Role-Playing Reality:

Queer Theory, New Materialisms, and Digital Role-Play

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Abstract

This thesis works to reconfigure who or what the situated agencies in digital role-play are to realise the more-than-human dimensions and embodiments of play. In doing so, it finds that all the collaborators in digital role-play [players, avatars, interfaces, networks, software, media content, art, performances, gestics, imaginings, alongside other games] disclose the emergent and latent relations and sensations that characterise play. In recognising all these elements as vital and active companions in role-play, this work addresses the question of what the realities of digital role-play are: where realities signify the actualities of what happens when human and nonhuman bodies entangle during play as well as the substances of reality – performance and affect, matter and meaning, space and time – all of which determine role-play. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004-) is taken as the primary example in this thesis, though the affordances of its role-players are irradiated alongside other games, art, literature, performances, and materials that likewise 'play' with fiction. Alongside these modalities, the *Argent Archives*, a massive collection of content posted by role-players who play *World of Warcraft*, evidences the lifeworlds of digital role-play. Since digital role-play is rarely studied, and the *Argent Archives* never so, this thesis explores foundational questions regarding the realities of play: what they comprise and how players actively create emergent gameworlds with their arts and acts. This thesis employs a methodology of promiscuity, that is, promiscuity *as* method in order to reckon with the entanglements of play. Inspired by the works of queer theorists and new materialists, which centre bodies, affects, and entanglements, a correspondingly promiscuous methodology follows the labyrinthine folds of encounter that define play while emphasising its intimate, sensual, troubling, and perverse aspects.

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INTRODUCTION

Thinking Promiscuously with Digital Role-Play

1. Playing Reality

Two questions shape this thesis: what are the realities of digital role-playing? And what realities do digital role-players gather and fabricate when they play and perform? The two questions are entwined, with neither coming first nor second and the answers that emerge address both. The term 'realities' resonates here with multiple meanings, enfolding: the actualities of digital role-play as players engage with each other as affective and touchable bodies; the matter and meaning that comprise digital role-play, alongside Deleuzean notions of actual and virtual reality. That is, the virtual as a plane of immanence, a reality of potentials that is always ready, waiting, and eager to engage in the process of actualisation. The 'first' question is an attempt to grapple with the realities of digital role-play as they converge as a kaleidoscopic collage of gestures, matter, times, events, and imaginings that glue and overlap during play. The 'second' question explores digital role-play's potential to (re)configure worlds through its capacity to disclose and enliven varied iterations of matter and meaning in a frame that bends space and time. This question deliberately recalls Jack Halberstam, who asks, '[u]nder what conditions can "new life" be imagined, inhabited, and enacted when within a gameworld?' (2017: 190). In embodying realities, digital role-players enact 'new' life rendered alongside a video game that players simultaneously condition by their collective performances. With this, three objectives emerge to address these questions:

i) to determine how digital role-play is positioned and oriented in relation to other games, artworks, and performances;

ii) to explore the potential of the queerly-disruptive promiscuity of digital role-play as it plays with the narrative, mechanics, and media of games; and

iii) to investigate how such a promiscuous conception of digital role-play appropriately signifies and examines the unfolding waves of reality that emerge in play.

In approaching these objectives, this project reflects digital role-play's own crosshatched means of becoming and overlaps multiple fields of academic inquiry with other games, artworks, media, and performances that likewise 'play' with realities. The massively multiplayer online role-playing game [MMORPG], *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004-), is the primary example because of its considerable gamescape and popularity. But, role-play within *World of Warcraft* is only one mode of play, and its affordances and practices are illuminated in dialogue with other modalities. Multiplicity defines the game; as Shaka McGlotten writes, *World of Warcraft* is a 'world collectively imagined and constructed by thousands of people for more than fifteen years' (2013: 44). At any given point, players must interact with myriad other players, playstyles, mechanics, fantasies, geographies, sounds, sensations, websites, and media. As such, this thesis investigates *World of Warcraft* alongside other media, holding that these media (art, photography, literature, reenactment, indie games, and dance) are already vital cuts of digital role-playing experiences.

This project offers no single definition of digital role-play, yet parameters that characterise or illustrate its specific capacities are set throughout. The principal among them is that to engage in role-playing is to practice passionate sincerity and amateurism. Amateurism is no insult; instead, it eschews notions of mastery, signalling an emphasis on process and becoming (Muñoz 2009). Role-playing centres intimacy and touch; it is a sensuous feeling-through of fantastical gameworlds that subverts preconditioned ideas of the 'digital' as immaterial. At the same time, passionate sincerity denotes dedication and carefulness in play. Role-players continuously create artworks, poetry, memes, short stories, pornography, role-play guides, cosplay costumes, music, and ephemera. They write meticulously detailed backstories for their characters and organise events at which role-players gather. As Sebastian Deterding and José P. Zagal hold (2019), a focal practice in role-playing is the shared creation and inhabiting of fictional worlds. Although this project often considers multiple modes of role-play, including live-action role-play [LARP] and tabletop role-play, digital role-play remains the primary mode for analysis. Digital role-play implies a fundamental entanglement with online spaces, with this entanglement meaning more than simply residing within the digital; rather, as Deterding and Zagal suggest, digital role-players actively fabricate digital spaces.

A promiscuous approach is adopted to capture these dynamisms and apprehend the conflux of forces at work in and around digital role-play. A promiscuous approach resembles an interdisciplinary approach; however, it better depicts embodied,

intimate, and playful forces as they embrace, bump into, and grind against each other during digital role-play. New materialist, queer, and performance studies scholars often evoke promiscuity to reckon with the entangling of human and nonhuman bodies (Worthen 2007; Dean 2009; Schneider 2011; Cohen 2015; Swanson *et al*. 2017). For example, Donna J. Haraway (2008; 2016) uses the term to express her linguistical approach, her relating of microbes, plants, animals, humans, and machines, as well as the intimate relations each of those relata poses. A promiscuous approach offers something more than interdisciplinarity that crosses disciplinary boundaries to develop integrated knowledge. Promiscuity signifies bodies' limitless relations to each other, where bodies can mean flesh as much as it means technological interfaces, media objects, stones, theories, sensations, and ephemera. However, in this introduction, I resist the promiscuous drive of the thesis, making distinct the emergent relata that become intimate in play so that the reader might become familiar with these individual affairs before returning them to their proper entanglements.

Pursuing this untangling of thoughts and concepts also resists totalising holisms, where the whole might seem to melt away the significance of the sum of its parts. Timothy Morton's article, 'Subscendence' (2017), highlights the concerns that wholes might transcend their parts. Instead, they offer that '[w]holes *subscend* their parts, which means that parts are not just mechanical components of wholes' (2017: para. 3). The players, the computers, the video games, the websites, the sensations, the theories, the art, and the performance all betray distinct features even when theorised within the subscendent whole of digital role-play. As such, this introduction will consider the

parts of digital role-play and the theoretical lenses employed to interpret them. Namely, performance studies and affect theory as they relate to role-play and role-play studies; queer theory and new materialisms as theoretical coordinates with which to understand the touch and intimacies present in play; and *World of Warcraft* as a site of potential for digital role-play.

2. Role-Play, Affect, and Performance

The study of role-play is predominantly split between tabletop role-play, LARP, and digital role-play. Though the formal performance elements of each mode of role-play have similarities, they differ primarily in the space of performance and their reliance upon technology (Hoover *et al*. 2018). However, in previous investigations of digital role-play, it is typically analysed *against* tabletop role-play and regarded as tightly structured and restrictive compared to its more analogue counterpart (Pittman and Paul 2009; MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2011; Sihvonen and Stenros 2018). Paul Pittman and Christopher Paul contend that digital role-players 'must adapt their role-playing to an existing, limited computer program' (2009: 56). Similarly, Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler state, 'a player who is consciously role-playing in *World of Warcraft* is seeking to create a character who transcends the game's mechanics and take on a plausible, defined reality of its own' (2011: 225). Here, video games and their prerequisite technological interfaces are constructed as an immutable ontological category, offering no space for the body to extend into and, therefore, an obstacle and impediment to role-play.

Much of the intervention of this project entails reconsidering the relationship between role-play and technology to recognise how they facilitate, rather than impede, one another. By centring the gestures, fleeting moments, snapshots, (re)actions, and bodily sensations of digital role-play, I understand technologies to not only enable and proliferate such experiences, but also determine the nature of, and partake in, role-play. Previous scholars have often considered role-playing through the lenses of performance, ritual, and theatre (Stenros 2010; Nellhaus 2017; Hoover *et al*. 2019). Sarah Hoover *et al*. have likened role-play to theatre as both share liveness and presence, able to unfold the 'live' in an 'unrepeatable stretch of events and experiences here and now, at a particular juncture of time, space, and people, with some opening to the unexpected and spontaneous' (2019: 222). Though the performances of digital role-play are unrepeatable, they are composed in reiteration and constantly iterating with technology. Following this, I identify role-play in artworks, photography, and performances rendered with, and through, technology. Works of human and technological intimacies, such as Stine Deja's film series (2018) *Hard Core, Soft Bodies*, disclose the technological as a matter of imagination, gesture, and embodiment. Such works explain how this congealing of gestures, practices, and (re)actions emerge alongside material realities to accrue or slough meaning with each iteration.

The works of Rebecca Schneider, which are fundamental throughout this project, are often concerned with the reiterations of gestures as they bounce between space, time, and matter. In *Performing Remains* (2011), a study of art, theatre, and US Civil War

reenactment, she argues that 'bodily practices, sedimented sets of physical habits, in-body techniques, and various modes of physical training remain such that performance-based arts recur' (2019: 68). For Schneider, gestures are iterative, that is, always reemergent; they 'simultaneously cites *and* opens out towards' something coming (*ibid*.). Throughout her works, she holds that gestures can jump between bodies, technologies, media, and matter across multiple times and spaces. Such conceptions resonate particularly with digital role-play since for players' gestures to extend outwards, they must transmit and travel through wires, technological interfaces, waves, pixels, graphics, and lines of code. Schneider holds that the 'biobody is not customarily considered mediatic itself, not itself a means for extension and the brokering of experience' (2019: 58). As explained, a recurring argument in extant digital role-play studies is that the systems and interfaces of video games are the delimiting factor in role-play. However, through gestures, Schneider presents how bodies are, in fact, 'the extension machines for media' (2019: 59). Media extends across bodies as much as bodies extend across media, a vital position for understanding digital role-play that does not privilege the player over the video game. Bodies, media, and technology are all fertile grounds for gestures, theatrics, and performance.

It is worth noting that an iteration of this call and response of gestures congealing over time is termed 'sedimented acts' by Judith Butler. In her landmark essay, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', she writes, '[m]y suggestion is that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated

through time' (1988: 523). She continues, 'one might try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure' (*ibid*.). As such, bodily acts, gestures, and movements emerge to constitute an identity. This project diverges from Butler as, by congealing over time, her conceptions of gender performativity ignore the body's capacity to enact time and matter simultaneously. In unpacking Butler's theories of performativity, Elizabeth Freeman holds that an embodied performance rendered through citational forces works only to consolidate the authority of a 'fantasied original' (2000: 728). She writes, '[m]ight some bodies, in registering on their very surfaces the co-presence of several historically specific events, movements, and collective pleasures, complicate the centrality of gender-transitive drag to queer performativity?' (2000: 728-729). Freeman calls this 'temporal drag' and proposes that it is 'always a constitutive part of subjectivity' (2000: 729). She explains that 'drag' is associated with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past upon the present. Temporal drag does not privilege linearity as temporal expression, or any generation of temporal expressions may be dragged from their past into the 'now.'

Like all embodied performances, digital role-play enacts temporal drag by registering the co-presence of fantasy's media past alongside actual events, political and cultural movements, artefacts, and specific eras. Schneider's analysis of reenactment can again foreground this imposition as she builds upon temporal drag, noting how reenactors place their bodies in specific gestic compositions to arouse sensations of the past in the present. On battle reenactors, she writes:

> Battle reenactors can reenact the US Civil War because they can place their bodies in the gestic compositions - the sedimented sets of acts - that US Civil War soldiers composed when those soldiers were themselves behaving as they have been trained to behave, or as they emulated others to behave, behaviours likewise *and at the time* based on prior practices and precedent notions of what it means and what it might mean to fight. (2011: 10)

Gestic acts become affective traces, signifiers of another time that bear the weight of meaning in the present. For Schneider, matter, such as clothing, ephemera, detritus, and foodstuff, can engage in temporal drag and arouse the same traces of sensations as the reenactors. She describes how when gestures, matter, meaning, and temporalities circulate in performance, they generate 'hyper-weird' mixes of sensation felt most in ephemeral moments of disruption. Schneider describes these moments as *slippages*, where the past is coaxed out to disrupt the present. A slippage entails an eruption of sensations, catalysed perhaps by a gasp, nausea, laughter, or panic when the feeler is surprised by their reaction to theatrics and performance. In a slippage, a moment snaps where the influx of realities muddies cognition and makes the performance feel *as if* it is real.

The specific gestures and gestic compositions enacted in digital role-play will be detailed later in this introduction and in later chapters. I want first to consolidate the concept of affects as integral components of slippages and a pervasive element in digital role-play, performance, and this project. Affects, and affect theory, are crucial coordinates in this work as they can explain bodies' unbounded relations to each other

(Singh 2018).[1] Thinkers such as Sara Ahmed ([2004] 2014), Teresa Brennan (2014), Mel Y. Chen (2012), Ann Cvetkovich (2003), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2002) imagine affects as 'sticky' emotions that move between bodies as they get touchy-feely. Brennan's notion of the 'transmission of affect' is particularly illustrative for thinking and feeling through the affects of digital role-play. She writes, '[i]s there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and "felt the atmosphere"?' (2014: 1). Between bodies and the room, a transmission of affect constitutes an atmosphere, a distinct 'air' that arouses bodily change. Brennan continues, 'the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject. The 'atmosphere' or the environment literally gets into the individual' (*ibid*.). Affects are relations; they broker an intimacy between bodies as much as bodies are intimate with affects. Digital role-play is a mutual performance, not just between players, but between other spaces, times, and matters. Throughout this project, considering affects becomes a means of inquiry that anticipates the myriad forces at work in play while exploring the intimacies and sensations that those forces arouse.

Thinking-with the circulation of affect and matter in digital role-play allows their potential to transform space and tie together interlocutors to emerge. All matter circulates affects, and matter and bodies are active collaborators in arousing slippages. Schneider (2011) makes a note of the error-ridden mayhem of muddying time, matter, and gesture in performance and remarks that slippages are provoked despite, or,

[1] This meaning of affect is opposed to Gilles Deleuze and Brian Massumi's notion of affect that does not imply the emotional, rather their meaning of affect signifies the autonomous ability to affect and be affected.

perhaps, because of the errors. Such an inference recalls José Esteban Muñoz's (2009) understanding that amateurism emphasises process and becoming. Becoming is principally a Deleuzean notion that eschews the subsidiary *being* in favour of shifting and morphing indeterminacies; change, flight, and movement. Becoming, unlike being, is a process, a continually enfolding and unfolding state. In role-play, becoming is a communal affair; between the intimacy of the play, collaborators are transformed, bending to the weight of each other. This perspective, which does not privilege the human player, follows queer theories and new materialisms that seek to undo human/nonhuman sorting operations (Haraway 2008), where worldmaking is an endless system of response between matter. Through the lenses of queer theory and new materialisms, the player/game sorting operation is undone, and all matter is understood as a vital collaborator in digital role-play.

3. Digital Role-Play, or, Queer Intimacies with Matter and Meaning

Video games remain a space where theory, praxis, product, and player are overwhelmingly heterosexual, male, and cisgender (Ruberg 2019). Yet, playing, making, and thinking about queerness and games has become a flourishing site. Queer thinkers have worked to reclaim video games, arguing that they have always been spaces of queer potentiality and relationality (Shaw 2015; Harper 2017; Ruberg 2019). Others extend queer theories and video games into each other, recognising the propensity for the two to explore each other mutually (Chess 2015; Pelurson 2018; Ruberg 2019). Makers and designers have created games and interfaces that queer the narratives, mechanics, and controls of games (Brice 2012; Marcotte 2018; Yang and

Davis 2021). Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw write, '[g]ames in all of their manifestations are a powerful place to imagine a queer utopia, not by simply imagining a better world but by giving players/makers/scholars the tools for enacting new and better worlds' (2017: x). The intersection of queerness and role-play also holds prevalence; however, scholars typically focus on tabletop role-play and LARP (Stenros and Sihvonen 2015; Vist 2018; Biswas 2019). Still, some scholars have explored MMORPGs, often marking the transgressive, intimate, and sexual play that occurs in massively multiplayer settings (Schmeider 2009; Sundén 2009; McGlotten 2013). In building upon the works of these scholars and culture makers, the capacities of digital role-play as a site of queer potential emerge, a site where players enact realities slantwise.

These game studies scholars draw on the insights of queer theorists who conceptualise a lifeworld for those whose lives run askew to the normative boundaries continually erected around them.[2] Evoking queerness here recognises it as a 'term for a way of reimagining, resisting, and remaking the world' (Ruberg 2019: 7). Queerness 'challenge[s] and break[s] apart conventional categories' (Doty 1993: xv) and, in doing so, open ups 'new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space' (Halberstam 2005: 1). Jack Halberstam offers that queerness does not delimit itself to sexual activities; it is also an 'outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices' (*ibid*.). Pertinently then, queerness can

[2] Sara Ahmed (2006), uses queer to describe what is 'oblique' or 'off line.' For Ahmed, queer bodies do not extend into heterosexual spaces and as such when within those spaces, the queer body appears slantwise. Those bodies then 'work to "queer" space; people "blink" and do "double turns" when they encounter such bodies' (2006: 161).

extend to space and affect outside of, though always pertaining to, queer sexuality. In the context of this thesis, my definition of sexuality is broad as it implies a carnal sensuality in 'constitutive pleasure and potentiality of forms of corporeal communing' (Luciano and Chen 2015: 185). Queerness in shaping this project invites affective and material traces that are weird, camp, perverse, deviant, enchanting, messy, and intimate. Queer intimacies pervade digital role-play and this project, promiscuous, perverse, affectively charged, and multisensory intimacies aroused in the grinding relations between bodies.

Intimacy is an integral vector in both queer theory and new materialisms, where queer relations with nonhuman matter open 'the body to all kinds of positive possibility, to numerous invitations for reinvention and becoming' (Cohen and Ramlow 2006: para. 17). In consolidating new materialist ideas with digital role-play, technology emerges as one of many active collaborators entangled in play rather than a restricting agent that taxonomically binds it. New materialism emerged in the works of Haraway and Rosi Braidotti at the end of the 1990s and early 2000s and has now become integrated into many queer and feminist works. The schools of posthumanism, new materialisms, speculative realism, and object-oriented philosophies have since developed, with this project most closely following those that identify under the general rubric of new materialist theory. I hold this position because materialisms are an inherently feminist and queer domain where ongoing debates about the relations between matter and bodies have been ongoing since – at least – the 1970s (Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Cohen 2015). A queer theoretical and new materialist sensibility finds intimacies,

stories, and sensations where dominant ideologies find discrete divisions, uniformity, and inertness.

At the most fundamental level, new materialists argue that an understanding of matter shaped by Cartesian philosophy and Newtonian physics is outdated. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost write that much of our perceptions of materiality are indebted to Descartes, 'who defined matter in the seventeenth century as corporeal substance constituted as length, breadth, and thickness; as extended, uniform, and inert' (2010: 7). They explain that these notions provided modern conceptions of nature as quantifiable and measurable; matter as 'identifiably discrete' (*ibid*.). As such, matter is regarded as inanimate or dead, unable to employ its own agencies or efficacies, relying instead on external agents for effect. New materialisms, then, work to reinvest matter with its efficacy and enchantment (Bennett 2009) or hold that any weighted meaning constructed around the dualisms of animate and inanimate, live and dead, are ruses and meaning should instead be remapped (Barad 2007; Chen 2012; Schneider 2019). In radically reimagining ontologies and relations, much new materialist thinking is also queer thinking. As Jeffrey J. Cohen, a scholar working at this intersection of new materialisms and queer theory, writes: '[t]he body is not human (or at least, it is not only human)'; neither 'is it inhabited by an identity or sexuality that is unique to or even contained fully within the flesh' (2003: 41). Flesh is unstable and contingent (Singh 2018), a constant dynamism of relation and response, but then so is all matter. Between these theories, a method of intimacy *as* inquiry can be explored here, where the affects aroused as bodies tumble into each other are the matters of investigation.

Karen Barad's formative notion of 'intra-action' is adopted to conceptualise the intimacies of digital role-play. For Barad (2003; 2007), interaction cannot subsume the dynamism of forces and agencies between entities. She writes:

> It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the 'components' of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful. A specific intra-action (involving a specific material configuration of the 'apparatus of observation') enacts an agential cut (in contrast to the Cartesian cut—an inherent distinction—between subject and object) effecting a separation between 'subject' and 'object.' (Barad 2003: 815)

Intra-action is a landmark moment for queer embodiment where there are no individual identities in ontology, only shifting phenomenal assemblages forged in a series of rolling 'cuts.' These cuts can be pieced together and pulled apart, infinitely making inclusions and exclusions, and so closing and opening any of all possibilities for becoming. The rolling agential cuts of digital role-play enliven an embodiment that includes biology, technology, media, imagination, gestures, movements, affects, and sensations. Barad states that 'matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency' (2003: 822). Bodies, in this conception, are matter like all else, and they come to matter in their intra-actions with matter. All matter in digital role-play is entangled; each seemingly distinct matter is a composite of an overlaying, a vector of relationality, and another partner in a network of giving and receiving.

4. *World of Warcraft*: A Promiscuous Site of Potential

There is no set path in playing *World of Warcraft*, though, through loot, player experience, achievements, and currency, the game encourages some more than others. As Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg write, there 'are many attainable goals with quantifiable outcomes, such as reaching level 70, or acquiring the highest level in a profession, or killing the dragon Onyxia, but when each of these goals is reached, many still remain' (2011: 8). *World of Warcraft* is set in the Warcraft universe, predominately on the planet Azeroth but also on Draenor and Argus. The Warcraft universe is primarily a high fantasy setting but contains many elements of steampunk, gothic, and science fiction. To begin with, players must create an avatar to move, interact, navigate, and orient themselves within the universe. During avatar creation, players pick a binary gender identity (male or female); a fantasy 'race' (for example, Orc, Elf, Undead, or Dwarf); their skin tone or colour; their hair and facial features; and race-specific modifications (such as horn shape or tusk length). Players must also pick their 'class' that dictates their talents and skillset when playing; for instance, a Warrior is a melee fighter who dons plate armour and charges into battle, while Druids are shapeshifters who channel the power of nature and the stars to harm or heal. The player will then enter the universe to explore the landscape, fight monsters, complete quests, gain experience, learn talents and skills, and interact with non-player characters [NPCs] and other players.

Typically, the player will first complete quests and dungeons (self-contained missions requiring five players to overcome difficult enemies and challenges collaboratively) to

gain experience and levels, explore the world, and play through the game's stories. The two most popular playstyles are combat-based play, known as 'player versus player' [PvP] and 'player versus environment' [PvE]. PvP denotes combat between players in an arena or a battleground, where they must fight and strategise in King of the Hill and Capture the Flag game modes. PvE denotes combat between an allied group of players and NPCs, typically antagonists in the story, with unique mechanics that players must overcome to defeat. Simple and repetitive play, such as fishing, mining, gathering herbs, and skinning animals, is known as 'grinding'; these materials can be made into items or sold to other players for in-game currency. The game's systems reward these playstyles with experience points, loot, tradable materials, and achievement points.

Role-play is a distinct playstyle in *World of Warcraft* that does not require a mastery of mechanics like PvP or PvE; instead, players must create a character and interact with the characters of other players and the world as if they are that character. These players usually have a backstory for their character alongside traits, likes, dislikes, jobs, families, particular gestures, accents, quirks, styles, and erotic preferences. Role-play is typically a mutual performance that thrives when dialogue, gestures, and affects bounce between players. Unlike questing, PvP, PvE, and grinding, the game does not reward role-play, suggesting that for role-players, the game is predominately a fantastical setting, a space for intra-action. Taverns have free tables and chairs for players, the appearance of armour can change to allow for particular uniforms or aesthetics, and there are large areas throughout the game with no mechanical purpose other than to provide a fantasy landscape. These playstyles are not exclusive or

discrete modes of play, but a continuum wherein a player might complete quests while they mine for ores or role-play while completing a dungeon.

This section is two-pronged, exploring why *World of Warcraft* is both a site of potential for digital role-play and a site of potential to explore the queer and material intimacies of digital role-play. As previously mentioned, comparisons between digital role-play and more analogue modes of role-play construct technology as an impediment to play. Tanja Sihvonen and Jaakko Stenros (2018) claim the limiting boundaries of *World of Warcraft* mean players must overcome the digital systems of the game to role-play, namely through social play, character creation, and forums. Demarcating video games in this way does emphasise the transgressive means employed by players to role-play. However, this assessment neglects the potential for role-play to impact the designed, technical, and mechanical elements of play while giving too much control to the game developers as the sole arbiters of these environments. Rather, role-play always imaginatively toys with technomedia; players bend, defy, and play with the game's rules, systems, and narratives. In exemplifying this, this section explores three integral practices of digital role-play, each of which betrays the intimacy and promiscuity inherent in role-play, namely: (i) 'modding'; (ii) movement and gestures; (iii) and transmedia activity.

'Modding' is a near-universal practice in playing *World of Warcraft*. It alters, enhances, or disrupts the game's software through fan-made downloadable content. One of the most popular mods, 'Details! Damage Meter' records players' statistics during fights,

principally the amount of damage dealt to the enemy. This mod is not disruptive; it only cements normative incentives to master the game while providing numerical means to punish those who do not or cannot match those numbers. However, modding can enact queerness by reshaping the game's programming and disrupting heteronormative elements of games through player agencies (Lauteria 2012). Tom Welch writes that queer mods 'radically alter both the games marketplace and the media landscape to invent a gameplay that is unfettered by the necessity of capital for game production and rehashed stories of achievement and machismo as selling points' (2018: n.p.). Mods have the potential to be utopian, envisioning a game uninhibited by the confines of heteronormative playstyles.

Fan practices and role-play are intertwined, both actively rewriting and recrafting technomedia to make space for players otherwise left out of normative narratives and mechanics. The production and consumption of mods and media content is a fundamental element of gameplay and is an entirely fan-based endeavour. Sihvonen, in an analysis of fan-made mods and the culture of gaming, writes that 'gameplay and modding [are] constitutive elements of games, especially in the analysis of games as sociocultural texts' (2011: 39). She explains how mods symbolically penetrate the insides of a game's programming, twisting the code as if 'perverted' (2011: 104). Though Sihvonen does not go so far as to deploy the word 'queer' explicitly, I want to flush out the incipient queerness in her argument. An apparent queer potential can be teased out in that mods and content which redefine, or pervert, what constitutes the game work to disrupt its taxonomic boundaries in a manner that is decidedly queer. Specific player actions open the game to difference, change, and augmentation,

effectively creating a reemergent game from their imaginings, creativity, and labour. Further, these mods are part of a large-scale fan practice of transmedia content creation and activities.

The most popular mod for role-players in *World of Warcraft* is 'Total RP 3', which provides tools to enhance role-play. 'Total RP 3' creates an in-game profile interface where players can write descriptions of their characters and what kind of role-play they enjoy, such as traits, erotic preferences, jobs, how they move through the world, and motives. Players can also locate other 'Total RP 3' users through the mod, they can customise the in-game chat to show their character's name, gestures, expressions, and body language, and it provides the tools to enable NPCs to speak. With this mod, players can resist the game's desire for competitive play in transforming the gamespace into a cooperative domain by acting as a conduit to connect players and cultivating the vast lifeworld of gestures in role-play.

Alongside mods, gestures are integral to digital role-play, a wave, a nod, a smirk, or a middle finger; all these displays of body language travel, carrying meaning through realities. To gesture is to extend meaning outwards, carrying a call that awaits a response. Schneider (2018) holds that gestures are ongoing body-jumping performances entangled with histories and potentialities. They are reiterative, defined by a continual and shifting call and response. Gestures are always reemergent, a bodily technique of (re)iteration (Schneider 2011). The avatar can perform some gestures, such as a wave, but players must express other gestures through the in-game chat

function. Schneider writes that gesture is carried 'perhaps by air, perhaps by stone, perhaps by film, light, pixels, passed through algorithms, or perhaps by body-to-body transmission' (2018: 287). The call of the written, the digital, pixelated gesture remains, carried through wires, light, and pixels to be responded to by those near, yet far away.

Often gestures that are enabled by mods, like 'Total RP 3,' cannot be seen by those who do not also have them installed. A queer reading of these gestures reveals them as covert and subversive, distinctly queer in their conceptions of relations and self-knowing. Covert and ephemeral performances are vital to queer relationality and community; they are the traces that evidence queer lives (Muñoz 1996). On queer dance, Muñoz writes that it is hard to catch and meant to be hard to catch, but 'it matters and takes on a vast material weight for those of us who perform or draw important sustenance from performance' (2009: 81). Specific gestures and movements carry the weight of interpellation to sustain digital role-play to those who respond. Gestures are mechanics and narratives in role-play, a constituent of play as much as hardware and software. Take the particular gait of role-players, specifically how they walk, which positions them in stark contrast to other players who run. Running is the default movement setting in *World of Warcraft*, and players will spend in-game currency to learn how to ride 'mounts' to move around the world, from objective to objective, efficiently. Whereas role-players are more likely to walk, often dwelling in scenes and places with fewer immediate goals to dash off to. Simply walking in *World of Warcraft*, as a gesture and gestic movement, carries a specific meaning to those in

the know. As gesture ricochets from body to body, it looks backwards, citing past traces, and it looks forward expectantly to those who know how to respond.

Figure 0.1 Siavash Wildhaven (2022). 'The Wildhaven Saloon.' Posted in the *Argent Archives* by Siavash Wildhaven. https://www.argentarchives.org/node/259017 [accessed 09/03/2022].

Like mods and gestures, players' constant creation of transmedia content transforms *World of Warcraft* into a site of role-play and queer potential. The *Argent Archives* and the World's End Tavern fan-fiction and role-play forum hold the most abundant collections of past traces of digital role-play. Gameplay, when understood more broadly, that is, not limited to the systems of a video game, suggests that the space for digital role-play is as much *World of Warcraft* as it is these two websites. This point is made evident by the poster [*fig 0.1*] posted in the *Argent Archives* that advertised Tavari and Siavash Wildhaven's event, 'The Wildhaven Saloon.' At the event, players could meet people, gossip, listen to music, dance, and order drinks, such as 'Snowplum Brandy' or 'Bloodsailor's Spiced Rum'. The bartenders and greeters at this event were role-players hired by other role-players to work these jobs, while musicians composed, recorded, and performed their music through a mod called 'Musician'. The poster is an artefact demonstrating the transmedia entanglements of digital role-play, as a poster created and posted on an external website for an in-game event that requires role-players to work at and mods to attend. Here, play entails entwining players, performances, labour, games, websites, media content, and mods.

Queerness is apparent in the community this event fosters, its covert transmission, and in the mods that (re)define – or pervert – gameplay. But, any argument for a queer utopia dissolves since this event emulates a commercial drinking venue, and neither the hired staff nor musicians were paid for their labour. According to Muñoz (2009), queerness is always on the horizon, an ideality; it is never quite attainable though still able to warm us with its potentiality. This poster and subsequent event enact a

glimpse of queerness and the pleasure in reaching for it, though it is still not quite there. It is illustrative of the queer readings of digital role-play throughout this work, where queerness often emerges in the doings and becomings of play yet is often caught in the mire of 'now'. These queer interpretations, though, gather traces of the lifeworld of play, like this poster, and assemble them in the desire for the possibility for 'new' realities that role-play might enliven. The Worlds End Tavern forum also holds artefacts of digital role-play, such as the *Privateer Press*'s monthly newspaper.[3] There are also instances of text-led role-play, where role-players reply to a thread in a forum, then to each other, with their character's thoughts and actions to build extensive and intricate stories from these collective performances. Artefacts from the *Argent Archive*s and forums are explored throughout this project as they simultaneously evidence the lifeworlds of digital role-play as they tie together and sustain its community of collaborators.

In creating essentially reemergent gamespaces with these websites, digital role-play indelibly links to fan practices where principally marginalised fans turn to the practice of making content to shape a media that includes them (Jenkins 2006; Friedman 2017; Dym, Brubaker, and Fiesler 2018). When commercial designers and publishers do not represent marginalised audiences, such as women, queer and gender-nonconforming people, fan desires lead them to create fantasies reflective of their realities. Deterding and Zagal (2019) have already bridged the meeting between role-play and fandom. They write that a 'core aspect of fandom is participating in a fictional world by

[3] See: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YTQbMEVFpJnxuj8GSITECy8Y6ps3SV2SIdr2hU-Y-oM/edit.

consuming and discussing media while also extending and co-creating them. RPGs make such shared creation and inhabiting of fictional worlds their focal practice' (2019: 6). As passionate fans of *World of Warcraft*, digital role-players have produced fantasy art, memes, stories, magazines, zines, ideas, models, music, maps, characters, recipes, cartoon strips, pornography, and cosplay costumes. This content creation remains a utopian project, reflexive of Muñoz's (2009) hermeneutics of trace, a critical approach of hope where backwards-looking forces are employed to (re)imagine queer futures. As he writes, '[f]rom shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality' (Muñoz 2009: 189). Through fan practices, players dismantle the ontology of video games to be intimately reconstituted with their own fantasies and desires.

Modding, gestures, and transmedia content creation betray distinctly queer sentiments in their covert transmission, resistance and disruption of normative play, and in reaching for a utopian horizon that creates essentially reemergent gameworlds. These practices and acts permeate digital role-play, transforming *World of Warcraft* into a transmedia site of potential for intimacy and sensation. These relations carry the material and affective traces that evidence the lifeworlds of digital role-play. This theoretical investigation into digital role-play is derived from and sustained by fan-made content, mods, and gestures as traces that persistently depict play. Despite *World of Warcraft*'s success causing a boom of literature in the early 2010s[4], this explicitly intimate conception of digital role-play remains underdeveloped. This project

[4] The journal *Games and Culture* (Kryzwinska and Lowood 2006) featured a special issue on the game in 2006, while Hilde G. Corneliuseen and Hill Walker Rettberg (eds.) edited a volume solely about *World of Warcraft* in 2011.

favours a reflective approach just as digital role-play promiscuously pieces together its lifeworld. It pieces together academic inquiry with art, performance, stones, gestures, electrons, bareback sex, poetry, the nonhuman, touching, feeling, and fantasy media finding erogeneity when intimately joined. In pulling fan ephemera from archives and forums, the makings of digital role-play readily reveal their unfettered promiscuities, an affordance that, when moved outwards, traces more and other networks of promiscuity. Likewise, the texts that figure this thesis's body are assembled from various fields of inquiry, including game studies, queer theory, geology, archaeology, quantum physics, new materialisms, media studies, environmental humanities, and performance studies tethered together by their connection to digital role-play. To establish the importance of (some of) the components of digital role-play and this lens for analysis, this project determines how they promiscuously encounter each other and share matter and meaning. The following section presents how this promiscuity as method is explicated throughout this thesis and is prevalent in many queer and new materialist works.

5. Promiscuity as Method

Digital role-play is sensual and erotic; role-players touch and feel their way through media, lingering on what is pleasurable, then gathering it all up to form a fiction to embody. In exploring the eroticisms of digital role-play, this project develops a promiscuous methodology that reflects role-play's promiscuously entangled relations in play. Robert Scholes (1979) holds that the patterns and flows of fiction are inherently sexual, arguing that every fiction, be it sexual in terms of its content or not,

betrays the intensifications, tensions, resolutions, and climaxes of erotic rhythms. Building upon Scholes's position, Shira Chess (2016) proposes that all video games play with queer pleasures. She weaves a compelling comparison between erotics and playing games, where narrative and mechanical forms of play arouse erogenous pleasure. Video games offer sensual ebbs and flow without the heteronormative 'cum shot' of narrative climax that pervades other media with narrative build-up and closure (Chess 2016: 88). Chess offers the queer case of *World of Warcraft*, positing that PvE practices give momentary climaxes while grinding teases non-reproductive pleasure in its simple satisfaction. She states that players 'can deviate, find their own pleasure, and revel in dilatory moments. It becomes easy to get sucked into the pleasure of "just one more…" in a persistent gameworld' (2016: 90). Further, the erotic pleasures of *World of Warcraft* are not always so typical. Elements of edging and sadomasochism emerge when mechanically complex enemies take weeks, or even months, of arduous struggle to defeat – and often, many players will never beat them.

The erotic rhythms of digital role-play tend to undulate, and climactic moments often diminish in favour of sensuous tweaks, strokes, and massages. To borrow a phrase from Chess, digital role-play allows for the processes of *becoming* rather than *coming*. Serving brandy and rum in a saloon, patrolling the busy streets of Stormwind, discussing strategies in a war-torn barracks, dancing to the tune of a bard's lute, wandering through a jungle, and exploring ruins are all dilatory moments of becoming. The pleasures are mutually gratifying as players work together to pursue pleasure. In expanding Chess' queer case, the erotic rhythms of digital role-play are manifold,

aroused from multiple intra-actions. Role-players rarely play alone, so queer pleasures become entwined as the rhythms of many come together. In being massively multiplayer, sensuality in digital role-play becomes multifaceted with many intimacies between many bodies; in effect, role-play becomes an orgy of exploration and pleasure.

Digital role-players are as eager to receive other ideas, machinations, content, fantasies, and sensation as they are to give. Just as playful and uninhibited entanglements pervade role-play, unfettered promiscuity becomes this project's methodological guide. Alongside digital role-play, this methodology builds upon queer and new materialist texts defined by their eclectic attention to things and keenness to couple the seemingly disparate. Tim Dean's (2009) *Unlimited Intimacy* is a foundational text here, a study of the queer subcultural practice of 'barebacking,' the deliberate and erotic abandonment of prophylactics during sex. Dean describes barebacking as an intimacy 'unfettered' by rubber or latex. He then argues that barebacking, promiscuity without compunction, might go beyond gay male erotic practice becoming a philosophy of living. Notably, Dean asks, '[w]hat might happen if we were a little more promiscuous about promiscuity itself, if we defined it more broadly, permitting promiscuity to affect all forms of attention, all those moments when our regard approaches and touches something else?' (2009: 5). In being promiscuous, this thesis touches various theoretical angles, ecstatically piecing them together and pulling them apart to study digital role-play.

It is important to note that, in running together barebacking and promiscuity, barebacking can, of course, be a monogamous practice. However, promiscuity here rarely concerns genital relations; instead, following Dean, barebacking is a springboard for thinking creatively about the inherently promiscuous and intimate encounters when moving through worlds. Such a methodology frames an understanding of digital role-play from which academic inquiry can spiral off, omnidirectionally, uninhibited by any discrete disciplines, taxonomies, and realities. It provides the reader with a sense of the unfolding landscape of role-play and builds a node of elementary information, such as theoretical concepts, artworks, games, media, erotica, performances, and literature. In following the varied paths that digital role-players take in fashioning and inhabiting their realities of play, this work asks what sort of realities can be travelled that might be robust and scrupulous yet remain fantastical in their exploration and becoming.

Many of the texts explored in this thesis betray such promiscuity. Julietta Singh's work, in particular, demonstrates a capacity for intimately connecting the seemingly disparate to recognise their dynamic and complex relations. In *No Archive Will Restore You* (2018), she compiles the archive of her body, assembling the traces of experience that have been deposited in her that scramble time and matter. The book documents Singh's 'body-archive', her body *as* archive, everything that has stuck to her or forced its way in, that which has been excreted and that which cannot be expunged. She attunes her body-archive to material matters such as faecal matter and mobile phones, alongside more amorphous matters such as sounds, pain, theoretical concepts, and

poetry. She understands her body-archive as messy and intractable, and she often pauses to dwell on the intimacies that have congealed to evidence a lifeworld. Schneider's essay 'Slough Remains' (2019) presents another example of a promiscuous methodology as she divulges a sedimented perspective of media that unfolds a theatrical Roman coin, the sweat of factory workers, Palaeolithic cave paintings, time-travelling gestures, and an episode of *Star Trek*. These two works exemplify how a promiscuous outlook bears the propensity to understand things how they are: entangled and bending to the weight of each co-constituent. So, to comprehend the realities of digital role-play is to recognise that they emerge from an endless system of response where bodies bump into bodies, generating friction and sensation.

This method of promiscuity takes influence from the actualities of promiscuousness, that is, encounters and contacts that are bodily, fleeting, and multiple. It equally takes influence from the 'negative' preconceptions of promiscuity, where it is habitually construed as dirty, transgressive, troubling, and even wrong. As mentioned, this method is not separate from an interdisciplinary one, only augmented to centre these facets of promiscuity that are already integral to digital role-play. Promiscuity is not limited to the queer theoretical and new materialist positions encountered in this thesis which are, in fact, a near-constant relationship throughout. Also, queer theory and new materialisms often have overlapping premises and arguments, meaning there is little that is dirty or troubling in co-mingling these discourses. Though both centre on grinding articulations, bodily encounters, and sensuality, all of which characterise the actualities of promiscuity. Instead, promiscuity occurs largely in the gathering, and

subsequent touching and feeling, of art, poetry, and media content, alongside the archival work undertaken throughout, all of which reveal the promiscuities, intimacies, and idiosyncracies of digital role-play.

Figure 0.2 'Summary of the Razor Hill Village Hours: Sports and Dice' (2018). Screenshot taken by Bicko Blingstock. https://www.argentarchives.org/files/gallery_image/razorhillhours_03.jpg [accessed 24/03/2022].

Though this introduction resists the urge to follow the endless folds of connective tissue that join the various arts and acts that typify digital role-play, resisting this promiscuous urge is challenging because role-play rarely delimits itself in this way. This point is made apparent by the screenshot [*fig 0.2*] above, taken from the *Argent Archives*, where digital role-players are enacting a battle between two factions, the 'Hand of Conquest' and the 'Thirteenth Grunt Regiment'. Participants are holding foam swords, also known as boffers or padded weapons, cementing this scene as a mock battle. Foam weapons are often used in mock battles in LARP and reenactment over real weapons as they are safer, weigh less, and can be fashioned to resemble real weapons. None of these factors concern digital role-players as play poses little risk of

physical harm, while weapons can be transmogrified to look like any weapon in the game. These foam weapons, then, are explicitly used to recall the mock battles of LARP and reenactment.

In *Knights of Badassdom* (2013), a comedy-horror film about fantasy LARP, a conversation takes place between Hung, an experienced LARPer, and his friend Joe, who has been dragged unwillingly to a LARP scenario. Hung explains LARP to Joe, describing it as similar to tabletop role-play, but rather than sitting around a table to play, LARP is doing it *for real*. Joe responds – 'For fake', making the fantasy of the scenario evident. To which Hung retorts – 'Fake-real, dude', as though LARP denotes a fantasy story and setting, there remains a realness, physicality, and substance in the costumes, props, gathering of people, and their mutual performance. The fake-real of LARP becomes more troubling in this LARP scenario enacted within *World of Warcraft*, where fantasy warfare and magic define the diegetic logic of the game, and yet digital role-players still emulate the fake-real of LARP. In this twofold flirting with the fake and real, digital role-players enact a disorientating juxtaposition of the two that defines the troubling capacities of slippages. Players, props, performances, media, and imaginings come together from multiple realities in such a mangle of fake and real that it infringes upon the 'negative' characteristics of promiscuity; messy, transgressive, and wrong. Similar examples are myriad within the *Argent Archives*, and each further portrays digital role-play's inherent promiscuousness with other modes and media. A correspondingly promiscuous methodology can follow the labyrinthine folds of

encounters that comprise digital role-play while emphasising its troubling, bodily, intimate, and sensual aspects.

6. Orientation

Throughout this project, it is my contention that digital role-play is a system of promiscuous bodies, each relying on one other to create and perform the realities of play. Namely, the experiences, emotions, events, gamespaces, materials, contents, and gestures of role-play entirely depend upon bodies (human and otherwise) coming together. To quote Haraway again, we are all situated and entangled, 'we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations' (2016: 4). The promiscuities of digital role-play also offer a sensual and erotic means to visualise speculative and materialist thinking, such as Haraway's, that recognises the constant circulation and contact of bodies that comprise every environment. Finally, this project reprises the works of role-playing game scholars, namely Rafael Bienia (2016) and Chloé Germaine (2020), who recognise the nonhuman players of games whose agencies make role-play possible, only employing queer theory to explain these relations and explore play as intimate, sensual, perverted, and promiscuous. As stated above, the objectives of this project are as follows: i) to determine how digital role-play is positioned and oriented within a crosshatched weave of other games, artworks, and performances; ii) to explore the queerly disruptive promiscuity capacity of digital role-play as it plays with the narrative, mechanics, and media of games; iii) and to investigate how such a promiscuous conception of digital role-play appropriately signifies and examines the unfolding waves of reality that emerge in play. What follows is an outline of the four

chapters of this thesis that situates their questions and arguments while orienting the reader to the varied perspective and facets of digital role-play required to address each of its three objectives.

