in which men are regarded as the authority within the family and society, and in which power and possessions are passed on from father to son.” Another way to look at it is from the view that our society is “male-centered,” meaning most things will tend to revolve around men and their status as “male.” Therefore, as everything is centered on males, females will generally have opposite characteristics to men. Men are characterized to be strong, independent, dominant, and unemotional. Females on the other hand, are being characterized as weak, dependent, submissive, and emotional. It all boils down to the emotional characteristic: men are unemotional therefore strong and women
Why are we seeing this change in society. Does this change society’s gender characteristics and stereotypes? The answer would be yes if there were more stay-at-home dads than stay-at-home moms, but the majority of “stay home” parents are still women.

So why are we seeing this change in our society and what does it mean? Well, it depends on who you ask but I think that this change is occurring for several different reasons. First of all, women are beginning to show independence. There are a larger number of older, unmarried women, lesbians, and single moms than in the past. Each of these is a symbol for women of that “I can do it by myself” attitude. The most prominent reason for the change in our society is that more women are able to attend college. With a college education, women are able to achieve higher paying jobs. In some cases, a woman makes more money than her husband and it just makes more sense for him to stay home and take care of the domestic work.

I happened to be watching the television show Supernanny, a show where a lady comes in to tame unruly children, and there was a stay-at-home dad with the most ill-behaved children I are emotional therefore weak. Since men are strong and women are weak, men should be dominant and women should be submissive. Now, I am not sure when being emotional became a weakness but in a patriarchy it is just so. And, of course, our society isn’t so “black and white,” but in general it is. All in all, in any society, the strong will make decisions and impose restrictions on the weak.

So, in order to strip down the gender roles in society today, we have to start at the beginning of the change from the strict patriarchal society in the past to today’s more laid back version of a patriarchy. I believe the change from a stricter patriarchy began after World War II when men came back from war and women had to give up their jobs, even though they didn’t want to. So, then came the feminist movement and now women are working and voting and taking care of the children. But now, in some cases, women are making more money than their male counterpart and within some of those cases, men decide to stay home with their children so that the wife can “bring home the bacon.” This reversal of the traditional gender roles is a major development in our patriarchal society. I believe the change from a stricter patriarchy began after World War II when men came back from war and women had to give up their jobs, even though they didn’t want to. So, then came the feminist movement and now women are working and voting and taking care of the children. But now, in some cases, women are making more money than their male counterpart and within some of those cases, men decide to stay home with their children so that the wife can “bring home the bacon.” This reversal of the traditional gender roles is a major development in our patriarchal society.
have ever seen in my life. He didn't spend any
time with the children; basically, he just sat at
his table and put together model airplanes. He
didn't make any effort to spend time or make
any connections with his three children. This
show brought up a very important question
about this role reversal that is taking place in
our society... are men capable of performing
domestic chores, especially raising children?
My question isn't are they physically able to do
so, but are they emotionally available enough
to the children? I believe that children need a
lot of emotional attention and connection with
their parents in order to be emotionally well
adjusted themselves. What I mean by this is that
they will have the ability to care, understand,
and raise children of their own. For the most
part, I do not think that men are socially trained
to provide emotional support. I think society
teaches men not to be emotional. One example
of this is the basic human emotion of sadness
or any emotion really. Sadness is typically
accompanied by crying. In our society, and
in the past, it is and has been more socially
acceptable for women to cry than for men and
crying is usually considered a sign of weakness.
I think I have witnessed my stepfather crying one time in my entire life. My mother, on the other hand, I have seen cry countless times (not that she is weak by any means).

Although I don’t think men are emotional or sensitive enough now, I think they are moving in that general direction. There are actually support groups for stay-at-home dads. It is hard for me to imagine men sitting around talking about the best way to change a diaper or get a soda stain out of the carpet, but these support groups provide a way for these men to connect emotionally to their peers and find out the best ways to raise their children. I think our society is moving in a positive direction with the stay-at-home dad. With more relationships leaning towards the fifty/fifty mark, it seems to work out better for the husband, wife, and the children because in the past most children didn’t feel like they even really knew their fathers. Now, children are influenced by their mothers and fathers which is providing a more balanced upbringing and, hopefully, will lead to a stronger society.

