

*virtual*intimacies



MEDIA, AFFECT, AND QUEER SOCIALITY

Shaka McGlotten

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Introduction

A life contains only virtuals. It is made up of virtualities, events, singularities. What we call virtual is not something that lacks reality but something that is engaged in a process of actualization following the plane that gives it its particular reality. The immanent event is actualized in a state of things and of the lived that make it happen.

—Gilles Deleuze, “Immanence: A Life”¹

This book is about what it feels like to connect, or fail to, in a technophilic and technophobic present in which intimacy has gone virtual, if it ever was real. We depend on communications technologies to facilitate our lives and our interactions with others; we look to new media for succor from our loneliness, to bring us into contact with others we might love, hate, or remain stubbornly indifferent to. The virtual operates as a promise of immanence, the indwelling force of things waiting, pressing, ready to act. As an immanent power, the virtual is often deferred, sometimes materialized, but always charged with the *capacity* to help us feel like we belong. Intimacy describes: a *feeling* of connection or a *sense* of belonging; embodied and carnal sensuality, that is, *sex*; and that which is *most inward or inmost* to one’s personhood. Intimacy is also a vast assemblage of ideologies, institutional sites, and diverse sets of material and semiotic practices that exert normative pressures on large and small bodies, lives, and worlds. In contemporary U.S. culture, intimacy names the affective encounters with others that often matter most, while also functioning as a juridical form, an aspirational narrative, and therapeutic culture’s *raison d’être*.² All of this is to say that intimacy refers to things we feel and do, and it is a force.

Intimacy has been a central site in the culture wars of the last thirty years. According to many among the political Right, intimacy's well-being, even its essential nature, has suffered under the onslaught of multiculturalism and other minority demands for inclusion. This perceived war has led to entrenched, if wholly irrational, positions, especially among the Right: to take only one example, miscegenation may no longer be a focal point of anxiety, at least not in polite company, but gay marriage operates in its stead as a new scapegoat for the failures, real and imagined, suffered by heterosexual marriage and the family and nation writ large.³ New technologies have added fuel to these anxious fires. Utopian cyberspace discourses, whose optimism is now viewed with both disdain and nostalgia, were always tempered by technophobic panics that turned on questions of intimacy, especially of the more carnal sort. Cyberspace promised infinite pleasures and freedoms, especially freedoms from the constraints of gender and sex—if your wife wouldn't do it you could find someone, even a bot, who'd do it for you online, without making you take out the trash—and at the same time evoked and reproduced fears about those kinds of sex that stepped outside the bounds of what anthropologist Gayle Rubin famously called “the charmed circle” of socially sanctioned sexuality.⁴ The Web, or so the fears went, would usher in an anarchic wave of sexual libertinism. And in a way, these fears were true. New digital media technologies, including but not limited to the Internet, have facilitated a new era of casual or anonymous hookups (Craigslist), CGI safe sex alternatives and role playing (Second Life), and, of course, the proliferation of masturbatory aids (DIY porn).

But these new freedoms and possibilities picked up anxieties like Velcro.⁵ Virtual intimacies signaled new possibilities even as they foregrounded the perceived failures of intimate belonging. Virtual intimacies were failures before the fact. If you had to get online to get it, it couldn't be the real thing. But what is the real thing, what is real intimacy?

Virtual Intimacies laterally answers this question by focusing on the experiences of gay men, including myself, who have navigated this expansive and expanding field of virtually mediated intimacies, who go on the hunt for love or sex and who often find themselves entangled—in the love and sex they were seeking or in other, less predictable encounters—along the way. Rather than a smooth space that flows,⁶ digital virtuality amplifies the inconstant stutter of desire. The technologies we hope will facilitate connection can instead block