The first chapter, 'The Role-Play Rhizome', explores digital role-play as a *rhizome*, a crosshatched weave of dissonances all intimately pressing together. It begins by studying avatars, the digital forms of a player that act, move, and are oriented within gameworlds. Avatars comprise many dissonances glued together, namely, biology and technology apprehended in player and avatar, liveness emanating from the supposed inanimate entity, and an anachronistic entanglement of past and present. In this chapter, Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's (2013) philosophical conception, an image of thought, the rhizome, is employed as a means to picture these entanglements. Four features define the rhizome: the first is connectability, the second is heterogeneity, the third is multiplicity, and the fourth is unforeseen directionality. The rhizome maps role-play in all its myriad forms of meaning as an omnidirectional, random, and intersecting node. Composites of the rhizome may seem disparate, yet they become indelibly linked through rhizomatic thinking. This chapter explores the multiplicities and heterogeneities of art, theatre, performance, literary moments, games, forum posts, *YouTube* videos, and scholarly works, following the threads of dissonance to situate role-play in all worlds.

This chapter is split into three sections, representing nodes of the rhizome characterised by dissonances that comprise digital role-play. The player and the avatar

signify the first node in the rhizome, which centres upon the dissonances between messy biology and clean technology. This section finds the messiness in digital role-play, revealing the potential of technology to be carnal, imaginative, queer, and transgressive. The second node follows the dissonances of live and dead; it seeks to reveal how performance spirals the live and dead and remaps those terms from their demarcated sites. Role-play, as a performance, is 'live' in the sense that it is lively, animate, and happening in the present. Yet much of its lifeworld is composed of the dead, such as technological interfaces and ideas, sensations, and gestures cited from past acts. The third node follows the dissonances of anachronisms when times feel as if they are out of place. Expanding Freeman's notion of 'temporal drag' (2000, 2020) that describes how temporalities are dragged back and forth and felt in the co-presence of multiple times upon the body, this section illustrates how role-players often become this kind of embodied anachronism. In connecting these dissonant matters, this chapter conceptualises the intimacies that constantly circulate during play as the glue that binds the dissonances together in this rhizome. Shaka McGlotten writes that intimacy describes 'a *feeling* of connection or a *sense* of belonging; embodied and carnal sensuality, that is, *sex*' (2013: 1). This chapter, then, explains how sensuous energies hold role-play together, traceable in touches, how objects pull and push bodies, media caress each other, and imaginations massage the senses.

The second chapter, 'A Queer Touch of Digital Role-Play', further develops notions of intimacy by getting touchy-feely with the material collaborators of games through queer theory and new materialist philosophies. At the point of contact in the embraces

of play, this chapter asks what happens if we become so intimate with the matter of the game that it brings it as close as the self, touching the self. When things touch, there is an exchange of sensuality when warmth, pressure, and presence bring feelings of other beings, spaces, and times to the self (Barad 2012). Touch is not principally a haptic affair; it is also affective. As Barad proposes, matter and meaning are not separate elements, '[t]hey are inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder' (2007: 3). To touch the objects of role-play is to feel their meaning and arouse worlds of imagination, sensation, media, and affect of the fictional through more familiar tactile textures. In forwarding much speculative materialist thinking, this chapter is not sentimental about skin and flesh, arguing that they do not contain or confine identity and sexuality (Cohen 2003). In conceptualising an emergent ontology of digital role-play that includes the nonhuman, this chapter turns to Dean's (2009) specific attention to the pervasive promiscuity between bodies. In digital role-play, myriad other bodies, forms, and figures circulate and are brought close at the close of touch. Boundaries grind the unfettered intimacies between touches and the lingering afterlives of touch between players, interfaces, media, and the residues of fictional worlds. This chapter reveals the queer perversity of feeling media affects as they leak between the bodies in play from the skin and right down to the subatomic level of touch.

Chapter three, 'Digital Stones: Slippage and Sensation', holds that role-play's inherent promiscuity enables players to drag elements of disparate realities and environments usually felt elsewhere into play. In a repeated effort to decentre the human body as

the leading affective site in play, this chapter postures that stones, and their sensations, are the foundations of reality in our world and are dragged into gameworlds to do the same. Thinkers such as Jeffrey J. Cohen (2015) and Kellie Robertson (2012) hold that stones are the bedrock of reality, yet people often construct them as inert and mundane. But stones are lively, an unrelenting and enduring substance of story and sensation (Cohen 2015). Movements and transformations are an ancient geological force, a tumbling rock, a mudslide, and a sudden snap under pressure. Stones have also brokered communication millennia before wires and pixels (Parikka 2015). Neolithic and Palaeolithic carvings and negative handprint artworks feature on the surfaces of caves and rock formations worldwide, repeatedly producing gestures that jump between the deep time of geology to be responded to in the 'now' (Schneider 2019). In aggregating these ideas about stones, thinking with the lithic reveals its particular worlding capacity where stones engender sensations and relations. This chapter thinks with stones to understand the digital lithic in *World of Warcraft*, holding those physical and sensory elements of stone endure in digital gamespaces. Digital stones are everywhere in *World of Warcraft*, and this chapter suggests that they elicit the same effects as their lithic counterparts.

The chapter builds upon the work of Elizabeth Grosz (2008) to understand virtual stones not as a matter of representation [signs, images, and fantasies] but as a matter of sensation [force, rhythm, and resonance]. For Grosz, sensation is 'the zone of indeterminacy between subject and object, the bloc that erupts from the encounter of the one with the other' (2008: 73). Eruptions of sensation impact the body directly,

skirting the brain, affecting internal organs, cells, and the nervous system. Cohen writes, '[w]hen stones are examined as something more than fixed and immobile things, as partners in errantry, then facts likewise begin to ambulate' (2015: 215). Stones are not inanimate objects, existing purely for use and abuse; from Cohen's perspective, stones disclose stories, sensations, relations, and art. This chapter then puts Cohen and Grosz's ideas in dialogue with the new materialisms of Karen Barad, Mel Y. Chen, Dana Luciano, and Rebecca Schneider to posit that digital stones are as likely to provoke sensations as their earthly and geological counterparts. Stones then open the possibility for other eruptions of sensations, known in this project as 'slippages.' A slippage describes a moment where the disparity between real and unreal becomes muddy (Schneider 2011). The final section of this chapter finds other slippages in role-play to build a 'hyper-weird' of realities which explains why role-playing can feel, at times, as if it is hedging the real.

The final chapter of this thesis, 'The Archives of Digital Role-Play', is a departure from the other chapters in that it principally investigates the structure, construction, and relations of the archives of digital role-play rather than their content. Throughout this project, content from the *Argent Archives* is pieced together and apart to trace evidence of the vast lifeworlds of digital role-play. The *Argent Archives* web team, which maintains and administrates the archive, considers its primary goal to tie together its community of collaborators. In acknowledging this function of the archive, this chapter seeks to de-historicise the archive, proposing that its artefacts are not props for historical narrative (Ernst 2016) but part of a system that moves and

distributes information to connect digital role-players. My argument here is that archives are unstable and incomplete, and thinking of their structure in this way reveals their relations and entanglements between bodies, media, objects, and histories.

This chapter extends two landmark conceptions of the archive to explain its instability while investigating the reverberations between archives and digital role-play: Singh's concept, mentioned above, of the 'body-archive' that is attuning to the body's constant accrual of matter and meaning, and Erin Manning and the SenseLab's (2020) notion of the 'anarchive.' The anarchive is a formless repertory of traces that carries the potential to actualise events, figured by the excesses of archives and events. Between documentation and lived experience, there is a constant spill of potentials, and it is in this relay that the anarchive precipitates. Manning describes the practice of anarchiving as that intense and ineffable something 'that catches us in our own becoming' (2020: 84). This chapter is necessary to investigate how digital role-play and the *Argent Archives* rely upon each other while offering a means to orient the reader to the convoluted maze of fragmented stories, characters, events, relations, and artwork that compose digital role-play.

As a final remark to this introduction, I want to note two fixtures of digital role-play that I have deliberately left out of this thesis, the furry fandom and the specific practice of erotic role-play [ERP]. People within the furry fandom are known as 'furries' and, typically, someone who is a furry enjoys anthropomorphic art, fiction, and role-

play and will sometimes take on an anthropomorphic identity themselves, known as a 'fursona.' The furry fandom is prominent in digital role-play in *World of Warcraft*, with furries often playing Worgen characters, a fantasy race of werewolves able to switch between human and anthropomorphic wolf forms. *Wikifur*, a furry encyclopaedia, has a page dedicated to Worgens, while in-game, Worgen characters directly reference the fandom in a preprogrammed joke that goes, 'Are you into… furries?'.[5] Much of the activity of the furry fandom takes place online or at conventions ('cons'); as Marla Carlson explains, 'some [furries] are involved in role-playing games; many use online avatars to perform in virtual space, and then sometimes perform in actual space by donning ears, tails, or complete fur suits at fan conventions' (2011: 193). Alongside their prominence within online games, several informal polls detailed on *Wikifur* indicate that there are many more LGBTQIA+ identified individuals of the furry fandom than in general society.[6] There are apparent threads of connection between this queer study of digital role-play and the furry fandom. However, there is minimal academic scholarship on the furry fandom, with only Carlson's research pointing towards their involvement in digital role-play. Further, statistics about the sexual orientation of furries were purely informal polls. Due to these factors, most of the evidence around the furry fandom and digital role-play is anecdotal, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to investigate the crossovers between the two thoroughly.

[5] 'Worgen' (12 April 2015). *Wikifur*. Available online: https://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Worgen [accessed 22/06/2022].
[6] 'Sexual Orientation' (19 February 2022). *Wikifur*. Available online: https://en.wikifur.com/wiki/Sexual_orientation [accessed 22/06/2022].

Another facet of digital role-play not discussed in this project is ERP, role-playing that engages in sexual activity and language. Like any other form of role-playing in *World of Warcraft*, players use emotes, the in-game chat function, and gestics to enact this sexual role-play. Some role-play scholars, such as Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler (2011) and Zek Cypress Valkyrie (2011), dismiss ERP arguing that it serves as a proxy for only the player's sexual gratification and is distinct from the continual production of fantasy that defines role-play. Their positions disarm the generative potential of ERP, iterating Susanna Paasonen's (2022) findings that sex is often understood to mark the boundaries of where play ends. But Paasonen holds that play must expand to include those strained, dark, and complex forms of pleasure that define sex. Lee Sherlock (2013) proposes that ERP is intertwined with role-play's worlding and meaning-making capacity. He writes:

> My contention is that there are players for whom and lines along which the boundaries between these categories are blurred even further, such that sex and erotic contact are not bracketed off from the potentialities of developing characters through role-playing, but rather are intertwined in the narrative 'lives' of characters as imagined, written, and performed. (2013: 168)

My position regarding ERP echoes Sherlock's: sex and sexual content permeate the world, and exploring sex through role-playing is conducive to the lives and lifeworlds of characters and players alike. However, this project is more concerned with the inherent eroticisms that circulate digital role-play rather than genital relations.

There is also a pragmatic reason for omitting ERP in this work, chiefly that the *Argent Archives* do not allow overtly explicit images or stories about sex and nudity. As the *Argent Archives* is my principal source of information on digital role-play, sexual relations are inevitably less discussed. ERP can – easily – be found in-game and within *Discord* servers, while websites, such as *DeviantArt*, overflow with sexual content. Only it would be intrusive to enter *Discord* servers, spy on players, or make a *DeviantArt* account to access this more private information. It is worth noting, too, that as a role-player, I draw on personal experience (which is itself ephemeral) and the *Argent Archives*, which has the benefit of moving beyond the purely individual and of being a resource that all researchers and players might access. So, in exploring the realities of digital role-play, this project explores information from the *Argent Archive*s in combination with in-game role-play events that I have attended, where everyone is welcome to watch and engage alongside.

CHAPTER ONE

The Role-Play Rhizome

1. The Rhizomatic Avatar

Figure 1.1 Dwarven Avatar (2020). *World of Warcraft: Battle for Azeroth*. Screenshot taken by the author.

Before you is a screenshot [*fig 1.1*], an image comprised of data, displayed on a screen, or perhaps printed on paper, of a character unmistakably humanoid yet resplendently fantastical. The character in the screenshot is clad in glowing scaled armour, adorned with trinkets and baubles, and wears a plaited beard reaching his knees. 'A Dwarf!' you might note, recognising the character's beard and stout figure. You might recall the Nibelung from Richard Wagner's (1869-1876) opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, a story from Germanic heroic legend. At the same time, you might recall J.R.R. Tolkien's (1937) company of Dwarves heading to the Lonely Mountain, led by the indomitable Thorin Oakenshield. Or perhaps, you see Peter Jackson's (re)imagining of Tolkien's *The*

Lord of the Rings (2001-3), recalling Gimli, son of Glóin. Staring back at you might be a Dwarf from the *Warhammer* universe (Games Workshop 1983-), and so the face of High King Thorgrim Grudgebearer of Karaz-a-Karak appears. Or, quite possibly, a Dwarf from *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004-) is before you, and as such, you behold a denizen of Ironforge. This figure recalls various remains of fantasy's mediatic past. Riding the regenerative currents of media, the figure bears the traces of oral tradition, literature, film, theatre, photography, and games, both analogue and digital.

Rendered in pixels and now present on paper, mobile phone, laptop, or monitor, the figure might seem animate despite his stillness. His bright blue eyes gaze outwards, his eyebrows raised in a slight gesture of surprise or possibly intrigue. His gaze extends outwards towards something he can see but remains unknown to us. He might be compared to Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920) or, more specifically, to Walter Benjamin's (1968) famed writing on the angel. Benjamin writes that the angel is fixedly contemplating, eyes staring, '[h]is face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet (1968: 257). Rebecca Schneider (2019), whose work draws on Benjamin's directly, holds that media is constantly (re)iterative, so while the preceding faces of the Dwarf are not present, like the piling wreckage, they are interpellated in each regeneration. The Dwarven avatar is a glimpse of the past that recurs; he is a fragment that evokes fantasy media, generations of technology, and the impressions of people touched by that media.

This chapter considers how role-players and avatars remain intertwined with their composites and, critically, the constellations of those composites' meanings. To reiterate the teachings of Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, networks of power/desire/interest are multiple and heterogeneous, and the avatar is subsumed in such networks. The avatar betrays no fixed meaning; instead, it connects to a multiplicity of other genres, technologies, performances, times, and media. A means to picture this, and the guide for this chapter, is found in Deleuze and Guattari's ([1980] 2013) philosophical conception, the rhizome. The rhizome eschews arboreal images of knowledge with roots and branches, favouring a more amorphous and patchworked map. In shifting away from roots and branches, the rhizome offers no hierarchical impositions where certain things might come 'first' and that things might seem disparate and distant as their branches have diverged.

Four features define the rhizome: the first and second features are connectability and heterogeneity; any rhizomatic element has the latent ability to intersect with other multiple and random elements. As Deleuze and Guattari write, 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order' (2013: 7). The third feature is multiplicity; rhizomatic elements are connectable but pertain to no structure. Deleuze and Guattari state a multiplicity 'ceases to have any relation to One as subject or object, natural or spiritual reality, image and world. […] A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature' (2013: 7). In Eugene Holland's words, the last

feature is ‘unforeseen directionality’, which arises ‘because [rhizomes] are heterogeneous multiplicities, philosophical rhizomes develop like a crazy patchwork quilt in unforeseen directions’ (2013: 39). Principally, rhizomatic thinking ‘enables us to think with the world, rather than thinking about the world – in both senses of the term “with”: we think with the world in the sense of using the world as a tool to think with, and in the sense of thinking along with the world the way it itself thinks’ (Holland 2013: 37). Reading with, and through, the world as matter and meaning produces meaning as much as it provides elucidation. In this way, the rhizome can be understood as diffractive, coming into being ‘when a multitude of waves encounter an obstacle upon their path, and/or when these waves themselves overlap’ (Geerts and van der Tuin 2016: para. 1). The avatar becomes non-objective and is best understood as a composite of a wider dynamism, the exploration of which entails tracing all the diffractions of digital role-play to which it is tethered.

Diffractions, in physics, produce varied perspectives depending upon the specific conditions of an experiment, and this concept is then figuratively carried over to feminist thinking (Haraway 1997; Barad 2007; Geerts and van der Tuin 2016; Merten 2021). Karen Barad writes, ‘we can understand diffraction patterns – as patterns of difference that make a difference – to be the fundamental constituents that make up the world’ (2007: 72). The specific experimental conditions for observing this role-play rhizome are its fundamental dissonances and their intimate convergences. Dissonance here means two (or more) heterogeneous forces that are integral composites in ontology and found irrevocably connected by rhizomatic thinking. For instance, Jeffrey

J. Cohen writes that flesh 'mingles dry earth with binding water: an unsettled union of wet and dry, cold and warm, fire and tears' (2015: 1). Dissonances permeate ontology and many more than wet and dry, cold and warm, fire and tears, can be found under the right conditions. Where composites might seem disparate and heterogeneous, a lens of dissonance discloses them as rhizomatic and interconnected. Three particular dissonances and their convergences comprise this lens: the dissonances between biology and technology, liveness and deadness, and past and present. As the waves of art, theatre, performance, literary moments, video games, forum posts, *YouTube* videos, temporalities, technological devices, and scholarly works overlap in the role-play, the dissonances that pervade each becomes a means to observe this role-play rhizome.

These three dissonances, and their convergences, manifest in the Dwarven avatar: (1) biology and technology in the form of player and game; (2) liveness and deadness in the animacy expressed by a supposed inanimate entity; and (3) past and present in the anachronistic regeneration of the past being dragged into the present. When biology and technology converge, they become akin to Donna J. Haraway's cyborg; 'a condensed image of both imagination and material reality' (2016: 7). Prior studies have constructed video game players as Haraway's cyborg (Owen 2014; Keogh 2018), although to be more specific on the conditions of this experiment, this dissonance concerns messy biology and clean technology. On the professed fantasies of machines, Haraway explains, '[o]ur best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because they are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a

spectrum' (2016: 13). By contrast, biology is messy and carnal, always gesturing, sensing, and decaying: yet technology and biology, converging in the role-play rhizome, capture instances of technology being messy. Specifically, 'messy' technology in this context means technologies that are queer and transgressive and that, like body parts, can gesture and gesticulate, regenerate and decay. In the role-play rhizome, messy technology undoes hierarchical impositions that restrict play and enables the thinking that avatars and gameworlds perform alongside the player and not solely because of the player.

The next dissonance captured in the role-play rhizome is between 'deadness' and 'liveness', where deadness is expressed by its resembling qualities of inanimacy, decay, stillness, and insentience. In contrast, liveness is expressed by animacy, agency, movement, and sentience as well as the performance notion of a 'live' event, that is, 'an unrepeatable stretch of events and experiences here and now, at a particular juncture of time, space, and people' (Hoover *et al*. 2019: 222). At the beginning of her essay 'Slough Media' (2019), Schneider details the liveness and deadness of a Roman token made of bone that depicts an actor in a theatrical mask. She holds that the masked actor produces affects despite its stillness, appearing both distracted and alarmed, its face gesturing to the left, calling attention to a tragedy out of our view. Translating the masked actor's gesture and expression, Schneider writes, '*Oh, no!* the tiny actor's mask seems to call out. *Something's coming!* Or perhaps something is going' (2019: 51). This speaking for the masked actor recalls, again, Benjamin's writing on *Angelus Novus*, another instance of writing in admiration that seeks to lend a voice

to the inhuman to engender liveliness and relations. Similarly, Mel Y. Chen (2012), a critical thinker on the queer and racial hierarchies of animacy, remaps discrete notions of animate and inanimate from these sites, offering that all things betray both currents. Chen's and Schneider's arguments work together to suggest how animacy and inanimacy recur in matters deemed dead and alive. From these positions, the avatar and player likewise form through the dissonant currents of deadness and liveness.

The final dissonance forming this lens is the anachronistic entanglement of past and present. Rendered by technology in the players' mutual 'now', the Dwarven avatar registers anachronism as fantasy's media past is dragged to its future in play and performance. Schneider holds that in the 'iterative play-replay nature of media' when devices pass, hand to hand, the 'experience is brokered *as if* anew' (2019: 51). The avatar comprises glimpses of the past that recur, caught in the reuptake of new generations of technomedia, gaining and losing matter and meaning as they move through time. Though each distinct dissonance might seem dualistic, they are always in contact, defined by constant friction as they tumble into one another. From here, exploring how and why these dissonances are held together in this role-play rhizome becomes pertinent. In this chapter, queer love and intimacy become the conceptual glue that holds these heterogeneities together. Before assembling the role-play rhizome with this lens of dissonance, the following section explains how the rhizome becomes itself, held together by queer love, intimacy, and desire. Shaka McGlotten writes that intimacy is 'characterized by gestures and interruptions, by a queer futurity

or a “not-yet-here,” in which nothing is necessarily being produced, only supported and endured’ (2013: 60). Likewise, intimacy is the force that supports and endures digital role-play, integral to every facet of role-play as much as it is to this lens of analysis. This chapter then splits into three nodes defined by the distinct conditions of each dissonance and how they interact within the digital role-play rhizome.

2. The Glue: Queer Love and Intimacy

Role-play is an inherently intimate activity. Between the dance of agencies, entities, and forces within and besides the video game, players must open themselves up to other performances as they come together to create and play. Players might question whether their ideas and performance are congruent within a fantastical world. Like many intimate moments, role-play in this context entails much umming and ahhing and shared apprehensions, yet pleasure and excitement remain when the material and immaterial circulate. To repeat, McGlotten writes that intimacy describes ‘a *feeling* of connection or a *sense* of belonging; embodied and carnal sensuality, that is, *sex*’ (2013: 1). Intimacy is born of emotion, an affectively charged desire for proximity. In *Between Men*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick names desire an intimate force; she calls it a ‘glue’ that ‘even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, shapes an important relation’ (1985: 2). On the backs of Sedgwick’s and McGlotten’s notions of queer love and intimacy, this section explores the intimacies that pervade video games and role-play.

In a later work, *A Dialogue on Love* (2000), Sedgwick discusses queer love, describing it as an experimental dare essential for intimacy. She holds, 'if you lose the thread of this intimacy, both your soul and your whole world might subsist forever in some desert-like state of ontological impoverishment' (2000: 168). On all this queer 'stuff', she writes:

> it's like a big dare,
>
> also like a big
>
> allegory about love.
>
> Experimental
>
> And at least to me,
>
> metamorphic (which is how
>
> I recognize love). (Sedgwick, 2000:155)

For Sedgwick, change and experimentation are necessary for efforts of queer love and intimacy so as to avoid ontological impoverishment. Throughout Sedgwick's work, her thinking moves from an ascetic position defined by Lynne Huffer as a 'Foucauldian hermeneutics of suspicion' (2018: 94) toward matters of affect. A hermeneutics of suspicion is characterised by sceptical interpretations of texts that work to expose their hidden meanings, an inherently paranoid position that texts are deceptive but, upon reading between the lines, reveal intents, ideologies, and implications. Though, in only highlighting what lies in the shadows of the text, what remains, remains open for interpretation, notably matter and affects. In eschewing the ascetics of Foucault, which Sedgwick defines as stiff and paranoid, she fosters 'frankly ameliorative' (2003: 144) motives defined by connections and affects rather than deconstruction and

critique. Digital role-play is often on the receiving end of suspicious and ascetic readings by being continually levelled against tabletop role-play, where scholars find it intrinsically restricted by the supposed immutable systems of video games (Pittman and Paul 2009; MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2011; Schrier, Torner, and Hammer 2019). In eschewing these conceptions of video games as limiting, this chapter reframes them through a Sedgwickian-inspired rereading of digital role-play where it is affectionately assembled beside other modes of role-play rather than valued against them.

Sedgwick's shift from ascetics to affect prompted reparative re-readings of phenomena where paranoia was pervasive in academia. Her most famed reparative reading is that of the queer subcultural mode of camp. As a precursor to Sedgwick's reading of camp, Judith Butler (1990) defined it as a parody, a mocking exposure of dominant cultures that only the paranoid gaze of queerness can demystify.[7] Whereas Sedgwick's reparative reading of camp defines it as:

> the startling, juicy displays of excess erudition, for example; the passionate, often hilarious antiquarianism, the prodigal production of alternative historiographies; the 'over'-attachment to fragmentary, marginal, waste or leftover products; the rich, highly interruptive affective variety; the

[7] Outside of Sedgwick's readings of camp, the concept is commonly used to denote, perhaps insult, the archetypical effeminate gay man; however, this is, of course, derivative. Camp was coined by Drag Queens and other queer nightlife fixtures. It is an alternative system of beauty, where taste is merited upon extravagance, effort, and ambition rather than more normative conditions of beauty. Camp is quite a nebulous term, with scholars positing that it is evanescent or even impossible to define (Horn 2017). With the emergence of queer theory, camp is also recognised to be a subversive strategy; As Fabio Cleto argues, camp revels in '"perverting" all "originary" intention, deviating it toward unpredicted – often undesired – ends: in short, demystifying the "myth" of authentic origins' (1999: 11).

> irrepressible fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation; the disorienting juxtapositions of present with past, and popular with high culture. (2003: 150)

Similarly, a reparative reading of digital role-play entails considering its abundant and intricate web of elements made evident in the events, content creation, guides, performances, and communities of role-play. This reparative reading attunes to these elements rather than prescribing digital role-play as it critiques or deconstructs its surrounding modalities. Through rhizomatic thinking, other arts, performances, and fantasies shaped by queer love and intimacy provide this path to likewise realise digital role-play as a startling and juicy display of excess erudition.

Bonnie Ruberg has already begun this conversation between Sedgwick, video games, and intimacy, arguing that intimacy proves to be a conceptual bridge between video games and queer theory. They read *Pong*, a table tennis-inspired arcade game, as exemplary of the intimate erotics between players, where erotics describes oscillations between control and relinquishment, giving and receiving, as the ball bounces between paddles. As *Pong* is an arcade game, players must position themselves side-by-side, perhaps touching, in an intimate triangulation of player, game, and player (Ruberg 2019). Ruberg thinks of *Pong* as a 'facilitator' of intimacy, brokering the intimacy between its two players. However, in this effort to situate video games themselves as active collaborators in play, I might understand playing *Pong* as a threesome rather than a twosome. In this reading, they cite media philosopher Laura U. Marks, who approaches media as 'tangible and beloved bodies' (2002: xi). In her study of multisensory media, Marks writes, 'I try to move along the surface of the

object, rather than attempting to penetrate or “interpret” it, as criticism is usually supposed to do’ (2002: xiii). She holds that this form of critique is mimetic; it presses up and against objects to take its shape; namely, she gets ‘close enough to the thing to become it’ (*ibid.*). Analogies between Sedgwick’s queer love and Marks’ media intimacies become apparent as both shift meaning-making away from critique towards explorations of metamorphosis and becoming through proximity. In exploring a process of pressing up, and against, digital role-play and getting close enough to become it, this chapter first moves along the surfaces of queer art performances where, like digital role-play, technology renders and brokers intimacies.

Figure 1.2 Cassils (2012-). *Becoming an Image*. Exhibition ‘Cassils: Human Measure’ (2021). HOME, Manchester. Photo taken by the author.

Art often plays with the intimacies and liminalities between the human and the nonhuman; critically, these are contiguities that technology can capture. Cassils' (2012-) *Becoming an Image* [*fig 1.2*] and Emilio Rojas' (2019) *Instructions for Becoming* [*fig 1.3*] both depict highly affective processes of becoming in their work and their subsequent series of photographs invite the viewer to follow in their own queer becomings. In *Becoming an Image*, Cassils is in a pitch-black room alongside a 2000-pound block of clay which they attack and mould with their body. The clay's form shifts with each punch, kick, and grapple from Cassils. Also in this darkened room are spectators, who can only see the performance via the momentary flashes of cameras. Through these brief illuminations, the spectators in the room, and later, viewers of the photographs, can witness the entanglement of clay and body. Amelia Jones, a spectator at Cassils' performance, writes, 'we can sense the fatigue that is setting in for the "boxer" as time goes by—the strenuous breathing, the splashes of sweat that land on those of us in the front row, the laboring body in brief flash images, which we apprehend only a split second later as afterimages burned into our retinas' (2015: 19). With each attack, their body shapes the clay, and in return, residues of clay cling to Cassils' body. At the same time, the audience becomes connected by sweat splashing on them, the sound of exhales and grunts hitting their eardrums, the smell of sweat on clay entering their noses, and snapshots of the performance. Over time, Cassils, clay, the audience, and the cameras become entangled by an intimate exchange of matter and affect.

Another work that captures human-nonhuman intimacies, *Instructions for Becoming* (2019), is a series of photographs that feature Rojas embracing trees known as Indio

Figure 1.3 Emilio Rojas (2019). *Instructions for Becoming (Indio Desnudo)*. Amatlan Mexico. From the series Instructions for Becoming. Copyright Emilio Rojas.

Desnudo. He lies upon the trees for seven to eight hours, allowing his body to sink into the tree, becoming an extension of its figure. In an interview regarding this work, Rojas states:

> I do not longer know who's holding who, trunk to trunk, limb to limb, bark to skin. Is it you whose embrace I longed for, for so long? […] Pressing my depression into your skin, my fingers to your sins, my rings to your rings, my lips to your openings, where it all again begins. (2020: 10:26-11:10)

In embarking on a process of becoming, Rojas' performance is intimate as he becomes entangled with the tree in moments then captured by a camera. Concentrating explicitly on the processes of becoming in Rojas' performance and subsequent photographs, its title, twinned with the extended length of time he lays with the trees, implies an arduous process, a dedicated effort to becoming entangled. More,

entangled besides the tree, listening, feeling, sensing, and thinking with each other, is there a specific point of becoming, or does becoming ebb and flow throughout the hours? *Becoming an Image* and *Instructions for Becoming* entail a metamorphosis, an intimate and experimental convergence of entities that requires a laborious and lengthy process. Rojas (2020) states that his instructions are a call to others to extend themselves in such queer embodiments.

Parallels emerge between these two artworks and becoming in digital role-play where becoming-with, be it a lump of clay, a tree, or a gameworld, entails a laborious and intimate process. Jason Pittman and Christopher Paul remark that digital role-players in *World of Warcraft* display a 'devotion' in their dedication to a character (2009: 59). When making a character, players often look to guides as instructions for becoming. Role-players have created hundreds of such guides to teach aspiring players about the various ecologies, cultures, religions, relations, histories, mythologies, aesthetics, and politics of Azeroth. One of the more renowned guides is Melyria of Moon Guard's ([2008] 2018) guide to Night Elf role-play.[8] This guide offers instructions by being a compendium of information that a role-play can employ to realise a fleshed-out character. It lists traditional food and drinks, clothes, gender roles, their evolution to government, and organised religion. Melyria *et al*. establish a spectrum between traditional or liberal-leaning Night Elves and propose how to role-play along the said spectrum. They state, '[t]raditional Night Elves are those who cling to the old ways' while liberal Night Elves 'are those who have broken away from tradition' (Melyria *et*

[8] The guide was originally written by Melyria of Moon Guard and has since been revised by Fayawen, Celegil, Aldrannath, and Kestrel of Steamwheedle Cartel.

al. 2018: n.p.). For example, a more traditional Night Elf will adhere to stricter Night Elf customs. They might predominately eat traditional Night Elf foods such as mandu and moonberries. They might abide by antiquated gender roles, where, for instance, only female Night Elves can serve in the Sisters of Elune, the Night Elves' ruling religious sect. Or, being sceptical of the high technology the Goblins and Gnomes brought, the Night Elf might choose to fight using a bow over a gun. A Night Elf role-player may then determine which archetypes to adhere to or eschew and play with these expectations for their character.

It is worth noting the dissimilarities between role-play guides and guides for video games in which mastery and prowess are the driving force. For example, *Dark Souls 2* (FromSoftware 2014) is an action role-playing game that has gained notoriety in gaming communities for its difficulty to play and master. The website *Fextralife* produces guides and walkthroughs for *Dark Souls 2*. Their new player's guide includes FAQs, tips, a dictionary of common acronyms, and links to helpful web pages, such as character creators and damage calculators. The FAQs typically consider character optimisation, such as the best class to start the game and what armour and weapons to use in different scenarios. In one of the walkthrough guides, the website states:

> If you are the type of player that falls in every single hole in the game, therefore diying [*sic*] a lot, it is highly recommended you do this:
>
> - Finish Things Betwixt tutorial.
> - Loot Majula.
> - Go to Heide's Tower of Flame and get a couple of phantoms.

- At the platform with three giants, go right and face Dragonrider Boss.
- Access No Man's Wharf.
- Get a couple of phantoms.
- Go to the top of the main stairs, turn left to the lighted room, break the bookshelf and get the ring of life protection.
- Equip it at all times to avoid losing souls or humanity whenever you die. If you die, go back to Majula (you'll need to have freed the blacksmith by getting the key from the merchant at Cardinal's tower in Forest of Fallen Giants) and repair it. You'll get a larger supply of these rings as you advance to the game. Provided you're using them, they work as arcade lives. (Fextralife 2020)

Mia Consalvo (2007) argues that game guides provide players with the means to drastically increase their acquirement of what she calls 'gaming capital'. For Consalvo, gaming capital describes the specific clout that game players accrue in relation to other players. She characterises game guides and magazines as paratext and does not advocate for their existence but recognises how they instruct 'player in how to play, what to play, and what is cool (and not) in the game world' (2007: 22). Fextralife's step-by-step process presents instructions for completion and success rather than for becoming. A heteronormative logic pervades this gaming practice where players gain capital through success and mastery. It is an inversion of Marks' mimetic media critique – it is a practice of mastering and not touching.

Where Cassils' and Rojas' photographs instruct on a process of entanglement and invite the observer in their own becomings nonhuman matters, role-play guides similarly offer instructions for the player to attune to a fantasy gameworld. For example, by knowing that Night Elves traditionally eat mandu, a role-player might uphold this tradition by keeping mandu in their backpack or making mandu to sell, or they might break from tradition and consume more Dwarven food and drink, such as roast meats and mead. Melyria *et al*. specify that no two Night Elves are the same; further, their lore is vague, and they are a fantasy race far from Humans indicating that 'everything about them, from social interaction to biology, can be different' (2018: n.p.). Whether the player leans more traditional or liberal, either option cultivates a relationship between the role-player and the fantasy world as the world is touched and the player becomes a part of it. This Night Elf role-playing guide is a piece of paratext akin to Fextralife's game guide and perhaps even provides gaming capital, where knowing more specific lore might produce a 'better' role-player. However, where Fextralife's game guide facilitates mastery and solutions, role-play guides invite the player to press into the gameworld, play with difference, and become tangled through attunement.

Intimacy, love, and touch are precedented notions in queer conceptual thinking that embrace affect, desire, and community over heteronormative logics of mastery and accumulation. In a special issue on intimacy in the journal *Critical Inquiry*, Lauren Berlant writes, '[i]ntimacy names the enigma of this range of attachments, and more;

and it poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective' (1998: 283). Likewise, for McGlotten (2013), intimacy is a 'vast assemblage' that exerts pressure on bodies, lives, and worlds. Intimacy links the trajectories of all collaborators in the assemblage of digital role-play to the individual role-player. Role-players exist in a multifaceted network of intimacies that desire to create a collective scene, a feeling, a sensation. To mirror McGlotten's thinking about virtual intimacies, digital role-play is 'supported' and 'endured' by the intimacies of its dissonant collaborators.

3. Dissonance One: Messy Technology

The first node in this rhizome explores the intersections of biology and technology in digital role-play to find instances of technology being messy. Building upon the formative works of Jane Bennett (2009), Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2016), and Donna J. Haraway (2016), this section holds that technology is imaginative and possesses the capacity for queer bodily gestures. It is readily assumed that biology and technology exist in separate spheres of matter and meaning. Technology is reflexively treated as the outcome and pinnacle of human ingenuity, while biological affairs, such as nature, are both beyond human control and subject to it (Chang 2019). Technology is hard and clean compared to its habitually binarised biology, which is soft and messy. However, technologies readily upset these assumptions, and this first node investigates the gestures of technology which are carnal, imaginative, queer, and transgressive. In priming such thinking, this node follows two digital works, Stine Deja's (2019) collection of videos *Hard Core, Soft Bodies* [*fig 1.4*] and Robert Yang's (2017) video

game *The Tearoom* [*fig 1.5*]. Although neither work are examples of digital role-play, both rely upon technology as a messy site of blurred boundaries, intimate ontologies, and interconnected bodily gestures, all of which are characteristics of digital role-play.

Haraway's cyborg is an integral conception for thinking of a being composed of material reality and imagination. For Haraway, the dream of technology imagines it as clean and pure, sterility that extends to her cyborgs, which she describes as 'ether' and 'quintessence' (2016: 13). She continues: 'The new machines are so clean and light. Their engineers are sun-worshippers mediating a new scientific revolution associated with the night dream of postindustrial society' (2016: 14). Haraway's manifesto makes the fantasy of clean technology evident, a position that echoes in Deja's and Yang's work, where technology is soft and sensual, and transgressions, intimacies, and perversions define its ontology. This conception of technology, when integrated with the dynamism of digital role-play, arouses a negotiation between materiality and imagination, where sex, gestics, plastic, virtuality, desires, pixels, and wires grind together. Both works consolidate the means to disrupt the supposed barrier technology imposes upon role-play, extending the thinking change required to recognise more messy and creative negotiations.

Deja's (2019) *Hard Core, Soft Bodies* [*fig 1.4*] is a series of videos, a collection of artworks that work to (re)imagine the human form. They feature chimaera-like beings instantly recognisable as humanoid, yet they are rendered entirely by 3D prosthetics. Set against grey backdrops, the beings in the videos gesticulate, making slight and

Figure 1.4 Stine Deja (2018). *Hard Core, Soft Bodies*. Photograph by Stine Deja. https://stinedeja.com/HARD-CORE-SOFT-BODIES [accessed 20/07/2022].

supple movements that are fleshy yet rigid. They are flesh and bone with metal and plastic at once, muddying the boundaries between hard and soft as the skeletal core of a body bends and twists. Simultaneously, a nose on another screen shines brightly, fooling the eye into believing that it might feel like plastic if you were to touch it. Like the Dwarven avatar composed of textures, shaders, polygons, and pixels representing and recalling skin, flesh, hair, chainmail, and fabric, visuals might enliven the sensations of touching and feeling without cutaneous contact. Deja's videos also draw attention to the driving questions of her exhibition: What does it mean to be human in the age of artificial intelligence and technological takeover? An answer to this question is: clean. Deja's creations are devoid of biological mess. The videos feature a digestive tract with no faecal matter, a heart that pumps no blood, a spine with no twitching nerves, and a nose with no mucus. Akin to dreamed notions of technology, Deja's critters are made of sunshine, and the interfaces in the exhibition depict ether on their

displays. However, the creatures remain messy in their perversion of biology and technology, arousing friction at the boundaries between the two dissonant matters.

Notions of mess and messiness often emerge in queer scholarship, sometimes to signify something dirty and unclean, but more often, the perverting of boundaries, borders, and straight lines (Cvetkovich 2003; Kendall 2008; Kirby 2008; Halberstam 2011). Ann Cvetkovich (2003) evokes messiness numerous times in her monograph *An Archive of Feelings*, specifically when reflecting upon the convoluted and contradictory energies of sex and sexuality. On sexuality and trauma, she writes, '[a]llowing a place for trauma within sexuality is consistent with efforts to keep sexuality queer, to maintain a place for shame and perversion within public discourses of sexuality rather than purging them of their messiness in order to make them acceptable' (2003: 63). Cvetkovich highlights the considerable messiness of queer lives that are unappealing to heteronormative audiences. Despite being 'cleaned' into pristine forms, Deja's hybrid beings still apprehend the muddiness and complexity of a form that comprises biological representations and material artifice. For the viewers of Deja's works, biological matter exists as models, colours, textures, and graphics rendered in pixels upon a screen. Likewise, for the digital role-player, other players exist as representations, implied by the performances and actions of the digital avatar and gameworld. Like Deja's work, digital role-play folds biological and technological matter and sensation where the technological can pass as the biological, the biological pass as the technological. As role-players touch and become attuned to avatars, interfaces,

and the gameworld of *World of Warcraft*, each entity becomes reliant upon the other to operate, so distinct boundaries between biology and technology become messy.

Figure 1.5 Robert Yang (2017). *The Tearoom*. Screenshot taken by Robert Yang. https://radiatoryang.itch.io/the-tearoom. [accessed 20/07/2022].

A queer work that is messy in every sense is Yang's *The Tearoom* [*fig 1.5*], a public bathroom sex simulator. The game is a homage that accesses the hidden history of 'tearoom sex'. Tearoom sex (more commonly known as 'cottaging' in the United Kingdom) is sex that takes place in semi-public spaces, most notably public bathrooms. Yang describes *The Tearoom* as a 'historical public bathroom simulator about anxiety, police surveillance, and sucking off another dude's gun' (Yang, 2017). Yang has replaced the characters' genitalia with guns as the popular streaming website *Twitch* prohibits showing genitals, whereas guns are allowed. In the first scene, the game places the player in a dingy public bathroom. The player then steps towards a urinal; their feet make a sloshing noise with each step that brings attention to the water, perhaps urine, on the floor. Continuing, the player must urinate in a urinal as another

man enters to do the same. A bar in the user-interface then pops up, and the player must make eye contact with this man; as the bar fills up, the man's pink gun will become erect. Once the bar fills, the man will come over, and the player and NPC will engage in oral sex. The police may enter the bathroom and arrest the player for public indecency at any point. Yang's game is a testimony to a lifeworld of queer sexuality and the queer lifeworld of games. It portrays the erotics of covert sexuality while irreverently parodying the non-functionality of toilets in video games.

Though Deja's and Yang's works vary in their degrees of dirtiness, messiness remains in the specific dynamism of art and technology that (re)imagines the human form and its lifeworld of desire and politics. The frictions between technology, art, human, and nonhuman in both works betray the meaning-making potential of dissonance as it generates narratives and affects. To borrow a phrase from Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, because of the entanglements of biology and technology expressed in Deja's and Yang's artworks, 'they knit into monstrously connected chimera' (2016: 40). Heather Swanson, Anna Tsing, Nils Bubandt, and Elaine Gan remark that thinking with monsters helps us to recognise landscapes of entanglement between multiple bodies and temporalities. They write: 'Monsters are bodies tumbled into bodies; the art of telling monstrosity requires stories tumbled into stories' (2017: M10). The entities in *The Tearoom* and *Hard Core, Soft Bodies*, are both monstrous bodies in their tumbling of biological and technological matter. An erect and fleshy gun-penis iterates cyborg narratives but emerges as something new besides tearoom sex while telling new stories about erogenous technology, video game erotics, and how streamable bodies

are more regulated than guns. Through art and technology, the human body can be reanimated, distorted, and manipulated in a way that messes with its form. These works help us notice a different perspective in the landscape of entanglement between technology and biology, where the capacities of technology produce effects. In the same way, thinking through digital role-play recognises how biology and technology tumble into each other; both are intimately entangled and entirely reliant upon the other during play. For example, players input the gestures through the computer, but the avatar performs the gesture, carrying its meaning while the player remains relatively still.

With this convergence of biology and technology, technology lends to role-play the potential to play with the boundaries of the human form and its potential capacities to act and perform. It is not an artificial extension or prosthesis; instead, technology 'incorporates and transforms parts of the natural world that intervene as a condition of its functioning' (Parisi 2017: 158). Digital gestures and movement carry the weight of interpellation to sustain role-play to those who respond. Sitting and waving, like walking, pervade digital role-play but are less frequently enacted by other players who do often not need their avatar to carry meaning through performance. Gestures are reiterative, defined by a continual and shifting call and response, and therefore always reemergent (Schneider 2011). In a later work, Schneider states that gesture is carried 'perhaps by air, perhaps by stone, perhaps by film, light, pixels, passed through algorithms, or perhaps by body-to-body transmission' (2018: 287). In digital role-play, gestures are inputted, pixelated, and mediated, but they still carry and extend meaning through software and hardware to be responded to by those who are both

near and far away. This suggests that the gestures of digital role-play are performed by a dynamism of biology and technology – in both composition and intent. Although the player inputs the gesture, the intent of the gesture is entangled with the histories and potentialities of the avatar as much as the player. As gesture ricochets from body to body, it looks backwards, citing past traces, and it looks forward expectantly to those who know how to respond. The Dwarven avatar, for example, carries forward fantasy's mediatic past and regenerates it with each 'new' gesture that other players and avatars meet. Gestures, stories, mechanics, bodies, hardware, and software are co-constituents in play, an assemblage of agencies working together to shape digital role-play.

This position undoes hierarchical impositions that privilege the player over the game, but similar arguments in the study of technology privilege the programmer, the designer of games, over the machine. For example, Joseph Weizenbaum (1976), a pioneer of artificial intelligence, argues that the computer has provided the programmer with the tools to create and regulate systems and ideas limited only by the territory of human imagination. He writes:

> One may create worlds in which there is no gravity […] or which time dances forward and backward in obedience to a choreography as simple or complex as one wills. One can create societies in whose economies prices rise as goods become plentiful and fall as they become scarce, and in which homosexual unions alone produce offspring. (1976: 113)

Weizenbaum marvels at the power of the programmer he has prescribed, writing '[n]o playwright, no stage director, no emperor, however powerful, has ever exercised such absolute authority to arrange a stage or a field of battle and to command such unswervingly dutiful actors or troops' (1976: 115). His writing privileges the programmer, claiming the immanent capacities of technology to shape the virtual for himself. Chun refutes Weizenbaum's claim, repositioning machinic executions away from the user. She writes, '[i]n networks, the real power would seem to be technology, rather than the users or programmers who authorize actions through their commands and clicks. Programmers and users are not creators of languages, nor the actual executors, but rather living sources that take credit for the action' (2016: 84). If then technologies are repositioned as vital co-constituents of digital role-play, the player can only play, act, perform, and communicate because of the capacities of the machines, the networks, and the programming. Just as the programmers rely upon the capacities of technologies to create gameworlds, role-players must do the same to play, perform, and connect.