So move over Ward Cleaver. Today’s stay-at-home dad has found a foothold in American society. Sooner or later, maybe sitcoms will have June Cleaver coming home from work to triumphantly open the door at the end of a long day at the office and say “Hubby, I’m home.”
"A good wife always knows her place"

More important than yours.
His top points of conversation are:
Let him talk first—remember.
His arrival is not the time
Tell him, but the moment of
Listening to him, you may have

Run a dispatch over the
Before your husband arrives.
The main part of the house just
Make one last trip through.
Clean away the clutter.

You have no right to question him.
Exercise his will with firmness and helpfulness.
Master of the house and as such will discourage
question his integrity. Remember, he is the
Don't ask him questions about his actions or

You, Mrs. Wife, have gone through at work.
Count this as minor compared to what
Or even if he stays out all night.
Don't complain if he's late for dinner

Work-wear people.
Looking. Is he just been with a lot of
Put on rubbers in your hair and be fresh.
He remembers. Touch up your makeup?
To rest so you'll be refreshed when
Prepare yourself. Take 15 minutes

EXCERPTS FROM HOUSEKEEPING MONTHLY MAY 13, 1955

The Good Wives' Guide.
At the heart of Stripping, Sex, and Popular Culture lies a very personal story of author Catherine Roach's response to the decision of her life-long best friend to become an exotic dancer. Roach and her friend both grew up together in Canada and moved to the United States to enroll in PhD programs at prestigious universities. For various reasons, Marie left her program and instead chose to work as a stripper.

The author, at first troubled and yet fascinated by her friend's decision, follows Marie's journey into the world of stripping as an observer and analyst. She finds that this world raises complex questions about gender, sexuality, fantasy, feminism, and even spirituality. Moving from first-hand interviews with dancers and mainstream and stripper aerobics at your local gym, Stripping, Sex, and Popular Culture scrutinizes the naked truth of a lucrative industry whose norms are increasingly at the center of contemporary society.
A man is rubbing his naked buttocks across my chest. No, I take that back—the buttocks are not entirely naked. A black thong is nestled between them (it turns out that there are male thongs as well—who knew?). My one coherent thought is that the friction is about to trigger a breastfeeding let-down and that milk will stain the front of my white T-shirt. It will glow neon-bright under the black lights of the club for all to see. My next thought is that he smells nice. I imagine the dancers in a back room, debating the merits of various colognes and warning new guys that you have to smell good or the women will never buy dances from you. My stripper is also wearing glasses as he performs his lap dance. It’s all somehow quite endearing.

For comparative purposes, I have decided that I need to visit a club where male exotic dancers strip for women. There are not really that many of them. In some places with male dancers, the clientele is primarily gay men, and in other clubs one night of the week or a certain section of the floor space is set aside for women customers to enjoy the gyrations of male strippers. But tonight’s club is meant just for the ladies. “Canada’s Hot Shots” is located in a nondescript commercial neighborhood of Gatineau, the French-speaking Quebec city directly across the river from Ottawa in the national capital area of Canada (my family and I are back up North again for the summer). The club is located in the basement of a building where upstairs, in a sister club, women disrobe for a largely male audience. The stairs down to Hot Shots and the lobby where you pay your cover charge open up into a large rectangular room, rimmed along the ceiling with neon tube lights in fuchsia and blue. Banquette seating and tables line the walls, as well as a long bar. A large semi-circular stage, mirrored at the back and lined with seats for patrons, takes up much of the space.

For tonight’s venture, my enterprising sister-in-law Danielle has rounded up a posse of women from her mommy-and-me play group and from her family. We’ve actually been here once before, about eight years ago, on the eve of Danielle’s wedding to my brother. Memories of the event are somewhat hazy, but I do remember being fascinated even then by the dynamics of the club, and I look forward now to a more focused study. Danielle is renowned within our circle as the organizer, a woman of high energy, humor, and efficiency who holds down a successful career as
a social worker, folds laundry with Origami-like precision, and is raising two young children with my somewhat slower-moving brother. Both of Danielle's older sisters are here with us tonight, as well as her friends Sophia and Phaedra (currently nine months pregnant) from the mom's group, and Anita and myself.