or confuse it. We might not have access to technology or have the literacy to use it. New digital divides are constituted not only by who has access to the Internet but by the specific points of access—blacks and Latinos, for example, increasingly use proprietary mobile phones to access the Web—and bandwidth. Sometimes things get messy when we can't get something to work, it doesn't work the way we want, or our lack of knowledge or foreknowledge means we screw things up (like leaving our Facebook profile public, or posting a face pic on a Craigslist personal ad, or accidentally cc-ing someone on an e-mail they weren't meant to have and not knowing how to recall it). Then there are standbys such as sexual shame (and its respectable effect, sexual propriety) that forty years after Stonewall doggedly cling to queer sex, materializing in persistent social stigma about sexual practices ("I'm okay with gays as long as they don't *flaunt* it") and the everyday bullying overheard in schools around the country ("hey, faggot"). The fluidity and playfulness of cyberspace and the intimate possibilities it was supposed to afford have been punctured by corporeality; for me and some of my informants, for example, the particularities of our racial enmeshments have operated as obvious and not so obvious drags on our erotic or romantic possibilities.⁷

I began researching this book during the dotcom boom and bust in Austin, Texas, at the turn of the last millennium. I wanted to know what the Internet offered queerness and vice versa—how it might shape or be shaped by its encounter with queer ideas and bodies. What I found was that while I could apply some of the excited rhetoric about cyberspace to what it felt like to be online—sex was easy to get, people could come out without fearing for their well-being, people could explore and experiment with their identities and the sorts of sex they wished they were having—the truth was much messier and less optimistic. You might be able to get dick to your house faster than a pizza, as one early informant told me, but for many the dick might be late, it might ask for an exorbitant tip, or it might not be hot anymore when it did arrive. By the early aughts, the exciting newness of this virtual medium—as in the chat rooms at Gay.com or in gay IRC—had morphed into something altogether more banal. People still complained about the sex they had or couldn't get; they still got the clap; and they engaged in binge/purge cycles, meeting guys for early morning one-offs, then swearing off Netsex forever.

Increasingly, I encountered narratives of loss and addiction, anime and nostalgia for the days before the Net. My research came to

focus less on these new technologies than on the time and spaces that preceded them, on the intimate worlds formed around practices of cruising parks and toilets, and around the many losses, material and affective, suffered from AIDS. These losses were contagious, creating an affective atmosphere that implicated and troubled me. I was relatively new to my gay tribe, and I experienced more than a little culture shock. My critique—of the neoliberal impact of gentrification on public sex and on the ways virtual spaces supplemented without supplanting sex in public toilets—was contaminated,⁸ and my epistemic certainties undone. The queer worlds I had hoped to find were a little too “brave new” for my liking, and they were saturated with melancholia and nostalgia. But they also turned me on and tuned me in—I learned that sex was a kind of background hum, that every space might become a queer space, if only I paid attention to sometimes faint but almost always present erotic frequencies: gazes held a second too long, subtle and not so subtle movements and gestures (a casual grope or a hand resting near a crotch), alert lingering in gym showers and saunas, or the peculiarly intense studying that goes on near some university toilets, especially out of the way ones.

Queer spaces, I learned, were spaces where normal rules of social intercourse were suspended, especially those defined by heteronormative ideals that permitted homosociality but discouraged homosex and emphasized sexual propriety. They were also spaces whose properties were creatively reworked to accommodate sexual pleasures—bathrooms became sites for impromptu late afternoon collective jerk off sessions, and after the bars closed, parks became landscapes of whispered conversations and half-seen figures. None of this is to say that these spaces were uniquely liberatory (there were still the closet, crabs, and the cops to think about), but they did come to represent for me something of the expansiveness of queer sexual practices that I had thought lost with HIV/AIDS and growing mainstream acceptance.

After leaving Austin, my home and fieldsite for seven years, I returned to the digitally mediated sites and events that first caught my ethnographic attention. This book collects a few of those reflections.