By getting close to technology and touching it rather than imposing mastery upon it, potentialities emerge of a technology that can gesture and communicate. A pertinent example of such efficacies is evident in Janet H. Murray's writing on computers: 'The computer itself, even without any fantasy content, is an enchanted object' ([1997] 2016: 99). She continues that the computer can sometimes 'act like an autonomous animate being, sensing its environment and carrying out internally generated processes, yet it can also seem like an extension of our own consciousness, capturing

our words through the keyboard and displaying them on the screen as fast as we can think them' (2016: 99). In their description of being enchanted by the computer, Murray remarks that the computer is not merely an object of use, to be mastered, but vibrant, working in tandem with her. This notion of vibrant matter is a concept and mode of thinking conceived by Jane Bennett (2009) that contests the destructive uses of matter for only consumption and exploitation. Rather, matter's enchanting vibrancy and efficacy are recognised as it produces helpful or harmful effects on bodies (Bennett 2009: xii). Thinking in this way about matter and objects acknowledges the shared distribution of agencies that comprise them and begins to conceive of them as assemblages of diverse actants. Bennett offers the electrical grid as an example, writing it is 'better understood as a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood-to name just some of the actants' (2009: 25). Thinking vibrantly with Yang's *The Tearoom*, for example, acknowledges the situated cultural affordances of queer histories of public bathroom sex, the cyborgian elements of the gun-penises, and *Twitch*'s biased position in its censoring of genitalia but not firearms. At the same time, vibrant thinking acknowledges the game's technological elements, code, graphics, textures, sounds, interfaces, controllers, game engines, media networks, mechanics, the designer and their labour. The same thinking about digital role-play acknowledges (to name just a few) the agencies of the wires, plastic interfaces, residues of skin, sweat, and spit on those interfaces, networks, mods and addons, websites, fantasy's media histories, other video games, gestures, the *Argent Archives*, other players, wi-fi, and role-play guides.

This tumbling of technology, biology, meaning, and stories, is best understood as a system of intra-action rather than interaction. Barad explains that *inter*action presumes an independence of entities and relata. In contrast, *intra*-action, akin to the rhizome, acknowledges the fundamental entanglement of entities and relata, where only particular 'cuts' of this entanglement are determinable to produce meaning (Barad 2003: 815). Technology and biology are both entangled matters, entangled with meaning and each other, and the specific apparatus of digital role-play provides one 'cut' of this entanglement used to provide meaning. As Barad writes: 'matter does not refer to a fixed substance; rather, *matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency. Matter is a stabilizing and destabilizing process of iterative intra-activity*' (2003: 822). As bodies tumble upon bodies, matter stabilises and destabilises, and with each substance that becomes enfolded, new frictions generate stories and reflections. Understanding technology as an integral part of the landscape of entanglement in digital role-play enables its efficacy, stories, and reflections to be properly situated. In doing so, this section undoes the position that technology restricts human imagination and realises technologies' capacity to be messy, transgressive, and gestic in its entanglement in digital role-play.

4. Dissonance Two: Liveness and Deadness

Where the previous section worked to recognise the efficacies of technology and its intra-actions with biology, this section examines the dissonances between the liveness and deadness of matter in digital role-play. Namely, this section holds that matter is at

once live and dead and finds that in role-play, liveness and deadness constantly circulate, each bending to the weight of the other. Mel Y. Chen propagates this thinking, arguing that we should 'remap live and dead zones away from those very terms, leveraging animacy toward a consideration of affect' (2012: 11). Chen holds that language characterises matter as live or dead on a hierarchy of animacies, inherently linked to queer and racial systems of oppression. They ask us to rethink what counts as human, the supposed epitome of 'alive', offering instead that entities comprise an ongoing congealing of live and dead matter. Schneider elaborates upon Chen's writing, contending that 'liveness is as much a ruse as deadness, inanimacy as much a ruse as animacy' (2019: 71). She employs this thinking to reconsider how the boundaries between 'live' and 'nonlive' art have been policed, arguing that livenesses and deadnesses circulate in performances for the dead, traces, and ghosts can be performed live. The previous section worked to understand the liveness of technology; still, to further undo hierarchical impositions placed upon digital role-play, the deadnesses of the player and the game must be recognised as they circulate with the livenesses. Again, this approach destabilises the demarcated boundaries between player and game, gesturing towards another diffractive realm for theorisation. This section begins by reading the fantasy race, the Forsaken, from *World of Warcraft*, as they are undead beings made of living death.

In *World of Warcraft*, the Forsaken are a faction of sentient 'risen' corpses. The faction is mainly composed of undead Humans; however, any fantasy race can, upon death, become undead. The Lich King and his necromancers initially raised many of the dead

humans and then bound them to his will through the Helm of Domination. The Lich King's grasp faltered at an undetermined point, and a contingent of undead broke free of his will. This band of renegade undead rallied behind the undead High Elf, Sylvanas Windrunner, to form the Forsaken and this new faction established their home in the bowels of the ruined Human city, Lordaeron, renaming it 'The Undercity'. Christie Golden, a writer at Blizzard, states that the Forsaken become reanimated in 'all stages of life: fleshly slain, partially rotting, almost mummified' (2018: n.p.). On the culture of the Forsaken, Bob Fitch *et al*. write, 'Forsaken culture reflects its people; just as the Forsaken stand on the line between life and death, their culture balances between the beliefs each Forsaken held in life and each one's quest for place in the present' (2005: 87). Like vampires, zombies, ghosts, and ghouls of literature, film, and television, the Forsaken are (re)animated representations of elements of humanity. Fred Botting states that in reflecting elements of humanity, these 'monsters' 'increasingly destabilised the boundaries between psyche and reality, opening up an indeterminate zone in which the differences between fantasy and actuality were no longer secure' ([1995] 2014: 8). The Forsaken straddle the passing of fantasy, actuality, animacy, and inanimacy; as flesh degrades and sloughs, they remain irrevocably and fantastically alive. As mirrors of humans, the same dissonances that intimately circulate to comprise the Forsaken are traceable as they intimately circulate their human counterparts.

Although not all role-players role-play as the Forsaken, they provide an apt avatar for exploring the question: when dead flesh passes alive flesh, which one is looking out

through the other's eyes? The ghosts and memories of life haunt the dead Forsaken: when risen, the Forsaken might keep their name from when they were 'alive'; however, should they forget their name or wish to change it, some will take a name from a nearby headstone. Some Forsaken remember their time as humans and their time doing unspeakable acts as thralls of the Lich King. In an in-game book, *Belamoore's Research Journal*, the author recounts his experience with a Forsaken named Kegan. The author states that Kegan did not often speak of his clan of undead but was eager to talk about his time growing up in Lordaeron before it fell. The author continues, '[Kegan] still holds much love for that lost kingdom, even though it now ruined, and dead.' It is not only their bodies composed of live and dead matter passing each other, but their home, their names, and their memories. Their home is the, once again living, ruins of their former dead capital. If taken from headstones, their names were once dead and forgotten, now again spoken aloud. Ghosts of life play upon their mind, memories of the time they were a different sort of alive or a different sort of dying. The Forsaken do bleed as if they were a living Human; however, they bleed the ichor of death.

As the dissonances of liveness and deadness enact a circular relation in the Forsaken, they reflect the same indeterminate zones of animacy and inanimacy that Chen asks us to consider. In *Animacies*, Chen queers both notions of animate and inanimate, troubling their hierarchical positions with conceptions like 'inanimate life' (2012: 11). They offer the example of airborne pollution, writing: 'the constant interabsorption of animate and inanimate bodies in the case of airborne pollution must account for the

physical nonintegrity of individual bodies and the merging of forms of 'life' and 'nonlife' (*ibid*.). The Forsaken are essentially zombies, that paradoxical mix of 'reanimated dead' (Tenga and Bishop 2017) or inanimated life, who upset notions that live and dead are binary states. The passing of life and death are readily apparent in zombies, but Chen also offers their body in the wake of the effects of mercury as an example. This poisoning forced them to reconsider and revise their embodied experience of intimacy and the porousness of their body. Chen describes how mercury altered their ontology, forcing them to become *mercurial*. They write that the toxin 'has directly transformed an affective matrix: affect goes faster, affect goes hostile, goes toxic' (2012: 201). In hosting the mercury, Chen finds animacy and inanimacy sharing their body and not knowing who was living their life. They declare this a queer intimacy, writing, '[t]here is a potency and intensity to two animate or inanimate bodies passing one another, bodies that have an exchange—a potentially queer exchange—that effectively risks the implantation of injury' (2012: 206). For Chen, queer, or queering, means veering away from dominant ideologies; it holds the potential to violate hierarchies and interpret animacy otherwise. It becomes pertinent to ask how digital role-play can become mercurial and how the plastics, code, metals, and waves transform the affective matrix of play. Namely, what potencies and intensities become aroused and exchanged when it is puzzling to parse who is role-playing, the player or the game.

From this matrix made by the amalgam of liveliness and deathliness, Schneider claims that liveness, deadness, inanimacy, and animacy are ruses. Schneider's position results

from the messy boundaries between 'live' art and nonlive work. Building upon Barad's (2003) notion of 'intra-action', Schneider coins the term 'intrainanimacy' to disorient the habitual relations between the binarised live and dead, animate and inanimate. She remarks, '[i]ntrainanimacy might better touch the slip and slide of our amongnesses, besidenesses, withnesses, and againnesses and resist delimiting us, as the prefix inter- might be said to do, to an essentialized "betweenness"' (2019: 72). In adopting intra- over inter-, Schneider seeks to recognise the reverberance of live and nonlive art and argues that 'live performance is itself often composed of the dead, or, better said, a medium for letting the dead play back across the bodies of the living' (2019: 71). She offers *Hamlet* as an example because ghosts frequently revisit the mortal world, and the dead speak, thus 'rendering the live and the record in inverse relationship to the simplistic claim that theater is live in distinction to a recording' (*ibid*.). Like theatre, there are intrainanimacies in digital role-play where the passing of animacy and inanimacy rub against each other, arousing a more mercurial life. An example of this transpires in a thread in the World's End Tavern, where Zaltaan asks the provocative question: 'What does your character do when you're not playing?'[9] Most of the replies are earnest, *as if* their character continues with their life without the usual presupposed player.

The thread of replies to Zaltaan's question features an array of players detailing their character's exploits without them. Characters have family and friends, hobbies, jobs,

[9] World's End Tavern: Role-play and Fan Fiction forum post (2019). *What does your character do when you're not playing?*. 19th August. World's End Tavern: Role-play and Fan Fiction. Available Online: https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/what-does-your-character-do-when-youre-not-playing/240354 [accessed 26/09/2022].

chores, histories, political positions, conceptions of self, sexual engagements, and dark secrets. One player replies:

> For the most part, Sarestha enjoys walks or rides in quiet solitude, when I'm not actively RPing her. Being a death knight though, there are occasions where she needs to sate her urge to cause suffering, and I generally try to keep the details of that off screen - it's pretty gruesome.

Another player replies by detailing their family life:

> At the Seamantle Estate, taking care of her children. She has two of them - Morgana and Eyndu. She also takes trips to Val'Sharah to meet and talk with family there.

While a Demon Hunter turned budding gourmand replies:

> After the fall of the Legion, and never having tasted anything more than light wine and cider in her centuries as a Night Elf, Zirahael has seized the oppertunity [*sic*] and is currently going on a world spanning tavern crawl across Azeroth in order to test the supernatural capabilities and constitution of her demonically enhanced physiology against the best the brewers of the different continents can throw at her.

These responses disorient the distinction between who the agential force in role-play is, the player or the character. Whose desires, imaginations, relations, and interactions are imagined, inhabited, and enacted in this digital environment? Just as Chen and Schneider suggest that deadness and liveness inhabit all things, digital role-play must be understood as a continually spiralling co-becoming of both. The deadnesses and

livenesses of the player and the character constantly pass in the performance. The player will remain still as the avatar gestures, but then the avatar must wait while the player uses the restroom. 'Dead' plastics, metals, waves, and data make up the device's interfaces, networks, and systems, which are vital for the lifeworld of play, connecting players and executing actions. As Chun (2016) insists, the player is not sovereign; they only authorise the actions that the machine, video game, and avatar will ultimately enact. Players imagine, move, dress, and perform as and with the character while being constantly influenced by the character and their relations. Even when the player has logged off and the game is closed, the character continues their life in the player's imagination and the imaginations of other players and characters.

Where previous arguments regarding digital role-play uphold the habitual binarisation of biology and technology, with technology placed lower on the scale of animacy, the responses to Zaltaan's question present another perspective: that avatars disclose liveliness without players. Gameworlds and avatars are not inanimate receptacles for player agencies; instead, they betray their own lifeworlds of gestures, affects, and stories. However, by approaching digital role-play as a matter of intrainanimation, gameworlds and avatars must also be understood as the dead that the live plays across. As such, avatars can be inanimate receptacles for players' efficacies as much as players can be the same for avatars. Schneider writes, 'animate and inanimate *both* differentiate *and* cobecome each other through a cut or interval' (2019: 76). Although players, avatars, and the game are each specific cuts, cobecoming in digital role-play, each dissonant force remains realised because the relationship is iterative and intra-

active. Then, the cuts will shift as matter and meaning congeal over time, adding to the dynamism of digital role-play the specific capacities and efficacies of said matter and meaning. With each iteration, the effects of animacy and inanimacy are renewed within this cut of digital role-play; at one point, it will be more lively, at another point, more dead, but always a co-habitation of both.

5. Dissonance Three: Anachronism

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that matter, meaning, and performance in digital role-play stabilise and destabilise through (re)iteration. For anything to be iterative, it must move through space, time, and matter, changing slightly with each iteration. Just as matter and meaning congeal and slough with each recurrence, so too do times. There are usually anachronisms at play in performance, as multiple times are registered, at once, across the body. Specific temporalities might habitually sediment or be actively stimulated by those in performance. Elizabeth Freeman (2010) calls this co-presence of times 'temporal drag', specifically associating the word 'drag' with retrogression, delay, and friction of pulling the past to its future. She coins this type of drag an under-discussed corollary of drag queens, who drag gender expressions around to play with identity and performance. In the early 1990s, queer and gender studies scholars often looked to drag queens to expose and deconstruct essentialist gender norms. Here, Freeman again turns to drag to expose and deconstruct normative temporalities. Digital role-players, like the designers of *World of Warcraft*, constantly play with temporalities, dragging times around to register an anachronistic co-presence of multiple at once. This node of the role-play rhizome investigates the

anachronistic entanglement that digital role-play, and other modes of performance, play with, both in the dragging of times and more 'queenier' instances of temporal expression. Namely, in a return to (Sedgwick's notions of) camp, role-play's capacity to piece together and apart multiple times emerges as an example of passionate and juicy displays of excess erudition.

In her autoethnographic account of LARP, Lizzie Stark recounts an evocative example of an anachronism displayed by a fellow LARPer named James, or more specifically, James' hair. She writes:

> James keeps his hair immaculate, gelling the top bit to keep it out of his face or gathering it into a low ponytail. Despite the new-fangled hair product he uses, this hair is hair from some unspecified time and place in the past, hair that doesn't make precise sense unless James is wearing one of his many medieval costumes. (2012: 50)

James' hair is anachronistic; it is out of time until history returns, enabling it to, once again, make sense. The perceiver cannot register from which specific Medieval time James' hair belongs, only that it does not belong to today. Then, even in a Medieval costume and setting, time is dragged forward by James' use of hair gel. Stark cements this anachronism by describing the hair gel as 'new-fangled', an adjective that the *Oxford English Dictionary* states originated in Middle English, but has now taken on a humorous edge, an archaic term that someone from an undisclosed past might say, and employed here to betray a rearranged time. Although seemingly quotidian, a hairstyle evokes the co-presence of temporalities hundreds of years apart. Campness is

evident in James' passionate attention toward his hair which juxtaposes the past and the present. It is interruptive in the 'now', and this hair makes sense in the camp displays of antiquarianism and ventriloquistic experimentation that pervade Medieval LARP.

The capacity of time to be dragged omnidirectionally, enabling two dissonant temporalities to exist together, is a prevalent notion in queer theory (Halberstam 2005; Freeman 2010; Pelurson 2018; Rao 2020). These scholars understand time as a construct that is not determinable by the heteronormative drives to marry, have children, and buy property. Freeman (2010) develops the neologism 'chrononormativity' to explain how hegemonic heterosexist conditioning has shaped temporality, making the heterosexual clock seem normal and natural. She explains that chrononormativity signifies 'the interlocking temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent and for the mundane workings of domestic life' (2010: xxii). Queering time in digital games, or recognising the queer time prevalent in digital games, has become a flourishing site of investigation in game studies (Lo 2017; Knutson 2018; Pelurson 2018). Such undoings of the heteronormative entrenchment of times to comprehend them as fluid and changing reflect Barad's (2007) new materialist understanding of time, which is dynamic and shifting as matter and meaning. Barad states that temporality is 'constituted through the world's iterative intra-activity. Matter's dynamism is implicated in its production. Temporalities are produced through the iterative enfolding of phenomena marking the sedimenting historiality of differential patterns of mattering' (2007: 180). Barad offers the example

of the rings of a tree that mark a sedimented history of intra-action, while James' hair provides another example. Both illustrate how the intra-actions of time and matter hold the potential to drag the past to its future and revise the past with any 'new' iterative enfoldings.

Although his work predates new materialisms, Benjamin's reflections on time anticipate Barad's work. He states, '[t]o articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger' (1968: 255). The past, that is, memory, is not a static fact; it changes in relation to its future. Building upon Benjamin, Schneider writes, '[h]istory, which is to say memory, courses along in curves and folds. It takes a repercussive wave form, or tendrilous branch form, or irrupts in tuberous, rhizomatic explosions of call and response and response become call again…' (2020: 81). Anachronisms and the dragging of times are inherent in performance, as Schnieder (2011) states on reenactment that manipulation of anachronism is the art and act of their performances. She continues:

> In an affective reverie, troubling the archive-driven tracks of a strictly linear approach to time, and manipulating the pitfalls and promises of anachronism like so many notes on a bugle, reenactors use their bodies to chase moments of forgetting where something learned (about time) becomes something played (in time), and where something played can touch or generate experience, even if 'only for a minute.' (2011: 42)

Schneider – specifically in this study of Civil War reenactment – does not examine new materialist conceptions of time; however, she understands temporality as an amalgam of composite spaces, times, and matters. In all its rhizomatic combinations, temporalities are revised through the matter and gestures of performance, able to be touched in moments of affective sensation. Performers who play with temporal drag passionately piece together and apart to arouse highly affective and interruptive displays of out-of-place times. This nonlinear, more rhizomatic understanding of time permeates digital role-play and, as Schneider finds with reenactment, is fundamentally entangled with matter, performance, and affect.

In the out-of-placeness of times, intimacies emerge where performers can get touchy-feely with the past. Schneider (2011) recalls moments of 'surprise' and 'exuberance' when reenactors who had died in battle would suddenly be revived and walk again. She recounts, 'at the end of several of the battle reenactments I observed, the various cadavers strewn about the field would get up, dust off, and, quite simply, *return to camp*' (2011: 54, original emphasis). In paying attention to Schneider's specific emphasis on the cadavers' *return to camp*, I want to draw a deliberate rhizomatic link between Sedgwick's (2003) own return to camp. To repeat Sedgwick's reparative reading of camp, she characterises it as a startling and juicy display of excess erudition marked by an over-attachment to the fragmentary, a fascination with ventriloquistic experimentation, and a disorienting juxtaposition of past and present. Schneider's use of affective words, such as 'surprise' and 'exuberance', first evinces these strands of connection between reenactment and Sedgwick's description of camp. Though the

most explicit link between the two emerges in the decidedly visceral display when a cadaver of a Civil War soldier gets up, dusts off, and returns to camp. Reenactors' dedication to their performance through costume, statistics, prosthetics, foodstuff, and gestures demonstrates erudition. At the same time, the mode as a whole is fundamentally an experiment in antiquarianism and ventriloquism as performers don a Civil War-era character and lifestyle. Finally, an over-attachment to the fragmentary is made evident by Schneider's attachment to a severed faux finger that features on the front cover of her monograph. On the finger, she writes, '[t]hough not at all in the head-space of a reenactor, I was brought up short and had to gasp coming upon this severed index lying forgotten and left behind' (2011: 52). At the moment that the faux finger passes as a forefinger, it provokes the affective sensation of shock in Schneider. A literal fragment, this finger is disorientating, interrupting the jointure between Civil War and reenactment in an eruption of sensation for the beholder. Such a co-mingling of camp and new materialisms demonstrates the inherent entanglement of space, time, matter, and meaning with performance, where each is affected and moved by the other.

This highly affective and interruptive anachronistic entanglement of past and present is an almost constant fixture in *World of Warcraft*. The game is an amalgam of appropriated cultures, traditions, histories, folklore, politics, beliefs, stereotypes, and archetypes from peoples, both past and present. As Tanya Kryzwinska writes, 'the worldness of *World of Warcraft* comes from an assemblage of different – fictional – races and cultures; each has its own ficto-historical background (within which a variety

of secondary myths and legends are found)' (2006: 387). These composites might be dragged and swapped around from this amalgam to create an atmosphere that feels fantastic and familiar. As well as offering examples of anachronism in *World of Warcraft*, this section explores the anachronistic practices and embodiments of digital role-play where campness pervades. Namely, moments when the juxtaposition of past and present becomes excessive, erudite, surprising, exuberant, and disorientating in play.

Perhaps the most obvious example of anachronisms at work is found in Azeroth's Human races. Humans in *World of Warcraft* are a stereotypical race of fantasy humans largely derived from white medieval European cultures, myths, politics, religions, and traditions. Their capital is Stormwind City, an Arthurian city where King Anduin Wrynn resides as the absolute monarch. Another faction of Humans, known as the Kul Tiran Humans, are derived from eighteenth-century Bristol during the Great Age of Sail; they are seafaring people who speak with thick West Country accents. Their capital, the seaport city of Boralus, is on the verge of industrialisation but beset by the sinister Ashvane Trading Company, which holds much political sway in the city – much reminiscent of the East India Trading Company. Finally, the Worgens of Gilneas, who were once Human but became cursed with lycanthropy, are derived from literary Victorian London stereotypes. These Worgens have cockney accents, their city, Gilneas, lends architectural styles from the Victorian Gothic revival, and they sport coattails and stovepipe hats. In *World of Warcraft,* these separate epochs converge into a strange concoction of themes, tropes, architectures, and accents, wherein a

Medieval Knight can meet a Gothic Victorian Werewolf or an 18th-century Bristolian seafarer can meet a high-fantasy mage.

Figure 1.6 'The Swan & the Beast' (2022: 1:14). Still from the Midnight Theatre.

Where *World of Warcraft*, the game, plays with anachronistic representations, the arts and acts of digital role-play raise anachronisms to a diffractive temporal overlaying. Consider, for example, the Midnight Theatre Company, a troupe that performs original plays in-game, and their production of 'the Swan & the Beast' [*fig 1.6*]. The play, they write, is 'based on the true story of murderous Vincent Furlough and tender Lilli Swann, which took place in the streets of Stormwind three years ago' (Midnight Theatre 2021). It is a pulpy and gothic murder mystery story written and performed by role-players in a makeshift theatre in the World's End Tavern in Shattrath City. To note just some of the temporalities at work: this Victorian Gothic-inspired play is set in the Arthurian city of Stormwind, performed by role-players with a stereotypical Shakespearean zeal, in a video game that has become a theatre stage. Shattrath City is

now mostly devoid of players as it was a central hub during the *World of Warcraft: Burning Crusade* expansion released in 2007. Unlike many other cities, where the in-game story has progressed, and graphic updates have occurred, Shattrath City has remained almost the same, so going to a play in Shattrath is to return to another time or the remains of media as it was in a previous iteration.

This piece of live theatre performed in a video game presents a disorientating juxtaposition of times as two supposedly outmoded forms of media collide. Critics and fans alike have declared that both live theatre and *World of Warcraft* are dead and dying. Schneider holds that live theatre, alongside TV, film, rock art, body art, and live art, has congealed into a 'skin curtain of the outmode' (2019: 71). On the dissonant lives and deaths of live theatre, Schneider writes:

> Live theatre has long imagined itself to be dead. Cinema was said to have killed it again, after a precedent slaying by photography. In the long march of 'new technology' theatre is the card-carrying bearer of obsolescence. […] It's dead, but, already dead, you just can't kill it. Any artwork that traffics in theatre or the theatrical (which is not the same as performance or the performative) can be ruined by that traffic, or (worse by some accounts) can be traffic in ruin. We can track a persistent investment in theatre's ruin value running through visual art and media history as well. It's the decay we love to hate. The decay that just won't quit. The theatrical—tinged always with the feminine, the queer, the undead, and the live body—is always there when you look again. (2012: 159)

Similarly, for many years, detractors, critics, and players have declared that *World of Warcraft* is dead or questioned its aliveness. A cursory google search, 'Is *World of Warcraft* dead?', pings back thousands of articles, forum posts, and threads, all calling into question the liveness or deadness of the game. So, live theatre performed in *World of Warcraft* is a Frankenstein's monster of congealing deadness. And yet, the dead march on; as Schneider contends, each outmoded medium is regenerated in performance, each becoming tinged with the queerness, theatricality, deadness, and liveness of the other. However, in the constant (re)iterations of performance, harmful legacies, ideas, and tropes become renewed that should have remained in the past.

In writing this section, the colonial narrative and stereotypes implicit in *World of Warcraft* have become painfully apparent. The white player is privileged in that three epochs of European (primarily British) histories might be toyed with while non-white players remain unrepresented. Many scholars have previously commented upon the racist implications that permeate *World of Warcraft* and how the game often repeats sentiments from older fantasy works that, consequently, renew them (Nakamura 2002; Higgin 2008; Langer 2012; Monson 2012). Only the histories of white people are privileged to be Humans in *World of Warcraft*, whereas the game's designers, echoing tropes in fantasy media, code non-white histories into the races of human-animal hybrids. The Tauren race are anthropomorphic cattle with their culture, architecture, accents, histories, and philosophies based on a blend of influences from Native American and First Nations people. Similarly, the Pandaren race are anthropomorphic pandas and their culture, architecture, accents, histories, philosophy, and so on are

based on a mix of influences from East Asia. The Troll race is especially objectionable, with the race labelled as 'savage' and 'renowned for cruel mysticism' in an in-game cutscene that introduces the race. The Trolls speak with stereotypical Jamaican accents, and their cultural influence is a derivative mash-up of Caribbean cultures. Role-players, then, unintentionally and intentionally revise and reiterate these harmful stereotypes through their performances.

World of Warcraft's and digital role-players' reliance upon colonial adventure narratives, such as the works of Rider Haggard and R.L. Stevenson, betrays what Ebony Elizabeth Thomas (2019) terms an 'imagination gap'. Thomas states that this gap has emerged because of the racialised disparities in the literature that children and young adults can attain, which confines them 'to single stories about the world around them' (2019: 6). Thomas argues that our fantasies and dreams must be decolonised to close this gap by interrupting the constant telling and retelling of colonial stories that endure the gap. Then, in their place, we must tell and retell stories of the Black fantastic to create a new storied imagination from which to draw. This interpretation of digital role-play argues that any elements of the rhizome can be destabilised and restabilised. So, to challenge these harmful (re)iterations, digital role-players must interrupt this cycle that supports an imagination gap and be more promiscuous with the fantasies they gather and extend in play. Though the racialised implications of playing *World of Warcraft* are unavoidable, the few paragraphs I afford to them perform their very same inadequacy. Where this thesis cannot do justice to the subject of decolonisation, an entirely separate thesis is needed to address the implications of the reuptake of

colonial adventure narratives in digital role-play. For example, the contingent of role-players who use the 'San-Shami' argot, a dialect derived from Arabic and Islamic cultures, illustrates this entrenchment of racism in *World of Warcraft*'s systems and designs. This argot is highly exoticised and sometimes used by players role-playing as slavers, snake charmers, desert bandits, and other racist archetypes; it is a facet of digital role-play that demands inquiry.[10]

6. Conclusion: Repair

By way of a rhizome, this chapter has explored – just some of – the disparate, tuberous, and omnidirectional forces that converge in digital role-play. From Sedgwick's reparative camp and queer love to Rojas' and Cassils' instructions for becoming, the same excesses of intimacy can be found in the queer temporalities, gestures, and affects of digital role-play. Exemplified first by the Dwarven avatar at the opening of this chapter, the role-play rhizome tumbles biology into technology, which tumbles into the live and the dead, which tumbles into the past and the present. While this chapter only explored three dissonant forces and their intimate convergences in the role-play rhizome, others are present. The only constant must be difference and intimacy; else, to borrow from Sedgwick, role-play would enter a state of ontological impoverishment. When players eschew differences in their reiterative performances, and stagnant stories are told and retold, an imagination gap is sustained that impoverishes play. By being promiscuous with times, matters, and stories, digital role-play can be figured as a repeated effort of queer intimacy. As Schneider writes,

[10] See: https://www.argentarchives.org/node/205247 for an overview of the San'Shami argot.

‘[r]epetition is a mode of becoming that pronounces a cut and, paradoxically perhaps, always (re)opens a door of difference’ (2019: 76). With each repetition, more matter, meaning, gestures, and affect can become tumbled into the rhizome, bumping and grinding, consistently generating friction.

As stated near the beginning of this chapter, the impulse of this work is to establish a reparative rereading of digital role-play that is more ameliorative, one that acknowledges the intimate entanglement of all the many collaborators in play. This rereading considers the passions and excesses of digital role-play, the abundance of sensation, and the capacity of role-play to assemble and touch time, matter, and meaning in its performances. With this, an iteration of Sedgwick’s reparative reading that finds the camp in digital role-play might define digital role-play as: the startling and juicy displays of excess affects, intimacies, and realities that realise play, for example; the passionate and sincere performances of amateurism that sustain the gestures, relations, arts, and acts of role-play; the hyper-weird assembling of other times, matters, imaginings, and media content that holds the potential to transform space; the entangled co-inhabitation of biology and technology, liveness and deadness that disorients hierarchies of animacy; the highly affective ‘over’-attachment to outmoded media that tinges role-play with queerness and theatricality. These facets signal a surplus of longing, investment, and imagination that more paranoid readings of digital role-play might overlook.

At its core, this reading of role-play in *World of Warcraft* makes the argument for what digital role-play *is* rather than what it lacks when compared to analogue play. Where previous thinkers have found the game's systems, processes, networks, and interfaces an impediment to play, this chapter exposes the intricacies of these technologies as they shape, and actively participate in, play. More than merely facilitators, video games are not discrete objects but a diffractive splay of interdependent constituents that encounter and overlap with the dynamisms at work in digital role-play. This understanding of video games opens them to the ongoing play of difference and change, where play can extend outside of the game to websites, archives, forums, and instant messaging platforms. Or, instead, the game itself is open for extension as the gamescapes and gameplay of *World of Warcraft* become these media sites, networks, and content. Though only three dissonances of digital role-play are examined here, they unfold the arts, acts, and intimacies of role-play and their potential to alter and change *World of Warcraft*. Critically, the game, its prerequisite laptops, computers, mice, monitors, and broader networks, media, and mods, often enable such creative alterations. In other words, these elements of play execute the gestures and movements of play, express the animacies of avatars, become the stage required for the Midnight Theatre Company, and connect and sustain the community of players. These arguments address this project's first objective, to determine how digital role-play is positioned and orientated with other modalities because these facets of play are illuminated when placed beside queer performances and artworks. This chapter also gestures towards the following objectives on the reality-making capacity of digital role-play, with each dissonance and convergence providing fertile ground for thinking

of the promiscuities and intimacies that circulate and define the landscape of digital role-play.

With scholarship being so sparse on digital role-play, this chapter (and subsequent chapters) gathers various other modes of art, performance, and studies to explore its affordances. Though seemingly an impediment, this dialogue proves generative in brokering bold connections, reflecting the rhizomatic capacities of art, performance, technology, and role-play. The material turn of twenty-first-century philosophy has tumbled into scholarship on live-action role-play, tabletop role-play, and board games (Bienia 2016; Wake 2019; Germaine 2020). These studies discern the agencies and forces of materials in their studies that properly position matter as active collaborators in play. The matter of digital role-play has yet to receive such critical and speculative analysis, and as such, its myriad strangeness and exuberance remain underrepresented. In crosshatching multiple paths set by queer and materialist scholars of technology, animacy, live performance, and temporality, this chapter pieces together an analytic approach from the parts of digital role-play. The next chapter furthers this crosshatch of theories to focus on the queer intimacy in digital role-play, to find that digital role-play is an ongoing system of uninhibited touching and feeling.

CHAPTER TWO

A Queer Touch of Digital Role-Play

~~~ == Massage == ~~~

just push and pull

massage one part into another
slow slow slow then chop karate chchchchopopopopop
along the shoulders

a reminder that there are bodies here
some of them soften beneath a thumb

no need to get all 'woo-woo'
and sentimental about flesh though, right?
Right.

don't mind the form at this point.
It is changeable and … shit,
just get the tension out, ok?

just push and pull
and press

it feels fine.

~~~~ == 0 == ~~~~

- Megan Snowe, 'Massage', 2015.

1. Getting Promiscuous

In role-playing game studies, there is often a determination to centre queerness in the face of a community, praxis, and product rife with prejudice (Stokes 2017; Vist 2018; Biswas 2019; Sihvonen and Stenros 2019). Much of this work presents a queer remapping of the history of games, shows how structures of power can be resisted through play, and playfully reveals the inherent queerness of games. Issues of LGBTQ+ representation in video games have been likewise centred but are often met with discontent as they often reveal a linear trajectory of progress – from very little to some. LGBTQ+ people have *always* existed in video games, as Adrienne Shaw's LGBTQ Video Game Archive demonstrates. Also, any 'straight' lines of progress obscure the rich and messy lives of queer folks and neglect the queer potential of games' designed, technical, and mechanical elements (Ruberg 2019). Where elaborating upon the queernesses (or lack thereof) in representations often leads to discontent, touching and feeling are fundamental facets of role-play that, upon close inspection, reveal an inherent queerness in games. In furthering this project of queering games, touching becomes a way to feel the queerness of matter and play, finding intimacies, perversities, and promiscuities. Where the previous chapter worked to establish the matters and forces that embrace during play, this chapter now asks how we might crawl between the space of touch and become so intimate with the materials of play that they become as close as the self.

Touching and feeling can be enacted in myriad ways: Pressing, resisting, inputting, rubbing, entwining, vibrating, sitting, scraping, flowing, repulsing, grinding, tapping,

caressing, pixelating, releasing, leaking, transmitting, looking, listening, oscillating, massaging, weighing. Jean-Luc Nancy, whose *Corpus* (2018) influenced this list, holds that our world has inherited the world of gravity; '[a] body doesn't have weight: […] it *is* weight' (2008: 93). Bodies weigh on, grind, rub, caress, entwine, and embrace each other, they counterweigh and buttress, and these touches and intimacies are always potentially queer. Tim Dean's (2009) *Unlimited Intimacy* examines the queer subcultural practice of 'barebacking' and seeks to broker this unbound proximity with a broader understanding of overcoming boundaries between persons. As previously mentioned, he asks, '[w]hat might happen if we were a little more promiscuous about promiscuity itself, if we defined it more broadly, permitting promiscuity to affect all forms of attention, all those moments when our regard approaches and touches something else?' (2009: 5). Though Dean's work begins with the predominately gay male practice of bareback sex, it is only one part of an unlimited network of intimacies and eroticisms that might then be characterised as queer. There is eroticism in all unbound proximity, an intimacy and sensuality that does not delimit itself to bareback sex, and it is an intimacy that carries into and defines digital role-play.

This chapter engages in the queer method of getting 'too-close' to media, a counterhegemonic reading that discloses value in 'reading too much into' the media object as it meets the body (Miller 1990; Ruberg 2019). As Bonnie Ruberg writes, 'the too-close reader transgresses by pulling apart the space between details and climbing inside, getting queerly intimate with a game' (2019: 68). In getting too-close to digital role-play, this chapter combines queer interpretations with physics and investigates

touching and feeling games at the micro level of matter and meanings whose muddy borders comprise touch. Being promiscuous with promiscuity, as Dean suggests, can reveal an unfettered intimacy between game interfaces, media, and players wherein matter and affect circulate between the proximity of hands and objects. For instance, on video game controllers, Steve Swink notes, '[t]he white plastic that houses my Xbox 360 controller has a smooth, pleasingly porous feel. It's almost like skin' (2009, 117). As the hand touches the controllers, it arouses a sensory response in the holder, as made evident by Swink noting the skin-like textures of his controller that make it pleasing to hold. Simultaneously, as the hand touches the controller, the hand will leave residues of dead skin and sweat upon it that sediment over time with each instance of play. The relationship between the player and controller reveals an intimacy between boundaries, an intimacy that engenders a sensuous exchange. In proposing such unrestrained proximity between the non/human, Megan Snowe's (2015) message in *Massage* becomes apparent: 'no need to get all "woo-woo" / and sentimental about flesh though, right? Right.' Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen (2015), writing on queer inhumanisms, contend that when there is an intimacy between the human and nonhuman, they rub on and against each other, generating friction and leakage. In recognising erotics outside of human genitalia, this chapter pays attention to the nonhuman actants in digital role-play to disclose how the queernesses and promiscuities of matter are felt and touched as it touches and feels in return, generating a circulating system of response.

There is potency and intensity in touch, with video games and role-play serving as a site of intra-active intimacies between bodies. On touching, Karen Barad writes,

‘[w]hen two hands touch, there is a sensuality of the flesh, an exchange of warmth, a feeling of pressure, of presence, a proximity of otherness that brings the other nearly as close as oneself. Perhaps closer’ (2012: 206). It becomes apparent that touch is not principally a material affair; it is highly affective. As Barad affirms, ‘[t]ouch moves and affects what it effects’ (2012: 208). Adopting these conceptions to think about digital role-play recognises the affectively charged intimacies that circulate in play. Touch produces intimacy and exchange at the level of immediate interfaces, such as those between a hand and a controller, as well as at the level of contact between the various collaborators of play, whether the contact is immediate, indirect, or relayed. To permit oneself to touch and be touched is to apprehend and invite in sensations, namely sensations of the self and the other. As Jacques Derrida puts it, touching is an act; it is ‘touching what one touches, to let oneself be touched by the touched, by the touch of the thing’ (2005: 276). To touch, and be touched, is to feel the warmth, pressure, presence, and otherness of the thing in relation to yourself. Touch always goes (at least) two ways; it is an exchange, and letting oneself be touched entails a touch from another. Barad (2012) employs notions developed in quantum field theory to further trouble Derrida’s understanding of touch and explains how touch is a communicative dance of electromagnetic interaction. To touch is to feel the repulsive force of negatively charged electrons pushing against the negatively charged electrons of your skin, nails, or hair. In Barad’s analysis, touch is always indirect; it runs athwart to bodies offering no contact, only repulsion. In offering no contact, a world of difference, different matter and different meanings entangle between the touch.

As touch is always both direct and indirect, it becomes open, able to stick around, be deferred, and touch elsewhere other than the initial haptic contact. Nancy considers the inherent indirectness of touch when he makes apparent the bodies that touch the pages of his book, his hands writing, and our hands holding. This touch is infinitely indirect, deferred by machines, eyes, and other hands. Yet, as Nancy writes, touch continues 'as a slight resistant, fine texture, the infinitesimal dust of a contact, everywhere interrupted and pursued' (2008: 51). The promiscuities of touch circulate both the sensations of entities and forces in immediate proximity and the residual lingers of past encounters. Rebecca Schneider writing on the circulation of materials, hand to hand, object to object, hand to object, suggests that the touch of a body, its sweat and perhaps even its gestures and sounds remain upon the object 'in the ongoing afterlife of contact' (2019: 56). To touch, then, is to touch the inherent leakiness of bodies and devices as they spill residual matter and affects. The body responds to being touched, so it responds to touching and being touched by the myriad of weights and infinitesimal dust that emphasise the intimacies and desires of our 'amongnesses, besidenesses, withnesses, and againnesses' (2019: 72). This is all, as Barad describes it, radically queer. There is an amorphousness and indeterminacy through repulsive intimacy that radically troubles notions about what is touching and feeling in contact.

Touching and feeling matter and meaning becomes a dynamic circulation of sensation that includes meanings, theories, and affects as much as matter. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) proposes that thought has materiality and texture, erogenous zones,

weight, and temperature, with which meaning can be vibratory and amorphous. She argues that there is an implicit intimacy between textures and emotions, signified by the epithet 'touchy-feely' and its implications of contact besides affect, affect beside contact. Parallels surface with Elizabeth Grosz's (2017) position that ideality and materiality are not two substances but two modes in which the real is distributed. She holds that ideality is inherent to materiality and, alongside the similarly pervasive conditions of conceptuality, meaning, and orientation, calls them *extramaterialism*. The two are ontologically linked as each subsists in the other; there remains immanence in the material and the material in immanence. Relating this to touch, for Grosz, this ideal facet of materiality 'enables materiality to be in touch with itself, to be autoaffective, which is the condition which materiality can complexify itself' (2017: 251). Since the digital is often aligned with immateriality, recognising the extramaterialisms of the digital alludes to materialities, that is, its substances alongside its idealities.

In the recurrent intimacy of digital role-play, the affective, imaginary, and mediatic circulate sensuality as much as hands and objects. Contact moves beyond the cutaneous, enabling touching and feeling to be moved and affected by the amorphous, the sentimental, the theoretical, and the mediatic. When the weight of bodies – whatever the boundaries of each figure – grind on and against each other, they leak residues with each contact (Luciano and Chen, 2015). In *Updating to Remain the Same* (2016), Wendy Hui Kyong Chun insists that an acute condition of the relations between media, networks, and users is how they leak. Users, devices, networks, and media each

leak information, noise, and electromagnetism, which, as Chun explains, 'is not accidental; it is central. Without this constant exchange of information, there would be no communication, no Internet' (2016: 52). Rather than focusing on new and fading media and devices that are at the 'bleeding edge of obsolescence' (2016: 1), Chun finds meaning in the leakiness of media networks and technological habits.

World of Warcraft, no longer at the bleeding edge of new, is now old and leaky, and digital role-play relies upon this constant exchange of information to entangle the multiple bodies that encounter each other in play. A means to imagine the ongoing afterlife of contact and encounter in digital role-play is a gyre – a word I borrow from Schneider (2019), which signifies a system in constant circulation and gestures towards the influx of material piling in the Earth's oceans. I am also drawing meaning from how gyres form: in geography, gyres describe the ocean gyres that endlessly swirl with the ocean's currents, formed by Coriolis force, a type of friction that determines circulatory patterns governed by the wind. A gyre, then, comprises an ongoing circulation defined by friction that amasses matter in its currents. Bodies leaking matter and meaning, such as skin, alongside media content, stories, and sensations, propagate digital role-play. Simultaneously, as these bodies come into contact with each other, so do their leaky residues, further entangling these matters, contents, stories, and sensations. Then, because digital role-play is a phenomenon where an array of bodies come into contact, a gyre is formed where the constant circulation of leaking, touching, and feeling generates new entanglements of matter, content, stories, and sensation.

In *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), Ruth Ozeki tells the story of two people entangled through a *Hello Kitty* lunchbox spewed out of the North Pacific Gyre. Washed up on the shore of Desolation Sound, Ruth, a novelist, finds the diary of schoolgirl Naoko Yasutani that she wrote in the days before her death. Oliver, Ruth's husband, explains that the lunchbox must be flotsam that escaped the orbit of the garbage patch swelling in the Pacific Gyre. He tells Ruth of gyres, likening them to a ring of snakes, each biting the tail of the one ahead of it. '"Each gyre orbits at its own speed," he continued. "And the length of an orbit is called a tone. Isn't that beautiful? Like the music of the spheres. The longest orbital period is thirteen years, which establishes the fundamental tone"' (2013: 14). Oliver's explanation reveals the vibratory weights of gyres; they have tempo and tone, and they entangle the farthest reaches of this sphere with their melodies. Ozeki's work elaborates upon the entanglement of all things, from systems and networks all the way down to subatomic particles; each reflects the other. This notion is fundamental to understanding MMORPGs, where gameplay relies on the networks linking the collective to the individual, each collectively (cor)responding to the gyre of media, players, and technology. Queer intimacy and touch become a way to feel through role-play as it, in turn, grinds at discrete distinctions between the human, the object, the imaginary, and the mediatic.

This entangling gyre of residues [material, affective, mediatic] discloses the sensuous intimacies that pervade digital role-play, the touch of it all, how objects pull and push on bodies, media is dragged from one place to another, and fantasy and performance

caress. Hand to hand, hand to device, device to media, media to imaginings, all threads are interposed and extend omnidirectionally. Digital role-play is the desire to enact a 'new' life, be a different person, interact socially, and go on adventures. It is the desire to touch and feel through another world, becoming situated and oriented besides it to give meaning to these bodies in space and time. It centres on writing about sensuality as much as hands, media, imaginations, and technologies circulate touch. To touch is to arouse sensation, so to touch is to feel. Grosz remarks that neither perceptions nor affections are inherently interior or exterior; instead, they are modes of connection: '[p]erception orients us to a world by enabling us to act in it, preparing bodies for action; affection also orients us to a world by enabling us to feel it, to draw it into emotions that also bring us outside ourselves' (2017: 190). To touch role-play, to be touched by role-play is to feel a world, its milieu, its temporality, its spatiality, and be oriented within it. Thinking promiscuously about touch, as more than skin-to-skin contact, reveals intimacies in the touching and feeling of media content, websites, plastic interfaces, graphics and textures, sounds, and other players.