The women of my focus group have engaged in various negotiations to join us this evening at the club. France, Danielle's oldest sister, is a forty-seven year old single mom with two sons aged twenty-one and seventeen. She laughs that her youngest boy was not too happy about her destination for the evening. He had admonished her, "Mom, that's not a place for you!" But she countered that this outing was her first girls' night in years and—wink, wink—that "the only reason I came is all my sisters were here." Sophie waves in the air the consent form that I request all my interviewees to sign: "I'm going to show this to my husband, to prove this is a research project. I told him and he was like rolling his eyes, 'Oh, yeah, right!'" Danielle is financing drinks all around with a roll of bills that turns out to have its provenance from my brother, who had slipped them to her before she left the house this evening.

Michael (he briefly toyed with the pseudonym "Thor" for this project) is a lawyer for the Department of Justice and has for years fondly accused me of inhabiting a super-elitist academic ivory tower. Now he pats me on the back approvingly when the topic of my book comes up: "You're finally writing something I'd actually want to read!"

It's fairly early when we arrive, with the crowd still thin, so we're able to snag a row of chairs, center stage. I go exploring and find a short hallway at one end of the club that leads to ten empty champagne rooms that are little more than booths. In the women's washroom, there is graffiti in the stalls: Dean is the man—thank goodness you are back! Derek is so cute when hard. I love Flex. There's also a dance floor. This is something new for me. The women patrons here can either dance with one another or pay one of the men to dance with them. Why, I ask myself, have I never seen this set-up at any of the other clubs I've visited? Why would women be more interested than men in buying a service where they actually get to dance with the stripper? It's an interesting question that begins to reveal some of the differences in dynamics between the two sorts of strip clubs.
As the dancers start to come out one by one for their stage shows, other differences become apparent. The men are dressed mostly in jeans or khakis and a T-shirt and shod in running shoes or work boots. I wonder about this, since the women dancers invest such time and money into their costumes. Are their male counterparts not willing or able to pay for such expenditures, or have they actually discovered—market research, survey says—that women find jeans and work boots to constitute the sexiest outfits? Or does the fashion industry simply lack outré choices in garb for men? The dancers also sport chain necklaces or stud earrings and tattoos or body piercings (nipples seem a popular choice). They are muscled, some more so than others, but all are in good shape and generally look to be in their twenties. Like the women dancers, they've put considerable effort into depilation: smooth, hairless chests are the rule, as well as a close facial shave.

Unlike the women, however, there is a lot of tease here. The men take the stage and dance to either slow or fast songs, as they also pose and stroke their bodies. The good ones grin and flirt as they make eye contact with the women in the audience. One guy introduced as Chico with tattoos all over his back fails to look at us at all: “Cute butt, nice tattoos, horrible attitude,” dismisses Anita. The dancers slowly pull down the waistband of their jeans or underwear to partly or totally reveal their bum or groin and then quickly pull the waistband up again. They flash a glimpse of their penis, flaccid or erect, and then turn away. Dean, for example, pauses in his dancing at the side of the stage and smiles at a woman sitting there with some friends. He gestures at his belt and arches an eyebrow. It cracks her up, as she leans over laughing with her face in her hands. It’s a move the men repeat often, and the women laugh in self-conscious delight every time. As Danielle admits, “It’s embarrassing, but it’s fun. When they show their penis, I can’t look,” she cringes, holding her hand up in front of her eyes. “You don’t look?” I raise my own eyebrows. “Well, I look,” she admits, laughing again. Sophia leans over to chime in, “I couldn’t look them in the eye at first either, but it’s getting better!”

There is, in fact, far more mirth in this club than in any male-audience establishment that I ever visit. The women respond to the dancers onstage with whoops of thrilled and embarrassed laughter. By eleven p.m. the place is packed, there’s a conga...
line out on the dance floor, and the swarm of female customers is screaming full-throttle. This is, in fact, the loudest crowd that I've ever heard in my life. Strip clubs with male patrons are much quieter than this. Unless there's a bachelor party going on, the guys are usually fairly subdued. Here, the gals are constantly hooting, hollering, yelling, laughing, and clapping. They howl “Take it off!” at the dancers, which despite the iconic status of the phrase, I actually never hear in any other club. They—we, I—are clearly reveling in it.