These now not so new virtual intimacies encounter and rework historical antecedents particular to queer, especially gay male, sociality: chiefly cruising and hooking up. These forms of contact and encounter have been famously celebrated by black gay science fiction writer and critic Samuel R. Delany, who writes elegiacally of New York public sex venues; for him these spaces of public sex afforded rare opportunities

for “interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will.”⁹ While a handful of other texts have emerged over the last decade that treat cruising and casual sex as important to histories of gay social formation, modestly recuperating promiscuous or libertine practices,¹⁰ they are largely relegated to an earlier, almost primitive, period of sexual practice. Neoliberal ideologies and the moralism of the New Right together effectively curtailed a collective politics of sexual liberation. The successes of these views are apparent in the ways many gays view public sex as antiquated, dangerous, and disgusting. And though new media affords the possibility of cruising, this is limited to the context of personal choices and consumerist self-styling. Hookup sites and cruising apps reduce social worlds of public sex to bad faith erotic free markets; they are in bad faith because like the neoliberal economies in which they are situated, the benefits of the market tend to accrete to the very few—namely, well to do, young, and very often white, men. New media also paradoxically literalize widely circulating views about their historical antecedents: such intimacies are *merely* virtual.

Transitory and often anonymous, these intimacies were nonetheless vital in the formation of queer social networks well before the advent of specifically digital communications technologies. The queer network has a longer history. There were the networks produced through word of mouth, through spaces of contact and encounter (such as bars or zones tied to cruising), through medical and educational tracts, through jurisprudence, and through earlier communication media. Historian Martin Meeker explicitly links modern gay identity formation to these media, arguing that the consolidation of gay and lesbian communities depended on the ways people “could connect to knowledge about homosexuality.”¹¹ Before gays could “come out,” they had to be “‘connected to’ the knowledge that same-sex attraction meant something, that it had social ramifications, and that it had a name.”¹² Meeker identifies three major trends in queer communication networks between the 1930s and 1970s: the formation of authoritative and candid networks (by gays themselves and not just by medical, legal, or educational discourses); mass mediated images that featured the “discovery” of homosexual networks; and DIY, commercial, and activist media that paralleled and contributed to strong subcultural formations in late 60s and the 1970s.¹³

These earlier analog networks, like the digital ones that preoccupy me, reflect what Alexander Galloway highlights as dominant tropes of

the network: as web of ruin and chain of triumph. A net is a device of capture and work, “an act of doing and the structure or thing resulting from the act.”¹⁴ Networks are systems of “interconnectivity” in which parts are in constant relation, and they are “symbols for, or actual embodiments of, real world power and control.”¹⁵ As a web of ruin or a chain of triumph, networks tend to produce or reflect order or disorder. This conceptualization is useful in part for the ways it helps me to understand some of the perspectives of my earliest interlocutors who, in telling me stories about the halcyon days of gay sex in the 1970s, attributed the waning of that period not so much to AIDS but to the very successes of the gay rights movement. By bringing sexuality to the fore, the movement effectively created sexuality as a kind of identitarian demand—everyone had to have a sexuality, and gays needed to be out of the closet. Rather than loose affective, experiential, or affinal ties, identity politics demanded stickier sorts of belonging, favoring identities and communities over impersonal socialities or a commons where they might encounter one another. My informants recollected earlier erotic socialities, non-identitarian collectivities and scenes of contact, impersonal events and singularities of lives lived in and through differently textured experiences and relations, not, or not only, in and through frozen categories of identity. Thus, the (however modest) achievements of gay lobbying efforts—a chain of triumph, in Galloway’s terms—created order in a messy and capacious world of public sexual encounters, limiting rather than expanding emotional and erotic opportunities (among others). Internet-based cruising and hookup sites likewise represented both chain of triumph and web of ruin among my informants. For many young gay men interested in expanding their social and erotic associations, IRC, chat rooms, and the like helped them to bypass bars or public sex spaces or the sometimes lengthy process of introduction that occurs through face-to-face social networking. They could get online and find exactly what they were looking for when they wanted it. But many older gay men despaired at these new digital spaces and not necessarily because they found them difficult to use. Rather, they perceived online spaces as ruinous because of the ways they foreclosed the possibility of the random encounter, or the unpredictable bloom of desire. They reasoned, and rightly so, that if people entered in the qualities they thought they wanted in a search engine, they would be less open to other possibilities that might occur in real world queer spaces. The arguments I make here likewise explore the Janus-like effects of networks on intimate encounters.