As previously discussed, role-play scholars have argued that digital role-play's co-constitution with technology impedes play compared to its analogue counterparts. Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler (2011) propose that players must circumvent several obstacles before becoming immersed while role-playing in *World of Warcraft*. These obstacles include the secondary technological interfaces required for digital role-play, the artificially constructed and arbitrary nature of gameworlds, and the fact that games are neither realistic nor intended to be. They cite Geoff King and

Tanya Kryzwinska (2006), who hold that all players are aware that gameworlds are artificial and limiting constructions. Yet, players permit themselves to feel these environments, to submit to the illusion that these gamescapes are 'more than just entirely arbitrary constructs' (King and Kryzwinska 2006: 119). MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler share this position, stating, '[n]o one is about to be sucked physically into the terminal only to find themselves playing a very real game of death' (2011: 228). Here, the biobody remains privileged over representation and technology; these arguments construct the player as more 'real' than the artificial and limited game environment. The intervention in this chapter comes from understanding the intimate entanglement of all components of digital role-play. Because role-play's material and affective collaborators require the same attention as their human partners, how they touch, feel, and affect what they touch and feel is as vital to digital role-play as human players.

As in other chapters, this chapter maintains that neither skin nor flesh is a barrier that delimits or contains a perceived inside; with this, touch is not limited by the skin of a body. To recall Jeffrey J. Cohen, '[t]he body is not human (or at least, it is not only human)' nor […] is it inhabited by an identity or sexuality that is unique to or even contained fully within its flesh' (2003: 41). Or, as Megan Snowe's (2015) poem suggests, there is no need to get sentimental about flesh; some bodies soften under the weight of a hand, and others do not. Digital technologies and media become entangled with the flesh just as our flesh and sweat deposit upon their surfaces. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost reflect on human co-constitution, writing, 'digital

technologies have become a part of our lives and who we are' (2010: 17). N. Katherine Hayles (2006) posits that in our saturation with networked and programmable media, we have entered the domain of the posthuman. She proposes that the posthuman is akin to the human, both 'historically specific and contingent'; only the boundaries of our ontology have shifted so that 'machine cognizers are crucial players as well' (2006: 160-161). This position reflects Baradian notions that embodiment is being of the world in its dynamic specificity, a '*mutual constitution of entangled agencies*' (2007: 33). When the flesh no longer delimits the boundaries of the body, touch becomes radically open, not simply the contact between two distinct bodies or agencies but an omnidirectional embrace. Digital role-play is an ongoing rolling cutting together and apart of entangled agencies, so for players to touch and feel their way through it is to touch and feel all co-constituent entities.

In recognising such co-constituent entities, this chapter lends a voice to nonhuman matters, telling their stories of role-playing alongside their human companions. These translations respond to Rafael Bienia's (2016) call for researchers to reconsider the relationship between materials and humans in tabletop role-play by mapping a gyre of digital role-play that entangles objects, affects, imaginings, and players. Bienia claims that when 'materials collaborate in tabletop role-playing games, materials role-play, too' (2016: 160). Many tensions are gathered around the table when playing tabletop role-playing games; each is as generative as the other. These provocations parallel Donna J. Haraway's (2016) notion of 'worlding', which invites us to imagine and challenge, play with words, inhabit new or different ecologies, radically combine

knowledge practices, and with this, tell new stories. However, Cohen (2015) warns us that any speaking for the nonhuman is a translation and therefore bound with errors, guesswork, and inclined toward the fantastical. Yet, he remarks that stories will always remain to intensify relations and make connections with the nonhuman. The materialities of analogue role-playing games that Bienia considers differ in many ways from digital role-play; a tree in a tabletop game might be represented by a drawing on a role-playing mat or perhaps by a miniature model, whereas polygons, textures, shaders, pixels, and lines of code comprise the tree in a digital game. Yet each is linked as mimetic doubles of the thing, evident as textured and touchable by sensation, affects, and perceptions.

Soft-body dynamics influence much of this chapter, a field of computer-generated graphics that simulates soft organic materials, such as muscles, fat, hair, vegetation, and fabric, through the pixels of a screen. Soft-body dynamics prompts questions regarding how to imagine and represent bodies with and without skin and flesh. This chapter constantly questions how digital role-play plays with and experiences these dynamic bodies. With this, the first section, 'Touching/Feeling', finds what bodies, figures, forms, media, and textures delight at the touch of role-play and how those bodies grind together in an entwining of sensuality that comprehends the intra-action of role-play in all its dynamic specificity. The second section, 'Leaking/Sticking,' recognises that after bodies touch, they leave residues of themselves after the contact. Chun emphasises the leakiness of networks, media, and technology, writing, '[o]ur devices, our computers, constantly leak. They are wonderfully creepy' (2016: 52). She

claims that the leaks of networks are an inherent and fundamental constituent of media technology and that the residues of these leaks can be traced, followed, and understood. In synthesising these two positions, this section follows poetry found in forums, role-play events, and the *Argent Archives* to suggest that poetry leaks at the touch between role-players, media, networks, and technology and gets stuck in the relays between borders.

The final section, 'Self/Touch', expands the queer conceptual trajectory of Karen Barad's (2012) notion of self-touching understood through quantum field theory. For Barad, touch is an exploration of indeterminacy where virtuality circulates, so the residues and leaks of digital role-play must be apprehended from the material and virtual world. Materiality and virtuality are not separate substances; they are as intimate as matter and meaning, touching and feeling. Rather, virtuality is the immanent potentiality of all things, an 'indwelling force of things waiting, pressing, ready to act' (McGlotten 2014: 1). These indwelling of possibility can all occur at the close of touch and, provocatively, at the close of a self-touch. When the self touches itself, it experiences its own otherness, temperature, weight, proximity, and texture. Touch is polymorphous and can also enliven affects, imaginations, media, and myriad other virtuals. This section, then, explores the self-touch of digital role-play, how digital role-play touches itself, to find how it enlivens those elements and effects of touch and emits its own fantasy media. This media circulates between players, the game, the *Argent Archives*, and other websites and platforms as players continually emit and reabsorb content to create a distinct fantasy milieu.

2. Touching/Feeling

Figure 2.1 Xiuching Tsay (2019). *She Has Her Own Island*. Copyright Xiuching Tsay.

In exploring touching and feeling, I first examine Xiuching Tsay's *She Has Her Own Island* [*fig 2.1*], a painting that apprehends how art enlivens the dynamics of soft bodies in order to present how flesh, skin, gestics, and bodily excretions do not necessarily presuppose a biobody. Akin to technologies of soft-body dynamics, this imposition suggests that the technologies of digital role-play, avatars, for example, are touchy-feely, solid and mechanical yet soft, messy, fleshy, and gestural. Working with Tsay's art, an example that is not obviously connected to role-play or digital spaces, allows me to reconfigure the space of touch, where touching can be deferred and delayed, and how it shifts the coordinates of connection beyond immediate cutaneous contact. As *World of Warcraft* is an online game, players are always connected

indirectly, but despite the distance between players, friction, textures, pleasures, and sensations remain between them.

She Has Her Own Island is a vibrant landscape of flesh-geography intimacies that features cloudy skies, mountain peaks, deep valleys, and a churning sea lapping at the shores of foothills. The typical landscape scene then begins to fade as fleshy forms surface, emerging as distinctly inhuman objects and leaky machinery. The painting teeters on the borderline between human form and geography; breasts become mountain peaks while folding skin composes the slopes, and genitalia spawn waterfalls, yet all else is as unfamiliar as it is sensuous. Fluid intimately connects the surreal characters in this dreamlike setting, with every character touching and feeling the other, such as the thick green liquid that dribbles down from the folds of the hills into a pool that mingles with seawater. Towards the background, a withering appendage caresses the cloud, and behind it, the horizon touches the sky with a flare of vibrant green. In this painting, touch is an entangling force, whether direct or indirect and deferred by the flesh, ooze, fluid, and the space between folds; each form remains intimate. There are many fleshy components in this landscape, and yet there are no hands (the archetypical metonym of the agential being), which lends weight to exploring the atypical yet equally sensuous feelings of touch. Like Tsay's landscape of intimacies, this section holds that touch directly or indirectly connects each body, form, and character in digital role-play.

Tsay's paintings often feature surreal critters all meandering, touching, and leaking across the canvas in their fantastical landscapes. She writes that her work irradiates 'the objects of memories, resurrects their essences and rediscover their hidden characters through an ecstatic quality of vision' (2019: n.p.). She tends towards concepts of hallucination to reimagine and recondition perceptions of readily demarked objects. Though the landscape in Tsay's painting is hallucinatory, this reconditioning of the scene is not false but speaks to other elements of its being; for instance, sensations, meaning, and intimacies become irradiated in these reimaginations. Tsay's artwork opens touch beyond pressure, temperature, and presence to include visuals, texture, sensation, and distance. Shaka McGlotten's work shares similar sentiments, holding that intimacy is tied to fantasy and longing, enabled 'through forms of presence that can be intensified by distance as much as by proximity' (2013: 52). Thinking about the intimacies of digital role-play requires such irradiated conceptions of both matter and touch because touching and feeling are not limited to cutaneous contact but relayed and deferred between interfaces, media, networks, and the gamespace. As Tsay does in their artworks, thinking about touching as an intimate connection beyond immediate proximity reimagines the sensations of touching and feeling.

Digital role-play is often playful with the preconditioned coordinates of matter, transforming them into otherwise sensations, meanings, and visions. The capacity of digital role-play to enact these transformations occurs because, as Barad suggests, matter and meaning are not separate elements; '[t]hey are inextricably fused together,

and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder' (2007: 3). To touch and feel the matter of digital role-play is to touch and feel its meaning, and vice versa; just as touching and feeling are a double bind, so too are matter and meaning. This bind is not a return to essentialism because matter does not delimit itself to being settled; instead, it is a claim for matter's radical entanglement with meaning. According to Barad, matter is always touching and sensing, a 'condensation of response-ability' (2012: 215). It is an enfolding and dynamic overlapping of iterative reconfigurations; matter materialises in response. On matter's (re)iterative materialisation with role-play, Chloé Germaine (2020) tells of props' emergent and generative capacity in LARP. LARP props, for Germaine, 'prescribe specific imaginings, trigger emotions, and generate the fictional world of the game' (2020: 364-365). The humans, besides the props, figure this as well, as they dress up and perform to generate those very same imaginings, emotions, and worlds. The human, as matter, is likewise reconditioned when role-playing because both material and human are collaborators in play. The substances of digital role-play are often different to LARP, but their capacity to prescribe specific imaginings and emotions remain and, when touched, produce tangible feelings of a fictional world.

Guided by Barad and Tsay, this section discloses the folds of matter and meaning entangled between digital role-play's touch and how these elements influence play. In much of Tsay's practice, water touches and connects the figures and forms that are present throughout and, in doing so, unfolds their shifting forms that would otherwise remain sequestered. Water, for Tsay, signifies a substance that churns, flows, and

pools as much as it is an allegory for shifting potentialities. Like water in Tsay's landscapes, technology is both material and propagator of touch, movement, and affect in digital role-play. As Nancy (2008) tells us, machines, vehicles, photocopies (and to include now more modern machines: computers, laptops, mobile phones, routers, webcams, and virtual reality headsets) enable touch to be infinitely indirect. In *World of Warcraft*, each body, prop, or structure is scaffolded by enmeshed polygons, which are then covered by an image or texture profile to render definition and likeness. Alongside these models, Gary Platner (2013), an environment artist at Blizzard, names the mood, the lighting, and the colours of each zone the 'meat' of the game. Platner illustrates how visual elements of the game arouse fleshy responses in the player by presenting scenes with changing skies and explains how colour and lighting evoke affective sensations of fear or tranquillity and physical sensations of temperature change.

Figure 2.2 'Mathaaesh and Tarilon' (2020). Screenshot taken by Mathaaesh Grimrange. https://www.argentarchives.org/node/248983 [accessed 21/02/2022].

Game design and role-play provide direct examples of the importance of getting touchy-feely with the digital, the amorphous, and the intangible and epitomise Nancy's stance on technologies' capacity to mediate and migrate intimacies. This screenshot [*fig 2.2*] features Mathaaesh and Tarilon on a romantic date, where the two intimately sit upon a tree branch or root. The two players have positioned their avatars close to one another by pressing and clicking keys and buttons to input commands. Despite deferments between the biobodies of the players, they remain connected via the embrace of their avatars. Both role-players correlate their movements and touch to generate proximity despite being separate, and as such, their interactions are entangled, both dependent on the other as role-play moves in and out of the video game. Besides the embrace of the avatars, 'touch' extends beyond these active subjects and into the background environment, namely, the bifurcating roots of the tree upon which the avatars sit have grown into the thicket's greenery, the lake, and the cliffs. Even the light from the stars in the sky(box) reflects upon the water and the avatar's hair, suggesting that each form is in contact, each agency substantial, generating meaning and affect when they touch. The date and this subsequent screenshot depend upon abundant promiscuities of touching and feeling: Hands press keys, rub rubber scroll-wheels, caress the plastic shells of mice, and in response, reactive weights transmit, switch, vibrate, and oscillate in their travel through wires and waves to be rendered and felt by other bodies, devices, and media. Though the touches are indirect and deferred, this screenshot speaks to the connectedness of bodies that generates proximity despite the distance.

The coordinate of scale further exhibits these intimate positionings in digital role-play, illustrating how contacts between matter and meaning can transform and irradiate them. Parallel to diffraction, where varying conditions produce varying meanings in an experiment, changing scales, that is, increasing or decreasing proportional dimensions, produces varied results. A clear example is that the lens of the camera will provide vastly different information than the lens of a microscope. In *Touching Feeling* (2003), Sedgwick discerns that technologies of travel and vision can emphasise texture and, therefore, meaning and ideality through scale. She offers trees as an example, as their cumulative texture can be seen from a great distance while flying in a plane, yet a piece of wood's texture is dramatically different if viewed through a microscope. The tree remains, as does texture, but scale reveals different meanings of the tree visible from vast leafy foliage to cellular xylem matrix. Scale likewise divulges the varied matters and meaning of digital role-play. Hand to device, device to device, the dust and residues caught between the touch, and the electrons that switch and oscillate through wires, transistors, and resistors, are all varying scales of touch. As an MMORPG, the distances and scales between the collaborators in digital role-play can range from immediately direct to infinitely indirect. Then between each relayed and deferred touch, matter, media, and affect leak and co-mingle with the other. All the while, objects and figures in the game bump, rub, and touch, pixel to pixel, and even sounds vibrate from the speakers into the ears of the players. Because touching and feeling are not separate elements, to feel the vibrations of the sound is to be touched by it.

So far in this thesis, it has not proved especially beneficial to distinguish between digital, tabletop, and live-action role-play as each shares similarities in acting out and playing with fiction and fantasies (Hoover *et al*. 2018). Also, the lifeworld of digital role-play so often rubs against the other two to accrue meaning. Although technology often permeates all modes of role-play, digital role-play is integrally co-constituted by and with technology, whereas tabletop and live-action role-play can be less contingent upon it. Technology here is characterised by its hardness as a frame, as a devised material object, alongside its ephemeral softness and inherent ability to explore matter and sensation through scale, distance, and difference. As explained in the previous chapter, the digital role-play rhizome connects hard and soft technologies, intensifying digital role-play's capacity to reimagine matter. As technology is a vital collaborator in digital role-play, for the user to rub, caress, grind, and tap stimulates the technological as much as it is the technology that rubs, caresses, grinds, and taps the user. As Barad posits, '[e]mbodiment is not a matter of being specifically situated in the world, but rather of being of the world in its dynamic specificity' (2007: 327). Touching, then, feels through the dynamic specificities of technology as much as it does the body and, critically, how the two become together.

To build upon arguments made in the previous chapter, this intimacy with technology eschews the position that the technological elements in digital role-play impede rather than collaborate in play (Pittman and Paul 2009; MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2011). Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler state that role-players cannot

remove themselves from the second interfaces required to interact with their characters and argue that this limits players' agency; the 'interface causes a separation between player and gameworld' (2011: 226). Digital role-players cannot be removed from the technological interfaces that co-constitute play; however, I argue that this inference need not negatively impact role-play as MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler suggest. Gregory L. Bagnall (2017) describes technological hardware as a vital navigation and exploration mechanism for gameplay, in distinction to MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler, who find that interfaces separate the player and the gameworld, Bagnall understands them as a means to operate within them. In queering controllers, both their materials and relations engendered, Jess Marcotte (2018) finds a sensuality in gameplay, describing controllers as a material interface that transmits and receives feedback between the player and the game's software. Such interpretations reposition interfaces as a broker between the player and the game and pertain to its relationship of touching and feeling. As the previous chapter highlighted, the realities of being co-constituted with technology can be enchanting. To reiterate Janet H. Murray's (2016) description of the computer, it is an enchanted object that can act autonomously and sense its environment. In further undoing the imposition that technology impedes role-play, this section finds that the relationship between players and interfaces is affective, intimate, and erotic.

There is an innate sensuality in holding and playing with game controllers and interfaces. As mentioned, Swink recounts his relationship with an Xbox 360 controller, remarking that it almost feels like skin, smooth and porous. He continues, writing that the 'controller feels good to hold; it's solid, has the proper weight and is pleasingly

smooth to the touch' (2009: 117). Many scholars have commented on the pervasive phallogocentrism of game controllers (Pozo 2015; Bagnall 2017; Marcotte 2018), a position that surfaces in the masturbatory allusions disclosed in Swink's account with his skin-like and pleasing controller. Highlighting these erotic connotations reveals some of the promiscuities circulating controllers. Still, in being promiscuous with promiscuity, the folds of constitutive pleasure are not limited to genital relations and masturbatory allusions – although those communing pleasures remain. In considering Dean's (2009) notions of promiscuity, my point here is to explore these intimacies between players and interfaces as instances of barebacking, that is, instances of unfettered and unlimited eroticism through intimacy.

Employing various lenses of scale finds eroticisms in any encounter and moves beyond the thinking that erogenous zones only belong to the genital relations of animals and humans. Thinking through game console controllers, Marcotte (2018) explains that they are often standardised and mass-produced to the extent that the material differences of each controller have become slight. In being mass-produced, the feel of the controller is a shared experience; to touch and be touched by the device is to feel what others might feel on a vast scale. Digital role-players are likelier to touch a mouse, a keyboard, a laptop, or a trackpad than a console, yet these interfaces are mass-produced, too, with near-identical plastic shells. Because *World of Warcraft* is a massively multiplayer game and many digital role-players play within the game at once, sensuality rises to a heightened degree as the haptics of play are simultaneously experienced by numerous bodies, each pushing and resisting, embracing each other's textures, and receiving and responding to feedback and transmissions. Then, over

time, each interface will change as skin, hair, sweat, saliva, foodstuff, coffee, coca cola, and energy drinks congeal upon the device. Remains of the ongoing afterlife of touch; these matters sediment with new meanings, or these meanings sediment with new matters.

Though this picture of digital role-play as a gyre of touching and feeling offers one means to undo the hierarchal impositions placed around the player and game, parallel arguments are extant within game studies. In *Gaming: Essays of Algorithmic Culture*, Alexander R. Galloway (2006) develops the notion of 'machinic embodiment', an intimate expression of gameplay whereby the actions involved in playing a game exist along two intersecting axes: the operator and the machine, and nondiegetic and diegetic machine acts. Galloway contends that machinic embodiments emanate from the non-diegetic acts axis of the hardware to the operating body, imposing its efficacy. He defines machinic embodiments as trace or ephemeral exertions of personality emanating from the game engine's abstract core. These machinic embodiments signify intimate terms, an entanglement felt in pleasurable moments when the machine exerts itself in the co-constitutive embodiment. Not only as a tool but as an active partner in shaping play. As machines exert their efficacy through trace and ephemeral exertions of personality, this opens the potentiality for axes of pose, gesture, and affect. As Schneider writes, '[t]ools and bodies, like poses and bodies, gestures and objects, objects and objects, bodies and bodies co-constitute each other in and through mutual and recurrent encounters, practices, that are always iterations, constituted and reconstituted in mimetic exchange (2019: 78). In the intra-action of play, 'mimetic exchange' means residues of matter and meaning remaining after the

contact, congealing with each (re)encounter, transforming each constituent. The machine that emerges during digital role-play is composed of an engine that runs *World of Warcraft*, which will then intersect with the digital role-player. The role-player as 'operator' does not denote control; rather, when the engine and other player-engines exert their efficacies, the 'operator' must react in response.

Discrete untanglings of analogue and digital, matter and meaning, original and representation, are often met with scholarly critique. Sedgwick (2003) specifically critiques the homology: 'machine : digital :: animal : analogical', which identifies machines with digital representation and the biological with analogical representation. She writes, '[e]ven supposing information machines and living organisms to be altogether distinct classes, they certainly have in common that each comprises a heterogeneous mixture of digitally structured with analogically structured representational mechanisms' (Sedgwick 2003: 101). In earlier internet studies, some scholars insist that cyberspace is an arena of pure ideality, evocative of a Cartesian split, where the body and mind split at the threshold of the screen to leave the body behind so that the mind might roam the digital (Castronova 2006). However, the digital world is as 'meaty' as the material world, and the material world is as representative as the digital (Marks 2002: 163). Vestigial physical connections can always be traced in digital worlds, suggesting an intimacy between the material and the digital. The biobody's instantiation with technology includes networks, media, and software as much as it includes hardware and interfaces. So for the digital role-player, this includes the game's programming, art, audio, physics, networks, chat function, media,

narrative, and fan content. These amorphous and seemingly incorporeal things have bodies, poses, gestures, and textures to grind up and against. This imposition does not imbue *realness* to the digital through materiality but disrupts any notion that the material world is more the original than the represented. Digital role-players, such as the two on a romantic date, might feel these forms as sensually and haptically as clicking a button on a mouse.

There are slight differences between representing matter and meaning in games, whether the medium is analogue or digital. At a basic level, analogue video is a system of flickering intensities where electron signals are shot at a phosphorous screen in a picture monitor in varying strengths and patterns to generate light. Marks explains that 'the body of analog video is constituted from flows of electrons that maintain an indexical link with the physical world' (2002: 148). To identify with the body of analogue video is to identify with the varying intensities of electrons that correspond to our own embodied perception. Digital video differs in that it translates reality in a sequence of 0s and 1s; image and sound are rendered through information rather than signals, so audiovisual digital video is not the guiding of signals but playing with discrete sets of information (*ibid*). Marks connects the two, noting that media can act as surrogate preconscious in its retention of information and signals that the human perceiver cannot grasp. Further, she states that digital media 'mimics' the body's exceptional potential to experience synaesthesia, writing**,** 'our own bodily way of translating information among modalities, is a kind of embodied thinking that can be accomplished by a translation program acting on a database' (2002: 149). This

synaesthesia is such that tastes, sights, affects, and textures can be touched and felt in digital realities.

The promiscuity of touch in digital role-play includes the textures and erogenous zones of the more intangible substances of the virtual and digital. Marks (2000, 2002) proposes that perception is not (only) a visual affair; that which is represented and signified can touch and be touched, feel and be felt, move and be moved. She describes this notion as 'haptic visuality', which resembles Grosz's and Sedgwick's theoretical strands that embrace the tangibility of the perceived, the theoretical, the ideal, the represented, and the signified. For Marks, haptic visuality relates to the materiality (or skin) of the film, where looking can act like touching to activate an embodied response in the perceiver produced by the textures, shapes, meaning, and histories of the image(s). The materiality of the film does not only relate to the screen that transmits a film; rather, haptic entanglements exist at every level of recording, editing, and transmission. From Marks' initial conception, film studies scholars have established a 'body' of work on haptic visuality (Chareyron 2015; Tarney 2015; Sæther 2017), which has subsequently grown into studies of technology, media, networks, and algorithms (Paterson 2007; Sha 2013; Marks 2015, 2020). Mark Paterson, examining live performances and artworks mediated by technologies, argues that when skin and flesh are mediated and remediated, this 'folding-unfolding of the body through technologies have implications for the affects and felt reactions of the audience, their own visceral, fleshly feelings' (2007: 11). Through technology, representations of bodies invite intimacy and become tangible, felt as an embodied response in the perceiver.

In a much earlier, though one that anticipates haptic visuality, Viktor Shklovsky claims that literary works attain their most significant impact when perceiving an object not spatially 'but, as it were, in its temporal continuity' ([1919] 1991: 12). Or, as he famously writes, 'in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art' (1991: 6). Just as Tsay reimagines and reconditions perceptions towards readily demarked objects, art irradiates meaning and texture beyond what human hands might feel. Touching and feeling are intra-active, a convergence of entangled sensations that the interaction between individual haptic contacts cannot realise. The touch of digital role-play is more promiscuous than simply a hand feeling the smooth case of a technological interface. The touch of digital role-play must then include the touch and feel of digital spaces, architectures, ecologies, colours, sounds, as well as players and devices – each an erogenous form, body, shape, or entity.

In digital role-play, technology and the body respond according to each other; neither comes first nor second. It is often a disorientating intimacy exemplified by *World of Warcraft* player, Harisu, who states, '[i]n the game I just try to be myself. If anything, my avatar has to concentrate on being me' (Cooper 2007: n.p.). Again, a comparable, though more severe, example emerges in Chen's retelling of their experience of mercury poisoning. They describe the sharing of life with the mineral and the impossibility of deciding who lives that life, that is, who is concentrating on being who, as a queer intimate relationship. Chen continues:

> There is a potency and intensity to two animate or inanimate bodies passing one another, bodies that have an exchange - a potentially queer exchange - that effectively risks the implantation of injury. The quality of exchange may be at the molecular level, airborne molecules entering the breathing apparatus, molecules that may or may not have violent bodily effects; or the exchange may be visual, the meeting of eye unleashing a series of pleasurable or unpleasurable bodily reactions, chill pulse, adrenaline, heat, fear, tingling skin. (2012: 206)

If such thinking is applied when considering the interactions between the player and the device, then to feel a mouse's smooth and solid plastic skin is to feel your own supple skin glide across it, while to feel the hot air jetting from a fan vent is to feel that the laptop's core is warmer than your body. The potency and intensity of digital role-play, the exchange of affect it arouses, may only occur when machine and organism, matter and meaning, pass one another and look out through the other's eyes. As bodies shift to become matter, they matter in their intra-action with matter.

The section has illustrated the intra-active gyre of touching and feeling in digital role-play. The touch of role-play is omnidirectional, impacting the body in an equally myriad directionality. Hand to hand, hand to an interface, interface to the software, pixel to pixel, texture to meaning, affect to vibration. Matter and meaning cannot be separated but can shift by accruing or losing matter and meaning as residues congeal or grind away. Role-play will always feel this effect as matter and meaning from various media becomes relational through objects. This effect is not only spiralled inwards, but the

residues of role-play also reach out into other media, to which they can then be absorbed once again, with whatever is accrued or lost. The proceeding section explains this position through the poetry that permeates digital role-play, where leaky and sticky residues of affect and matter circulate.

3. Leaking/Sticking

Figure 2.3 115th Meeting of the Stormwind Poetry Appreciation Society (2021). Stormwind Park. Screenshot taken by the author.

Many role-players write and recite poetry during play, with over a thousand poems compiled in the *Argent Archives*. At the same time, the Stormwind Poetry Appreciation Society holds monthly meetings to listen to and perform poetry readings. This image [*fig 2.3*] is a screenshot I took while attending the society's meeting and shows an audience of role-players gathered to 'listen' to a poetry reading. In these meetings, role-players meet in Stormwind Park to recite original poetry or those written by other poets. At the beginning of the meeting, role-players may sign-up to recite a poem

while others gather around in anticipation. Once sign-ups are closed, Tinker, poet, and organiser of the society, Bertal Wobblespring, welcomes everyone, thanking them for attending, and then invites the poets up one at a time. Some poems are silly, some are whimsical, a few are rowdy, and many are heartfelt and raw. They often differ in style, form, genre, rhyme, and – surprisingly – delivery. I mention this as the poems are recited through text, via the in-game chat function, not orally, so players must transmit cadence or inflexion through punctuation, style, syntax, and stops. One poet recited an 'old faire piece' entitled 'The Frog's Lament', which they tell us has not been performed in many years. It was a witty and jaunty retelling of 'The Frog Prince; or, Iron Henry', a fairy tale collected by the Brothers Grimm. Like other media, elements of poetry circulate, leak into, and stick around digital role-play, becoming traceable as equivalent styles, contents, and delivery.

The avatars in the screenshot also inhabit the gameworld as an erogenous self that touches other avatars at the meeting. Technologies render skin and the dynamics of cloth, leather, mail or plate armour, each comprising distinct weights and textures. These materials bend and fold around the form and contours of bodies which themselves sit or stand upon the cold stone slabs of Stormwind Park. Each avatar takes up space; they move past each other to their seats on the wall or floor, perhaps brushing into or bumping against the other. Unlike the floor, the walls, the trees, or the rocks featured in the screenshot, the boundaries of these avatars are not defined by their perimeters, meaning they can pass through each other with no resistance. Yet, players and avatars position themselves to avoid any overlaps and passings, as if their

bodies could not, or there would be obstruction and friction. Still, technologies render these contacts: backsides touch stone and grass, skin touches leather and metal, and cloth capes flow behind the bodies touching other bodies. These 'props' precipitate imaginings and depict the feel of 'real' bodies in this gyre of contact. The material, the mediatic, and the affective gathered, the pressure of each upswelling sensation.

As mentioned, a massive array of poems is archived in the *Argent Archive*s, from haikus to sea shanties to great skaldic tales. Some players write original works, while others alter poems to become more culturally congruent within *World of Warcraft* or more general fictional worlds. For example, Mandalay Silvershadow's (2009) rendition of 'Oh, Captain my captain' resembles Walt Whitman's poem of the same title in style and rhyming scheme. Many poems in the archive are political and criticise Azeroth's past and present leaders, such as 'The Mad King Menethil' (2019) by Cathaleena Moonwhisper, which tells of Arthas Menethil's descent from the king of Lordaeron to the tyrannical Lich King. Or, Maureen Coddler's poem, 'Teldrassil' (2018), inspired by an in-game event, is an ode to the World Tree Teldrassil, home to the Night Elves burned to the ground by Sylvanas Windrunner during the War of the Thorns. Coddler writes that this poem was inspired by the song 'Edge of Night' (2003), sung by Peregrin Took in Peter Jackson's film adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*. Other poems are religious and claim devotion to in-game deities, such as Foreman Tye's 'A Shaman's Plea' (2018), a hymn to the Earthmother that asks for her guidance. There are even distinctly Romantic poems dedicated to the land and nature of Azeroth, such as

Rialean Sterning's 'Dun Morogh' (2016), which tells of the frozen howling winds and crisp snow of the mountains of Dun Morogh.

These examples of poetry make it apparent that role-players habitually revise, renew, and reiterate media. Residues and traces of works in other media are transformed into content befitting the fictional world. That this transformation of media content is habitual is crucial because, as Chun (2016) contends, habits remain in media by disappearing from consciousness. She explains that habits are things that we learn from others, it synthesises us, yet in contradiction, it is deeply personal, writing:

> Through habits users become their machines: they stream, update, capture, upload, share, grind, link, verify, map, save, trash, and troll. […] Habits are creative anticipations based on past repetitions that make network maps the historical future. Through habits, networks are scaled, for individual tics become indications of collective inclinations. Through the analytic of habits, individual actions coalesce bodies into monstrously connected chimera. (2016: 1-3)

Poetry is just one example of leaky media and the habitual coalescence of forces in digital role-play. The habits of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of role-players writing, drawing, posting, imagining, updating, touching, feeling, and being moved imbricates a network of fantasy media that is extended in each recurrent encounter between them. Through the individual habits of players, creating and transforming poetry, digital role-play becomes monstrously connected to wider networks of literature.

In the context of this work, the generative capacity of bodies encountering each other, all touching, feeling, and leaking, becomes a system of friction. The weight of matter touching – whatever the form of each might be – is a grinding articulation of sensuality. This intimate embrace of borders and boundaries, specifically the contact at the limen of the human and nonhuman, is sometimes posited to *melt away* discrete distinctions between those touching (Jones 2002; Giffney and Hird 2008). However, as Jane Bennett notes, 'members of an open whole never melt into a collective body' (2009: 35), and it is crucial to resist totalising holisms that transcend the parts that make up the whole. Timothy Morton (2017) offers the notion of 'subscendence' that describes how wholes *subscend*, rather than *transcend*, their parts. They write, '[w]holes *subscend* their parts, which means that parts are not just mechanical components of wholes and that there can be genuine surprise and novelty in the world, that a different future is always possible' (2017: n.p.). Although bodies as a whole do not melt into each but remain in subscendence, they are still positioned intimately together as an assembled whole. As discussed previously, Luciano and Chen (2015) argue that when the boundaries between the non/human become intimate, they grind up and against each other, generating friction and leakage. Following Luciano and Chen, a slight conceptual shift can understand this intimacy of borders as a generative grinding rather than a melting away of categories. Alysse Kushinski (2019) understands leaks as signifiers and material occurrences; that which leaks is a substance which seeps through while, as the adjective: 'leaking,' is defined as something without the ability to contain. Role-play is leaky and leaking; it cannot contain its content(s), so it leaks. This grinding and leakage is highly generative, provoking a material and sensual exchange between each body. Friction and leakage

guide this section; they are the aftereffects of the grinding of bodies, forms, and figures made evident in the previous section.

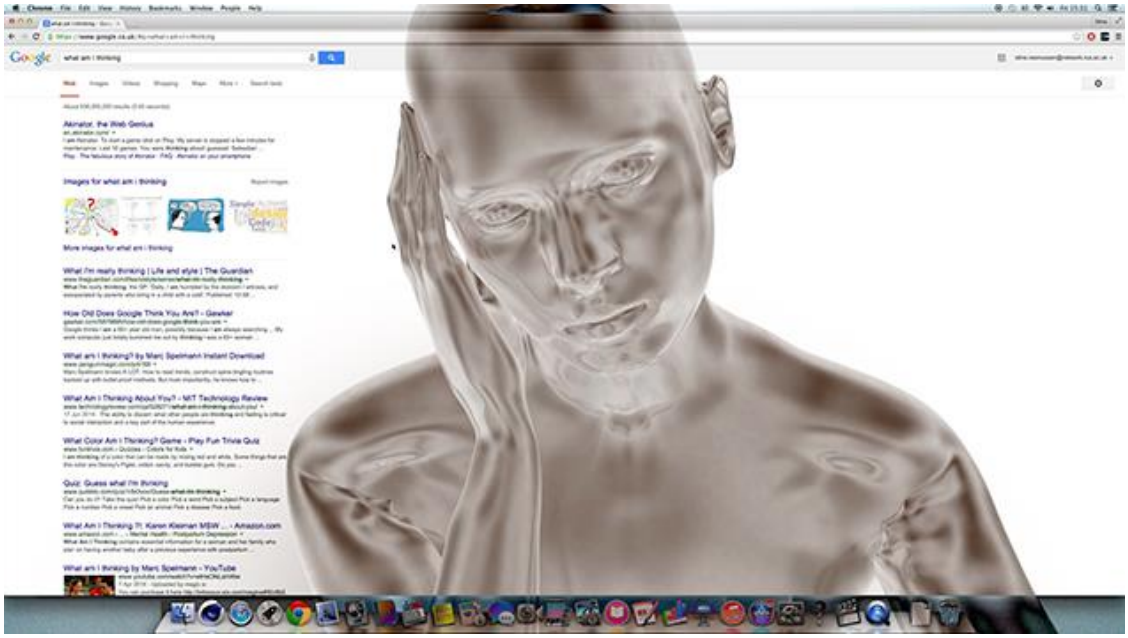

Figure 2.4 Stine Deja (2015). *The Perfect Human*. Film still. Copyright Stine Deja.

Once again, art that takes influence from soft-body dynamics exemplifies the grinding and leaking of media. The image above [*fig 2.4*] is a still from the film *The Perfect Human* (2015) by Stine Deja, which considers the perfect(ible) human: how it acts, thinks, and is comprised. The film still features a sterile, metallic entity inhabiting a web browser. This body, or perhaps another body in front of the screen, is searching for an answer to the question: 'what am I thinking?'. The entity is alone in the web browser but is seeping out and touching all others who have searched the same thing. Deja takes influence from Danish filmmaker Jørgen Leth's (1967) work of the same title; both films feature so-called perfect humans who exist in a white vacuum-like space and whose actions are narrated by a dispassionate and mechanical narrator as they do what perfect humans (try to) do. In Deja's film, the human 'Googles' questions, send text messages to a mysterious contact named Observer and watches videos

about taking the perfect selfie. In being captured with technology, we, the viewers, may look in and watch the figure bleed between websites and virtual spaces. This perfect human signifies cyborgian sentiments, and its metallic soft-body is mutable and shifting.

Deja's perfect human materialises in the relays between media, leaking and sticking amidst devices, websites, networks, and media. Chun (2016) proposes that digital networks, such as the internet, are inherently leaky; they leak on the level of technical infrastructure and at the level of content and media. Digital role-play is likewise instantiated in these networks, suggesting it must be fundamentally leaky. Such an imposition explains how individual content, imaginings, and affects leak between bodies and connect to wider networks of the internet, such as *Discord*, *YouTube*, *Reddit*, *Tiktok*, *4chan*, and *DeviantArt*. Chun's work reimagines networks through constitutive leaks and habitual repetition to posit that new media grinds at the distinctions between work and leisure, fascinating and tedious, hype and reality, amateur and professional. Between these dualisms, leaks leave residues and traces that form connections; they connect people on a mass scale and sediment into data, freezing memories, affects, and interactions into storage. As Schneider writes on media and the production of devices, '"sticky" residue and resonant aftereffects of manufacture extend a media object off of itself into the broader scene of its hand-lings and mark said object as participant in rituals, habits, and encounters' (2019: 56). The leaks generated from the friction of play have substance, they are sticky, and as matter and meaning are inseparable, meaning can be sticky too. From these ideas, it is my argument that affects, imaginings, and media content, in the form of leaks, have

material substance and weight and that digital role-players can become intimate with these leaks through the haptics and sensations of touching and feeling.

By proposing that meaning, which comprises sensations, imaginings, theories, and affects, has substance, this thesis treats meaning the same as other sticky matters. Sara Ahmed (2014) imagines affects as movements that can circulate and pick up further affects because they are sticky. In their stickiness, affects signify fleshy and physical substances; namely, that you may be 'touched' or 'moved' by affects, which is to feel their stickiness congeal on you. As they circulate, they might get stickier or less sticky depending on the directions of movement and whether affects slip or stick. Emotions, bodily sensations, and objects are in constant contact; as Ahmed notes, '[e]motions are both about objects, which they hence shape, and are also shaped by contact with objects' (2014: 7). She clarifies that objects are not repositories of feelings and emotions, likened to Ann Cvetkovich's (2003) 'archive of feelings,' but rather affects circulate objects, and they can generate feelings and affects. Thinking with affects establishes how an object impresses upon us, physically and emotionally, and how its form, texture, and history are shaped and shape us. To borrow Julietta Singh's (2018) sensuous notion of *leaning* into queerness, objects, matter, and meaning in leaning into queerness become insistently messy. Objects are not empty but embodied through the unlimited intimacy of entanglements. As the product of circulation between bodies and matter, this conception of affects resonates with digital role-play, adding another current to it as a grinding gyre of circulating matter and meaning.

To be affected by something is to get stuck in, and by getting stuck in is to become sticky, accumulating affect with each contact. To get stuck into role-playing is to stick to all the surfaces of its myriad forms. Poetry is one form of media in excess that leaks in and out of role-play, but content in all forms gets caught in its frictions. Websites, media-sharing apps, forums, and instant messaging platforms are brimming with fantasy art, memes, stories, models, music, maps, character ideas, cartoon strips, pornography, and cosplay. Each piece of content is a traceable thread that, when followed, produces meaning. Then, upon a larger scale, the circulatory gyre of mediatic affects becomes evident. A typical example of this movement is the digital portraits of character avatars that role-players themselves will draw or commission artists to create. These artworks turn into profile pictures on *Discord* or adorn character profile pages on the *Argent Archives*, while players might post pornographic versions on *DeviantArt*. Because the player and character are forging their online identity together, it suggests that the player is extending media into these more personal domains. Schneider (2019), on media, notes that the biobody is not usually considered a means of material extension; it is limited compared to technology. She writes that such assumptions eschew the co-constituting entanglement of human biology with other matter. Instead, the biobody is media; it extends and negotiates experience, as technology and media do. Role-play makes this evident, as objects, bodies, characters, affects, media, and imaginations all circulate without distinction between where one ends and the other starts. Each can extend the other in the intimacy of play and its afterlife.

Where the ongoing afterlives of digital role-play extend the sensuality of play across media into digital spaces, digital games disclose even more intimate moments of touch and affect. In illustrating how affects and stick during gameplay, the following passage queerly unpacks Jesper Juul's experience of touching and feeling games to reveal how they are the catalysts for intimacy as much as physical contact. In *The Art of Failure* (2013), Juul describes feelings of pain when he fails while playing a game and understands these feelings as a motivator to continue playing and improve his gameplay. Rather than conceive feelings of failure as a motivator, these affective sensations congeal into intimate moments between the player and the game. Since affects move and circulate, Barad's (2012) proposition that touch moves and affects what it effects might be inverted, stressing that affects move and touch what they effect. The implicit queerness of failure has been previously illustrated by Jack Halberstam (2011), Bonnie Ruberg (2017; 2019), and by Juul and Halberstam (2017) together in conversation. But, this work is somewhat of a departure from strictly considering queer failure, instead exploring Juul's sticky and leaky experience of failure as an arousal of queer touch.

In the opening pages of his monograph, Juul (2013) proposes that failure is integral to an overall enjoyable ludic experience. He offers three axioms that define playing video games; (i) millions of people play video games daily, (ii) humans have an innate and fundamental desire to succeed, and yet (iii) players engage in a system that actively encourages failure (2013: 2). From these axioms, Juul's 'paradox of failure' is derived where failure is understood as essential to video games as it allows players to have a greater sense of accomplishment when gaming. He writes, '[failure is] a motivator,

something that helps us reconsider our strategies and see the depth in a game, a clear proof that we have improved when we overcome it' (2013: 9). Ruberg (2019) critiques Juul, observing that his paradox of failure ascribes his white, heterosexual, and male-gendered experience to all players. They argue that Juul has established a 'framework of normative desires, one in which there is a 'normal' way of feeling' (2019: 141). It is worth noting that the games Juul discusses are predicated upon systems of winning and losing; however, proclaiming failure as a universal motivator for mastery should be called into question. A more promiscuous interpretation, for example, finds that playing and habitually failing at games might well be understood as a practice of sadomasochism, with players receiving pleasure from the pain and humiliation. Building upon Ruberg's critique, I want to move an understanding of failure away from a productive force to a touchy-feely one, where it generates intimacy rather than productivity.

Juul, a self-proclaimed sore loser, details a remarkably visceral response when playing – and failing – the rhythm game Patapon (Pyramid 2008). He feels discouraged and unhappy with each iteration of failure, yet he returns: 'I put the game away; I returned to it; I put it away again' (2013: 1). Despite failing, he continually seeks out that adverse feeling. Interpreting Juul's description of gaming, Ruberg (2019) argues that this gameplay experience is embodied and affective and proposes that it arouses an intimacy between player and game. They state, '[for Juul] the pain of losing lies less in any intellectual or even fully conscious response and more in a jolt of 'torment' felt deeply in the body' (2019: 141). Ruberg continues, offering that 'even beyond their

haptic interfaces, video games can effect embodied physical feelings – that 'real' sensations of pain and pleasure can leap from the mediating screen to player, transmitted via a kind of intimate touch between player and game' (*ibid*.). Akin to Murray's enchanted computer or Galloway's machinic embodiments, almost despite himself, Juul's account details affective and embodied sensations aroused by the touch of the game. For Juul, this pain is constructed as productive, motivating him to improve at the game. In deviating from a desire to master gameplay and centre touch rather than mastery, more intimate aspects of play emerge as jolts, jumps, proximity, and movements of affect. Across media, namely Gothic literature, LARP, and digital role-play, I find parallel descriptions that tell of such leaky and sticky affects. The subsequent section explores these descriptions to investigate how bodies become and stay connected through such affectively charged intimacies.

The intimacies between player and game can be understood as sustained by the circulation of affects that stick around during gameplay. For example, upon completing another game, *Meteos* (Q Entertainment, 2005), Juul, not failing once, states that he 'put the game away, not touching it again for more than a year' (2013: 1). Without the movement of pain and pleasure grinding upon the body, the affective experience is hampered, ending intimacy with the game. As much as pleasure brokers touch, the touch of failure, pain, and fear likewise catalyse contact. These considerations of affects and intimacies extend beyond media outside of video games, traceable in Gothic literature and LARP. On Mary Shelley's Gothic classic *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), Elizabeth Freeman (2010) proposes that Frankenstein's

fleshy undead monster renders physical and affective sensations between the monster, the gothic character, and the reader. She contends that monsters, such as vampires, ghosts, and zombies, of the gothic genre 'catalyze bodily sensations such as skipped heartbeats, screams, shudders, tears, and swoons in the gothic characters, and presumably in some readers' (2010: 98). As undead flesh touches decaying organs like a hand touches a book, each shares proximity and sensations that elicits a reaction from the reader, who experiences a 'fleshly touch from the dead and an unpredictable fleshly response to it' (2010: 98). Since touching, feeling, and affects cannot be separated, when the effects of one element become heightened or hampered, the other elements will react accordingly. For example, when affectively charged moments are in excess, as in a reader of Gothic literature, touching and feeling circulate. Whereas, with the dampening of affects, as in Juul's experience playing *Meteos*, touching and feeling become impeded.