We women are in fact required to create such a noise level by the MC. This man, whose name I never catch, plays a different role than the DJs in the male-patron clubs. The MC at Hot Shots doesn't spin the music but is often out on the stage introducing the dancers and revving up the crowd. His job seems to consist primarily in getting us to scream as loudly and as often as possible. “How many of you ladies want to see Dan naked?” he shouts into his mike. “We have to work for it?” Sophie asks me. “Didn't I pay at the door?” The MC is constantly inviting us to show our enthusiasm, and we generally oblige, despite our sense that we're being cajoled into a type of performance ourselves. Anita, in particular, react in mock outrage, banging her fist on the bar: “Men are so spoiled, this is ridiculous! It's like they need active encouragement. Women strippers wouldn't get away with that!”

But perhaps the crowd needs the MC's persuasion as a form of permission to shun time-honored feminine modesty and decorum and to perform instead the usual male gender role of raucous, raunchy oglers and consumers of naked flesh. Phaedra, for one, is having a hard time making this switch. As a cocktail waiter weaves by selling shots from a holster and row of plastic glasses dangling down in front of his legs like a giant penis, she confesses that she'd be having more fun if she could drink. “Part of why it's hard for me to relax and enjoy it here is because I'm so pregnant. I think because I'm pregnant, I feel like I'm not supposed to be sexual—I'm just all maternal now,” she says, rubbing her belly and raising yet another cultural script about femininity, namely that maternity desexualizes us.

Niko comes out next for a slow dance, oiled up and already naked. “C'mon, ladies, scream!” urges the MC. Niko leans back against the mirrored wall lining the rear of the stage and arches his back as he strokes his chest. When he steps
away to grab one of the ceiling rails affixed above the stage, he leaves a bum print on the mirror that stays there for the rest of the night. He then swings butt naked over France’s head while hanging onto the rail, as she turns to me and grins, “C’est bon, ça!”

Two feature dancers also perform for us tonight. One is a slim man from Toronto—“C’mon, give it up, ladies!”—who comes out in a Mexican outfit. Unlike most of the other dancers who are simply flirtatious and suggestive, his act is blatantly sexual although oddly cold. He makes little eye contact and is judged down by my group as insincere. Dressed in his pouch thong and sombrero, he seems to turn off the crowd, and when he offers simulated cunnilingus and fellatio for toonies, there are few takers.

“Oh God,” Danielle fans herself afterwards, “I’m scandalized—that was too much!” When I inquire as to which part of his act was too much, she screams back, “The asshole!” Phaedra, however, who is starting to get into the spirit of it, asks, “Hey, if I become a stripper, can I be ‘Connie Lingus’?” The other feature goes by the appellation C-12, named apparently for the length of his male member. Much of his act consists of fiddling with it like it’s a toy, waggling his willie at the ladies and twirling it around. The crowd reacts more favorably to his goofy play than to the other dancer’s brazenness. Over another round of drinks, we agree that we prefer dancers who aren’t too overtly sexual—too crude or in-your-face—but who flirt a little, look you in the eye, show personality and some humor by poking a bit of fun at themselves and at the whole strip club scene.

For what I swear to God is the twentieth time tonight, the MC asks us, “How do you like it so far, ladies?” This is our invitation/command to scream and clap our delight, and we unfailingly comply, as the place erupts yet again in ear-splitting decibels. I start to realize that being here feels oddly mainstream and socially acceptable. As we were rounding up the posse, a widowed friend of my mother’s who is in her late sixties agreed about the appeal of a night out at such a club—“It’s a hoot!”—and told me to have a good time, dear. There are at least six young brides in this Friday evening crowd (identifiable by the short white veils they wear on their heads, supplied, I assume, by the cashier when the bachelorette party comes in), most of them probably getting married tomorrow and each
accompanied by a tableful of bridesmaids, all screaming away.