On a very basic level, *Virtual Intimacies* describes a range of contacts and encounters, from the ephemeral to the enduring, made possible by digital and networked means: chat rooms, instant messaging, porn, status updates, tweets, online personals, dating sites, hookup apps, sexts.

Virtual Intimacies also captures a dominant cultural attitude about these phenomena: they're trouble, a diminished and dangerous corruption of the real thing. These beliefs have been widely refracted in and through mainstream media. A famous *Time* magazine cover from 1995, for example, features the morphed image of a child at a keyboard, whose shocked expression is eerily lit by a computer screen. The headline: "CYBERPORN EXCLUSIVE: A new study shows how pervasive and wild it really is. Can we protect our kids—and Free Speech?" While the debates about children's sexuality are a structuring element of debates about the Internet (see chapter 4), anxious fantasies about the impact of new communication media on intimacy were and remain widespread, variously fixating on the ways porn consumption negatively impacts desire (even turning some otherwise straight men's desires queer),¹⁶ the ways virtual affairs via webcams or virtual worlds threaten marriages (or more rarely, lead to them), or on the hours whiled away to gaming (the stereotypical basement dwelling nerd). Digital media, and especially the Web, ushered in a new wave of technology-based disorders that, according to some, produced antisocial, anti-intimate behavior. In this context, addiction operates as an always at hand analytic to explain the lure and danger of virtual worlds, though these arguments confuse whether it's addiction or the pleasures of the Web that are cause or effect.

Most of the stories in this book refract these dominant cultural beliefs that virtual intimacies are failed intimacies that disrupt the flow of a good life lived right, that is, a life that involves coupling and kids, or at least, coupling and consumption. From this critical point of view, virtual intimacies approach normative ideals about intimacy but can never arrive at them; they might index some forms of connection or belonging, but not the ones that really count; they are fantastic or simulated, imaginative, incorporeal, unreal. Such characterizations resemble dominant beliefs about queer intimacies as pale imitations or ugly corruptions of the real deal—monogamously partnered, procreative, married, straight intimacy. Each of the chapters in the book highlights these widely circulating notions, foregrounding some of the ways queer belonging, mediated intimacies, and failure orbit one another in the popular imaginary.

But there's room yet for optimism. Thus, I do not simply, or not only, point to the fallacy or injustice of such attitudes. Rather, working from Deleuzian conceptions of the virtual, I offer two arguments that run laterally to the normative ones above. First, I underscore the ways virtuality is not opposed to the real; virtuality refers to immanence, capacity, and potentiality. Second, I underscore the ways intimacy is already virtual in the ways it is made manifest through affective experience.

For Gilles Deleuze the virtual refers to an immanent plane of potential, to the capacities something is capable of. "A life," Deleuze says, "contains only virtuals. . . . What we call virtual is not something that lacks reality but something that is engaged in a process of actualization following the plane that gives it its particular reality."¹⁷ The virtual is something waiting or pressing, something sensed, something dreamed or remembered.¹⁸ It is that which is so in essence, but not actually so. It is real but not concrete, ideal but not abstract.¹⁹ It is a vitality not fully captured by form.

In *The Virtual*, anthropologist Rob Shields usefully outlines a range of historical virtualities, from the Reformation's insistence that the Eucharist was virtually rather than actually real, the illusionistic simulations of *trompe l'oeil* in Baroque painting and architecture, to the panoramas of the nineteenth century that sought to provide a total view of a scene or event. Shields also looks to rituals and rites of passage as "liminoid virtualities." In these practices and spaces, ordinary life is suspended and another reality takes precedence, a reality that, echoing Deleuze and Guattari's fascination with "becomings," empowers a transformation from one state of being to another.

As scholars of sexuality before and since Foucault have observed, queers have been especially adept at transforming intimate worlds and forms of sociality.²⁰ Virtuality helps to name the incipient social and affective worlds—modes of encounter, material configurations, emotional possibilities—that queer publics create, nourish, and sustain. Queers have made artful lives, and we have generated new affective dispositions. Affection, as the capacity to affect or be affected, is likewise virtual.²¹ In this book I am preoccupied with affective states such as anxiety and optimism that are produced in and through virtual relationalities and mediated intimacies. Intimacy is not itself a form of affect; rather it is more like affect's own immanence—proximity, connection—a necessary precondition for certain affective states to

bloom, especially those that have to do with other people. Affect happens in and through intimacy.