Between Freeman's study of gothic literature and Juul's study of video games, Chloé Germaine's (2021) study of LARP provides another example of the leakiness and stickiness of touching and feeling. Recounting a Gothic LARP scenario, *The Sorrow of Huntingdon Hall*, Germaine writes:

> Clawed, decaying fingers burst through the wall, crumbling the plaster into dust. Instinct takes over. I stumble, knocking into a chair, falling against someone. In my panic, I scramble, pushing this other body out of the way of my escape route. (2021: 32)

This passage discloses how sensations might move around a room, ricocheting and sticking to all within. As fingers burst through a wall, affects suddenly transmit throughout the room, triggering multiple encounters of touching and feeling. Shock and panic congeal upon Germaine who moves to push another body and a chair out of their way in the wake of the wave of fear. The decaying fingers, the plaster wall, the setting of the scene, the invocation of horror tropes, and the other role-players in the room all touch, move and, to reiterate Barad (2012), affect what they effect. From these three interpretations, it is apparent that touching and being touched by media, device, or prop is to be touched by sticky affect, allowing it to sediment and move emotionally and physically. Juul inputs touch to the mediating device, 'I repeated the trusted ▲-▲-■-● sequence of button pushes' (2013: 1), to which the pain of failure outputs to prolong play. For Freeman, touching and feeling dead flesh provokes a response from the characters in gothic fiction as much as the reader. Then, Germaine's writing exposes that the touch of the room, furniture, props, and players all circulate affect, each able to touch and be touched by the other.

Just as leakages of affect spill over and into multiple media, the touch and feel of digital role-play does not delimit itself to the video game, where each contact becomes like a spillage, a traceable material-affective substance. When devices, bodies, media, and networks all come together, they cannot contain their matter and meaning, so they cannot help but leak over and into each other. Role-play is leaky; as it bumps and grinds on its movement through networks, it picks up or leaves behind residues of matter and meaning with each contact. The residues of these leaks might be followed,

such as poetry with roots outside the realms of Azeroth, but they do not lead to a mythical origin of touch. Instead, these residues provide information about the contact, what affects have become stuck in that touch, or what affects might have been lost. Poetry, failure, gothic horror, and digital role-play are all affectively charged and habitually leaky. Between media and bodies, each circulates and partakes in the sensations of the other in each recurrent wave of encounter, spiralling into a gyre of materiality and affect.

4. Self/Touch

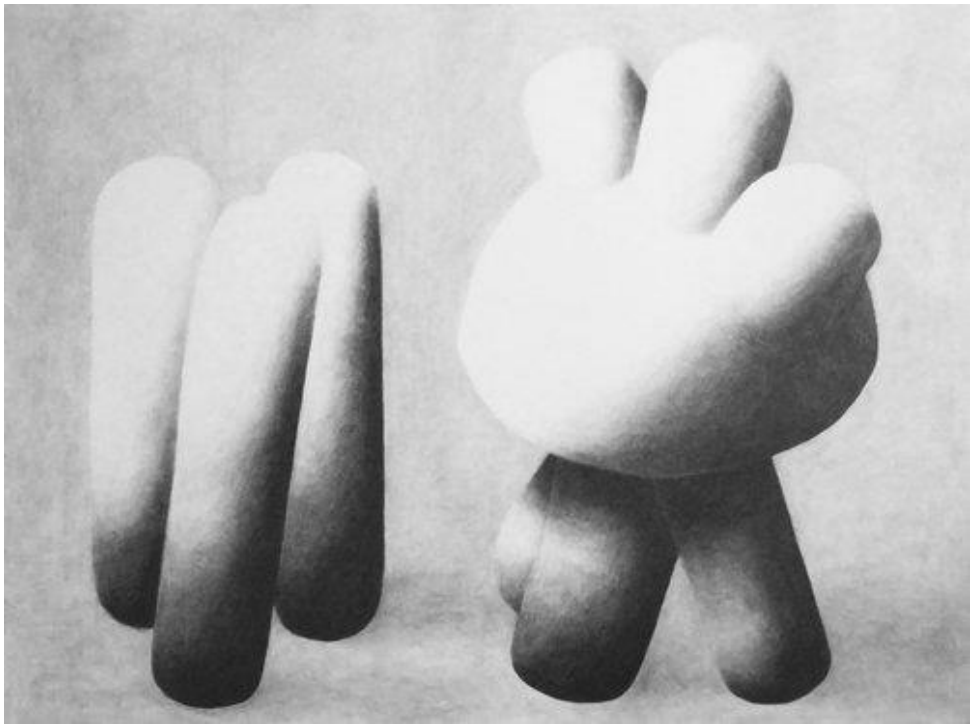

Figure 2.5 Megan Snowe (2015). *Body Body*. Copyright Megan Snowe.

In the illustration above [*fig 2.5*] are some curious-looking figures reminiscent of amoeba or bacteria. Their forms are sensuous and abstract, and these amorphous figures gather; they lean, balance, and pierce one another. The creatures are drawn with graphite with shading that renders their bodies distinctly soft. The paper or

screen that the critters reside upon does not tell of the softness of their bodies, meaning the viewer cannot feel their curves and crevices or tweak their nub-like appendages – not with their hands, anyway. These figures are self-portraits drawn by the artist and poet Megan Snowe. She explains that these forms investigate the possibilities of an abstract sensuality that is material and digital. Snowe's (2015) work explores her question: 'What would my abstract sensual self, my digital erogenous self, that inhabits the digital and imagined sphere look like?' Like the works of Marks and Sedgwick, Snowe's self-portraits reveal the body and texture – the meat – of the digital, virtual, imaginary body.

Snowe, in these self-portraits, exhibits the tangible possibility of being touchy-feely in a virtual space. She has a shape, a figure, and a form that can bump up against other shapes. Her sensuality is relational and mutable to its desires while it collides with other bodies, space, and desire, which might also be her body. Thinking about her self-portrait, Snowe (2015) writes:

> I don't know all of the forms my sensual body takes.
>
> The forms extend beyond my physical body, into spaces and code, into interactions and day dreams. For me this disconnect has to do with a confusion of location, an embracing of fluidity in lifestyle, identity and adaptation strategy. If I can and need to be anything mustn't my sensuality be also?
>
> And also what am I but a collision of spaces? a series of volumes throughout which lie a map of sensitive nerve endings? My body(bodies) is(are) tense and

> inviting - firm in its(their) physicality, but may be only visible because of a gentle shift in light.

Snowe is not sentimental about her skin and flesh; her sensuality does not limit itself to the confines and contour of a biobody. She also gestures towards the difference and otherness of the self in writing 'its(their)' in response to her body's otherwhere sensuality. As her body extends, its form becomes space, code, interactions, and imaginings that can fold back onto itself — her sensual body self-touches. Drawing influence from Snowe's self-portraits, this section speculates how digital role-play might touch itself and what a self-touch of digital role-play might enliven. Both efforts work to reveal the muddy enfoldings and unfoldings of the virtual and the self-evident that emerge and extend in digital role-play.

Trouble arises from a self-touch because the folding intimacies of touch are also aroused when the self touches itself (Nancy 2008; Barad 2012). Also, in leaning into its masturbatory connotations, a self-touch is auto-affective, sensual, and stimulating; as Nancy (2008) holds, the body delights in being extended by touch, an extension that the self can arouse. In their essay, 'On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I am' (2012), Barad suggests that when two hands touch, there is an exchange of sensuousness, warmth, pressure, presence, and proximity that brings otherness close to the self. Then, should the touch be between two hands of the same person, it might 'enliven an uncanny sense of the otherness of the self, a literal holding oneself at a distance in the sensation of contact, the greeting of the stranger within' (2012: 206). Such enfoldings illustrate the co-constitution of matter and meaning, virtual and

actual, no matter how seemingly disparate entities, agencies, ideas, textures, and sensations always touch and touch themselves. From these troubling notions of self-touch, this section finds what unfettered intimacies emerge when this self is promiscuous with itself, promiscuity that makes felt the unlimited folds of matter and meaning in digital role-play. Akin to Snowe's self-portraits, the self-touch of digital role-play can behold the self's sensations as it extends into spaces, code, interactions, and imaginings.

Barad understands self-touch through the ideas of quantum field theory, advocating a move away from classical physics and its understanding of ontology, specifically that physical particles are separate from the 'void'. In quantum field theory, the void is a 'living breathing indeterminacy of non/being'; it is a vacuum, a 'jubilant exploration of virtuality, where virtual particles – whose identifying characteristic is not rapidity, but rather, indeterminacy' (2012: 210). Barad continues, explaining that virtual particles in the void do not exist in space and time; instead, they are 'ghostly non/existences that teeter on the edge of the infinitely fine blade between being and non/being' (*ibid*.). The electron, a physical particle, encounters and precipitates through the void; it is fundamentally inseparable from it. As the electron figures the outer orbit of an atom, touching and being touched is to feel the negatively charged repulsion of electrons. Threads of connection can be drawn here (and are by Barad) between these conceptions of electrons and touch and queer theory. Most ostensibly as a theory that troubles prior settled notions of touch, quantum field theory rouses a queer perspective evocative of McGlotten's (2013) queer perspective of digital intimacies.

Namely, intimacy and electrons share a specific affordance and composition in that both are an indwelling spiral of actuality and the immanent virtual.

In quantum physics, the electron is a point particle, meaning it has no substructure, unlike composite particles (such as protons). The electron has 'self-energy,' which represents the interaction of the electron with the surrounding electromagnetic field that it, and its fellow electrons, creates. This self-energy, Barad explains, 'takes the form of an electron exchanging a virtual photon with itself' (2012: 212). To iterate the importance of scale, this single virtual photon that the electron exchanges itself with exist in the void, meaning it is an exploration of virtuality. When scaled up, this exchange suggests that each electron of every entity is the coalescence of physical particles and the jubilant indeterminacies of the void. This understanding of matter is crucial beyond analogy (though analogy remains pertinent); for Barad, queer identity and embodiment *do* quantum field theory. Barad remarks how troubling this is by citing physicist Richard Feynman for whom the electron-photon exchange enacts a perverse moral dilemma. Feynman states, '[i]nstead of going directly from one point to another, the electron goes along for a while and suddenly emits a photon; (horrors!) it absorbs its own photon. Perhaps there's something "immoral" about that, but the electron does it!' (Feynman, quoted in Barad 2012:212). Another layer of involution and convolution becomes apparent, too, as the promiscuous electron not only exchanges a virtual photon with itself; within the void, there is the possibility to interact with an infinite set of virtual particles. As Barad remarks, '*there is a virtual exploration of every possibility*' (2012: 212). If touch, as we feel it, is the touch of

electrons touching themselves, then all touch is perverse, an infinitely perverse exploration of every possibility. Then when two parts belong to the same entity, self-touch, it is an encounter with the infinite otherness of the self. 'Polymorphous perversity raised to an infinite power', declares Barad, who then notes, 'talk about a queer intimacy!' (2012: 213). Touch is radically intimate, a promiscuous exploration of the otherness and potentiality of the void. As we *do* theory, this perversity is always in effect, and so to promiscuously touch and feel your way through worlds, as role-play does, is to dwell in this perversity.

Touch, as exposed by Barad, is a paradigm of electromagnetic intra-action. So, when role-playing, touching and being touched by the plastic interfaces, the wires, the routers, the table, the chair, other players, and the self is a matter of electromagnetic repulsion. The self-touch of digital role-play encounters the void in the same way, existing as Barad's superposition of uncertainty. As self-touching is radically open yet queerly intimate, enlivening the strangeness of the self alongside a myriad of others, the indeterminacy and potentiality of all these touching forces become mutually arousing. Then in this gyre, role-play works to extend the effects of the virtual and the material as much as it is composed by them. This gyre of self-touch is circulatory; it both transmits and extends. Impressions of the immanent virtual are expressed in actualities of digital role-play while role-play impresses upon the virtual felt as feelings of connection and sensuality. The perspective of scale again becomes vital; role-play, scaled down to the subatomic level, mirrors the electrons that compose it, exploring matter and indeterminacies of the virtual. Role-play promiscuously arouses and

(re)iterates potential machinations of fantasy, gesture, media, and affects in circulation. Like the electron, role-play goes along for a while and emits its own energy, to which it then, at once, reabsorbs it.

As energy transforms, as it is pushed and pulled, emitted and reabsorbed in the intimacies of play, a means to imagine touch is performance, specifically a dance that ebbs and flows. Carla Hustak and Natasha Myers write that it is 'momentum' that 'helps us to get a feel for the affective push and pull among bodies, including the affinities, ruptures, enmeshments, and repulsions among organisms constantly inventing new ways to live with and alongside one another' (2012: 97). Hustak and Myers think of momentum as a force that dancers feel as they lean into and follow movements as opposed to Newton's laws of motion. These movements are affective and physical responses to energy which means that through momentum, dancers respond to the energy of music, emotions, senses, and other dancers; dance is always relational. Barad proposes that individuals 'are infinitely indebted to all others, where indebtedness is about not a debt that follows or results from a transaction but, rather, a debt that is the condition of possibility of giving/receiving' (2012: 214). Each mounts the relational indebtedness of all agencies and entities, which is made apparent at the site of touch. Role-players may only dance with the feelings, sentiments, and sensations of fictional worlds in relation to other entities. Interpreting digital role-play through the energies that circulate between players recognises that each player is

indebted to the other as each provides momentum that fuels the movements for others to follow.

Figure 2.6 'Uldum Nights #8 – 8' (2020). Screenshot taken by Justin Tinkerlake. https://www.argentarchives.org/node/239010 [accessed 20/07/2022].

Role-play, dance, and self-touch are all determined by momentums, transmitting energy that ricochets and transforms with gesture and movement. Flowing around the material, the digital, the quantum, the mediatic, and the affective, role-play tells of the intimacies between each. It is a queer intimacy, an entanglement to get lost in; lost in the arousal, the figuring, the feeling, the response, and the promiscuity of all matter. The *Argent Archives* contains many instances of players converging at in-game events, which, when understood through these notions of momentums, can be seen as multiple distinct energies, all bending to the weight of the other. For example, the screenshot above [*fig 2.6*], taken by Joshua Tinkerlake, features role-players gathered in the Mar'at Bazaar in Uldum to celebrate the Uldum Nights festival. Siavash

Wildhaven organises this annual event which includes a free market for people to trade goods, a raft race, a parade to celebrate Midsummer, and a party with a fireworks show after the parade. Some role-players set up stalls to sell gadgets, toys, magic jewellery, potions, and ice cream. Others serve cocktails, such as the 'The Desert Rose' consisting of pink grapefruit gin, apricot brandy liqueur, rose water and rose syrup. Then, some provide the festival's entertainment by telling stories and fortunes, dancing, playing music, and performing magic tricks. As a festival with many components working in tandem, this event, like dance, is relational, relying upon the co-presence of multiple momentums to push and pull bodies at play. The event organiser, stall vendors, bartenders, bards, dancers, pyrotechnicians, musicians, and attendees all produce and follow, give and receive momentums to generate the conditions for a festival of affinities and ruptures, enmeshments and repulsions.

Another example surfaces in the Dalaran Magic Faire, a server-wide celebration of magic and learning hosted by Kelly Jendrock and the Kirin Tor Intelligence role-playing guild in the floating city of Dalaran. The ninth edition of this faire, which took place in August 2022, saw role-players come together to organise, host, and attend speeches, a wand tournament, a research excursion, a cook-off, a trade market, a debate night, an open forum, a puzzle tournament, and several public lectures. The lectures included Zyretha Snowdawn's 'Circumstance Informing Spellwork,' Kelly Jendrock's 'Tales from the Northrend War – Insights from a Kirin Tor Military Strategist,' and Miss Mori's 'Advanced Transmutation – Introductory Course in Reality Weaving.' Miss Mori's lecture, in particular, tells of how realities exist in different shapes and sizes and

teaches spellcasters how to mould reality, piece realities together and apart, or create realities separate from other realities that typically co-mingle. She coins this craft 'weaving' and explains how energy is required to weave: 'Energy, everyone. Energy is what I will commonly refer to when we weave; for without energy, without magical energy.. essence. We cannot weave. There needs to be something present for us to create something else. Be that turning that energy into something tangible, or something more-.. intangible' (2022: n.p.). Miss Mori's notions regarding energy resemble Muñoz's (2009) own, where dance is like energy; it does not disappear but simply transforms. The energies of dancing and weaving never dematerialise, only rematerialise through performers' practices. Likewise, the same energies that sustain queer dance and reality weaving circulate the role-players at the faire as momentums transmit, transform, and ricochet between each other to create the event. Miss Mori's lecture builds upon canon lore within *World of Warcraft*, only extended into something new with her theorisations. In effect, Miss Mori absorbs the energies present in pre-established lore, extends that energy through her practice, and then transmits it to other players through her teachings and performance.

The position that gamescapes are arbitrary or illusory landscapes (King and Kryzwinska 2006) becomes undone in the intimacies of the Uldum Nights Festival and the Dalaran Magic Faire. Namely, where digital role-play self-touches, as made evident by the affects, bodies, and performances that grind with digital settings, pressing virtuals, and fictional characters. Digital role-play cannot help but touch itself as the momentums of each subscendent element pressing into and weighing upon the other determines and

constitutes gameplay. That is, digital role-play as an assembled whole is defined by the constant contact of individual elements. Each element is not the component of a machine but a body in motion with other bodies, simultaneously distinct yet part of an assembled whole, meaning, in the gyre of role-play, bodies touching both touch each other and self-touch at the same time. Similarly, MacCallum-Stewart's and Parsler's (2011) contention that players will never be 'sucked' into the terminal to play a 'very real' game of death is troubled when the role-play event does not centre death or war. Outside the game, celebrating at a festival or listening to a lecture pose little risk to attendees, and it is these energies and sensations that circulate during play. Should the energies and momentums of these role-play events be the focus of reality rather than death, then realness is pervasive in their community, labour, research, and celebrations.

This gyre of forces is not limited to digital role-play, with other games being further able to elucidate the queerness of these confluxes and, indeed, role-play's own gyre. *We Dwell in Possibility* (2021) is a queer gardening simulator made by Robert Yang and Eleanor Davis. The game is set in a bright and lush garden that the player can choose to sculpt with flowers and objects that the garden residents might bring. These residents are AI people ('peeps') who flow across the garden, bringing flowers, trees, coffee shops, projector screens, colonialist statues, stereos, and tents. Peeps might plonk their objects in the garden or carry them around, or the player can make the peeps drop their items. Some items give the peeps hats, make them horny, happy, dance or snog, or turn them into Tories who will become angry and steal the more erogenous

items. Yang and Davis write, '[f]rom this simple model of politics, sexuality, and landscape architecture, the player improvises a virtual heaven or hell, or more likely something both at once -- a society' (2021: n.p.). Between architectures, sexualities, and politics are the erogenous zones of intimacy. Plants bear plump fruits that the peeps suckle on, flowers spurt the peeps with ejaculate, while erotic sculptures have a particularly arousing effect on the peeps.

In his notes on the game, Yang dwells on the virtual, writing that the notion of virtual does a lot of work, yet we rarely touch on its meaning. He cites Marie-Laure Ryan (2001), who outlines common understandings of the virtual. Namely, the virtual as 'digital': commonly associated with video games; the virtual as 'potential': an Aristotelian idea that an acorn has *virtus* to become a tree; the virtual as 'fake': associated with Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum, a virtual that replaces the real, a hyperreality that *seems* more real than reality. Ryan is sceptical of Baudrillard's deceptive Other that seeks to replace the real. Instead, she finds resonance with Pierre Lévy's *le virtuel*, which recognises virtuality not as a replacement reality but as another distribution of the real; a pluralistic, non-linear, and inexhaustible reality. Yang remarks the naked peeps who dwell in the garden embody *le virtuel*: 'they have 2^3(=8) different body configurations […] and 6 different skin tones, resulting in 48 possible combinations of body traits; they wrap-around the screen edges in an infinite loop; they can run endlessly without tiring, and sometimes they can even fluidly change their chest or genitals at will' (2021 n.p.). Yang's peeps embody Gilles Deleuze's writing on virtual, namely, '[w]hat we call virtual is not something that lacks reality, but

something that enters into a process of actualization by following the plane that gives it its own reality' (1997: 5). As the peeps' lives interweave the potentials of the virtual with the actual, they might express either, and then against permanency, either might emerge or dissipate at any point.

To dwell in virtuality is to dwell in the possibilities of intimacy and promiscuity. For McGlotten, the virtual is analogous to intimacy; they write it 'is often deferred, sometimes materialized, but always charged with the *capacity* to help us feel like we belong' (2013: 1). They continue, '[v]irtuality helps to name the incipient social and affective worlds—modes of encounter, material configurations, emotional possibilities—that queer publics create, nourish, and sustain' (2013: 8). Yang and Davis' game, an indwelling in possibility, becomes an indwelling of the virtual, an indwelling of intimacy. The game positions intimacy, sensuality, and politics to illustrate how the virtual does not comprise a lack of reality. Yang writes that players bring their politics and desires into the game, noting that a conservative player might engineer a garden full of statues and police; in contrast, a queer player might prune all that to fashion a queer utopia. Players can do this because *We Dwell in Possibility* is a 'sandbox' game where the importance of winning or losing diminishes in favour of playing with desires. When I play this game, I often attempt to make a queer utopia that enables me to, as Muñoz puts it in his writing on queer futurity, 'imagine a space outside of heteronormativity' and cast 'a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*' (2009: 35). Then, I enjoy watching the peeps be happy, snog, look at art, and dance. Yet, I have role-played as a conservative, removed anything queer, and allowed the peeps to erect

police stations and colonial monuments and watch them become progressively more aggressive. Thinking about digital games and role-play in this context attunes to the immanence of desires at play, where waves of multiple bodies encounter one another at once; this actualisation of desires, connections, and sensualities proliferates the conditions for intimacy.

All desires are present in the virtual, all pressing, weighing, and lingering at the limen of actualisation. Mapping digital role-play onto these Deleuzean concepts of virtuality sees virtual spaces become something more and other than space created by computer game programming and technological devices. Digital role-play becomes like an electron and the void, a jubilant exploration of potentialities. Although, no matter how far the unfettered promiscuities of digital role-play spread, as a rhizome, matter and meaning of play will still gather into nodes. These nodes form from the continual encounters of play when their co-constituents bump and grind, intensifying the threads of connection within nodes in each recurrent encounter. These nodes are not static and can shift and morph as new threads are made, and old threads are cut. In staying with Deleuze's teachings, these nodes culminate into a milieu, that is, 'the congealing of a block of space-time' (Grosz 2008: 49). In physics, space-time is a model that entangles space and time into a single four-dimensional manifold. Barad writes that space-time 'is an enactment of differentness, a way of making/marking here and now' (2007: 137). Space-time, as an apparatus, explains why observers can perceive things differently relative to where and when events occur. In role-play's congealing block of space-time, it self-touches and experiences itself repeatedly, working to make

sense of the muddying confluence of forces. Yet outside of that milieu, other players might view the dynamic specificities of digital role-play as weird, puzzling, or even embarrassing.

A milieu describes how a species experiences a lifeworld – its rhythms, ebbs and flows, momentums, affinities, and entanglements (Grosz 2008). It is structural, in a sense, in that it explains structural relations that are 'ongoing re(con)figurings of space-time-matterings' (Barad 2007: 448). The microcosmic garden of *We Dwell in Possibility* presents a milieu with each member of the gamescape experiencing the other in a system of response where players explore politics and desires as pressing virtuals. Ryan (2001) understands the virtual as a deluge and that virtual things flood reality at us all at once, and she offers two strategies for moving through this flood. Utilitarians, who move directly from one goal to another, as Yang writes, wading through 'the ocean of shit (aka the internet) to reach their destination'; and flâneurs who promiscuously bump into different realities as they wander the digital. The deluge of virtual reality warrants an ongoing and shifting response from digital role-players who might employ an approach of wading through or grinding against; either option, however, will always generate friction.

5. Conclusion: Garbage Patch

The flotsam that rides the gyres is called drift. Drift that stays in the orbit of the gyre is considered to be part of the gyre memory.

- Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 2013.

I have presented a highly selective yet rhizomatic account of touch that encompasses barebacking, poetry, quantum field theory, art, media, and leaking to understand digital role-play's unfettered intimacy and promiscuity. The chapter is selective because it has presented gyres as something jubilant, a system of endless possibility. However, just like the ocean gyres, the currents that compose them are easily polluted. As the currents converge in the ocean gyres, the influx of marine litter, such as plastic bottles, toothbrushes, pens, plastic bags, plastic lighters, fishing nets, and nurdles (microplastics), has amassed into colossal garbage patches. Researchers from The Ocean Cleanup have projected that the Great Pacific Garbage Patch in the central North Pacific Ocean contains an estimated total of 1.8 trillion plastic pieces weighing 79,000 tonnes (Lebreton, Slat, Ferrari, *et al.* 2018). Like the ocean gyre's constant inundation by an endless deluge of rubbish, debris, and toxic chemicals, the ambulating currents of racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia soil the gyres of role-play. Alongside the swirling currents of play that crystallise into fantastical milieus, harmful tropes, stereotypes, and caricatures similarly sediment and take shape.

Colonialist traditions are embedded within *World of Warcraft* with its fascination with medieval Europe. White-saviour storylines and hypermasculinity are typical, while queer or disabled NPCs rarely exist in-game. Female NPCs are hypersexualised or offer femininity that is 'without complexity, personality, or reality attached' (Mandelbaum 2010: 87). Payal Dhar writes, '[a]lthough fantasy affords us every freedom to imagine new worlds and cultures, for the last 200-odd years, humans have mostly managed derivative facsimiles of our own. This includes reproducing the scourge of systemic

racism' (2020: n.p.). Thinking with entanglements apprehends one reason for prejudice's enduring cling to fantasy. As Ozeki (2013) explains, the principles of entanglement that govern molecules also extend to structure other perceptions and experiences. Entanglements govern matter and meaning from molecules to more expansive systems and networks. Plastic waste has become devastatingly entangled with marine ecologies, with many living organisms becoming tangled and trapped by plastic that can maim, strangle, and drown them. Plastic entanglements do not even spare the ocean's geology. Dana Luciano details plastiglomerates, a technoscientific stone-plastic hybrid: 'eroded shreds of plastic fused with naturally occurring minerals into a new durable material' (2016: n.p.). For Luciano, this lithified plastic is a speaking substance; it geologically marks the extinction of 'asshole' humans due to our obscene consumption.

Akin to the plastic, basalt, and organic that have fused into plastiglomerates, *World of Warcraft* and discrimination have sedimented into a distinct agency. The designers of *World of Warcraft* have done little to stem the flow of these polluting currents. In 2021, Activision Blizzard, the creators of *World of Warcraft*, was sued by California's Department of Fair Employment and Housing (DFEH) following a two-year investigation on the grounds of an ingrained culture of discrimination and sexual harassment. The DFEH claims that male employees would play video games during work while delegating their responsibilities to female employees, discuss sexual

encounters, and make jokes about rape.[11] The release of the game's latest expansion, *Shadowlands* (2020), revealed the first transgender NPC. Within the game, the Shadowlands are an afterlife, an infinite plane where the souls of deceased mortals travel to be reborn, serve, find peace, battle, or be trapped and tortured for eternity. One character, Pelagos, presented as a woman in his mortal life but chose to be a man in the afterlife. As this example is the only evidence of transgender lives in Azeroth (outside of players and player-made content), players must grimly assume that it is impossible to transition in mortal life and only realisable upon death. The only other queer-identifying characters (of note) in *Shadowlands* are Thiernax and Qadarin, two married men from the distant planet, Fyzandi. Again, Azeroth appears unhospitable to queer people when two explicitly 'out' characters hail from an otherwise unknown planet. It is more typical that the sexuality and gender identity of NPCs exist in the realm of connotation, with in-game information only hinting at queerness. Ruberg, in *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (2019), eschews interrogating representations as evidence of queer lives in video games and instead finds queerness in the designed, technical, and mechanical elements of games. Queerness is not necessarily about

[11] 'California sues Activision Blizzard over alleged harassment.' *BBC News*, July 22, 2021. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-57929543 [accessed 17/02/2022]. On the Lawsuit case brought again Activision Blizzard for discrimination, content creators Taliesin and Evitel (2021) state: '*World of Warcraft* might have been built by a certain group of guys at a certain point in history, but it doesn't belong to them anymore. It belongs to me; it belongs to my guild; it belongs to the RPers on Argent Dawn; it belongs to Red Shirt Guy, and Limit, and Echo, and Naguura, and Annie Fuchsia, and Preach, and Bellular, and Asmongold, and Sharm, and community artists, and machinima makers, and podcasters, and some dude who logs in a couple of days a week when his kids are asleep to keep up with his renown and farm a couple of old mounts, […] and the thousands upon thousands of people who have worked to make this game exist, many more of whom have been victims of this abuse of power than perpetrators of it.' 'Our Faves Are Problematic - Blizzard's Ultimate Shame... Can We Ever Forgive?' YouTube video, posted by 'Taliesin & Evitel,' July 24, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqd1uAtqtTQ&t=1017s&ab_channel=Taliesin%26Evitel [accessed 17/02/2022].

diverse representations that often pose only a thin veneer of what a queer life might entail. Building upon Ruberg's work, this chapter finds queerness in the touching and feeling of digital role-play as mechanics and interactions that elicit the perversities, intimacies, and promiscuities of queerness.

Such an account proves generative, making evident the synesthetic force of touching and feeling that enables role-players to wade through currents of matter and meaning to become oriented and situated within the gameworld. Touching is not mastering (Marks 2002); instead, it holds a sensual and carnal potential to feel through the fantastical and become beside it. Sedgwick's entanglement of touching and feeling has become so tacit that 'even to talk about affect virtually amounts to cutaneous contact' (2003: 17). Likewise, contact virtually amounts to feeling: touching = feeling = touching = feeling. The gyre never ceases. Touch is polymorphous perversity but is also polymorphous promiscuity. As Dean suggests, promiscuity affects all forms of attention, and touch cannot help but embrace and arouse an infinity of others. The gyre is exciting, a pressurised vortex of entangling promiscuities that the touchy-feely capacity of digital role-play exemplifies.

It falls beyond the scope of this thesis to properly establish the impact these entangled currents of bigotry that the designers of the game and the genre perpetuate have upon players. This chapter focuses on the arts, acts, and practices, that is, the *tekne* of digital role-play, principally because investigating the lives of queer folks introduces a different strand of argumentation. Considering the tekne of digital role-play, though,

finds queerness in the memory of its gyre, intimacies situated in all the amongnesses, besidenesses, withnesses, and againnesses of the game. Queerness pervades the entanglements of digital role-play, exhibited in the unfettered promiscuities and intimacies between all matters, bodies, affects, and imaginings. Each contact is like an upswell of current into the broader gyres of digital role-play to be reabsorbed, at once, by all the matter and meaning that co-constitutes play.

CHAPTER THREE

Digital Stones: Slippage and Sensation

Keep yer feet on th' ground!

- Common Dwarven saying, *World of Warcraft*, 2004-

1. Bedrock

Figure 3.1 Stormsong Valley, Kul Tiras (2018). *World of Warcraft: Battle for Azeroth*. Screenshot taken by the author.

In Azeroth, Stormsong Valley [*fig 3.1*] is a land of bulbous foothills, rock-strewn highlands, and meandering brooks. The land is verdant because inland streams and the mineral-rich sea air enable plant life to flourish. Life is bucolic here, and many of the valley's citizens are farmers, beekeepers, and mead brewers providing sustenance for the whole island of Kul'Tiras. Stones feature in many formations in the valley, including mountain peaks, craggy ravines, foothills, gorges, boulders, outcroppings, flats, balancing rocks, and raging elementals roaming a drained marsh. Initially, lines of

code, polygons, textures, and shading appear to constitute these digital stones; however, this chapter investigates the mimetic link between digital and actual stones, arguing that they share the very same matter, sensations, and stories. The fundamental questions of this thesis ask what the realities of digital role-playing are and what realities, as in matter and meaning, comprise digital role-play. The gamescapes of Azeroth mirror the realities of our 'away-from-keyboard' environments where stones and rocks form their foundations, meaning that stones are an integral and constant element of the realities of digital role-play. By considering stones as the bedrock of reality in digital role-play, the foundational material of stone emerges as a means to investigate these questions.

Although stones are the bedrock of reality, they are often seen as inert and mundane. Kellie Robertson (2012) posits that rocks are often synonymous with nonsentience, noting the insults 'heart of stone' and 'dumber than a box of rocks,' which insist upon the dynamism of humans and the inertness of rocks. She writes, 'the rock contaminates the human to the extent that the latter is drained of all sensation and vitality' (2012: 91). Yet stones are lively and offer an infinite world of story and sensation. Movements and transformations are an ancient geological force, a tumbling rock, a mudslide, and a sudden snap under pressure. Stones have also brokered communication millennia before wires and pixels (Parikka 2015). The deep places of the earth and its surfaces feature carvings and negative handprint artworks that gesture from the Neolithic and Palaeolithic to today (Schneider 2018). Plastiglomerates, lithified plastic fused with minerals, likewise begin to unfold some of

the entanglements of the technological and the geological (Luciano 2016). Each of these incarnations of stones pertains to stories and sensations that generate relations between human and nonhuman entities.

In forming the foundations of worlds, stones are an enduring and unrelenting substance of reality. In his phenomenology of stone, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, Jeffrey J. Cohen argues that when anthropocentric thinking is interrupted, stones can be acknowledged to imbue '*terra* with its firmness, mundane reality with comforting solidity' (2015: 29). Stones offer a particular worlding capacity by comprising the very foundations of worlds and as endless emitters of stories and sensations (Cohen 2015: 58). This chapter unsettles the gap between real and digital, holding that elements of stones endure in play and cultivate the moments in digital role-play where it feels *as if* real. They remain active partners in the digital worlds of *World of Warcraft*, with a distinctive movement of narrative, perception, cognition, and sensation relational to their digital composition. On the intersections of ecology and games, Alenda Y. Chang argues, 'games are intermediary objects through which swirl both imaginative fantasy and real activity and places, with real, if not directly predictable effects' (2019: 4). To investigate the matters of reality in digital role-play, this chapter explores the material, artistic, and philosophical links between digital stones in *World of Warcraft* and actual stones, and determines what real effects stones generate in digital role-play.

Following ecologists Erle C. Ellis and Navin Ramankutty (2008), Chang proposes that games act as mesocosms, 'experimental enclosures intermediate in size and

complexity between small, highly controlled lab experiments and large, often unpredictable real-world environments' (2019: 17). Ellis and Ramankutty (2008) hold that human influence now pervades terrestrial biospheres, with most of 'nature' being intrinsically intertwined with human systems. They aim to rid the reflexive understanding of 'nature' as an Edenic space where human influence only disrupts and disturbs. Instead, they offer that most ecological systems are 'anthromes', that is, Anthropogenic biomes. Employing this idea in game studies, Chang describes games as 'portions of a field sectioned off for study, or partially enclosed waters, game ecologies toy with select variables within environments that remain close to, but apart from life' (2019: 21). In understanding games as mesocosms, it becomes possible to model the relations, agencies, and composition of ecological matters, including humans, so that the intimately entangled lifeworld of each can be studied. Chang contends that video game ecologies, though they have significant ties to real-world environments, keep a degree of separation from the life they represent. In contrast, this chapter proposes that traces of ecologies persist within video games; whether they have stuck around in the game-making process, are forcibly dragged into the game, or are gathered by role-players, some matter and meaning of nature remain.

Chang contends that scientific experimentation and games are linked more than just figuratively. This chapter follows her reasoning, adding interpretations of art and philosophy to further the link between digital and actual stones. The environmental sciences elucidate stone's regularities, predictabilities, and consistencies, while art and philosophy describe its force and impact – how it *feels* (Grosz 2008). As Cohen argues,

‘[w]hen stones are examined as something more than fixed and immobile things, as partners in errantry, then facts likewise begin to ambulate’ (2015: 12). He makes the sensations and stories of stones apparent when he tells the reader of an oval-shaped salt-and-pepper piece of granite that sits on the windowsill of his study. Recalling Bruno Latour’s slight surprise of action, Cohen remarks that he spotted the stone while walking in Maine and found himself stooping down to grasp it before he was ‘aware of making a choice’ (2015: 211). He communicates his geophilia here, writing, ‘[s]o many qualities of the rock allure, calling me to continued contemplation, calling me to introduce this stone to you’ (2015: 212). Stones are Cohen’s collaborators, an enduring company and a constant slide of narrative, perception, cognition, and sensations. Just as Cohen introduces the reader to the granite that sits on his windowsill, Laura U. Marks, in an essay titled ‘My Rock’ (2009), introduces us to another rock that sits upon her windowsill. She traces the rock’s history and how its shape came to be while predicting the trajectory of its story as it moves beyond her into its future: ‘It is smooth because it has been tumbled together with other rocks for eons. Its fissures show that eventually it will break up into small rocks, and finally to dust’ (2009: 503). Expecting the impressions of stones as inert matter, Marks describes her rock as a living substance of time, not inanimate – ‘just very slow’ (*ibid*.). Marks and Cohen explain how stones persistently unfold stories and carry narratives, wherein to tell stories with stones is to behold the dynamisms of ecosystems, environments, times, shared agencies, and companionate properties. Digital stones are everywhere in *World of Warcraft*, and this chapter argues that they elicit the same allure.

In the mesocosms of video games, compositional and relational links can be traced and followed that generate or elucidate shared sensations and stories. These speculations become apparent upon unpacking Elizabeth Grosz's (2008) specific conception of sensation to understand digital stones not as a matter of representation [signs, images, and fantasies] but as a matter of sensation [force, rhythm, and resonance]. For Grosz, sensation is 'the zone of indeterminacy between subject and object, the bloc that erupts from the encounter of the one with the other' (2008: 73). Eruptions of sensation impact the body directly, skirting the brain, affecting internal organs, cells, and nervous system – hence Cohen's slight surprise of action in his encounter with the granite. This chapter will then put Cohen and Grosz's ideas in dialogue with, once again, the new materialisms of Karen Barad, Mel Y. Chen, Dana Luciano, and Rebecca Schneider to posit that digital stones are as likely to provoke sensations as their earthly and geological counterparts.

Cohen often responds to ecologist David Abram (2010), who embraces the entanglement of all things and yet pauses at stones. He writes, '[w]hat of stones—of boulders and mountain cliffs? Clearly, a slab of granite is not alive in any obvious sense' (2010: 46). Abram is also a staunch critic of the ubiquity of technology, claiming it makes it possible to forget nature's expressive and animate power. In his translations for the nonhuman, he writes that nature expresses itself through rhythm, movement, and animacy rather than words; in place of representation (technology), he finds dance, sensation, and participation. Neither stones nor technology figure into the rhythms that comprise Abram's understanding of ecology. To expand upon Cohen's

work, with Abram's question in mind, I argue that the pixels, polygons, textures, and lines of code that are composite of the digital lithic and the architectures and fixtures they fabricate express themselves as ecological movements and sensations.

Outside of form, shape, and colour, digital stones do not readily appear to share much in terms of molecular composition with stones. However, stones do not limit themselves and settle into fixed positions; they persistently unfold into media and digital spaces. Scholars such as Jussi Parikka (2015) and Shannon Mattern (2017) think of stones *as* media that disclose and communicate information across deep time. Namely, that lithic matter is a medium of data storage that, when decoded, shares information about the history of the earth (Luciano 2016). Further, all devices that receive and transmit media content are entangled with the lithic, comprising elements such as lead, lithium, and platinum. For many scholars, media does not encompass only connotation, semiotics, and representation; rather, media encompasses the circuits, voltage, military engineers, the environment, dirt, light, chemicals, cities, talismans, and the sweat of factory workers (Kittler 2009; Parikka 2015; Mattern 2017; Schneider 2019; Marks 2020). New materialisms and affect theory often eschew the poststructuralist emphasis on representation, so I want to understand stones as a matter of mimesis rather than representation. Schneider (2011) argues that mimesis (alongside its family of resembling qualities: the theatrical, the copy, the double, and the fake) are interruptive in that they enact a transitiveness that enables disruptive sensations. According to this mode of thinking, mimesis is characterised by the real and fake at once; it attempts to capture the sensation of the original while remaining

indelibly different. Building upon Parikka's proposition that media technologies and the earth have a bounded relation, this chapter argues that there is a bind between the digital and actual lithic. Both stones share a very physical link in material composition, while many more shared sensations emerge when digital stones are understood as being implicated in mimesis.

The mimetic describes a copy that is not a copy. According to Michael Taussig, mimesis is two-layered; it is a 'copying or imitation, and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived' (1993: 21). Similarities emerge between Grosz's conceptions of sensation and mimetic connections as both generate sensations that impact bodies upon encounter. But, more specifically, the mimetic double can generate sensations of what it is copying or imitating when the perceiver encounters it. The mimetic digital stones will emit the sensations of stones because they share a palpable and sensuous connection that the perceiver feels. For Schneider (2019), mimesis is becoming through repetition, and it is distinct from representation, more akin to (re)iteration. Her iteration of mimesis builds upon Roger Caillois ([1935] 1984), Fred Moten (2003), and Taussig (1993), where mimesis describes the ricocheting of gesture that inaugurates and recycles relation. Schneider writes that she enjoys the notion of hail because 'it opens and perhaps suspends or extends an interval, an opening for response […], it might also open worlds for difference' (2019: 90). As one form hails another, the other will reciprocate, and in this (re)iteration of gesture, a world of difference becomes imbricated in the connection that a perceiver can then feel.

There is a mimetic and gestural relationship between these stones where actual stones hail digital stones, and digital stones receive and recycle this gesture and respond by hailing. Digital stones receive elements from the stone's hail; then, the hail might be suspended and extended and, in this interval, will receive further hails. In this ricocheting and recycling of relation, role-players become caught in the crossfire and feel the recycled gestures that digital stones emit. In the give and receive of gestures, a physical link is brokered, too, because, as Taussig (1993) holds, there is an afterlife of contact, so things that were once in contact remain so. That is, the image of a thing that was once in contact with it retains some of the capacities of the substance it touched. This position is made evident by Schneider (2019) when she considers the red ochre negative handprints upon stone made by Palaeolithic peoples worldwide that she describes as petrified gestures that have hailed for over forty thousand years. To properly situate the mimetic relations and capacities of digital stones and actual stones in the mesocosm of *World of Warcraft*, this chapter explores the links between the two: a material and physical as well as a sensory, affective, and narrative link. The objectives of this chapter are two-fold; in extending the works of Chang (2019) and Parikka (2015) to include digital role-play, the material link between media and geology emerges, while Grosz's (2008) notion of sensation in dialogue with Cohen (2015) reveal more sensual links. Fusing and lithifying all these works establishes an arena to think *with* stones in digital role-play, where stones are vital players and active collaborators in making a world. Stones pervade digital role-play as a foundational material substance as well as stories, sensations, and efficacies.

Where stones of digital realities reveal their lively forces in these considerations, this chapter's next section investigates how thinking with sensations and matter might map onto other elements of digital role-play. The vital aspect of these sensations is that they are momentary and fleeting; as Grosz writes, they are *eruptions* (2008: 73). Digital stones remain just that, digital stones, but as mimesis, the stone-like elements of the digital stones erupt in moments of disruption. The term slippage best embodies and characterises these eruptions of sensations. A slippage describes a snap, a flood of sensation where the disparity between real and fake becomes indistinguishable. Recalling a US Civil War reenactment she attended, Schneider (2011) marvels at the nauseatingly convoluted system of temporal and material forces at work. She reflects upon this 'hyper-weird' mix of temporalities, writing 'there can arise at times a quasi and queasy sensation of cross-temporal slippage' (2011: 14). As times and matters are dragged back and forth, the faux slips into the real, and vice versa, these sensations erupt in the gut before the brain can logically render them. These slippages, felt as recoiling moments of nausea, guide this final section, which argues that digital role-play maintains its own disruptive hyper-weird mix of realities that begin to unravel why it sometimes feels *as if* real.

In calling into question the realness and fakeness of digital role-play, this chapter is somewhat of a departure from Jesper Juul's (2006) assertions that games are 'half-real' in that they are both real rules and a fictional world at once. He maintains that is always a distinction between the real and the fictive, whereas this chapter claims a

much muddier distinction between realities in digital role-play. In digital role-play's hyper-weird mix of realities, the real and the fake grind up and against each other to generate a complex mix of sensations that momentarily confuse the limits between the two. Chang (2020) has already begun this critique, making it evident that games can blend real worlds and fictional rules. By investigating the mimetic fake in digital role-play, this chapter recognises that it does not signify a loss of sensation, vitality, or reality compared to its 'real' counterpart. Rather, the fake extends the same hail it received from the real, alongside other gestures gathered in the interval of response.