The place strikes me as poles apart from the male-patron female-stripper clubs. It engages in no pretense at up-scale, high-class "companionship," nor does it feel seriously sexual or slimy. For a woman to visit a club like this entails an entirely different dynamic than a man patronizing a female stripper club: more playful than sexual, more amusing than arousing, more entertaining than erotic. At one point near the end of the night, the dancers all come out on stage to do a choreographed "Greased Lightning" medley dance number, tumbling over each other and joking together as they dance, clearly not taking themselves or the steps too seriously. I never see anything like that in a male-oriented strip club.

The bridal parties reveal another difference in the audience dynamics. Women, more so than men, come to clubs in groups of friends and when they buy private dances, they tend to do so for each other. The women ambush someone in their party with a dance paid for on the sly and then look on gleefully from the sidelines as their companion gets her dance. The pleasure of the lap dance isn't merely for the woman who receives it, but is a group pleasure equally shared by her squealing and finger-pointing comrades. Men may on occasion spy surreptitiously on another guy's private dance and buddies may well arrange a dance for a shy bridegroom, but they don't generally take turns buying each other lap dances and then watching and laughing uproariously as they get them. They just don't. Here, however, such behavior is standard, and the male model is held in some suspicion. Danielle asks me what goes on in the champagne rooms: "You're in there all by yourself. Isn't that sort of perverted? You're not there with your friends!"

We have two ambush dances in our group, both orchestrated and paid for by the highly efficient Danielle. She first arranges a dance for her sister Julie, who is on the eve both of a divorce and her forty-fifth birthday. Paul shows up at her chair, turns her around to face him on the floor, and begins to sway to the music as Julie blows Danielle a kiss. Paul strokes and brushes up against her with his hands, face, and bottom. France is screaming "Oh my God!" and falling off her seat laughing. Danielle is yelling "Go, Julie! Go Julie!" We're all watching and wildly cheering. Afterward, we huddle for a debriefing: "I can't
believe I just did that!” Julie collapses backwards in her chair. “It wasn’t embarrassing, although I wouldn’t have done this twenty years ago; I was too shy.” She is still blushing now, but with a huge smile on her face. “It was fun, though. He had a nice personality, which was good. I just decided to enjoy it,” she says, giving her sister a hug.

And then, of course, it’s my turn. Danielle uses the money that my brother gave her to buy me a dance with Niko (at twenty dollars a song, the same price that the women dancers usually get). Her purchase is without my knowledge and despite the fact that I had earlier tried to head her off, sensing her intentions, by insisting that I didn’t need such an experience for the purposes of my research. She correctly intuited that my protests could be ignored. She further figured out—I don’t know how, Danielle is truly legendary—that Niko was my favorite of the dancers. Perhaps it was because of a routine he had done earlier in the evening when he managed to seem both sensitive and silly by spoofing the words and gestures to some sappy love song about a broken-hearted boy pining for his girl. There was also that bum print still up on the mirror that somehow seemed charming. Or maybe it was the fact that he wore glasses, as do I.

At first, he stands in front of me straddling my legs and, not exactly knowing what else to do with my hands, I lay one on his hip. He gently removes it by the wrist as he explains, “Le contact n’est pas permis ici. En arrière du club, oui, mais pas ici.” Only in the champagne rooms in the back is contact permitted; I should have known, of course, that one pays more for the privilege of touch. He turns his back to me and pushes his bum up against my breasts and then bends around to brush my chest with the side of his face. I worry again that he’ll start my milk and what then, but it doesn’t happen. The whole thing is just pleasantly silly and naughty and fun. I’m aware that I too have a big goofy smile on my face the whole time. It’s partly embarrassment, partly the novelty of the experience, partly the knowledge that Anita, Danielle and her sisters, and everyone else in the mom’s group are all staring at us and cackling away. As my mother’s friend surmised, it is a hoot. To some extent, the gratification is the same that I get from a visit to a masseuse or hair stylist: a professional’s attention focused entirely on me and my pleasure, allowing me to connect with and enjoy my body.
At one point in the song—and I have to confess that I can't remember what song it was; I'm not even sure I was aware of it at the time—Niko dances slowly in front of me and pulls open the waistband of his tight black thong. I follow his gaze down to his flaccid penis as he fondles it. It seems that I'm supposed to watch, that it would be churlish or rude not to look, but it doesn't even feel all that remarkable to be getting this private glimpse down at his groin. Nor does it strike me as erotic—with all due appreciation for the not inconsiderable talents and endowments of Niko. We've been sitting front and center all night long and I've already seen more penises than in my entire life. Oh my God, I suddenly realize—I'm jaded! Is this what it's like for a regular male client at a club? Ho-hum: another breast, another vulva?