Intimacy is supported by a range of discourses and practices, but as an experience it is composed largely of feelings, feeling more or less connected, as if one belongs or doesn't. In this way, intimacy is and always has been virtual. As an assemblage of power relations, intimacy is scripted, even if those scripts are diverse and sometimes contradictory, but this does not mean there is no room for maneuver, for minor or major interventions in the ways extant intimacies might be reworked or new ones cultivated. That is, virtuality is one way to conceptualize intimacy's own ongoing immanence. Getting online is one way to understand this, but not the only one.²²

I therefore do two things in this book: First, I track some of the ways technologically mediated intimacies are framed in popular, mass-mediated discourses as failed, establishing an equivalence between virtuality, failure, and queerness. In stories about public or online sex, sexual predators, or porn, anxieties about virtually mediated intimacy are also stories about the failure of queer desire and sex. However, describing the virtual as a failure to be intimate also exposes the fault lines of intimacy writ large. Thus, secondly, each of the chapters that follow also turns this framing of virtual intimacies as failed on its head, asking, What's real about intimacy to begin with? I do this not, or not only, to cynically challenge the intimacies people experience or more or less enjoy, but to recuperate the expansive possibilities that inhere in the notion of virtuality as immanence, as potential. The messy material encounters that come with sex show among other things, for example, the ways carnality can function as a creative political, even pedagogical, practice that resists and elaborates dominant narratives of intimacy. In this way, I work to show how virtual intimacies, rather than signaling the failure or corruption of intimate belonging, underscore the ways intimacy still possesses unrealized capacities and lines of flight.

At first blush, these arguments might seem too local or naively utopian. Do the ways same-sex desiring men desire one another or use technology to connect matter in a global context of environmental degradation, brutal repression, and imperialism? Do they matter to the apparent victory of neoliberal capitalism, or are they even perhaps symptomatic of its success? After all, isn't the promise of the virtual like the promise of the market, an unattainable thing we long for, the very longing for which does us harm?²³ While I understand virtual

intimacies as situated within the circuits of what Jodi Dean calls “communicative capitalism,”²⁴ the commodified self-styling and interactive exchanges that express the democratic freedom to produce the self but only in and through fantasies of the market, there is also, I suggest, an uncaptured immanence and excess: the typically invisible but nonetheless present alternatives to the hegemonic forces that demand we believe that There is No Alternative to neoliberal hegemony.

Ideologies and institutions of intimacy under neoliberalism have increasingly incorporated and absorbed otherwise oppositional energies, domesticating the subcultural styles and resistant practices particular to queerness. Homonormativity, only recently a tantalizing theoretical possibility that described nascent homo incorporations into the mainstream, has crystallized into a matter of fact.²⁵ And while queer theory has never managed to become institutionally ensconced, queerness as a kind of quasi-awry thread in the multicultural fabric of U.S. mass culture has become a more permanent fixture: we’ve had New Queer Cinema, *Queer Eye*, Ellen, *The L Word*, Lady Gaga, and an ever-expanding array of gay supporting characters (we make great best friends). Since 9/11, homonormativity has also taken new forms, participating as homonationalism in a larger assemblage of state policies and discourses that buttress the permanent states of political emergency and exception that in turn work, increasingly desperately, to secure U.S. economic and cultural hegemony around the world.²⁶ Gay “freedoms” are metonymically linked to the freedoms of democracy and the market, and they are used to obscure the rapaciousness of imperialist and corporate hegemonies.²⁷