Ursula K. Le Guin's writing on poetry characterises much of the motivation of this chapter, specifically that poetry is the human language 'that can try to say what a tree or a rock or a river *is*' (2017: M16). She continues that poetry can do so 'by relating the quality of an individual human relationship to a thing, a rock or river or tree, or simply by describing the thing as truthfully as possible' (*ibid*.). Rather than relating human experience to other matter through metaphors, much of the impetus of this chapter is to describe, as truthfully as possible, the specific capacities, affordances, and efficacies of matter to find what relations emerge in digital role-play. From the rudiments of stones and their digital counterparts, investigations expand to encompass the broader digital ecologies, buildings, stages, lighting, interfaces, music, and rhythms. As such, the arguments in this chapter are an effort to describe as truthfully as possible the myriad strangeness of digital role-play; the realness, the fakeness, the obvious, and the confusing, and even notions of magic, enchantment, and alchemy that players, performers, and scholars alike evoke.

In responding to these questions, the first section, 'Cataclysm', examines stones, rocks, crystals, mountains, and fissures in *World of Warcraft* and investigates their varied compositions, relations, and processes to establish a physical link between their lithic counterparts. By exploring an in-game event, 'The Shattering,' a worldwide environmental catastrophe, a distinct turn in ecological thinking for role-players is recognised. The following section, 'Sensation', investigates and explores the sensations, affects, and narratives that digital and actual stones share as they emerge in art, philosophy, and archaeology. Stones are everywhere in *World of Warcraft*, and through sensation, this section finds role-players responding to the enduring stories of the digital lithic. The final section, 'Slippage', examines slippages and 'magic moments' where the fantastical reality of the gameworld feels as if it is real and investigates how role-players play with sensation to structure the architecture for such an arena of enchantment.

2. Cataclysm

Figure 3.2 The Great Divide, The Barrens (2010). *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm*. Screenshot by *Wowhead*. https://classic.wowhead.com/guides/zone-changes-from-classic-to-cataclysm [accessed 01/02/2022].

Upon the launch of the expansion *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm* (2010), players logged in to find that much of Azeroth had been sundered and reformed both in the game and in the narrative. Coined 'The Shattering', this cataclysmic event was a chain reaction of natural disasters caused by the Dragon Aspect, Deathwing, who burst out from the Elemental Plane into the physical world, shattering the boundaries between the two. Earthquakes, floods, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions ensued, dramatically altering Azeroth's geography. One of the more devastating effects of the shattering is the fissure that cuts through The Barrens caused by tectonic plates breaking apart and the land subsiding [*fig 3.2*]. Describing The Shattering, Chang (2019) writes that, from a ludic perspective, these changes were unprecedented in an otherwise static environment, where ecologies are agglomerated rather than changed. Alongside this, records within the *Argent Archives* take an ecological turn, with screenshots, diary entries, and reports emerging from players reckoning with this new world. Caught in the Barrens when the Great Divide formed, Dah'niuh Da Tra'orit writes, 'Like ice, the earth cracked in a rage - the large shards of earth crossing over each other and falling into the gaping scar that widened almost instantly' (2011: n.p.). Then, when the tsunami hit out at sea, Grizzik writes, 'The wind came first, the wind and the noise. Fishing boats were drawn up by the swell, even larger trading vessels were wrenched into the titan wave's crest as its energy funnelled into the mouth of the Bay' (2017: n.p.). Through a consideration of this period of upheaval, this section investigates how stones, as matter, sensation, art, media, and content, are entangled with video games and, consequently, digital role-play. As a time of obvious rupture, the Shattering acts as a catalyst for ecological thought, yet this thinking-with the environment is pervasive throughout play, design, and scholarship.

Ecological thought concerns how we conceptualise and imagine nature, and it is as much a method of thinking as it is an ongoing project (Morton 2010; Cohen 2015; Haraway 2016). For Timothy Morton (2010a; 2010b), ecological thought must reckon with the discords of ecology itself; it is cosmological and dark, unbeautiful and requiring love, interconnected and absent. As they write: 'Yes, everything is interconnected. And it sucks' (2010a: 33). Ecological thinking about digital role-play must recognise the entanglements of nature in games and how role-players connect and become with these entanglements – at the same time, recognise the waste and despair that the game brings, with its need for high-powered computers, global server farms, and uncompensated 'crunch' labour. In interpreting this interconnectedness, Cohen observes the 'stickily' (2015: 169) connectedness of ecologies, while Andrew Pickering characterises the bringing together of the human and nonhuman as a 'mangle' (1995: 21). This chapter centres on a task of ecological thought that Morton lays out, namely, to 'figure out how to love the inhuman' (2010a: 92) and to consider how to 'visualise the unbeautiful, the uncold, the "lame," the unsplendid' (2010b: 280). This means understanding nature in video games as not some lack or separation from nature. Nature in video games is not inert, artificial, and unreal but a dance of interconnected agencies like any other ecology with its own rhythms and discords. Pertinently, it is role-players who often play with these ecologies, making apparent their sticky mangle with the 'outside' world through their arts, acts, and practices. Before turning to these entanglements, this section expands upon extant media studies discourses that have long argued that the environment is integral to every facet of media to establish what it is that role-players are thinking and playing with.

Video games are composed of as much environmental content as environmental matter. As Parikka argues, 'media starts much *before media become media* (2015: 37). Media, then, must comprise lithium, lead, copper wires, voltage differences, the platinum core of hard drives, stone carvings, and data storage buildings. Scholars such as Friedrich Kittler propose that media studies must incorporate these 'hard' matters of media as much as representations and semiotics. Many scholars have furthered these impositions, necessarily illustrating how the substances of media connect to labour, production, and ecology and the gendered, queered, and racial residues that linger with them (Parikka 2015: Mattern 2017; Noble 2018; Schneider 2019). In *A Geology of Media*, Parikka (2015) proposes that frameworks of geology can be employed to study media, as its structures the myriad 'levers, layers, strata, and interconnections that define the earth' (2015: 4). These frames are not limited to the soil, crust, and layers of the ground but are connected to industrial production, economies, climate change, and geophysical life worlds. Geology becomes an intervention in thinking about the materiality of the technological media world as it shares interconnecting matter, processes, and frames.

The first link that suggests connectedness between digital and actual stones emerges in that both stones and technological interfaces share component materials. Towards the surface of stones, lichens, mosses, algae, dirt, and sand mark their colours and textures. Stones, too, are composed of metal ores in the form of oxides, sulphides, silicates, native metals, and noble metals. For example, lead, a common element, is

universally found in electronic equipment: traces compound the tin-lead solder that connects circuit boards; it acts as a radiation shield in monitors, and is necessary as a plastic stabiliser in cabling. Parikka recognises lithium as a material that brokers a connection between geology and interfaces. He writes that lithium is a 'premediatic media material that is essential to the existence of technological culture but also as an element that traverses technologies' (2015: 4). To describe this entanglement of media, both analogue and digital, and nature, Parikka offers the notion of medianatures (a variant of Haraway's naturecultures [2003]) that 'crystallizes the "double bind" of media and nature as constituting spheres' (2015: 14). Just as naturecultures 'become who they are *in the dance of relating'* (Haraway 2008: 25), so do medianatures. Digital stones exemplify a medianature – and video games at-large as mesocosms – as an encounter between media and nature that co-become through their relation. Digital stones become what they are in an ongoing encounter between the digital (as media, content, hardware, software, graphics, textures, shading, labour, and production) and stones.

As medianatures describe the composite matter in media and nature, they can also describe the double bind of each as transmitters of information, meaning, and stories. Shannon Mattern (2017) insists that media studies must expand to include the communicative potential in the material composites of cities. She writes, '[m]ud, that most humble of geological resources, and its material analogs clay, stone, brick, and concrete, have supplied the foundations for our human settlement and forms of symbolic communication' (2017: 113). Concrete epitomises these sentiments for

Mattern as a modern and premodern material in mixing primordial matter with new techniques and technologies. These theorisations emerge as efforts of 'worlding' (Haraway 2016), where media and nature are processes of becoming-with, with each tying, describing, and generating stories. Mattern tells the story of concrete as primordial matter that becomes a 'flat, banal, brutal face' of a wall, which offers a space for inscriptions, 'for home-grown means of local inscription, for the subaltern to have a voice' (2017: 111, 113). Medianatures are story-generators that disclose nature's capacity as a connective and collaborative force. This initial thinking of video games as a medianature tells the tale of lead and lithium's journey from stones to the factory to players' homes.

Stories, narratives, and poetics all move us to fellowship with the environment (Cohen 2015; Le Guin 2017). Cohen writes, 'story intensifies relation, even with the nonhuman' and with this, stone 'erodes our long habit of regarding the world as a place fashioned for our habitation, of thinking humans an apex or culmination' (2015: 34). In listening to stones and telling stories *with* them, humans become decentred as the catalyst of media. Chang (2019) offers many examples of how video games compose and record nature, which enliven a companionate relationship between players and their composites. One such example Chang gives is *Mountain* (OReilly 2014), a game where the player becomes a mountain in a 'simulation of geologic consciousness' (2019: 141). Although, she explains that players are constrained by their humanness as they must experience the game *as* humans. But still, an affective bond remains between the human and nonhuman, connecting the player to the

mountain's longevity, mortality, history, and territory. Thinking with stones reveals how they lend their matter, sensations, and stories to video games. By exploring the sensations of stones as they have been touched, felt, and recorded in media throughout time, these sensations might then be traced as they (re)emerge in *World of Warcraft* and the performances of digital role-play.

Mountain provides a pertinent example of how the lithic evokes empathetic feelings not typically felt by video game players (Chang 2019). This experience mirrors Cohen's (2015) slight surprise of action when he reacts to the salt-and-pepper piece of granite and then feels compelled to introduce the stone to us. Latour argues: 'I never act; I am always slightly surprised by what I do' (1999: 281). He continues, proposing provocatively: '[t]hat which acts through me is also surprised by what I do, by the chance to mutate, to change, and to bifurcate, the chance that I and the circumstances surrounding me offer to that which has been invited, recovered, welcomed' (*ibid*.). Cohen (2015) argues that stones do not delimit themselves to settle because they are material of inexhaustible mystery, provocation, and vitality. In doing so, he seeks to move beyond the utilitarian industrial domination of stone to a relationship that is hesitant and gregarious. A more gregarious relationship enables a mimetic and intimate connection to emerge where action sloughs and reaction emerges, a reaction that centres empathy, emotion, and sensation.

Attempts to record and interpret the sensations of stones emerge throughout human history, from Neolithic rock carvers to game designers, and ties between these

medianatures reveal echoing practices in each iteration of recorder and interpreter. To offer an example that this call of stones is nothing new, archaeologist Andrew Meirion Jones (2012) details one hail which was responded to by Neolithic rock carvers in the Kilmartin region of Scotland. Upon analysing the rocks and the carvings, Jones proposes that the prehistoric carvers perceived the rocks as animate. He writes, 'the rock surfaces do not appear to be treated as inert materials; instead, the carvers appear to have been responding to the cracks, fissures and undulations of the rocks; motifs were carved in answer to the uneven and changing character of the rocks' (Jones 2012: 81). Jones goes on to describe a remarkable performance whereby the carvers used pebbles of quartz to carve, that when it struck the stone, would produce a triboluminescent effect that became more vibrant under certain conditions. The striking performance left shaping residual affects upon the rocks; it was itself yet another call, responded to by the next generation of carvers who visited the rocks. In a (re)iterative performance of call and response, these rock carvers (re)act to the vibrating call of their surroundings. Artists, writers, game designers, and role-players like neolithic carvers do not imbue stones with agency but gesture back to the sensations these matters emit.

The graphic design and artistic methods of creating the mesocosm of *World of Warcraft* reveal the mimetic connection between lithics and how actual and digital stones share sensation. Each playable zone in the *World of Warcraft* universe begins with a grey plane, a sky box, and a selection of environmental props, such as stones, plants, trees, buildings, fixtures, and graphic textures. The grey plane is moulded to

become the area's mountains, valleys, and plateaus, while the environment props begin its ecology alongside this plane.[12] After the artists shape a mountain from the initial plane of terrain, they then employ a technique called 'vertex colouring,' which highlights and shadows the peaks, clefts, valleys, and dents of the mountain and other stony terrains. In *World of Warcraft* and many other games, most terrains and objects with solid surfaces have a tessellated mesh of polygons representing the object's surface. This mesh forms the object's boundary and, during creation, highlights its form to make apparent the dents, bumps, and folds of the stones and terrain. Vertex colouring adds colour to the mesh's vertices rather than the face, which is the empty space between the lines. This technique paints hues and shades onto the mesh of the stones, accentuating each curvature and undulation of its form.[13] Artists have developed a gregarious technique in that they colour and shade in an accentual response to the form of terrain and stones.

During this initial process of moulding and assembling the digital ecologies of a zone, the artists and designers of *World of Warcraft* state that stories and relations emerge that guide the area's geography, style, mood, paths, and character of the whole zone.[14] The artists of Azeroth make evident Cohen's (2015) understanding of stones as

[12] Kristy Moret explains this initial phase of level design in *World of Warcraft* during the panel, 'Designers at Work' at Blizzcon 2019. A recording of this panel was uploaded to YouTube by Nekoyou. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRS9jjU9IrI&t=837s&ab_channel=Nekoyou [accessed 23/05/2022].
[13] Gary Platner explains the use of vertex colouring in *World of Warcraft* during the panel, 'Art of *World of Warcraft*' at Blizzcon 2013. A recording of this panel was uploaded to YouTube by SoMuchMass. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ppr7L5aP26w&ab_channel=SoMuchMass [accessed 23/05/2022].
[14] Gary Platner and Matt Sanders explain how landscapes tell stories in *World of Warcraft* during the '*World of Warcraft* Level Design' panel at Blizzcon 2016. A recording of this panel was uploaded to YouTube by Collin Gilbert. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYDd3T_s1zo&t=2775s [accessed 23/05/2022].

vibratory machines and stories in endless motion as they begin the world with its lithic formations to enliven stories and relations. Stones shape the bedrock of reality in the digital realities of *World of Warcraft,* and the practices of its artists and designers acknowledge how Azeroth is composed of art and stories as much as matter. The position that art and stories are imperative conditions of Azeroth's gamescapes enables the thinking required to posit that digital stones interlock layers of art, stories, and matter that provoke (re)iterative sensations of what they mimic. Art and sensation cannot be separated; for Grosz (2008), art is erotic expression drawn from the plane of composition and felt through the intensities of vibration that is sensation. She writes, '[a]rt proper […] emerges when sensation can detach itself and gain autonomy from its creator and its perceiver, when something of the chaos from which it is drawn can breathe and have a life of its own' (2008: 7). The geology of Azeroth reverberates with the sensations of their stony counterparts, with the sensations of stones emerging as autonomous forces, rhythms, and resonances. So far, this chapter has recognised that the bedrock of reality of *World of Warcraft* is bound to the geologic. The following section expands this study of art and stones, emphasising the force of stone's sensations as digital role-players become co-constituted in their encounter with the digital lithic.

3. Sensation

Stone and flesh share a molecular composition, mingling earth and water (Cohen 2015). This point is made evident by Laura Aguilar's (2006) photograph *Grounded #114* [*fig 3.3*], which captures a stone-flesh intimacy to reveal the stoniness of flesh, the

fleshiness of stone. The captivating image features a boulder, rough and mottled with a myriad of sandy hues, and in front of the boulder is a form not unlike it, the figure of a human. Both share an asymmetrical oval shape, then folds of flesh mirror the gentle undulations of stone, the cleft of a buttock resembles the stone's dents, and even the figure's hair echoes the grassy tufts that sprout from the base of the boulder. Together they occupy a liminal point where the differences and similarities between stone and flesh come into question in their intimacies. Cohen notes, '[c]reating art with stone is not the domestication of an element, but a human-lithic collaboration that recognizes the art stone already holds' (2015: 61). This sentiment is shared by Chang (2019), who holds that thinking ecologically about games helps us reframe them beyond domestic

Figure 3.3 Laura Aguilar (2006). *Grounded #114*. Copyright Laura Aguilar.

interiors. This section investigates stone's art and art with stones, arguing that both are an encounter with a bloc of sensations, intensities, and vibrations; a bloc that runs athwart to humans producing only itself, but one that is repeatedly and habitually drawn on by role-players.

Cohen (2015) understands art with stones in the same way that I read the stones of Azeroth as art, not only because they are designed objects but because it is a response to inherent art that stone already holds. He argues, '[w]e create art with stone because we recognize the art that stone discloses: fossils, a museum of strata, lustrous veins, faceted radiance' (2015: 21). Building upon Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notions of monuments, Cohen describes stone's art as a confiding monolith of sensation, not inevitably designed to be interpreted by a subject, but sensation itself, a 'vibratory machine, story in endless emission' (2015: 58). Remarking upon humanity's earliest art, such as the ochre hand traces found on cave walls the world over, where the stencil of a hand meets the negative space of the rock, Cohen claims this art is a 'desire for stone's persistence, a ritualistically repeated act of love' (2015: 54). The artists and designers of *World of Warcraft* begin fabricating its digital ecologies with lithic formations, relying upon them for form, sensation, and stories. These digital artists reiterate the ritualistically repeated act of love in the desire for stone's sensation.

To further explain the specific meaning of sensations, they are composed of affects and precepts extracted from the energetic forces generated between subjects and objects. As Grosz writes:

> Sensation impacts the body, not through the brain, not through representations, signs, images, or fantasies, but directly, on the body's own internal forces, on cells, organs, the nervous system. […] It is not representation, sign, symbol, but force, energy, rhythm, resonance. Sensation lives, not in the body of perceivers, subjects, but in the body of the artwork. Art is how the body senses most directly, with, ironically, the least representational mediation, for art is of the body, for it is only art that draws the body into sensations never experienced before. (2008: 73)

For Grosz, art is a machine of relations, that is, sensations and vibrations which monumentalise to connect flesh and world and, in doing so, intensify bodies. Deleuze and Guattari describe a monument as artwork that does not produce sensations to commemorate or celebrate something but persistently produces sensations to give the thing 'a body, a life, a universe' (1994: 177). Writing rhetorically, Grosz asks, '[d]oes this mean that works of art exist only to the extent that they are sensed, perceived?' (2008: 71). She responds with, '[n]ot at all: the sensations produced are not the sensation of a subject, but sensation in itself, sensation as eternal, as monument' (*ibid*.). There is, however, a critical distinction between the conceptions of Cohen and Grosz, namely their fundamental difference towards the sensations of the inorganic.

Like Abram (2010), Grosz places a hierarchical barrier around the inorganic, holding that art 'is of the animal' (2008: 63). She writes, '[i]t comes, not from reason, recognition, and intelligence, not from a uniquely human sensibility, or from any man's higher accomplishment, but from something excessive, unpredictable, lowly' (*Ibid*.).

Cohen responds to Grosz's position, claiming that there is an inherent eroticism in the magnetic intensities of stones. He holds that both stones and art emit and absorb vibratory intensifications of sensation that produce affect and engender relations. Further, when discussing Aguilar's *Grounded #114*, neither Luciano nor Chen (2015) could ignore the eroticisms emanating from the intimacies it depicts. They pose that the boulder and Aguilar are engaging in a sexual encounter, '[t]he folds of her flesh counterpoint the dents in the in the stone, both marking textured, touchable bodies' (2015: 184). Instead, Luciano and Chen suggest that if sexuality is considered less in terms of animal genitals and more as 'constitutive pleasure and potentiality of forms of corporeal communing' (2015: 185), Aguilar's image can be considered sexual and erotic. With this in mind, I investigate examples of role-players communing with stones to find the constitutive sensations and erotics generated from the energetic forces between them.

Within the *Argent Archives*, hundreds of entries include stones, many of which recognise stones as a foundational presence in Azeroth, drawing attention to the sensations of the digital lithic. In what follows, I look at three examples drawn from the archive: the first is a geophilic marvelling of lithic formations; the second reckons with stones as a primordial vibratory and sensory force; and finally, an example that explains stone's entanglement with space and time.

In awe of the geology of Deepholm, Valven Fireseal, in 'The Elemental Planes & Their Unusual Denizens - the Arcane Arts of Azeroth', writes:

> On a geographical note, Deepholm is truly a wonder to behold. While its cave-like appearance may give a sense of being trapped, its vast plains of crystals, pillars, and glowing, floating rocks can take the breath of even the most seasoned traveller. Great caves tunnel across the landscape, fungi unique to this realm make up what passes as forests, and waters spring from the rock to form beautiful pools, that marvellously reflect the myriad of lights the stones emit. (2016: n.p.)

Fireseal's writing exemplifies a thinking-with stones that moves beyond the individual to intimately map an ecosystem that highlights the vibrancy of stones and their environmental companions. In a startling recognition of the unfolding and enduring capacity of stone, Jotun Stonebender recounts a lithic-induced moment of realisation:

> He placed his right hand against the stones, still slick with morning damp. He could feel the stone. He could feel the earth slowly shifting beneath him, in the million-year-dance of stone against stone. He could feel the past. (2009: n.p.)

Stonebender's writing betrays a distinct geological sensibility that mirrors Cohen's own, disclosing stone as an unrelenting slide of movement and history. Cohen argues that '[s]tone is thick with sedimented time' (2015: 36), and Stonebender accentuates this argument, evoking stone's sedimented deep time as it shifts beneath Azeroth to meet his hand in the present. Further, by evoking stone's million-year 'dance', Stonebender acknowledges that stones are not settled forms but constantly and persistently moving in relation to other stones they encounter. Parallels between Chang's reading of OReilly's *Mountain* become apparent: playing-with stone enables

an affective bond between the human and nonhuman, the capacity to feel stone's longevity, mortality, history, and territory.

Where these two role-players read stones through their inherent capacity to unfold sedimented time and entangled ecologies, they are, in fact, mirroring a trope in fantasy literature where some writers work to expose the same. Alan Garner's ([1960] 2014) *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* is a fantasy novel that tells the story of two children, Colin and Susan, who unknowingly have in their possession a magic stone that can save the world. Complete with the typical fixtures of Western fantasy: Dwarves, Elves, sorcerers, and knights, the children must stop a shape-shifter and a malevolent wizard from possessing the titular weirdstone. Garner's novel is set in Alderley Edge and is characterised as much by the natural landscapes of Cheshire as its accents, mythology, and folklore. Much of the story takes place in deserted copper and cobalt mines whose shafts, chutes, and tunnels burrow under the landscape like warrens. When our heroes are deep within a copper mine, a description of the rock follows: 'The yellow walls were streaked with browns, blacks, reds, blues, and greens - veins of mineral that traced the turn of the wind and wave upon a shore, twenty million years ago' (2014: 123). Though Garner's novel predates the theorists and role-players cited throughout this chapter, they echo his sentiments, where the lithic discloses temporalities alongside colours and the entanglements that form them. This same work also describes a moment of stone-flesh intimacy when the children and the Dwarves are crawling through tiny gaps of stone to flee the mines. In a particularly tight squeeze between the rocks, Garner describes how the crew lay full length, 'walls,

floor, and roof fitting them like a second skin' and 'sand lodged in every fold of skin, and worked into mouth, nose and ears' (2014: 177). Caught in the first stages of petrification, the characters feel the weight of the stone pressing into their flesh and consciousness, as Colin declares: 'I'm a living fossil!' (2014: 178). Despite these vivid descriptions, upon leaving the mine, Garner writes, 'children and dwarfs almost fell over each other as they swarmed up the last monotony of stone, out of the eternal, stagnant silence, into light, and life, and wide horizons' (2014: 183). As this early example of fantasy writing demonstrates, dissonant perceptions emerge when the characters are within stones and outside of them as cognition toward the caves goes from time, colour, contemplation, and intimacy to dank monotony and stillness. Like Stonebender placing his hand upon the stones, contact and proximity allow the human to think of the vivacity of stones. This imposition suggests one explanation as to why the geophilic Dwarves of *World of Warcraft* repeatedly remind us always to keep our feet on the ground.

In a final example, Lady A. Darklaw (2016) explains the fundamental entanglement of space, time, and matter in the Warcraft universe in a disorientating synthesis of magic, nature, and dragons. In her book, 'Codex of Magic, Book One: Fields of Magic', Darklaw writes:

> Two unknown elements, Time and Nature, build upon the four basic elements. They require them to be already present before being able to manifest. For where could nature flourish without water and warmth, without earth and air. How could time affect things that do not exist? Time cannot affect things that

> do not exist, without matter there can be no time. Like a snake it coils around everything that happens, has happened and will happen. Connecting them all with delicately woven strings that even the Bronze Dragonflight do not fully understand. (2016: n.p.)

In this interpretation of spacetimematter, Darklaw presents a fantastical translation of physics and entanglements to explain the magic in Azeroth. She furthers her account by explaining that nature consists of a complicated fabric woven by every living thing, describing it as uncontrollable and unmasterable chaos. Others in the *Argent Archives* describe stones as calm, patient, or wrathful; still, in many examples, the stories and sensations of stones prove to be an enduring companion in the imaginings of digital role-play.

All these stories broker relations with stones, with stones being the catalyst rather than the player. These stories exemplify the gameworlds of digital role-play as a co-constituting sphere of media and nature, an engendering mesocosm where ecosystems are modelled and imagined. However, all of these stories with stones are attempts to translate them into something recognisable to human experience. Cohen (2015) writes, '[a]ny speaking of the nonhuman is a translation, and therefore error prone, filled with guesswork, and inclined toward fantasy' (2015: 36) Yet, stories, narratives, and translations intensify relations and enable 'the envisioning of a world indifferent to us, a world that excludes us, and a world that impinges with discomforting intimacy' (*ibid*.). Mirroring Cohen, on poetry, Le Guin writes, it is 'the human language that can try to say what a tree or a rock or a river is, that is, to speak

humanly for it, in both senses of the word "for"' (2017: M16). Worlding with stone is speaking 'for' stones, an attempt to interpret and decode its stories and sensations. However, these interpretations and translations implicate stones by unfolding their sensations and stories beyond imitation and representation. Namely, they partake in the same energies that stones emit and generate some of the same reactions from beholders.

As a final remark, stones are everywhere in *World of Warcraft*, but they do not have many purposes in the context of objectives and mechanics in gameplay. Digital stones implicate and explicate stones and share composite matter and sensation. Their dynamic planes ground the world with depth and distance, carefully positioned boulders enliven an ecology, and players can mine some nodes for ore. Still, principally, interactions with stones remain outside of mechanics. Stones are integral to play, but players cannot kill them for loot and experience; they do not hand out quests, they are not weapons or armour, and nor do they advance the plot or storyline. In *The Lathe of Heaven*, Le Guin writes: 'What's the function of a galaxy? I don't know if our life has a purpose and I don't see that it matters. What does matter is that we're a part' (1971: 70-1). Reality does not need to have a purpose; it only matters that matter is a part of it. Reality does not need to pertain to a function; the only purpose that emerges to make it matter is that matter is entangled within, besides, and among it. To expand upon Le Guin's writing through Cohen's (2015), though stones, a bedrock of reality, have no purpose, they still pertain to specific effects concerning other matters. Cohen argues that as a primordial matter, world-

making with stones borrows from their capacity to bluntly map and emit reality. As such, digital stones have no mechanical purpose in *World of Warcraft*, but they remain the bedrock of every zone and the imaginings and stories of role-players who desire its persistent lifeworld.

From this bedrock of understanding, the final section expands these notions of sensation into the broader stages of performance, where eruptions of sensations mould embodied experience as much as they can be moulded. Namely, it follows examples of embodied disorientation generated from out-of-place sensations emerging from matter and performance. Slippages principally emerge in role-play, reenactment, and theatre when the performances feel, just for a moment, *as if* they are real. Assembling sensations is a lively ontological process; it recognises that sensations occur in passive encounters and can be pieced together and apart to fabricate 'new' experiences, places, encounters, and events. Just as the sensations of stones endure between platforms, sensations can be assembled to generate a hyper-weird gyre erupting force, rhythm, and resonance.

4. Slippage

When witnessing digital role-play, it can often be difficult to distinguish what is theatrical and what is real. This screenshot [*fig 3.4*], taken by the role-player Aamar and posted in the *Argent Archive*s, entitled 'Boralus Date', features a Human and Void Elf on a romantic date in the port city of Boralus. Both have donned formal attire,

Figure 3.4 'Boralus Date' (2021). Screenshot taken by Aamar. https://www.argentarchives.org/node/250778 [accessed 10/11/2021].

and their bodies are positioned close to each other, gently embracing as they sit on a sofa. The viewer can partially discern a cake with icing and a coffee press on the table before them, marking the date as a festive event. There are no other players around to witness the date, so only snapshots like this evidence the romantic couple to the world outside these two players. The viewer is left only with the impression of two role-players tenderly entangling their avatar bodies. However, from this initial impression, it is unknown whether the players' bodies are entwined in the same way, if the avatar bodies are mimetic doubles for their own desires, or if the relationship is an entirely fictional endeavour. In this snapshot, the viewer can only reckon with a fleeting moment of sensation of intimacy rendered through digital role-play.

As Grosz (2008) contends, sensations are an indeterminate bloc that erupts in an encounter that skirts the brain, impacting internal forces, cells, organs, and nervous systems. From Aamar's screenshot, the sensations of two lovers erupt, but when the

brain catches up to the body, those sensations might fade as the fantasy of the moment is realised. It might then be disorientating to the perceiver when sensations erupt, and the body reacts as the jointure between what is real and what is not remains undecided. As previously mentioned, the term 'slippage' best defines these moments of sensation. Performance often arouses slippages, with examples emerging from reenactment, LARP, dance, theatre, and digital role-play. This section presents examples of these disruptive sensations, paying particular attention to the moments of disparity and disorientation to find the commonalities between performances. In doing so, this section makes known the slipperiness of reality, where the real and the fake can pass each other, in affective ways, felt deeply in the body. This section primarily responds to Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler's (2011) claim that players are not physically sucked into the terminal to find themselves playing a very real game of life and death. Instead, investigating slippages as ephemeral evidence of real sensations generated and felt from fictional realities permits unique access to explore the lifeworlds of the performance of digital role-play. This section calls into question notions of the fake and the fantastical to explore the real slippages of sensations they provoke.

Slippages and slipperiness are often evoked in queer theory, new materialisms, and ecological thinking, perhaps because they are acutely aware of the mutability of embodied experience, where matter, affect, and temporalities can slip and slide between each other. To briefly explore and synthesise some examples of slippages, first, Chang (2019) holds that when we play video games, 'we underscore the slippage

between solitude and community, wildness and civilization, matter and media' (2019: 4). As queerness is inherently and insistently unfixed, it is marked as slippery, 'like trying to hold a soap bubble' (Clark and Kopas 2015: para. 3). On the queer slipperiness of matter and animacies, Chen articulates that the two slip and slide in and out of each other; animacy 'embraces the ramified sites and traces of shifting being' (2012: 187). They write, '[a]nimacy theory objectifies animate hierarchies, assessing their diverse truth effects against the mobilities and slippages that too easily occur within them, and asks what paths the slippages traces' (*ibid*.). The (in)animate states of matter and meaning are not fixed and constant but mobile, able to slip, or be dragged, into different positions of animateness or, when they pass, multiple positions at once. Similarly, Jeanne Vaccaro (2015) evokes slipperiness in her writing on the *Crochet Coral Reef* (2005-), a vast assemblage of animal and plastic fibres forming the rhizomatic exoskeleton and geometries of a coral reef. Moving along this coral reef, Vaccaro connects its form to the sensory and emotional dimensions of feelings that craft transgender lives. She writes, 'I am interested in how we attempt to measure […] distances and movements between slippery and stuck things' (2015: 284). She continues, '[a]s a meditation on straight lines and flatness, drawn onto dimensional spaces and curvatures, the hyperbolic dimension invites us to examine positioning, or figuring, and the orientation of bodies, eyes and hands, knowledge and feeling' (*ibid*.). Slipperiness is persistent in performance, technology, art, and language, so slippages are immanent; wherever there seem to be fixed positions, straight lines, and the privileging of hard facts, slippages will emerge.

Though all of these conceptions of slippage circulate, I borrow a more specific meaning of the notion from Schneider (2011), who employs it to describe the disorientating juxtaposition of past with present witnessed in US Civil War reenactment. On the slippages of time that she felt, she writes, 'despite or perhaps because of the error-ridden mayhem of trying to touch the past, something other than the discrete 'now' of everyday life can be said to occasionally occur – or recur' (2011: 14). For Schneider, the past and the dead recur to be felt in the now of reenactment. Perhaps her most palpable example of slippage occurs when she finds herself shocked by a plastic finger lying on the grass. She recounts:

> Though not at all in the head-space of a reenactor, I was brought up short and had to gasp coming upon this severed index lying forgotten and left behind. I also had to laugh, but only after the initial moment of shock when faux finger passed for forefinger – or when the precise jointure between the two was not yet decided. (2011: 51)

In Schneider's slight surprise of action, a moment snaps where the disparity between the double and the original becomes indistinguishable. Then, echoing Cohen, who introduces the reader to the salt-and-pepper piece of granite, the front cover of Schneider's, *Performing Remains*, features the severed finger centre-stage. Perhaps Schneider invites the reader to experience the same slippage of affect and percept, gasp, and then laugh at the disorientation stirred by the piece of detritus. By featuring the finger on the front cover of her monograph, Schneider might also be enshrining the co-becoming of this snap of affect through (re)iteration. In this iterative becoming, an assembling of perceiver, finger, performance, and scene, felt bodily sensations

emerge in a moment when a piece of detritus actualises sensations from another reality.

From the world of LARP, another moment of slippage emerges when Lizzie Stark (2012) details her experience as Portia Rom, a chronicler for the *Travance Chronicle*. She recounts that one day, while LARPing, she entered an inn with two friends she had recently met, one of whom, named Balthazar Yhatzi, ordered a bottle of wine from the bar. They drank the wine whilst telling jokes. During their festivities, Stark describes a moment when goblins invaded the inn:

> Suddenly, a cluster of goblins burst through two of the doors of the inn, pinioning the little part in between. Someone yelled 'Goblins!' and Portia froze for a long moment before some instinct toward self-preservation gripped her. She grabbed her borrowed staff and dove under the table, her last glimpse of the room revealing a green-faced monster flashing at Balthazar's back as he cried out in pain. (2012: 70)

She describes how the experience had shaken her, while the shock and adrenaline catapulted her into laughter once she realised that the goblins were men in masks and the 'wine' she drank was Kool-Aid. Stark, like Schneider, could only laugh at the body's reaction to the amalgam of forces intra-acting that disorient real and unreal. Despite, or in despite of, themselves, Schneider and Stark found themselves surprised by their actions not being dictated by them but by the sensations provoked by detritus and stage.

From reenactment again, the theatrical tinged with the fantastical is exemplified by Richard Handler and William Saxton's (1984) study of living history and 'magic moment.' Their article, in part, investigates the experience and strives for magic moments in reenactment where reality and temporality seem so that the performance feels real. Handler and Saxton explain that magic moments are a barometer of authentic experience yet straddle a slippery position between narrative and authenticity. Namely, to be deemed authentic, there must be a scrupulously accurate representation of the past, but it is 'between cues' or off-script when magic moments are most likely to occur. Handler and Saxton describe magic moments as 'evanescent flashes of consciousness steeped in the reenactor's recollections of his own experiences or sense of wonder about the experiences of others, flashes that themselves may be instances of reflexive consciousness' (1984: 256). Magic moments are a double bind of reflexiveness muddied with painstakingly rigorous mimesis of the past that flash up in highly affective moments. Then, after these sensations have flit by, reenactors are left with the desire to, once again, touch time in its return.

The phrase 'magic moment' is sometimes used by role-players in *World of Warcraft*, which mirrors the sentiments of reenactors. For example, Chitsa, a Blood Elf Paladin, contends: 'The real "magic moment" happens every time I forget myself completely in the game' (2019 n.p.). More often, in digital role-play, magic moments are considered moments of immersion which, like reenactment, are considered a rigorous strive for authenticity. In their role-play guide, DaggersEdge (2018) has a subsection entitled 'Maintaining Immersion' that, in great detail, explains the everyday minutiae of life in

Azeroth that role-players should know. This exhaustive guide includes information on cosmology, legal systems, units of measurement, exclamations and phrases, illnesses, plant life, music, careers, and clothing. DaggersEdge explains that a role-player can add layers of immersion to their experience by learning these everyday things. In gathering and piecing together these examples, threads of connections between each media take shape. Each mode, reenactment, LARP, and digital role-play is characterised by: disorientating sensations that impact the body, the recurring moments of nausea when fake feels as if real, the magic and enchantment of those moments, and the meticulous attention to assembling matter and meaning in the pursuit of authenticity and immersion.

From these examples, this section considers the queasiness, shock, and laughter invoked by slippages to investigate and explore how the disorientating jointure of realness arouses a bodily reaction. First, Schneider explains that hyper-weird mixes of temporalities, matters, and sensations induce slippages, writing, '[a]midst the hyper-weird mix of seriousness, frivolity, dress-up, fake blood, real salt pork, statistics on dysentery, mock amputation, and camp humor […] there can arise at times a quasi and queasy sensation of cross-temporal slippage' (2011: 14). She continues, '[a]t various and random moments, amidst the myriad strangeness of anachronism at play, it can occasionally feel "as if" the halfway dead came halfway to meet the halfway living, halfway' (*ibid*.). In tripping upon the transitivity of time, Schneider's body reacts at these disorienting snaps where a physical gut feeling of nausea lingers. Similarly, Schneider and Stark both recount 'having' to laugh at their body's reactions to the

slippage when things feel real for a moment. From their accounts, Schneider and Stark's experiences exemplify Grosz's specific conception of sensation. The queasiness and laughter provoked by the bloc of sensation of other times and places skirt the brain, impact the body, and throw reality into upheaval to make the self reel.

The bodily reactions of nausea are sensations familiar to researchers of theatre and performance. Nicholas Ridout (2006) writes about the 'ontological queasiness' that is a foundational element of theatre. For Ridout, theatre's queasiness or disquieting nature derives from its composite accessories. Accessories can mean symbols and signifiers, but for Ridout, in this context, accessories are the 'marginal or unwanted events of the theatrical encounter, that will turn out, of course, to be somehow vital to it: stage fright; embarrassment; animals; the giggles; failure in general' (2006: 14). These moments can be highly affective and vital facets of performance. As Handler and Saxton suggest, the magic moments of reenactment occupy a space of temporary collapse when the rigorous production of an authentic past slips and the performers become embodied beside this 'new' anachronistic reality. A prerequisite to slippages is the rigorous mimesis of a scene, a meticulous setting up of the stage that connects all these performances. DaggersEdge's role-play guide, for example, cements the desire to cite accurately and critically in the performance. Still, digital role-play is persistently amateurish, where mimetic doubles, marginal mistakes, and slippage remain integral elements. Just as thinking-with stones explains some of the becomings of digital role-play sensation, the broader architectures of the amateur stages of role-playing elaborate another frame that extends and cultivates becoming.

In the opening line of *Performing Remains*, Schneider declares, 'I went to Civil War' (2011: 1). She does not say she went to an American War Civil reenactment; rather, she *actually* witnessed 'battles mounted in the *again* of a time out of joint' (*ibid*.). When Schneider engages with the fake and the faux that permeate reenactment, she experiences them as mimetic and not as more or less real than the so-called 'original.' She states, '[t]here's nothing mere about the theatrical, and moreover, theatricality, like interpretation, is not a matter of the loss of some prior, purer actual' (2011: 18). Similar sentiments are shared by Chloé Germaine, writing on the objects of LARP, specifically a part-magic part-electrical 'field generator' that she created. She recounts that despite the 'strangeness' of the prop, which looked very much like a prop, it still 'prompted quasi-emotional responses from the characters (for example, fear, bewilderment) and real emotional responses in the players (for example, hesitancy)' (2020: 368). The prop propels the perceiver to encounter the slip and slide of realities that compose the object itself. Schneider holds that there is queerness in the slip and slide of times, in the jump of affect. She is explicitly discussing temporality here; however, just as queerness has undone the heteronormative sorting algorithm of time, it can undo discrete notions of reality.

Props, ephemera, detritus, and settings figure much of the stages of performances, creating emergent spaces for transformation and sensation. Here, I want to specifically bring in Muñoz's queer notions on stages, becoming, and ephemerality to explore the setting of the stages of digital role-play. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz (2009) describes his

experience slipping between the symbolic threshold of the punk world and gay life. In a moment of reflection, he notes that punk radicalised his suburban self so that he might imagine and enact his queer desires. To explain how becoming punk brokered a queer lifeworld, Muñoz considers the photographs from Kevin McCarty's (2002-5) *Chameleon Club* body of work. McCarty's photographs feature empty stages from punk venues and gay clubs in Los Angeles. On these empty stages, Muñoz writes, '[t]he glow that McCarty's photos generate is that anticipatory illumination, that moment of possibility right before an amazing band or performance manifests itself on stage and transforms the world for the performance's duration' (2009: 104). Muñoz posits that McCarty's stages narrate a stage of in-between-ness; their story is of spatiality, aligned with temporality, residing at the threshold between identification, lifeworld, and potentiality. It holds importance for Muñoz that punk is a performance of amateurism,

Figure 3.5 'The Tourney Begins 629-01-08' (2022). Screenshot taken by Llynwarch ap Lleron. https://www.argentarchives.org/node/258786 [accessed 11/02/2022].

as it 'signals a refusal of mastery and an insistence of process and becoming. […] The performance, in its incompleteness, lingers and persists, drawing together the community of interlocutors' (2009: 106). By eschewing the desire to master in performance, the affective, emergent, and fragmentary generates space for others to enter. Though reenactors, LARPers, and digital role-players rigorously mimic other times and space, it is an attempt to touch these realities and not master them. To recall Marks' declaration once more: 'Touching, not mastering' (2002: xii).

An illustrative, though typical, scene of digital role-play is evidenced in the screenshot [*fig 3.5*] above, which features the opening ceremony of The Everstill Tourney, hosted by Llynwarch ap Lleron. This screenshot betrays an archetypical chivalric tourney directly derived from Arthurian legend. Llynwarch ap Lleron can be seen on a raised stone dais where he addresses the hopeful knights and gathered crowd. Each knight wears a tabard with their house's coat of arms and holds an Alliance banner that features its heraldic lion. In the top right corner, the hired waitstaff wear formal attire, and these role-players will serve refreshments to the guests. The tourney occurred in Redbridge, and this opening ceremony specifically took place on the Everstill bridge. This bridge is usually empty because Redbridge is a low-level zone with little traffic, but, like McCarty's stages, for these role-players, it remains generative, an anticipatory space that enables moments of possibility to transform the world in performance.

Akin to Germaine's writing on LARP props and Schneider's on the faux in reenactment, these digital role-players have pieced together matter in an attempt to borrow and

feel some of their meaning and sensation. On the field generator that she made, Germaine writes, 'We constructed it from an old carriage clock, to which we affixed colored LEDs, wires, brass knobs, and dials that served no real function' (2020: 367). The Everstill Tourney elicits the same piecemeal assembling of 'stuff' to enliven certain sensations. Each knight has transmogrified their armour, meaning they have changed their appearance to resemble a chivalrous knight. Their tabards bear the insignias of in-game factions, but role-players don them to signify their noble house. The banners are in-game 'toys' available in *World of Warcraft* which are just-for-fun items but often employed by role-players to embellish scenes. All attendees to the event have positioned their bodies in specific relation to each other in a way that negotiates a spectacle and the power structures between Llynwarch ap Lleron, the knights, the attendees, and the waitstaff. It is a homebrewed event of embodied reiteration, an iterative scene of a High Fantasy tourney enlivened upon an otherwise deserted bridge. The stages of digital role-play mirror Muñoz's propositions about queer and punk stages as they are both makeshift, a piecemeal of matter and meaning that performers actively gather to generate sensation, characterised by an openness that allows difference to enter.

In their philosophical works, Deleuze and Guattari (1994) and Grosz (2008) conceive stages as an architectural framework of a territory. This conception enables the thinking that when players work to assemble sensations in a specific place, they define a stage. Defining territories in *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari (1994) tell of the mating rituals of the Australian tooth-billed bowerbird. In their performance, the

bird will set their stage by cutting leaves from the canopy above them, causing them to fall to the ground. The bird will then flip the leaves over where the paler inner side marks a stark contrast to the hues of the earth. They write, '[i]n this way it constructs a stage for itself like a ready-made' (1994: 184). The bird then finds a suitable branch, fluffs its feathers, and chirps a complex song 'made up from its own notes and, at intervals, those of other birds that it imitates' (*ibid*.). They continue that the stage, the bird's song, the branch, the other bird calls, and the ruffling of the feathers are 'blocs of sensations in the territory—colors, postures, and sounds that sketch out a total work of art' (*ibid*.). Building upon this mating stage, Grosz defines territories as 'a stage of performance, an arena of enchantment, a mise-en-scène for seduction that brings together heterogeneous and otherwise unrelated elements' (2008: 48). She holds new relations form and comes together to enable new functions to erupt in these assembled rhythms and milieus. Deleuze, Guattari, and Grosz all describe how a stage pertains to cohesion in the relations between plants, stones, animals, colours, shapes and their respective rhythms. To gather these ideas with digital role-play recognises that digital role-play occupies a stage made of the cohesive rhythms between players, digital stones and broader ecologies, toys, costumes, music, sensations, and stories. The video game itself is an empty stage brimming with potential, and then the set stage is a bloc of gathered sensations that erupts to situate becoming. The stages of digital role-play are immanence through assembly, a specific aligning of matter, meaning, and performance.