Maybe I'm naïve, but the whole point of these clubs doesn't seem to be sexual titillation. Here's another of the MC's comments: "Oh, you ladies must be loving this! I bet you're getting wet now!" On the way home, Danielle, Sophia, and Phaedra talked about how they found his suggestion crass and off-target, a clueless male fantasy that assumes women's sexuality to be visually stimulated. But no one here seems aroused. The men are faking it with their rubber bands (I learn about the backstage "tying off" technique from a male stripper I later interview: "Get a magazine or if you're lucky enough get a girl from the crowd to come up—they're called fluffers—then you get a hard-on, take the elastic, tie it at the very base of your penis, tie it tight and push it even further, almost inside your stomach, wrap it around your balls to hold your penis up and do your show. You've got twelve minutes maximum"). Nor do the audience members seem aroused, the way some male patrons undeniably are in their clubs; the women here are laughing and talking with each other too much for that.

Instead, the point of this spectacle seems to be the all-out mega-thrill of upending patriarchy for the night. It's about making a joke out of the norms for feminine demureness and masculine dominance laid down by the culture, and to judge by the level of laughter in the place, the joke is hugely funny indeed. We catch on quickly to the game. As Anita soon discovers, "I like seeing them as sex objects! It's a good turning of the tables." Danielle had prodded me earlier in the evening, when she was plotting my lap dance, "Is there one that you like—black or white? tall or
short? It’s like being at the shopping mall!” Afterward, she confessed that when “I ordered Niko for you and he didn’t come right away, I got mad at him . . . I felt like a pimp,” she chortled, marveling at this strange and newfound sense of self.

We’re aware that we’re in the middle of a situation that completely turns around the gender scripts of patriarchy: here we’re encouraged to objectify these men, to unabashedly view their value as residing in their looks and charm, to treat the dancers as if they exist to provide for our pleasure and cater to our whims. We scrutinize their physiques; Phaedra notes, “I keep looking at their flaws, checking for pimples and flab.” We revel in the quite extraordinary knowledge that these men devote themselves to tending their bodies for our enjoyment: they groom, shave, shower, choose clothing, put on cologne, develop dance routines, all for us.

There is, one must admit, just a tad of the sweetness of revenge at work here: of letting men know how it feels to be caught in the double bind of a masculinist and lookist culture wherein a woman has to look good or be ignored, but wherein looking good can get her unpleasantly ogled. Here, now, we get to ogle the men all we want, as we have all felt watched by men ourselves. There is undeniably a pleasure in ogling and, in the case of this reversal, a transgressive and liberatory thrill of we women getting to do it ourselves. The satisfaction of the ogle exists even if, perhaps because, this sustained and assessing gaze can make the person so regarded feel self-conscious and vulnerable.

This act of looking stresses the power of the viewer. Depending on the context, it can either grant and share this power with the object of the gaze, or it can demean and humiliate them. This is one dynamic that functions no differently in either a male or a female strip club.

When we finally get up to leave, our ears are ringing and deadened by the night-long blast of unleashed feminine ribaldry. I think about how men go to opposite-sex strip clubs for a variety of reasons, one not inconsequential motivation being that they thereby prove their masculinity. Women, on the other hand, go to places like Hot Shots to shed their femininity, at least in the form of some of its traditional trappings. They go to try on instead a new and very different form of femininity, one being crafted right now in the crucible of striptease culture. Women go to places like Hot Shots because, in striptease culture, now as never before, they get to.