The various zones of Azeroth, when understood as stages, are fundamentally architectural as multiple vectors joined to frame a territory. Namely, the initial moulded stone plane forms its foundations, and then the vectors of other stony strata, buildings, biological structures, and textures are joined. Deleuze and Guattari posit that '[a]rt begins not with flesh but with the house' (1994: 186). Furthering Deleuze and Guattari, Grosz writes that the floor 'makes of the earth and of horizontality a resource for the unleashing of new and more sensations, for the exploration of the excesses of gravity and movement, the conditions for the emergence of both dance and athletics' (2008: 14). In this sense, *World of Warcraft*, the game, and the hardware of monitors, computers, laptops, and keyboards are all architectural. Critically, Grosz states that there is no single architecture and no single enframement in territorialisation; any group has its own mode of organisation and connection between body and earth. My argument is that gamespaces and technological interfaces are architectures, joining multiple vectors, strata, and planes connecting various agencies to frame and co-mingle sensations in a specific territory.

The connection between digital role-play and stages of territory offers one reason why slippages emerge in performance. As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, 'territory borrows from all milieus; it bites into them, seizes them bodily' (1987: 314). Schneider betrays similar sentiments, proposing, '[t]hose who manipulate the citation-production and affect-assemblage machinery of the stage have long been aware that the "nervous" or "sick or incredible" way you feel, can trip the switch between "act" and act, on stage and off' (2011: 66). However, there is a critical distinction between the two in that

Schneider develops her conceptions of affect upon the backs of queer and feminist thinkers, where affect denotes emotions that circulate, stick upon, or jump between bodies. She cites Teresa Brennan's, *The Transmission of Affect* (2004), which conceptualises the bodily feelings aroused by the atmosphere of a room, which is likewise applicable here. Brennan holds that the transmission of affect, the atmosphere of a room, is 'responsible for bodily changes; some are brief changes, as in a whiff of the room's atmosphere, some longer lasting. In other words, the transmission of affect, if only for an instant, alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject' (2004: 1). According to Brennan's argument, the transmission of affect has a certain alchemical capacity, momentarily transforming matter. Moments of enchantment play into all these performances and slippages of sensations, as magic moments, the dead returning, and the entangling of players within a fantastical setting. As a final remark to this section, I want to excite the connection between magic, enchantment, alchemy, and the slippages of digital role-play.

Perhaps because of its radical reinterpretations of matter, from inert commodity to disruptive, lively, and entangled, just like slippages, magic is a reoccurring notion in much queer and new materialist discourse. Throughout Jane Bennett's (2001; 2009; 2020) work, she advances the idea of an enchanted world. In *Vibrant Matter,* she writes how the figure of enchantment goes two ways: 'the first toward the humans who feel enchanted and whose agentic capacities may be thereby strengthened, and the second toward the agency of the things that produce (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies' (2009: xii). In her later work, *Influx and Efflux* (2020), Bennett

evokes alchemy, a transmutational process that performs at the level of affects to transform individual feelings into a shared mood. Equally, Chen (2012) also works to recover the alchemical magic of language throughout their monograph. They hold that in realms of discourse and animacy, 'relational exchanges between animals and humans can be coded at the level of ontological mediation, or alchemical transformation' (2012: 129). Finally, Schneider (2011) pronounces live performance a problem-magic that troubles the placedness of the original. All these works conjure magic and enchantment to explain how the efficacies of language, performance, and matter trouble and transform reality. They betray the slip and slide of reality where matter and meaning are not fixed and immutable but enchanting and disruptive. Thinking with magic to understand the slippages of digital role-play beholds its alchemical transformations of matter and meaning that enchant performances with reality-bending effects. LARPers, reenactors, and digital role-players describe the performance as momentarily disrupting the dominant logics of their sensibilities when sensations drive their actions. To borrow a phrase from Grosz, digital role-play becomes an 'arena of enchantment' (2008: 48) where assembling matter and meaning alchemise times, places, and spaces that, in moments, can align to spark something more and other than is perceptibly logical.

5. Conclusion: Getting Lost

Ursula K. Le Guin states: 'Science describes accurately from outside; poetry describes accurately from inside. Science explicates; poetry implicates. Both celebrate what they describe' (2017: M16). To translate meaning from Le Guin's position to the context of

digital role-play here: the experimental systems of a mesocosm accurately describe digital role-play from the outside; artful stages accurately describe digital role-play from the inside. That is, mesocosms describe the composition of the elements of digital role-play, and the stage describes sensations. The mesocosm reveals the complexity of composition and relation in digital role-play; the stage reveals the myriad forces at work generating and transmitting sensations between each other. Together they reveal a fragile disparity between the fake and real as both share a molecular composition, form, sensations, and relations.

This chapter has attempted to describe digital role-play as accurately as possible. As mentioned in the introduction, it is a departure from Jesper Juul's (2005) notions that games are half-real, where game rules figure the *realness* and fictional worlds figure its *fakeness*. Describing digital role-play reveals how much more convoluted it is than a simple divide between rules and fictional worlds. As shown, the digital stones have a physical link to their geological and lithic counterparts, which disrupts notions that video games are synthetic worlds. Digital role-play occupies a unique position, too, where few concrete 'rules' dictate play. Juul (2005) claims that rules can be limiting, but they set up meaningful actions in the gameworld. The 'rules' of digital role-play often attempt to maintain immersion (DaggersEdge 2018), which entails rigorous mimesis of the fake to induce sensations of a world. Reality is disrupted when fakeness can generate realness through sensation, when there is a constant and dynamic assembling and passing of the fake and the real at any given point.

Accurately describing the relationship between digital stones and actual stones at the start of this chapter began the thinking change required to reckon with the muddy limits between fake and real. It laid the groundwork for conceptualising slippages by eschewing notions that the perceived original holds something more – more sensation, vitality, and reality – than the copy. Or, to paraphrase Schneider (2011), there is nothing mere about role-playing; it is not defined by the loss of some prior, purer actual. It is worth repeating that though digital role-play enacts a hyper-weird gyre of realities, where the fake and real are muddy, the slippages of sensation that confuse the limits between the two remain *moments*. But, this imposition opens digital role-play to distinctly queer discourses where the momentary, the fleeting, and the ephemeral are vital energies in live and queer performances.

The transmission of affects that circulate between the energies of digital role-play provides a space for players to get lost in. In this context, these descriptions of digital role-play mirror Muñoz's descriptions of queer dance where both share a comparable circulation of energies between gesticulating bodies and amateur stages. On queer dance, Muñoz writes:

> *Queer dance is hard to catch, and it is meant to be hard to catch – it is supposed to slip through the fingers and comprehension of those who would use knowledge against us. But it matters and takes on a vast material weight for those of us who perform or draw important sustenance from performance. Rather than dematerialize, dance rematerializes. Dance like energy, never disappears; it is simply transformed. Queer dance, after the live act, does not*

> *just expire. The ephemeral does not equal unmateriality. It is more nearly about another understanding of what matters. It matters to get lost in dance or to use dance to get lost: lost from the evidentiary logic of heterosexuality*. (2009: 81)

Akin to queer dance, this energy that never disappears but transforms is vital for role-players who draw sustenance from it. Jack Halberstam, after Muñoz, makes a similar claim, writing a 'touch and randomness as much as analogy and determination [gives] meaning to bodies in space and time' (2020: 40). Muñoz's arguments are made more pertinent concerning Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler's position that immersion and magic moments are a 'Holy Grail' to role-players, that is, rarely achieved, and more likely reconstructed retrospectively through anecdotes (2011: 228). Muñoz, in an earlier article, writes, '[w]ork that attempts to index the anecdotal, the performative, or what I am calling the ephemeral as proof is often undermined by the academy's officiating structures' (1996: 7). In the form of anecdotes, ephemeral evidence is not enough material evidence to constitute proof for MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler. However, as Muñoz (1996) argues, the ephemeral is evidence, and performance is an alternative medium for documentation and recording. The ephemeral matters to digital role-players, who passionately and sincerely perform and create content to support an arena for slippages.

Finally, to conclude upon the magic, enchantment, and alchemy of the slippage, it is a magic of being-with (Bubandt 2017) that stems from thinking, telling stories, and performing, with matter. It demands intimacy with other matter, just as queer theory and ecological thinking demands intimacy with other beings (Morton 2010). Queer

theory has long recognised the magic in destabilising dominant and naturalised narratives and categories. As Frederick L. Green states, 'queer theory argues that there is beauty, power, and truth, even magic where dominant culture and its authorized language posit only ugliness, impotence, and falsehood' (1996: 326). Digital role-play troubles discrete notions between virtual and actual realities by staying with the myriad strangeness of matter, meaning, and performance, piecing it together and apart in play. Digital role-play encounters the fake and the real similarly, both as textured and touchable bodies, able to erupt sensations without hierarchical demarcations. Digital role-play stages a dynamic and shifting space, place, and time where nothing is certain, but there is beauty, power, truth, and magic in this uncertainty. In borrowing from matter its force, rhythm, and resonance, zones of potentiality are assembled from which slippages can erupt.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Archives of Digital Role-Play

What's *your* archive?

Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You*, 2018

1. The *Argent Archives*

Alongside in-game play, role-players persistently make artworks, memes, poetry, machinima, short stories, pornography, music, cosplay costumes, role-play guides, zines, clothing, books, recipes, and much more. The *Argent Archives* is one of the largest collections of this material, specifically for those who role-play on *World of Warcraft*'s Argent Dawn server. At the time of writing, the *Argent Archives* contains around 28,640 stories and notes, 1700 poems, 10,400 diary entries, 46,840 documents of adventures, 40,750 characters, 16,400 drawings, 47,400 screenshots, as well as the details of thousands of events that date back to 2007, near *World of Warcraft*'s inception. Then there are tens of thousands of other entries, including conceptual writing, published works, wanted posters, guild details, and job listings. The archive is vast and individual role-players have posted every record within it. Throughout this project, the *Argent Archives* has been a fundamental source of trace experiences that have been pieced together and apart to evidence a lifeworld of digital role-play. The *Argent Archives* stores information while also connecting role-players by acting as a message board for events and guild recruitment, a space to link and share content, and another platform for role-playing besides *World of Warcraft*. In investigating the realities of digital role-play, the archive itself, its form and structure, requires the same

critical attention as its content in order to recognise its impact as another 'body' circulating in the gyre of play.

Despite its vast amount of sources, the *Argent Archives* is primarily an archive that serves to hold together the community that compiles it. The team that maintains and administrates the archive does not consider its principal function to be the preservation or collection of artefacts and history. The *Argent Archives* web team writes: 'The Main Goal of the *Argent Archive*s Web portal is to tie the Argent Dawn community together.'[15] Here, the Argent Dawn community refers to the community of role-players who play on *World of Warcraft*'s Argent Dawn server, the only server dedicated to role-play in the Europe-West region. To date, there has been no academic study of the *Argent Archives*, so this chapter positions it besides queer and new materialist discourses about archives. Queer theorists likewise understand archives as something more than repositories of information by recognising the entanglement of bodies and archives, as well as the embodiedness of archives (Cvetkovich 2003; Ahmed ([2004] 2014; Singh 2018). Particularly relevant to the *Argent Archives*, Sara Ahmed (2014) offers a model of archives as a 'contact zone' where they take shape in their contact with bodies, texts, and feelings. Similarly, Jussi Parikka understands archives as an environment and imagines them as an 'entity that folds into so many levels, potentials, and scales' (2019: 31). These two positions suggest an approach to the *Argent Archives* as a site of community and construct it as an environment comprised of circulating texts and feelings and where live bodies are enfolded within it as much as

[15] The Argent Archives Web Team (no date). *About*. Argent Archives. Available online: https://www.argentarchives.org/about [accessed 26/09/2022].

material remains. In effect, this chapter will present how the *Argent Archives* exemplifies Wolfgang Ernst's proposition that online archives lose their 'temporal exclusivity as a space remote from the immediate present' and instead become 'tempo-realities' (2016: 14-15). The archive is de-historicised and does not hold artefacts used as props for historical narratives but holds information that moves, connects, and distributes. Just as previous chapters have explored the intimate relations of digital role-play, this chapter considers an archival tether between digital role-play and the *Argent Archives* and how play reverberates between the two.

This chapter employs two conceptions of archives to understand the *Argent Archives* as an embodied environment that moves, connects, and distributes the tempo-realities of digital role-play: Julietta Singh's (2018) 'body-archive' and Erin Manning and the SenseLab's (2020) 'anarchive'. In *No Archive Will Restore You* (2018), Singh intimately compiles the traces of history that have become deposited within her to frame her body as an archive. With her body as archive, Singh reckons with everything that has stuck to her or forced its way in, which has been excreted or cannot be expunged. She attunes this body-archive to vaginal canals, guttural sounds, childbirth, death, faecal matter, vomiting, poetry, extreme neurological pain, mobile phones, new materialisms, and queer family. Like her body-archive, there are no 'straight' lines in Singh's work, and she often pauses to dwell on the messiness that comprises it. The anarchive is similar to the body-archive, only it does not seek to document the past; it is a repertory of excess traces that carry the potential to actualise events. Manning writes, '[t]he anarchive has a pull, and it is a pull to immediacy. It wants to activate, to

orient. Or, better said, it is always already activating, orienting. This makes it a collaborator in all takings-form' (2020: 84). The body-archive and anarchive share a capacity to catch experience in the making; both catch 'us in our own becoming' (*ibid*.). As play reverberates between the *Argent Archives*, the body-archives of role-players, and *World of Warcraft*, the anarchive exists in these relays. Where the body-archive can intimately assemble the traces of past experiences of digital role-play, the anarchive catches those experiences in their making while pulling, activating, and orientating those who play, create, and post.

It is important to briefly illustrate some prior conceptions of the archive, which has long been a foundational and contentious site for many queer theorists (Cvetkovich 2003; Halberstam 2005; Ahmed 2014). Famously, Jacques Derrida writes, 'NOTHING IS LESS RELIABLE, nothing is less clear today than the word "archive"' (1996: 90). He asks, 'why archive this?', a provocation that offers the archive as a repository with authority to govern as much as it contains (Singh 2018). This question has become an unfolding of queer activism and culture-making. Muñoz (1996) holds that because queerness has historically been transmitted covertly, discrete and hard materials do not evidence the lifeworlds of queer people. Instead, traces and ephemera become the vestiges of self-knowing, sociality, and relationality that comprise the queer archive, namely innuendo, gossip, fleeting moments, and performance. He continues, '[b]ecause the archives of queerness are makeshift and randomly organized, due to the restraints historically shackled upon minoritarian cultural workers, the right can question the evidentiary authority of queer inquiry' (1996: 7). So, when Derrida asks, 'why archive this?', a

queer answer might be: 'because no one else will, or perhaps can.' The archives of digital role-play follow similar subcultural logics where the *Argent Archives* is makeshift and randomly organised, yet filled with snapshots, event flyers, gossip, tall tales, diary pages, and glimpses of adventures, all of which cultivate and nourish play.

Although archives can hold affective traces, other scholars have eschewed archives in favour of memory and performance to portray the past. Rahul Rao argues that the archive conceals secrets, where he is interested in 'the open secrets that hide in plain sight' (2020: 23). He follows Avery F. Gordon, for whom memory understands 'the constellations of connection that charges any time of the now with the debts of the past and the expense of the present' (1997: 142). Likewise, Rebecca Schneider (2011), at the very beginning of her monograph, *Performing Remains*, states that to study history's theatrical return, she did not go to the archive (the more legitimate path); instead, she went to Civil War. The archive lacks performance and theatrics, namely *live*ness in which sensations of the past can be enlivened. Both Rao and Schneider nod towards the archive losing something or not being able to contain elements of culture and history. Or more, the archive is not the sole facilitator for the omnidirectional touching of times.

Yet, the body-archive and the anarchive are composed of documents as much as performance and memory. Just as the body that houses the archives decays and regenerates over time, so do the memories, gestures, theatrics, affects, and matters that compose it. Karen Barad (2007) argues that matter and memory are

fundamentally entangled, a notion that, in this context, muddies the distinction between archives, memory, and performance. Barad writes, rather than residing within the folds of individual brains, 'memory is the enfoldings of space-time-matter written into the universe, or better, the enfolded articulations of the universe in its mattering' (2007: ix). Performance and the archive both offer 'cuts' of this entanglement; intra-active enlivenings of specific folds of matter and memory. Bodies, as matter, figure into this involution of matter and memory, with performance becoming the body's mattering. An archive does not have to be built of brick-and-mortar; just like bodies, its form and figure can be as messy and illegitimate as its contents, and it can perform and play, decay and unfold.

Much of this chapter responds to Singh's archival process and enacts an intimate archiving process that finds what is assembled within a body-archive of digital role-play. In the first section, I piece together the traces of play deposited in my body-archive, attuning to the temporalities, memories, gestures, matters, feelings, sounds, art, content, theories, media, and technologies that co-mingle within it. From this intimate compiling, I draw lines of connection from my experience of role-playing to the collective traces found in the *Argent Archives* to determine the excesses that spill between the two (and other role-players), connecting individual experience to the collective community. Excess defines the body-archive and the *Argent Archive*, both of which spill into *World of Warcraft*, and, vitally, the anarchive, which precipitates in the relays and spill between each mode and captures digital role-play in its becoming as it occurs across each platform. The final section draws comparisons between digital role-

play and walking sims, both of which rely upon archives and their excesses. Walking sims, once a derogatory term, refers to games that players must walk through and piece together stories from an assortment of clues and ephemera. Games such as *Gone Home* (Fullbright 2013) and *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow 2017) are characterised by an emphasis on narrative and exploration rather than the mechanical expertise of the player. Again, this chapter is less concerned with the story or content of these games and more with their structure, players' movement through the gamescape, and the process of gleaning information from traces to then assemble, pull apart, and reassemble meaning. In this context, walking sims, body-archives, and the *Argent Archives* are all typified by a form figured by excess, each illustrating a process of moving through space and making meaning from multiple disjointed bodies.

Where digital role-play and walking sims share a reliance on archival techniques in their gameplay, both also rely on walking as movement through their gamescapes. Running is the default movement setting in *World of Warcraft,* with PvE and PvP playstyles requiring players to move quickly and deftly to overcome mechanics and enact strategies. Grinding and questing do not require the player to run; however, running will increase efficiency leading the player to acquire more experience points or materials. Walking within *World of Warcraft* is typically a signifier of digital role-play, specifically for players pursuing more dilatory moments and realness. A player walking through a walking sim or a role-play event must abide by the excess fragments of lifeworlds that characterise each mode, passing through and attuning to these excesses as a means to evidence and centre experience. Drawing analogies between

the two demonstrates how digital role-play is a constantly congealing archive of embodied traces and how the anarchive captures this becoming between platforms.

2. 'What's *your* archive?'

In *No Archive Will Restore You*, Singh recounts her days as a graduate student, writing: 'We were scrambling toward the archive. We knew it was crucial, but I suspect that few of us knew what it meant or where it was, or what to do with it' (2018: 21). She recalls how everyone wanted to know; 'what's *your* archive?' where archive less implied historical records or a physical place and more the student's enabling fiction. Following this desire path to the archive, I will compile my version of a body-archive of digital role-play, intimately piecing together traces of play that have sedimented within me. From this body-archive, this section demonstrates how digital role-play and the *Argent Archives* become the enabling fiction of each other, principally by exploring their excesses. Both in the *Argent Archives* and digital role-play, there is an excess of content, imaginings, matters, gestures, and sensations. These excesses are what figure the anarchive; as Manning writes, the anarchive 'exceeds the archive and is uncontainable in any single object or collection of objects, anarchiving is by nature a cross-platform phenomenon' (2020: 93). The *Argent Archives* or body-archive alone cannot enact the anarchive; however digital role-play is fundamentally a cross-platform phenomenon – the relationship between the two proves to evidence this – and it is in the relay between the two where the anarchive is enacted. But to illustrate this idea, this chapter proceeds with an intimate compiling of the matter and meaning deposited in an example body-archive of digital role-play.

Body-archives are messy, illegitimate, and embodied archives that are porous with many orifices for entry and exit (Singh 2018). Within Singh's specific body-archive, she finds deposited intimate desires, strange infatuation, past traumas, a need to expunge, philosophy, and the general detritus and upkeep of being. On defining the body-archive, she writes:

> The body archive is an attunement, a hopeful gathering, an act of love against the foreclosures of reason. It is a way of knowing the body-self as a becoming and unbecoming thing, of scrambling time and matter, of turning toward rather than against oneself. And vitally, it is a way of thinking-feeling the body's unbounded relation to other bodies. (2018: 29)

As bodies decay and slough, so does the enabling heft of the archive, but from it emerges the potential for a messy archive that captures the self as it enfolds and unfolds. In its unbounded relation to other bodies, the body-archive is unrestrained. Feelings can be recorded, gestures can be held, and touch will leave residues after close contact. Space and time can be dragged omnidirectionally because fragments of these matterings are already folded within the embodied archive. In assembling these notions, this section pieces together a messy and embodied archive of digital role-play that recognises the similarly intractable and embodied realities that role-players fabricate in play.

The form of a digital role-player's body-archive resembles Singh's own, equally messy and porous. Instead, the body-archive's content will differ; as previous chapters have

explained, it must account for a syncopated world, oblique performances, slightly skewed between reality and fiction. In this context of digital role-play, a betweenness occurs when the discrete thresholds of individual media, fantasies, and imaginings are temporarily dismantled and then reassembled to generate 'new' experiences upon moving and when located in an emergent medial site. For instance, role-play scholars José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding write: 'When we go to the theater, read a book, or watch a movie, we imagine ourselves in the shoes of the protagonists, and bits of their fictional worlds may linger with us on the way home' (2018: 1). The lingering fantasies of media, literature, art, and performance congealing upon the player are the fuel of role-play. Parallels between body-archive and digital role-play become apparent as Singh writes, 'I am a disquieted archive that fumbles in words. A thing made up of infinite, intractable traces' (2019: 26). These traces or 'bits' of fictional worlds are deposited in the individual body-archive of role-players and become sedimented alongside sounds, emotions, ideas, desires, textures, temporalities, space, gestures, and fantasies from any reality.

Any role-player with access to a computer and a stable internet connection might assemble a body-archive of digital role-play. Thinking through the matter and meaning deposited and sedimented in the body-archive is a highly intimate process. Singh states that it is '[t]oo intimate and too bewildering an undertaking, because like all other bodies mine has become so many things over time, has changed dramatically through forces both natural and social' (2018: 29). Intimately piecing together a body-archive of digital role-play entails being receptive to the affective traces of role-play,

such as those found in the *Argent Archives*, alongside sediments of technology, queerness, other games, playstyles, media, and content. Further, some personal traces from my own body-archive are shared to add to this hopeful gathering. Still, as Singh contends, each will be drastically different depending upon the deposited traces; the body-archive that follows is just one variation of many.

I first expressly set out to role-play when playing *Dungeons & Dragons 4th edition* (Wizards of the Coast 2007) with a group of friends. I played a character named Pietas Odi, a name comprised of two Latin words that I liked the sound of – they felt archaic and romantic. I later found out that the name roughly translates to; 'I hate piety', a sentiment not held by my psionic Half-Elf, and so, thereafter, he mostly went by Pete. He was a figure of becoming and unbecoming, emerging as I played and performed; he existed on a, since broken, mobile phone as a digital character sheet, and he had material substance in the form of a miniature model of Elrond, a Half-Elven lord from J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth. There has been an array of characters in an array of settings since Pete: Bobolus, an eccentric swamp Druid; Grindelwollop Codstrotter, a fastidious and scholarly Goblin; The Guv'nor, a swashbuckling and food-driven pirate; Yggzar Yggmarsson, a gruff and proud Rune Knight; and Ichabod the Oily, a zealous yet awkward cultist. Elements of every character now circulate and emerge in play. Traces of these characters have become bound up in my body-archive of role-play, and traces of each character become bound up with each other.

Though these specific characters are bound to a tabletop role-playing game, an analogue game, each emerges through an instantiation with technology, only to varying degrees. Game rules are taken from PDFs and websites, such as '5e.tools', while media and online image boards influence worldbuilding and character inspirations. At the same time, players will use mobile phones during play to check the details of spells and abilities. With the onset of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its eminent lockdowns, our *Dungeons & Dragons* sessions moved online onto the virtual tabletop website 'Roll20', rendering the 'tabletop' entirely digital. Likewise, role-playing within *World of Warcraft*, a video game, denotes a saturation with networks, programming, and media. Something akin to what N. Katherine Hayles writes, that we are 'an informational pattern that happens to be instantiated in a biological substrate' (2006: 160). As previous chapters have explored, digital role-play is always an encounter with technology, so this variant of a body-archive must also inhabit these specific technologies that determine and co-mingle in play.

My commitment to queer theory, culture, and media has brokered a queer sensibility throughout all my characters. Twinning this commitment with my decidedly queer troupe of fellow role-players has meant that role-play has always been a profoundly queer event for me. Attuning to the queerness in the body-archive invites affective and material traces that are camp, perverse, deviant, enchanting, messy, and quotidian. Intimately engaging with queer theory has explained my, and many other role-players, constant attachment to the quotidian. Specifically, it echoes Muñoz's (2009) writing that the quotidian can excite a queer utopia. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz cites Frank

O'Hara's (1960) poem, *Having A Coke With You*, which tells of the quotidian act of drinking a Coke with a lover. In his poem, O'Hara displaces a previous veneration of high art instead of recognising the exhilaration in the intimate everyday moment of sharing a Coke. For Muñoz, this quotidian act 'signifies a vast lifeworld of queer relationality, an encrypted sociality, and utopian potentiality' (2009: 6). It portrays excitement in a sociality brokered by a common commodity: a sociality that is repeatable and, as such, gestures towards the future. Digital role-play that centres the quotidian catalyses echoing sentiments, whereby the game, a common commodity, brokers the repeated relationality, sociality, and potentiality of digital role-play. For example, the Stormwind Poetry Appreciation Society, who (as of writing this) has met 129 times to share poetry. As Muñoz writes, the quotidian is a promise of futurity, a sentiment that clings tight to this body-archive of role-play.

Taverns, a near-constant fixture in fantasy digital role-play, best exemplify the capacity for the mundane to cultivate lifeworlds of relationality, sociality, and potentiality in role-play. Role-play that occurs at a tavern usually requires players to role-play as innkeepers and tavernkeepers. In *World of Warcraft*, innkeepers and tavernkeepers are typically NPCs who broker the everyday minutia of a fantastical milieu with function as critical ludic components, such as quest-givers. Recently, the game has framed every player as the hero who habitually saves Azeroth. Many role-players dislike this development and have posted their concerns on online forums. Ryska (2019) writes, 'I don't mind being *a* hero. The problem is the true, established heroes in the universe keep saying "we can't do this without you" instead of "we could use

your help". Gross.'[16] Similarly, Blasco (2019) states, 'The problem is that we became the hero of Azeroth, instead of the community being the heroes of Azeroth. […] When Azeroth is in danger, I shouldn't be called to be the Superman of this story. Azeroth, its people, should be the ones who rise up to defend their home.'[17] In stark defiance of the game's saviour narratives, role-players that take up the roles of innkeepers and tavernkeepers place themselves in a position of unease. They channel everyday and fantastical sensations together in a performance that muddies both.

Role-players are also hired by other role-players to 'work' as bartenders or servers at player-made events, which further convolute matters. Players often post job listings on the noticeboard section of the *Argent Archive*s. For instance, the Marquess Dawngleam advertised several jobs for waitstaff and party managers to facilitate a gala. He briefly outlines their responsibilities, such as serving drinks, welcoming guests, verifying names, and sending invitations. These practices recall Chun's (2016) arguments that new media grinds at the distinctions between work and leisure, fascinating and tedious, amateur and professional. No foodstuff or beverages are consumed in these events, in a manner familiar to digestion anyway; however, dialogue, sentiments, gestures, and entertainment remain present. There is something of the everyday of these practices, so seemingly grounded in the mundane and actual

[16] Blizzard Forum general discussion post (2019). *Why the Game calls you THE Hero*. Blizzard Forum. Available online: https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/why-the-game-calls-you-the-hero/277803/4?page=2 [accessed 26/09/2022].
[17] Blizzard Forum general discussion post (2019). *Why the Game calls you THE Hero*. Blizzard Forum. Available online: https://us.forums.blizzard.com/en/wow/t/why-the-game-calls-you-the-hero/277803/22?page=2 [accessed 26/09/2022].

that their role is usually performed by an NPC, that they drag with them such a pervasive quotidian realness.

The quotidian and video games often have a troubled relationship, with the unease reaching a climax due to the recent popularity of walking sim games that buck video games' violent and fast-paced traditions. In *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013), perhaps the most renowned walking sim, the player takes on the role of a university student returning to their family home to find that their family is absent, where they must piece together clues to discover where their family has gone. The game is narrative-driven, with little capacity for failure, and as such has been deemed 'not a game' due to its lack of violence, heavy action, or clear-cut resolution (Chess 2016: 92). As such, the setting of *Gone Home* has been 'repurposed' to an alternative version, *Gun Home*, that supplements the games with guns, thus (re)instating its status as a game (Schreier 2014). Similar to these reactions to *Gone Home*, Paul Pittman and Christopher Paul claim, '[r]ole-playing games seem to depend more on "playing" than "gaming"' (2009: 55). They highlight that the 'purpose' of role-play is to interact with others in the same virtual world where there is no win condition. Role-play and walking sims alike have their categorisation as games questioned because they centre storytelling, exploration, and interaction over win conditions, mechanical competence, and fast-paced action. These impositions construct 'game' as an immutable ontological category and 'gaming' as a prescriptive norm. By this norm, 'gaming' would not include playing many massively popular simulation games such as *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016), *The Sims* (Maxis 2000-), or *Euro Truck Simulator* (2008-). Yet, for

many video game players, including but not limited to role-players, the mundane is a vital gameplay experience, so rather than understanding role-play as something other, it is merely another potential site or avenue for becoming and meaning-making in games.

The mundane can be the origin of intimacy (Pace, Bardzell and Bardzell 2010), and this intimacy permeates other modes of performance and play, notably in reenactment and LARP. Lizzie Stark (2012) states that her most cherished memories while LARPing happened while being gathered in a gazebo decorated with blankets and cushions, smoking a hookah, and milling over philosophy and theology. Rather than grand quests and adventures that went on elsewhere, the quotidian was the most compelling for Stark. Another example of this energetic mundaneness emerges in reenactment. As discussed in the previous chapter, Schneider (2011) finds sensation and slippages in the mundane materials of reenactment, making a note of 'dress-up, fake blood, real salt pork, [and] statistics on dysentery' (2011: 14). The 'real salt pork' is particularly evocative as it is *real* meat preserved with salt that reenactors eat to mimic soldiers who ate it during the US Civil War. The pork exists doubly out of time; the salt drags its life (as food) forwards, while some sensations of the Civil War are dragged forward by reenactors eating it. In consumption, the salt pork enters the body while its sensations impact it just as internally, but the sensations linger, deposited as a trace within the body's archive.

Archives often brim with everyday artefacts, but entangling the live body, with all its mundanities as it consumes, lives, sloughs, affects, and is affected, with archives is a radical conception as, traditionally, only material remains and remnants inhabit the archive. As Schneider writes, '[i]n the archive, flesh is given to be that which slips away. According to archive logic, flesh can house no memory of bone. In the archive, only bone speaks memory of flesh. Flesh is blind spot' (2011: 100). The body-archive instead embraces flesh, specifically that as flesh decays and regenerates, it unsettles the archive as stable and whole. This instability and porousness catalyses the ongoing dynamism of being and becoming as bodies constantly bump together and fall apart. On the inhabitants of archives, Parikka argues remains are not merely archival but 'material, concrete, touchable, sensible objects and things' (2019: 12). He holds that archives are an environment as their composite remains are already entangled with their co-existing environments and ecologies. Schneider (2011) proposes another notion that destabilises the archive, posturing that archives might be a site of live performance, while live performances are archival remains on the move. Bodies and archives are each as shifting and unstable as each other. Environments and bodies slough and regenerate, just as performances dematerialise and rematerialise. The body-archive, then, is wholly mercurial, affectively and molecularly shifting as matter and meaning enfold into it.

This effort to trace a body-archive of digital role-play is an ongoing endeavour. Still, the excess and surplus of relations and potentialities have begun to emerge by tracing these few deposits. Then, from these excesses, the relationship between digital role-

play and the *Argent Archives* can be recognised as a practice of anarchiving, or as Manning calls it, that intense and ineffable something 'that catches us in our own becoming' (2020: 84). Alongside the excesses of the body-archive, the *Argent Archives* web team state that the archive contains a 'numberless amount of history.'[18] The *Argent Archives* is excessive in many ways; there is an overwhelming amount of content in the archive, more than any single person could ever consume; there are very few means to navigate through the archive, and it is only loosely moderated or regulated by a handful of volunteers. These surpluses are vital because, as Manning writes, anarchiving 'needs documentation—the archive—from which to depart and through which to pass. It is excess energy of the archive: a kind of supplement or surplus-value of the archive' (2020: 92). There is a constant spill between the *Argent Archives* and the body-archive, between lived experience and documentation. It is in the relay between the two where the anarchive precipitates.

The events of digital role-play, the festivals, faires, dances, parties, and parades illustrate this spillage between the *Argent Archives* and *World of Warcraft*. Role-players will plan these events, then post the event details on the *Argent Archives*, and then enact and play the event in-game, where players will take screenshots and create artworks and writings to be shared, once again, on the *Argent Archives*. Events and the anarchive feed into each other, as Manning writes:

[18] The Argent Archives Web Team (no date). *About*. Argent Archives. Available online: https://www.argentarchives.org/about [accessed 26/09/2022].

> Anarchiving pertains to the event. It is a kind of event derivative, or surplus-value of the event.
>
> Approached anarchivally, the product of events is process. The anarchive is a technique for making practice a process-making engine. Many products are produced, but they are not the product. They are the visible indexing of the process's repeated taking-effect: they embody its traces. (2020: 93)

Manning's usage of the word 'event' here explicitly means something pulled into experience, a force of actuation tied with data about the occasion. The literal example of digital role-play events remains applicable since the actuating force is bound to the data posted in the *Argent Archives*. Anarchiving takes place in the in-between of these processes: the in-between of the conception, the posting, the enacting, and the sharing. To anarchive is to straddle the transitivity between events and see the potentiality of traces of happening in the making.

The anarchive is interwoven with Deleuzean notions of virtuality and actuality, for it is in this transitivity between platforms and media where the potential for actualising events is held. In the previous chapter, much of it worked to reckon with the convolution of real and fake as they actualise in the performances of digital role-play. Here, the anarchive offers another perspective as the anarchive catalyses the germs of potentiality to shape occasions. As Manning argues, '[t]he virtual is real, as Deleuze reminds us, but not actual. Our work, as regards the anarchive, was to devise techniques that could make the unrealized as real felt (2020: 80). Further, she writes that the anarchive is a practice where the ineffable is felt; it captures 'force's uneasy

connection to what takes form' (2020: 87). To attune to the anarchive is to make felt forces as they take form and critically, how those forces matter in future iterations of events. Namely, this virtual force of difference shapes the reuptake of events as they take form. The excesses of the digital role-play and the *Argent Archives* anticipate the occasion, figuring it out as it happens.

World of Warcraft, the designed game, determines much of the gameplay of digital role-play. Despite its design, it is mutable and partakes in the excesses of the players and the *Argent Archive,* meaning the game will transform when events actualise in its gamescapes. Again, to offer a very literal interpretation of Manning's notion of 'event', the recurring meetings of the Stormwind Poetry Appreciation Society, Uldum Nights festival, and the Dalaran Magic Faire gather potential and upswell in the *Argent Archives*, forums, *Discord* servers and imaginings of players to then actualise in-game. Notably, this structure of excess might owe something to cinematic excess and classical cinema, wherein 'classic' cinema conveys as much information as is needed to generate and move the narrative. According to Kristin Thompson (1986), excess is a feature of, for example, melodrama and musicals: a superfluidity, semiotic overload, which critiques the simple narrative drive. A single coherent narrative might not be able to contain, or cannot be unified with, the excesses of the film, and so tensions arise. These excesses are often figured through the text's more sensual elements – colour, music, gloss, shine, and fabrics – and can 'overload' the narrative by virtue of their excessiveness, undercutting or critiquing it. Interpreting digital role-play as Thompson interprets cinema finds the excesses of digital role-play moving beyond the

game's narrative drive to structure play and critique its coherence. This work centres the sensual and haptic as integral elements of digital role-play, and so, the practices of players overload the game with their sensuality. For example, paying attention to the excesses of digital role-players makes evident how they critique *World of Warcraft*'s saviour narratives by continually performing the mundane and everyday at their events. Simultaneously, excess structures the game, specifically when the excesses of players actualise into in-game events, ultimately altering its shape, matter, and meaning. These excesses are inherently transmedial, constantly spilling between platforms, in effect, extending the gamescape for digital role-play to include *World of Warcraft* as much as other platforms.

To further explain digital role-play's structure of excess, parallels exist between philosophical conceptions of lightning and the anarchive, which, when drawn, provides an image of thought of the anarchive. Lightning is a snap of energy, a fluctuating zigzag that stretches, transforms, and fluctuates upon the night sky. For Elizabeth Grosz (2011), lightning signifies the impulse for energy to catalyse, inciting a momentary identity to emerge, shaping something different from the night sky. On difference and lightning, Grosz writes:

> Difference is the point at which determination, the lightning, meets the undetermined, the black sky. […] Whatever identity there may be – lightning has the most provisional and temporary form of identity, an identity that is fleeting and intangible – difference is the movement of self-differentiation that separates itself from the difference that surrounds and infuses it. (2011: 93)

In a markedly similar fashion, Karen Barad sets the stage of their essay, 'TransMaterialities', with a night sky with no light, and then, suddenly 'tenuous' throngs of electricity slip into and out of existence 'faster than the human eye can detect' (2015: 387). Lightning, according to Barad, is charged yearnings, glimmers of 'branch expressions of prolonged, barely visible filamentary gestures, disjointed tentative luminous doodlings' (*ibid*.). In synthesising these two positions, lightning emerges when energy, charged with potentiality and determination, yearns to express a transient identity of difference compared to the night sky. No lightning strike is the same, but each strike comprises an influx of energy that engenders an actual expression. The lightning nor the night sky are the anarchive. Rather, the excess energies of both, the moment before lightning expresses itself, is the anarchive. And, to anarchive, to take notice of that charged yearning, understanding it as the energy that actualises and proliferates upon the night sky.

Manning (2020) holds that every event will have its own process of anarchiving. Attuning to the anarchive of digital role-play entails recognising the excesses of energy, determination, and yearning found in the *Argent Archives* and past performances. Then examining these energies as they rematerialise, each time different, like lightning, as players work to make felt fictions, fantasies, and imaginings. One such process of anarchiving becomes apparent in studying the slippages of digital role-play, when the tumbling of matter, meaning, and affects suddenly aligns to erupt sensations that make the fantastical feel momentarily real. As Chapter Three explains, slippages demonstrate how matter and performance alter what sensations and realities take

form, even if what takes form seems ineffable. These moments might feel enchanting or nausea-inducing, pleasurable or painful, but still, these feelings catch us in our own becoming. Also, slippages are iterative, the desire for their effects repeatable in myriad arrangements, a vast array of sensations erupting from a vast array of matter. In considering the excesses of these matters, meanings, and affects, the sensations of slippages are recognised as they happen, as they catch players in becoming, and the impressions of these excesses then become distinguished, to be recognised again in later reuptakes. However, in sticking to the path of the quotidian, I offer that the specific gestics of walking in digital role-play portray a distinct anarchival practice. Where lightning offered an image of thought for the anarchive, walking presents a more tangible example of the anarchive in digital role-play. Walking in *World of Warcraft* is a signifier of role-play, as opposed to the default setting of running, but it embodies the taking-effect of role-play in the gameworld. By leaning into the queerness of walking sims, the following section investigates gamespaces as archival environments to be wandered through by players. In this wandering, the player must reckon with the piecemeal traces of experience as they actualise.

3. The Archives of Walking Sims

Walking is one of the most prominent and pervasive signifiers of digital role-play in *World of Warcraft*. As previously mentioned, running is the default movement speed in the game, and players will spend in-game currency to learn how to ride various land and flying mounts to increase their speed further. With the tap of a button, a player can easily toggle between running and walking. However, it does, of course, slow down

the completion of objectives. As such, it is often only role-players who walk as they are concerned with the semblances of realness and with lingering, dilatory, and voyeuristic moments of play. Walking around the gameworld, a player can catch role-play in its becoming, for example; hearing role-players discuss the food they have eaten on their travels; encountering them dancing to the tune of a bard's lute; overhearing salacious gossip; observing guards on patrol, or spying on some underhand shady dealings. Role-play becomes reminiscent of playing a 'walking sim', games that are interested in the practices of wandering, exploring, and dwelling to enable alternative modes of embodiment, orientation, community, and environment (Kagen 2020). Mona Bozdog and Dayna Galloway hold that walking sims do not demand a mastery of mechanics, control schemes, or twitch reflexes; rather, they rely on the 'cognitive, critical, and interpretive skills' of the player (2019: 16). This section investigates how walking sims rely on archives while expressing the intractable anarchive to establish how digital role-play does the very same.

Walking sims have been readily discussed alongside archives and interpreted as decidedly queer iterations of games, with the notably queer figure of the *flaneur* often being evoked (Kagen 2017; Pelurson 2018). *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013) has received much attention as a site of queer potential. In the game, the player, who takes the role of Katie, must move through a house to piece together, and engage with, the queer experiences of Katie's sister, Sam. By interacting with objects and reading notes, the player will unearth Sam's romantic relationship with Lonnie and their parent's homophobic denials of said relationship. Eventually, the player will

discover that Sam had fled with her lover to start a new life. Zachary Harvat likens *Gone Home* to the archive, writing both are 'worldbuilding mechanisms, means of reconstructing a place or a moment in time, engines for constructing and exploring spatialized narrative, for creating alternative worlds' (2018: 14). However, Dimitrios Pavlounis (2016) and Bonnie Ruberg have both criticised this position, with Ruberg arguing that movement through the gamespace is, in fact, rigid and linear: 'more like a "rail shooter" or a "dark ride" than the *flaneur*'s meandering stroll' (2019: 2). Another tension in likening *Gone Home* to the queer archive emerges as there is the possibility to entirely complete the game and piece together and produce a linear narrative. Pavlounis holds that *Gone Home* moves 'the player away from the disorienting, disrupting, and potentially transformative narratives that the open archive affords and demands' (2016: 587). As the archive of *Gone Home* is whole and contained, it offers no excesses that might spill over into the anarchive or porousness for the anarchive to pass through. In being the excess energy of an archive, the anarchive requires an archive that is never whole, one that is disordered and unstable; as the title of Singh's monograph reads, *No Archive Will Restore You*.

The archival process between the anarchive, the *Argent Archives*, and body-archive of digital role-play in *World of Warcraft* is a more interruptive relationship, centring fragmentation and irresolution over holisms and completion. A more acute example of the relationship between digital role-play and archives emerges in Tabitha Nikolai's artworks, *Shrine Maidens of the Unseelie Court* (2018a) and *Ineffable Glossolalia* (2018b). *Shrine Maidens of the Unseelie Court* is part of a worldbuilding project

exploring queer apocalypse, trans-futurism, isolation in suburbia, and the ambivalences of relying upon an online community. *Ineffable Glossolalia* is an attempt to speak of trans* experiences with a continually and brutally suppressed vocabulary that must instead turn to myth, neologisms, and ruptures. Both works are virtual environments characterised by an erratic conflation of matter, text, sounds and animations, their composition excessive and intractable. *Shrine Maidens of the Unseelie Court* takes place in a derelict suburban neighbourhood and a dour house complete with giant spiders, marijuana plants, bin bags full of rubbish, a litter tray, an inspirational quote, the constant drone of cicadas, and a bubbling bath. Should the player get into the bath, they will transport to a cavern where metallic patterns swirl above a black monolith. Within the monolith is a bedroom that features a stained mattress, anime and sci-fi posters, snacks, overwhelming electronic music, and a computer displaying an instant-messaging platform.

Ineffable Glossolalia places the player in a building inspired by the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft, where, when walking through its rooms, the player will encounter walls adorned with framed paintings, rows of filing cabinets, a stack of flaming books, and an operating room alongside comic books, quotes by Jorge Luis Borges, and snippets of imageboards from *4chan*. Upon stepping out from the institute through transparent plastic curtains, the player is met by a surreal and glitchy plaza where pink and black checkered boxes float across the scene, and a meteorite glows blue in a nearby crater. *Ineffable Glossolalia* deals with loss through excess, as Nikolai writes: 'This piece inhabits the reverberations of archival loss, the ongoing effects of lack, and

explores the ways in which erased people must often mend and make do' (2018b: n.p.). Both environments bombard the player with a disorientating juxtaposition of fragmentary and marginal remains that constitute a lifeworld. Understood as archives and walking sims, a player moving through these artworks encounters cuts of lived experience while simultaneously encountering the cracks of what is missing.

On the queer case of Nikolai's walking sims, Rob Gallagher (2020) explains that these games present piecemeal traces of Nikolai's experience as a trans teenager that the player must glean to garner meaning. Gallagher (2020) argues that because Nikolai's work is fragmented, incoherent, and refuses to provide resolutions, the player must reckon with how intractable traces of history, technology, and culture shape messy lives that a linear narrative cannot represent. In moving through Nikolai's walking sims, fragments of identity can be pieced together and cut apart as intractable traces of a queer lifeworld unfold. Gallagher proposes that Nikolai's work is archival, holding that they 'present the archival past in ways that encourage players to abide with loss and lack, illegibility, incoherence and impurity' (2020: 118). This archival approach to games and play encourages the incalculable trace, an archive as messy and illegitimate as the bodies that compose and compile it.

To walk through these archives is a process of anarchiving, a literal passing through the fragments of experience that, when (re)arranged, are made felt. A linear story does not emerge because there is none, no contained narrative to be unearthed. But that does not denote a lack of matter and meaning; instead, traces of lived experience leak

out of every orifice of the virtual world, only they are incoherent and incomplete. As the vernacular of Nikolai's archives rely on myths, neologisms, and ruptures, excesses of meaning emerge from the pieces of disparate experiences and by reckoning with what is missing or taken. Should these archives be understood as walking sims, as Gallagher (2020) understands them, then wandering through the virtual worlds becomes a process of abiding with the lack and loss of meaning as it takes form before the player. As such, this practice is a practice of anarchiving, where becoming is caught and lost in the excesses of the archive, and this particular process of anarchiving is possible in digital role-play. Wandering through role-play events, stumbling upon role-play in the gameworld, and getting lost in the mass of intractable content in the *Argent Archives* is the anarchiving of digital role-play. Walking in digital role-play is not so much a method; it is a process of attunement to the proliferation of actions as they happen. Walking in digital role-play is opening oneself up to the various traces of matter and meaning as they precipitate into experience during play.

None of these archives of traces, Nikolai's walking sims, the *Argent Archives*, and body-archives legitimise performances, experiences, and realities. Instead, these archives reveal the scale of traces that comprise these encounters; they signify the heft of experience that produces embodiment and the intricacies of the relations and sociality of bodies. This imposition directly recalls the *Argent Archives* web team's statement regarding the archive, that it ties together a community. Community means more than bodies; it encompasses emotions, materials, content, media, events, and performances, all becoming tied to the collective trajectories of digital role-play. Like

so many facets of digital role-play, thinking with the archives of digital role-play reveals another promiscuous thinking-feeling of the intra-connectedness of matter, meaning, sensation, and performance. Thinking about the bodies and archives of digital role-play attunes to its environment of deposited and sedimented traces. To reiterate Donna J. Haraway's proposition: 'Nothing makes itself' (2017: M25), all things are a system of response. Reality included. The particular relation between digital role-play and the archive offers one of just many specific dynamisms that enliven this system. As the *Argent Archives* is an archive of excess and surplus, this relationship is the most obvious tract to follow.

4. Conclusion: Capturing Excess

As opposed to the previous chapters of this thesis, which often investigate the content of the *Argent Archive*s, this chapter principally explored the composition and form of all the (an)archives of digital role-play. In doing so, this chapter proposes a means to capture the relationship between the *Argent Archives*, digital role-play, bodies, and the actualisation of events and experiences as they all grind together. Specifically, it has found a way to reckon with the vast lifeworld of digital role-play as it appears as traces, remains snapshots, and glimpses in the *Argent Archives*. Throughout this project, this content in the *Argent Archives* has been understood as traces of matter and meaning, able to be pieced together and apart to generate evidence of the lifeworlds of digital role-play. But then, because digital role-play only emerges through the intra-actions between entities and relata, the archives of role-playing are likewise co-constituents in its emergence. As such, this chapter has been necessary to consider relations between

the body-archives of digital role-play, the *Argent Archives*, and, critically, the forces that exist in the in-between of each. Through Manning's anarchive, which recognises how 'form and force are always in co-composition' (2020:80), the excesses and surpluses of both the body-archive and the *Argent Archives* capture the indeterminate as it actualises. Navigating through *Argent Archives* is to orient yourself in a convoluted maze of fragmented stories, characters, events, relations, and artwork. In the excess, these fragments spill over from the body and the archive; in these movements, the anarchive emerges.

Wandering in *World of Warcraft* and the *Argent Archives* alike is an example process of how the anarchive can be attuned to; it is a mode of orientating towards the potentialities and tendencies of play as they actualise. It enables receptiveness to the virtual as it presses all around the player, priming them to the feelings of role-playing as they take effect and actualise. To recall Shaka McGlotten once more, the virtual is an 'indwelling force of things waiting, pressing, ready to act' (2013: 1). This chapter has considered works that seek to destabilise the notion that the archive legitimates embodied experience. As Singh queries: 'What is this place – the archive – where the beginning of things and the authority to govern over them both emerge?' (2018: 24). Instead, through the conceptions of body-archives, archives as environments, the anarchive, and Nikolai's walking sims, archives can be seen as anything but whole, stable, and contained. So, to pass through a digital role-play event or dwell in the *Argent Archives* is to wander in an inherently unstable place where excesses sediment to catalyse experience. All while you are bumping into the myriad other body-archive

in play, each a ‘body that is in excess, that is another world and also this one’ (Singh 2019: 114). The composition of each archive is defined by excess, an excess disclosed by their encounter and exchange with other embodied lifeworlds of play. To consider digital role-play through its archives is to anticipate becoming, its actuating forces, through encounters.

CONCLUSION

Cuffing Digital Role-Play

> When I sew a cuff on a garment, I am opting to finish a seam differently. Is this ornament? And if so, does that mean it is in excess of form? Or is it part of the taking-form of that which is being cuffed?
>
> - Erin Manning, *For a Pragmatics of the Useless*, 2020

1. A Cuff

This project reconfigures who the situated agencies in gameplay are to realise the more-than-human dimensions of play while disclosing the circulation of emergent and latent relations and sensations that all the collaborators in digital role-play partake in and impart. Influenced by queer, feminist, and new materialist philosophies where matter and meaning are like an ecology of feelings and fractals (Vaccaro 2015), this project has argued that digital role-play is likewise an unfolding and enfolding system of relations. I have characterised this system of relations as promiscuous, and the promiscuity continues in the waves of substance and sensation that emerge as reality in digital role-play. Employing a correspondingly promiscuous approach in this study illustrates the embodied sensations, intimacies, touches, and feelings of digital role-play in a way not previously explored in digital role-play studies. Centring bodies, both digital and physical, and their unfettered relations with one another, challenges hierarchical impositions surrounding them, as each body and each interaction is as arousing as the other. Although bodies fold to make persistent connections to other matters, this conclusion momentarily stops the flow of these folds to fashion a limited

space for reflection, but one that gestures to other matters that require continued contemplation.

To conclude this work, I employ Erin Manning's (2020) writing on 'cuffing', that is, sewing a piece of fabric perpendicular to the garment, which temporarily stops its flow yet gestures off in another direction. On cuffs, she explains, 'I choose to see the cuff as the embankment that stops the fold's continuous variation. The cuffing pulls a shape out of the fold's variability. This is what a cuff can do, I think: to make apparent that all activity edges' (2020: 91). Because digital role-play in this project has been pictured as constantly folding, cuffing it as a conclusion will provide it with shape, a body that can generate friction against existing bodies of knowledge. Manning writes that to explore the folds of a process constantly 'is to follow that process, to risk the labyrinthine' (2020: 92). Instead, cuffing digital role-play changes its direction, cornering the folds of its material and providing limits to play that can then be examined as a whole process. Some frictions emerge between cuffing and this project's reliance on Muñoz's (2009) writing on the importance of getting lost in queerness and performance. However, Manning explains that to cuff is to 'move with the material toward its change of direction' (2020: 92). Cuffing queer performance then does not dematerialise the process; it moves with the energy of the performance to frame or embellish it. For example, the cuff of a queer dance might entail a final embrace, a change of song, or a specific gestic flourish. It is not an absolute end of the dance, and the energy does not dematerialise; it is simply waiting to rematerialise in the next dance.

This conclusion will feature four cuffs, cornering four critical coordinates of this thesis: performance, technology, intimacy, and *World of Warcraft*. Each cuff will provide a space to reflect upon the two foundational questions of this thesis – 1) what are the realities of digital role-playing?, and 2) what realities do digital role-players gather and fabricate when they play and perform? – while acknowledging the limitations of the promiscuous methodological approach employed throughout this project. In piecing together a wide array of coordinates, more focused and specific analyses of aspects of digital role-play have been eschewed in favour of thinking about the generative insights of encountering, gathering, and assembling. Further, employing a promiscuous approach wherein divergent theories, sensations, and matters can embrace reveals how highly selective this project has been, analysing only a small part of the system of digital role-play. By cuffing the elements of digital role-play that this project investigates, spaces for closure and outcome emerge while gesturing to other directions where more coordinates might join – thus, the promiscuity continues.

There is room for myriad other coordinates and combinations that follow the folds of digital role-play. For example, sexuality and sensuality in terms of genital relations, how the frictions in digital role-play might be harmful rather than pleasurable, or tensions that arise between more incompatible coordinates. However, cuffing digital role-play will limit this urge for the labyrinthine to conclude upon the specific affordances of digital role-play that are less prominent in other modes of play and performance. Three affordances of digital role-play here will relate to each cuff: digital gestures for the performance cuff, interfaces for the technology cuff, and digital media

for the intimacy cuff. All three of these facets have featured prominently throughout this project, and each cuff will conclude upon each chapter of this thesis. These three cuffs will come together in my conclusions about the final cuff that brings them all into conversation with *World of Warcraft* and *Argent Archives*. This cuff determines how the relationship between role-players, the game, and the archives generates excesses of matter and meaning, which intra-act to form an emergent site for play, queerness, and potential further studies.

2. Cuffing Performance: Digital Gestures

Chapter One illustrated how seemingly disparate activities, processes, objects, and media converge in digital role-play and how other modes of performance, such as reenactment, LARP, and tabletop role-play, all fold into each other. Throughout this project, digital role-play has been more closely likened to LARP than other studies that compare it to tabletop role-play. However, comparing one medium to another inevitably follows an endless fold where one performance element might be more comparable to another, whereas another element might not. For example, digital role-play and LARP occur in larger environments with more performers, allowing for movement and casual encounters. In contrast, tabletop role-play usually involves a small group of people sitting around a table. Yet, digital role-players must communicate some gestures and movements through words, meaning, in this regard, it resembles tabletop role-play. All three media rely upon the generative capacity of objects, things, and props to arouse slippages of meaning, emotion, and imaginings. However, in digital role-play and LARP, the material space of the performance is

malleable with these objects, most notably, the use of clothes to prescribe meaning. So, to avoid risking these labyrinthine folds, this cuff of digital gestures concludes with the taking-form of performance and digital role-play.

Previous scholarship on digital role-play tends to centre on dialogue as a form of communication rather than gestures and gestics (Pittman and Paul 2009; MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2011). These studies are pertinent as communication within *World of Warcraft* most ostensibly occurs in the in-game chat function. However, digital gestures and gestics are an entire realm of communication left understudied. Torill Elvira Mortensen (2006) comprehensively discusses 'emotes' in *World of Warcraft*, which include preprogrammed gestures and personalised emotes and gestures that role-players can type out. However, she does not discuss how players place their avatars in particular gestic compositions to carry meaning. Throughout this project, I have explored gestures as a primary form of communication in digital role-play, often over conversations between players. Digital gestures are a pervasive element in digital role-play but are less commonly enacted in other modes and so can offer a cuff, or limit, specifically for digital role-play. As such, to cuff the performances of digital role-play, this section will conclude with the digital gestures performed in *World of Warcraft*.

The three dissonances investigated in the first chapter [biology and technology, live and dead, past and present] are excited in digital gestures, specifically in their dependency on technology and the delays and relays in inputting gestures. The digital

gestures considered throughout this thesis involve moving the avatar into particular gestic compositions to prescribe meaning, typing commands (such as '/wave', '/cheer', and '/dance') to play a character animation, and typing descriptions of gestures into the in-game chat function. In relying upon the avatar and device to carry gestures, the player and the avatar repeatedly display the dissonances between biology and technology. The dissonances between live and dead are displayed in the continual negotiation between motion and stillness, animating a relationship where the player remains still while the avatar is in motion. Further, because role-players must input gestures, they must wait between each action and reaction. These delays call into question the liveness of the performance. There is space and time for other matters and meaning to get caught up in the pauses. This imposition recalls the last dissonance between past and present; as every interaction is syncopated, notions of a linear temporality are disrupted. By cuffing these elements of digital gestures, rather than folding them into the performances of other modes, I can reflect and conclude upon the specific affordances of digital role-play.

Gestures in digital role-play must move between the player, the interfaces, and the game and, as such, can be understood to 'migrate'. Carrie Noland develops the notion that gestures migrate and, in their movement, 'create unexpected combinations, new valences, and alternative cultural meanings and experiences' (2008: x). These migrations include movements with technology, as Lesley Stern (2008) describes in her essay on the migrations of cinematic gestures, arguing that in cinema, a 'repertoire of camera techniques [are] used in conjunction with a repertoire of bodily techniques to

produce a charged gestural discourse' (2008: 206). Gestures executed by bodies migrate to mechanical apparatuses, where a camera sweeping, panning, tilting, and zooming continues the gesture, carrying meaning onwards. Stern suggests that cameras execute their own gestures, providing the example that a profilmic body embodying a corpse elicits affect despite the body being entirely still. She writes, '[g]estural mimesis occurs even though the body on screen is decidedly ungestural (2008: 208). She credits the camera's movements as that which inflect expressions through gesture rather than the still body. To extend Stern's notion of cinematic gestures to digital role-play is likewise to recognise a migration of gestures between players, interfaces, and video games, each employing a repertoire of techniques to produce meaning. To inflect gestures through bodily technique, digital role-play relies upon the gestures of the video game as the player is almost entirely ungestural.

Chapter One concluded that technology is as messy, imaginative, and perverse as biology. One means to explain these conceptions is to lend from film studies the notion of cinematic gestures and recognise how the technologies of digital role-play likewise determine meaning with their migrating gestures. Moving between players, interfaces, and the video game, digital gestures depend entirely on the gestures enacted and extended by the technological and the digital. Behind a screen, the role-player will input commands to which the in-game avatar will execute the gesture, such as an intimate gestic positioning beside another avatar. Unlike tabletop role-play and LARP, gestures must be inputted and carried by digital collaborators to produce effects. To cuff digital role-play, then, is to recognise that all gestures in digital role-

play are mediated; they are all delayed, requiring additional input to be instigated, namely the tapping of keys on a keyboard. In each gesture, there is a gap between the call and response, which calls into question the 'liveness' of the performance of digital role-play. When there are constant interruptions between the relay of gestures, a syncopation, space and time get caught up in its meaning. In concluding the performances of digital role-play, the migrations, delays, and interruptions of their gestures provide a cuff as they relate to the dissonances of live and dead, past and present.

The continual negotiation between stopping and starting, motion and stillness question role-play's liveness and disrupts its linear temporality. Digital role-play is punctuated with delays, pauses, silences, and interruptions as players must input dialogue and gestures and then wait for another player to do the same. In cornering these dissonances and changing their direction, this cuff draws analogues between the delays and relays of digital gestures and the cinematic phenomenon of stop-motion animation. Stop-motion animation is time-consuming and precise; the animator must imply motion by continually manipulating a figurine and then take a shot one frame at a time. Jack Halberstam (2011) proposes that stop-motion animation captures a dynamic between life and death because it negotiates a relationship between motion and stillness, action and passivity; stop-motion conveys life where stillness is expected and stillness where life is expected (2011: 178).[19] Halberstam explains how stop-motion animation, as opposed to classical cinema, depends on the actions of the

[19] Halberstam cites Christopher Kelty and Hannah Landecker's (2004) article, 'A Theory of Animation', where they hold that life equates to movement.

humans behind the camera, constantly morphing the profilmic characters' forms and gestures. He proposes that this is a relationship of dependency, where the actions of the moulder linger upon the characters as ghosts that the camera captures. In stop-motion, the dead are in motion, while the only living present are the ghostly acts that linger in the scene. In digital role-play, the avatar, like the profilmic figurine, often relies upon the input of someone behind a screen to prescribe meaning. However, the person behind the screen equally depends on the camera and the figurine to prescribe meaning. As such, stop-motion, like digital gestures, evokes Stern's cinematic gestures, where the ungestural body relies upon the migration of gestures between technological actors to carry gestures.

The notion of cinematic gestures resonates with the new materialist theories employed throughout this work in that both recognise the gestural capacity of the nonhuman. Yet, it proves pertinent to recognise that the player is always behind the computer and the devices, a present but invisible ghost that moves to instigate the gestures. In stop-motion animation, like digital role-play and cinema, there is a relationship of dependency, but the dependency goes both ways; each collaborator is dependent on the migration of gestures between actors. In these activities, where each entity is inherently entangled with and mediated by technology, each must rely on the other to carry meaning and extend performance into space and time. Live and dead, motion and stillness, action and passivity circulate in many performances, bodies, and processes (Chen 2015; Elaine Gan *et al*. 2017; Schneider 2019), each relating to a specific circulation of live and dead matter and meaning. The avatar, the

device, and the player all circulate animacies and inanimacies, made evident by the migration of gestures that is reliant upon each of these elements of digital role-play.

The stops and starts of gestures further disrupt any consolidated notions of linearity in digital role-play. The delays and relays of inputting gestures make every moment in digital role-play slightly out-of-time, syncopated, or even anachronistic. A queer theoretical perspective might understand these delays as a disruption of temporality, each moment of failing of linear temporality. Matt Knutson (2018) argues that queer temporalities in games eschew the high-stakes urgency of competitive games, such as *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009-) or *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Hidden Path Entertainment 2012-), that demand precise and strict sequentialism. Instead, he contends that to embrace the queer temporalities of play is 'to backtrack, pause, rewind, reset, reconsider, mull over, reject actionable windows and accept failure and frame-imperfect timing' (2018: n.p.). This queer temporality differs from Freeman's (2010) previously discussed chrononormativity, as it does not disrupt or reveal heteronormative trajectories prescribed as 'normal' or productive. However, as Knutson suggests, when precise and strict sequentialism sloughs, transitory moments of contemplation, hesitation, and failure are enabled and proliferated. Specifically, in the temporal in-betweens of digital role-play, feelings of anticipation burgeon in the imperfect timings. Or, more precisely, prolonged anticipation is invited in, the edging of affect in every interaction.

With the upsetting of spontaneity and linearity, Sarah Hoover *et al*.'s (2018) suggestion that all role-play occurs in the now, a 'live' performance, becomes similarly troubled regarding digital role-play. Alongside the delays and relays of inputting gestures, further interruptions occur if the player's internet connection is slow or unstable, causing lags and disconnects that drag players further out of time from each other. Also, the devices themselves might crash or break down, culminating in the same effects as a lag or perhaps ending role-play immediately and abruptly. These breaks in the liveness of digital role-play are often unavoidable, not only because of the syncopation incurred by inputting gestures but also because play relies upon the efficacies of prerequisite hardware and networks. Not only can the player's laptop crash or break, but the player is also wholly reliant upon the much broader efficacies of fibre-optic cables, server farms, internet service providers, and, to recall Bennett (2010), the electrical power grid. These facets of digital play move against Hoover et al.'s arguments that all modes of role-play share liveness, that events and experiences occur in the 'now' of a particular junction of space, time, and matter, opening 'to the unexpected and spontaneous' (2018: 222). These vital components of digital role-play trace its connection to other, equally charged forces but, once again, make evident a divergence from its analogue counterparts. As the extension of gestures and transmission of affect might lag, and they must continually stop and start and travel up to thousands of miles, they will connect players, though, in –just– less than an instant.

Scholars rarely discuss the gestures and movements of digital role-play, yet, by limiting the performances of digital role-play with this cuff of digital gestures, their individual

capacities in the performance emerge without needing to place them in dialogue with the gestics of LARP and tabletop role-play. In cuffing digital gestures, their disruptive temporalities emerge, how they straddle motion and stillness, and how players rely entirely upon interfaces and avatars to carry meaning outwards. These facets are intrinsic to digital role-play and yet remain underdeveloped in existing work bodies on digital role-play. Because of its entanglement with technologies, digital role-play often shares more connective tissue with other forms of digital media, such as cinema and animation. As Manning explains, cuffing produces an embankment for the folds of the material while still changing its direction to gesture towards something other. In decidedly rhizomatic fashion, digital gestures embank the performances of digital role-play while gesturing towards other digital media. Although less diffractive and promiscuous than the dissonances investigated in Chapter One, the cuff of digital gestures holds testament to the inherent rhizomatic capacity of the performances of digital role-play.

3. Cuffing Technology: Interfaces

In applying Tim Dean's and Laura U. Marks' notions of touch, intimacy, and promiscuity to digital role-play, Chapter Two demonstrated how the boundaries between the rhizomatic elements of digital role-play bump into, and against, one another. The conclusion of this chapter imagined digital role-play as a constantly unfolding and enfolding sensuous gyre of touching and feeling: touching = feeling = touching = feeling. To cuff this gyre, the particular 'cut' of intimacies between players and technological interfaces limits and shapes these intimacies while still making the

excesses of touching and feeling apparent. Akin to the previous cuff, technological interfaces are not integral to LARP and tabletop role-play and so offer an edge against the labyrinthine fold connecting each medium. This cuff, then, frames the touches of digital role-play, as investigated in Chapter Two, by limiting these intimacies to those between players and interfaces, both technological interfaces and in-game user interfaces.

Concentrating on interfaces further engages with thinking of boundaries between bodies in digital role-play as opportunities for encounters rather than barriers or prophylactics. As previously discussed, when bodies come together, they do not melt into a whole (Bennett 2001; Morton 2017); instead, they encounter each other and circulate physical and affective sensations. Since scholars of digital role-play have been critical of its reliance upon technological interfaces, suggesting that they inhibit immersion and restrict human imagination, it has proved pertinent to destabilise the hierarchical impositions such thinking enforces. My position here echoes the works of game scholars Rafael Bienia (2016), Chloé Germaine (2020), and Paul Wake (2019), who emphasise that play emerges as a co-constitution of human and nonhuman entanglements, or, as Wake and Germaine put it, games are 'co-actors in the production of realities, social or otherwise' (2022: 6). In their study of digital role-play in *World of Warcraft*, Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler conclude that because of the limitation of the video game and its prerequisite interfaces, role-playing within MMORPGs is 'almost impossible' (2011: 243). They do propose that digital role-play is an act of deviance as it perverts the game's gameplay elements and disturbs the

'normal' practices of playing *World of Warcraft*. Still, the position of this project holds that technology enables these deviant and perverse play against the normative prescriptions of the game's designers.

Interfaces and player embodiment are vital elements of gameplay, and although the vast majority of players will use mass-produced interfaces, with only slight differences between models, there remains a capacity for queering these controllers. In their formative article on queering controllers, Jess Marcotte (2018) demonstrates how alternative materials might augment controllers to generate different means for embodiment and interaction when playing video games. To emphasise Marcotte's usage of the word 'augment,' the material interfaces become augmented in their continual contact and exchange with human operators. Over time with every encounter, skin, spit, and sweat congeal onto the plastic exterior of the device while continual contact gradually erodes their softer parts. Hair and dust also get caught up in the fan system of the device, an entanglement that gradually degrades the device by impeding its ability to cool down. Touching, feeling, intimacy, and exchange have been enduring threads of connection throughout this project, as it persistently explored how the residues of matter and affect move around and stick to bodies wherever there is contact. Cohering to thinkers such as Rebecca Schneider (2019) and Julietta Singh (2018), this ongoing exchange and attunement works to connect bodies, transforming them with residues from the afterlife of each encounter. Even at the surface level of contact between body and device, intimacy causes the device to transform.

Touching and feeling matter are fundamental issues in much queer and new materialist discourse, with Marcotte's (2018) work bridging these notions by queering the materials of controllers. Marcotte inventively queers controllers by designing them with matter, such as plants and textile objects embroidered with conductive thread. My arguments on the interfaces of digital role-play in Chapter Two exist besides Marcotte's design and writing, as another route to queering controls and controllers in video games. Where Marcotte modifies the matter of controllers to queer embodiment in play, in thinking promiscuously about the bodily exchange in play, there is queerness in the passing of matter between players and mass-produced devices. In thinking promiscuously about the intimacies and the exchanges of matter, new materialisms can reveal queerness and perversity in everyday gameplay. Further, because interfaces are mass-produced with only slight differences, there is a shared intimacy between interfaces and players despite the distance. Like *World of Warcraft*, intimacy is massively multiplayer as thousands of bodies exchange matter with thousands of devices.

My mouse, for example, is distinctly mine, or perhaps, it is distinctly *me*. The engraved rubber on its sides has smoothed over time, and continuous contact with my thumb has left a noticeable groove. Many of the remaining engravings have become clogged with the detritus of my body and my surroundings. Sweat and skin have congealed on the mouse, leaving a negative print of my fingers on its smooth parts while dust clumps cling to its cord. Although this is a visceral description, it is accurate and signifies how, despite being mass-produced, my mouse accrues differences in contact

and sloughs its uniformity. Mass production, queered, perhaps offers an alternative to Benjamin's arguments in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility* ([1935] 2008), where an original art object necessitates a placedness, that is, a unique weave of space and time that produces its 'aura.' For Benjamin, the reproducibility of artworks means 'stripping bare of the object' its aura since it must yield its uniqueness and lose its specificity in time and space ([1931] 1979: 250). In being reproduced, the artwork's unique weave of space and time is lost, or taken, rendering this 'new' artwork a fake, a faux, or a copy. Focusing explicitly on Benjamin's concerns about reproducibility regarding my mass-produced mouse demonstrates how reproduced objects take on a life of their own: the unruliness – perhaps promiscuity – of entanglements challenges the auratic as even an exact replica diverges into something new. My mouse is mass-produced, but in its augmentation, it has transformed into something original; it is now unique, so it must claim a new aura and a specificity of time and space. This imposition is not a reiteration of Benjamin's concept of the aura but a displacement of the 'original' as the progenitor of such medium specificity. Again, difference becomes manifold should these notions be scaled and the mouse of every role-player considered, thousands of placednesses playing together.

This cuff has shown that there remains an exchange of matter and meaning which arouses and moulds bodies despite only concluding upon a small cut of the intimacies circulating in digital role-play. At the same time, gesturing towards the material worlds of tabletop role-play suggests that studies on both modes must address all the collaborators in play to recognise how each enacts and prescribes their own

sentiments, sensations, intentions and intimacies. Alongside Marcotte's queer controllers, Bienia's study of tabletop role-play, and Germaine's study of LARP, the philosophies of the material turn are relevant to the study of video games and digital role-play. At the most fundamental level, digital role-play requires a computer, an internet connection, a video game, and other players. As such, employing new materialist ideas in a study of digital role-play reveals the intimacies and intricacies in every inter and intra-action of play.

The queerer materialisms of Karen Barad, Mel Y. Chen, Jeffrey J. Cohen, Donna J. Haraway, and Dana Luciano have been vital throughout this project as they recognise the rousing capacity of bodies in contact while acknowledging that embodiment neither starts nor stops at the flesh of the human body. As Cohen's earlier work points out, queer theory should not delimit itself to the flesh because it would seem 'strange that a critical movement predicated upon the smashing of boundary should limit itself to the small contours of human form, as if the whole of the body could be contained within the porous embrace of its skin' (2003: 41). The materialisms of Barad, Chen, and Luciano further such thinking, only their work concerns the grinding of boundaries into other boundaries rather than the grinding away of boundaries. Intimacies, perversities, touches, and feelings often rely on two or more bodies being in contact. Even a self-touch enlivens the stranger within, an outside perspective of the toucher's own body (Barad 2012). The boundaries in digital role-play, all of those interfaces and technologies between the player and another player, are not barriers but opportunities for contact that can enliven vast worlds of matter, erogenous zones, and

sensation. Also, no matter how small or fleeting these contacts are, they are integral to digital role-play.

As a final remark here, a somewhat altered version of the second chapter of this thesis exists in Chloé Germaine and Paul Wake's (2022) volume, *Material Game Studies*. Combined, the essays in this collection build a body of work to address analogue games and their players' position within the debates of the material turn, namely, as embodied components within worlds of matter. My essay, 'A Queer Touch of Fantasy Role-Play', employs this methodology of promiscuity but applies it to the matter of tabletop role-play: a miniature wargaming model, a used and stained Chessex board, and a character sheet covered in scribbles. Both tabletop and digital role-play are characterised by their gyre of unfettered relations between bodies; only the bodies in the systems of relations differ. Like the other essays in the volume, my essay straddles game studies and the philosophies of the material turn. The lens of queer theory that defines my essay invites in the sensual, carnal, and perverse aspects that circulate in tabletop role-play. Digital games tend to dominate game studies, meaning that queer theory and digital games have become more intimate than analogue games. As such, Chapter Two has been able to build upon the works of scholars such as Marcotte (2018), Shaka McGlotten (2012), and Bonnie Ruberg (2019), who explore topics of intimacy, touch, and perversities in video games. However, a queer and new materialist investigation of digital role-play's erogenous zones, sensuality, and bodily exchanges remains just as underdeveloped as analogue role-play. Positioning these two works together is generative, extending thinking with the unfettered intimacies of

role-play into each mode to recognise how bodies come together to touch and feel without hesitation as to whether they are technological, biological, real, or fake.

4. Cuffing Queerness: Digital Media

This project has argued that digital media is a vital element of digital role-play. By demonstrating that 'video game' is not a discrete ontological category, I propose that creating, sharing, and consuming media is a form of gaming and play. In illustrating this notion, Chapter Three investigated and explored stones, stages, and slippages and traced matter and sensations from myriad sources as they reemerge and 'erupt' in digital gamescapes. Through queer and new materialist thinking, this chapter proposed sensations of various matters, principally stones, that can be felt *as if* real in the digital media representations of video games, even if only for a moment. Further, it argued that digital role-play troubles reality because it assembles a hyper-weird mix and meaning that enables a zone of potentiality that transmits an equally hyper-weird mix of sensations. This cuff will conclude upon the queerness of sensation in digital role-play, namely, how creating, consuming, and assembling digital media is a decidedly queer effort; it actively shapes, twists, or perverts an otherwise normative gamespace. This cuff will reflect upon the specific queer and media theories employed in this project to investigate the examples of content creation analysed during this project.

The queer teachings of Muñoz have been foundational in this study, principally his understanding of the potentiality of traces to be gathered to create a queer utopia.

Also, his theorisations of performance and gestures as energies that both stimulate and sustain performers. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz (2009) investigates specifically queer art, writings, and performances, such as the works of Kevin Aviance, Kevin McCarty, and Andy Warhol. At the same time, because *World of Warcraft* is a AAA game, not an indie game, Jack Halberstam's work is fundamental because he often queers popular-culture artefacts. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam (2011) reveals the active enshrinement of heteronormativity in, for example, children's animation and nature documentaries, offering a queer perspective against the imposed narratives of heterosexuality. As Carolyn Dinshaw writes in an early and formative queer work, queerness 'makes people stop and look at what they have been taking as natural, and it provokes inquiry into the ways that "natural" has been produced' (1995: 77). Heteronormative content is the standard in most game genres (Ruberg 2019), including *World of Warcraft*, and, as repeated throughout this project, there are very few instances of queer representation within the game. But, through Halberstam's same thinking, queerness is revealed in the interactions, pleasures, and environments of games. This work sits at the juncture of both, where a AAA game is queered by performances of role-players and their creation and consumption of fan-made content.

The creation and consumption of fan-made digital media enable contiguities between players and propagate the migrations of matter and meaning in play. Alongside said queer theorists, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's (2016) arguments on new media have been fundamental to this project, namely, that digital media is a network which links the

collective to the individual, merging them into a monstrously connected chimaera. She writes, 'networks embody "glocal" combinations by condensing complex clouds of interactions into definite, traceable lines of connection (or connections imagined to be so) between individual nodes across disparate locales' (2016: 2). In Chun's conceptions, habits [posting, updating, liking, retweeting] connect the collective to the individual, whereas this work finds traceable and imagined lines of connection in the habitual creation and consumption of fantasy media content. That is, the creation and consumption of fantasy media content connect the collective [digital role-play] to the individual [the player, the game, the event, the forum, the *Argent Archives*], producing traceable lines of connection between disparate players. These habits coalesce individuals to create the network of digital role-play, a subscendent body with myriad parts to move along, press into, and feel. When understood in the context of video games, Muñoz's queerness as ideality and potentiality offers a unique worldmaking capacity where players can be in and create new worlds (Macklin 2017; Ruberg and Shaw 2017). The creation and consumption of fan-made content is a collective endeavour sustained by individual actions but foregrounded by the desire to create a shared space for play.

The examples of digital role-play presented in this thesis, the screenshots, poetry, event flyers, diary entries, forum posts, and drinks menus, were made with a specific purpose, whether that be to organise an event or for self-expression. In the continual sharing, consumption, and creation of this content, networks emerge, connecting role-players, evidenced by the massive collection of content in the *Argent Archives*. Though

the *Argent Archives* is loosely organised, lines of connection are present as most posts contain hyperlinked 'keywords' that link them to other posts. Also, more conceptual lines of connection become readily apparent that illustrate myriad issues and topics, such as my ecological interpretation of role-players' reactions to the cataclysm that sundered Azeroth. Tracing a line of connection between this time of ecological crisis and role-players' proceeding taking of screenshots and writing of diary entries, surveys, and creative pieces reveals a specific environmental turn in their reactions. More sensual connections arise in the queer desires for proximity, evidenced by the screenshots of role-players who have intimately positioned their avatars beside one another. Through these interpretations, individual actions connect to networks of theories, sentiments, and movements that are collective trajectories. These two examples show the collective trajectories of environmental and queer bodily desires. As Chun proposes, thinking about media in terms of traceable lines of connection can condense the complex cloud of interactions within the *Argent Archives* and reveal how entangled individual actions comprise these trajectories.

To cuff queerness and the examples considered throughout this project: sometimes they are representations of queer bodies, though, more often, queerness circulates in the unfettered intimacies and unbound relations that characterise and materialise play. Both, however, reach for queer utopia in their collective potentiality to shape *World of Warcraft*. As Muñoz writes, queerness is on the horizon; it is not yet here, 'thus, we must always be future bound in our desires and designs' (2009: 185). The desire to create, share and consume these fan-made pieces of digital media actively

(re)designs the game. Muñoz argues that reaching for the potential of queerness at the horizon is a practice that is a necessary mode for 'stepping out of this place and time to something fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter' (2009: 189). Fan-made digital media rework and recreate *World of Warcraft* with the desires and designs of its players. Players actively remake *World of Warcraft*, moving it from a normative space into something bigger yet more intimate and sensual with their events, creative writings, theories, interactions, art, pornography, guilds, adventures, and performances.

This cuff has demonstrated that thinking queerly about the digital media of role-playing in *World of Warcraft* repositions fan-made content as just as vital as the parts designed by Blizzard. Jason Pittman and Christopher Paul write, '[i]n a computer game like WoW, the fictitious world and all it contains is limited to the game's programming, whereas the contents of [the] world in a tabletop game is limited only to the players' imaginations' (2008: 56-7). Mortensen also contends that *World of Warcraft* is a 'much more static world than a tabletop game or a LARP' (2006: 408). However, queering enables theorists to 'challenge and break apart conventional categories' (Doty, 1993: xv) and so can deconstruct 'video game' as a discrete ontological category. Video games are not only the programming of designers, nor does role-play only inhabit the video game. Fan-made content materialises *World of Warcraft* and digital role-play as much as lines of code, graphics, shaders, NPCs, scripted dialogue, weapons, spells, and quest text. Thinking queerly about digital role-play recognises the tantalising position

of role-players beside the game, who reach for the horizon with their arts and acts, sustaining and cultivating a sensual and vibrant world with their practices.

5. Cuffing *World of Warcraft*

In this final cuff, I want to comment upon *World of Warcraft* as a site of queer potential and discuss why game and role-play scholars have neglected to study the game since the early 2010s. Moreover, why its place in the discourse has diminished despite massive collections of information on the lifeworld of digital role-play – the *Argent Archives* – remaining uncharted. As mentioned previously, in the late 2000s and early 2010s, there was a boom in academic discourses surrounding *World of Warcraft*, most notably Tanya Kryzwinska and Henry Lowood's (2006) journal issue on the game and Hilde G. Corneliussen's and Jill Walker Rettberg's (2011) *World of Warcraft* reader. Queer identities are only briefly mentioned in these volumes; however, some scholars do explore queer issues elsewhere (Schmeider 2009; Sherlock 2011; McGlotten 2013; Pulos 2013). During this project, I have only found two works relating to queerness and role-play in *World of Warcraft*, Tanja Sihvonen and Jaakko Stenros', 'Cues for Queer Play' (2018) and Lee Sherlock's article, 'What Happens in Goldshire stays in Goldshire' (2011). None of those mentioned above works examines the *Argent Archives*; as such, it proved pertinent to trace the vectors of play, performance, and interactions as they move between the video game and the archive. In this cuff, a more 'macro' understanding of the shifting position of *World of Warcraft* in the sociopolitical locus can provide one answer to the decline in scholarship. Then, by considering the *Argent Archives* and its structure as outlined in Chapter Four, this cuff offers *World of*

Warcraft as a reemergent site of potential for queerness, play, and further studies, should the designs and desires of role-player be properly situated.

The player base of *World of Warcraft* has been declining for a decade after it peaked during the *Wrath of the Lich King* (2008) expansion. Activision Blizzard has also been embroiled in multiple scandals, such as the Blitzchung Controversy and the *California Department of Fair Employment and Housing v. Activision Blizzard* (2021) lawsuit. The Blitzchung Controversy involved Activision Blizzard suspending professional *Hearthstone* player Ng 'Blitzchung' Wai Chung for using his post-game interview to support protesters demonstrating in Hong Kong. Activision Blizzard said Blitzchung violated tournament rules, removing him from the Hearthstone Grandmasters tournament, taking away his money won from the said tournament, and banning him from playing in *Hearthstone* esports for a year (Polygon 2019a). This action was met with ongoing criticism, including boycotts of Activision Blizzard games and protests (Polygon 2019b). As previously explained, the lawsuit against Activision Blizzard caused an outburst of condemnations and actions from its employees and player base. Alongside criticisms of the company and game, many high-profile *World of Warcraft* YouTubers and *Twitch* streamers, such as Preach Gaming and Asmongold, stopped playing entirely. A readily apparent answer to the decline in scholarship surrounding *World of Warcraft* looms by linking it to the general departure of players from the game.

Though more recently, some scholars have found *World of Warcraft* a site of potential for queer thinking (Chess 2016; Brett 2018), other AAA games with more queer representation, such as BioWare's *Mass Effect* (2007-) and *Dragon Age* (2009-) franchises have received more attention (Harper 2017; Krampe 2018; Pelurson 2018; Youngblood 2018; Dym 2019). Both the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* franchise allows for queer relationships between players and many main-character NPCs, such as Dorian Pavus, who, as Gaspard Pelurson writes, 'unashamedly live[s] their queer sexuality in broad daylight' (2018 n.p.). There is only one prominent queer NPC in *World of Warcraft*, Pelagos, a transgender man who became part of the game in November 2020. Where queer bodies, relationships, and interactions are readily present in other AAA games, examining the queernesses of *World of Warcraft* often requires finding it sequestered below the surface of the game. Still, queerness remains in the intra-actions between players and the game and in the making strange the game's mechanics, world, narratives, and media. Unlike the parts of *World of Warcraft* designed by the developers at Blizzard, instances of queerness readily precipitate, for example, within the *Argent Archives*. However, the *Argent Archives* itself can be hard to catch, and it has been missed in academic discourses. My interpretation of the *Argent Archives* in Chapter Four made sense of this by likening it to a collection of queer ephemera, comparable to queer dance, as theorised by Muñoz (2009), that is hard to catch but possesses a vast material weight for those who draw sustenance from it.

Chapter Four concluded that matter, meaning, sensations, and theoretical positions can be pieced together and pulled apart from the myriad traces of performance compiled in queer archives. This playful and queer approach that generates meaning from the excesses of ephemeral materials in the *Argent Archives* exposes a version of *World of Warcraft* that is not discrete and static but emergent, reemerging otherwise with each iteration of assembled traces. As I suggested above, despite its promiscuous approach, only a fraction of the potential lines of connection between bodies have been traced in this project. For example, religions, myths, and folklore are a fixture in the game, figuring much of the '*World*' *of Warcraft* (Kryzwinska 2006), an aspect of role-play reflected by the ubiquity of hymns, mantras, festivals, and folk stories within the *Argent Archives*. Another space for consideration emerges in digital role-play's repeated imitation of LARP, namely LARP props, which have been the subject of some scholarly consideration (Cox 2018; Germaine 2020). In this instance, digital role-players make strange role-play by bringing stereotypical LARP props into a world where dragons exist, and players can cast magic spells. Finally, how more 'standard' ways of role-playing, for example, levelling up, pretending to be an Orc, going on raids, and enjoying the avatars, might grind against the more 'queer' modes that emphasise movement, gestures, intimacy, and promiscuity.

It is worth mentioning that players will typically engage in both iterations of role-playing as they are part of a scale rather than opposites, with each supplementing the other. I have been hesitant to define role-play as it is too expansive a mode to contain within a definition, even framing it within a scale of 'standard' to 'queer' encroaches

restrictiveness that inadequately describes role-play. The arts and acts of digital role-play inherently leak into other media while other media inherently leak into it. The examples presented throughout this work demonstrate this position, as many are, arguably, not strictly examples of role-play as it might be understood in game studies. However, should role-play be defined more broadly (or promiscuously) by its subscendent parts, then its artistic, queer, intimate, performing, affective, and technological elements will be found in and illuminated by other modalities. Thinking of digital role-play in this regard also approaches the playful affordances of other modes, where playfulness signifies fun and pleasure as much as it emphasises playfulness in shifting coordinates, worldmaking, interaction, and community. As Miguel Sicart argues, playfulness is an attitude, a way of engaging with the world that takes 'the attitude of play without the activity' (2017: 21). He understands playfulness as 'play without play', that is, a physical, psychological, and emotional stance towards things that makes us create, perform, and engage without the coherent and finite actions of an activity (2017: 21-22). Offering examples, Sicart proposes that we can be playful during sex or when flirting and seducing, and we can be playful with language when we use satire and puns. Though, in this context of digital role-play, I find playfulness in its decidedly queer capacity to knock signifiers loose, unground bodies and make them strange (Dinshaw 1995). However, once again, this promiscuity risks the labyrinthine, and so, to curb these notions to role-playing games and offer something of a definition: there are tabletop role-playing games with strict and extensive rules, such as *Warhammer* (Games Workshop 1983-), as well as games with stripped-down rules, such as *Cthulhu Dark* (Graham Walmsley 2017). A Role-player might play both games and change the game's rules to create an iteration of the game

that suits their playstyle and produces different kinds of emergent narratives. Role-playing resembles modding here, defined by the desire to inhabit a world while wanting to change the game's systems or gameworld, in effect, perverting the game to create emergent realities in the wake of such transformations.

Despite its shortcomings, a promiscuous methodology elucidates digital role-play's inherent spillages between modes while centring the bodily, intimate, and sensual aspects of digital role-play that have otherwise been unremarked upon in previous scholarship. Furthermore, in being promiscuous, that is, in being unbounded in relation to other bodies, this study and digital role-play bump into many materials, affects, gestures, and theoretical positions with little regard to discrete disciplines and ontologies. Though not every path that emerges can be travelled down, this study can gesture to this myriad of other potentialities. Since digital role-play in *World of Warcraft* is rarely studied, this potentiality is essential, offering an array of glimpses that are generative of the vast lifeworlds of role-players that actively make up the game. Chapter Four positioned the *Argent Archives* alongside Tabitha Nikolai's (2018) digital archive, *Ineffable Glossolalia,* because both evidence lives through material traces that are fragmentary, nonlinear, and messy. As Rob Gallagher writes, *Ineffable Glossolalia* is an adventure through a fragmentary and polyvocal archive that presents the player with a 'cacophonous multimedia assemblage capable of accommodating such complexities' (2020: 116). The realities of digital role-play are similarly discordant and complex, traversing various media and modalities; hence to gather meaning from evidence found in the *Argent Archives*, the navigator must experiment by piecing

together and apart these fragments to discover their various outcomes. Promiscuity as the method for this experimentation is a methodology that gets lost in and excited by the touching and feeling of all these erogenous bodies that comprise digital role-play.

Figure 5.1 Role-players queuing to use an outhouse at a music festival (2022). Screenshot taken by Aranict Rushbrook. Courtesy of Aranict Rushbrook.

This final cuff has offered that when *World of Warcraft* is understood as something more and other than just a game designed by Activision Blizzard, it reemerges as a site of queer potential, play, and study. Specifically, when the *Argent Archives* is understood to be a vital component of the game, an abundance of meaning is generated from the equally abundant amount of material traces. Relying on traces, ephemera, and the momentary to evidence lifeworlds is a queer endeavour (Muñoz 1996) and, in paying attention to the excess of traces that define digital role-play, *World of Warcraft* becomes ungrounded and strange rather than restrictive and normative. To close these concluding remarks with an example, the screenshot above [*fig 5.1*] features a queue of avatars all waiting to use an outhouse while attending a music festival. Queues for portable toilets are an almost constant fixture at music

festivals, and this screenshot suggests that this ubiquity extends to digital role-play. Although avatars have no digestive or urinary tracts, meaning they do not require sanitation, gestics and affects remain vital, so they queue in front of a mechanically functionless toilet. In the deliberate pursuit to arouse sensation in play, queueing for the restroom is rearticulated and realised in performance. A 'new' reality of *World of Warcraft* emerges through the performances of digital role-players; they fabricate a more queer, weird, and enchanting game, where matter and meaning, touching and feeling, gesture and sensation circulate in an ongoing system of giving and receiving.

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