Virtual intimacies, as immanent and expanding possibilities, might appear to mirror the logic of normative and nationalist structures of power (of both the hetero and homo varieties) that promise endless freedom and choice. But insofar as they congeal failed, carnal, ambivalent, and over- or hypermediated forms of intimate encounter (public sex, online hookups, predation, and so on), they also reflect the most irredeemable of queer intimacies, intimacies unlikely to be trumpeted as desirable freedoms. In this way, virtual intimacies also resist incorporation into the unreflective, deeply cynical, and/or phantasmatic celebrations of freedom that support homonational and neoliberal ideologies. Again, part of what I am trying to recuperate—intimacy’s virtuality or immanence—is about trying to imagine forms of connection and belonging that are not necessarily identitarian and that do not fit neatly into our beliefs about how we might belong to a couple, a family, or

nation. I labor to render intimacy as a “structure of feeling,” as social and psychic, as an entangled contact zone of political and personal energies,²⁸ as constrained by *and* outside an overdetermined politics of identity, sexual or otherwise. Of course, the attendant dangers of this perspective are outlined by the critiques of homonormativity and homonationalism. By favoring experience as a more vital phenomenological engagement with the world over identity as a preformed and socially scripted category, I risk reproducing a depoliticized and narcissistic individualism: “experience,” after all, and its seemingly endless permutation as such is precisely what is at stake and for sale in communicative capitalism and in the triumphalist networks of online commerce. But part of the promise of my approach (to the immanent and the open) is that it underscores the constructionist maxim that personhood is not necessarily constituted by what one does, but by how one feels, and by the ways one names those feelings (or doesn’t) and puts them into relationship (or doesn’t) with larger social histories of difference or national belonging. (Men who have sex with men aren’t always gay, nor should they have to be. Queerness might refer to an oppositional political movement, or the refusal to be named as such.) Intimate virtuality in this way communicates fragile, ambivalent, but nonetheless real, experiential, and ethical movements that strain against (without fully escaping) the limits of identitarian forms. Intimacy builds worlds, affective, social, institutional, and otherwise; framing intimacy as virtual and as queer, rather than distorting or diminishing intimacy’s “reality,” defiantly argues for its expansion.

The book is divided into five chapters. Each tells a story about virtual intimacy and cuts across a range of mediated sites and spaces: the policing of public sex in Austin, Texas, juxtaposed with sex scandals suffered by conservative ideologues; the cultivation of new forms of intimacy in the popular online game *The World of Warcraft*; the emotional challenges black gay men face while navigating online gay sex publics; the ways the collectively imagined “erotic innocence” of children is mobilized to police sex in the digital age; and the creative transformation of “porn into life” by new queer DIY pornographers. In each chapter, I explore the ways some mediated form of connection, typically erotic, is perceived to have gone awry: the licentiousness of the Net gives way to predation (chapters 1 and 4), online games transform intimacy into a means to an end (chapter 2), online racisms produce all too affective dis-ease (chapter 3), and shared DIY porn emerges as antiporn activism’s exemplar of internalized misogyny and

false consciousness (chapter 5). Taken together, these chapters offer a snapshot, admittedly partial, of our virtually intimate present in which some forms of sex, like those in public or online, become the castigated and fascinating objects of mass culture, while simultaneously representing the birth of new forms of sociality.

The tensions in the titular idea—the ideological or affective entanglements that stick to and emerge from the collision of the virtual and intimate—are expressed through the interplay of a handful of themes, namely failure, anxiety, scandal, and loss, as well as creativity, play, and optimism. These themes come to life through stories men told me or that I, more or less confessionally, reveal to the reader. In each chapter, then, I attend to the regulatory efforts to glom desire onto normative ready-made paths, to harness and distribute its potential toward “good” objects and ends such as “real” or steady forms of attachment, while also emphasizing the labors, perverse and otherwise, that animatedly rework categories of intimacy in more novel and compelling ways.

Chapter 1, “The Virtual Life of Sex in Public,” elaborates virtual intimacy’s relation to talk about and feelings of failure. It brings together stories about sex in Austin, Texas, a city famous both for its high-tech aspirations and, among gay men, a lively cruising culture, with recent mass-mediated sex scandals and an appearance on the voyeuristic TV show about Internet predation, *To Catch a Predator*. I outline how talk about “sex in public,” which includes actual public sex acts and mass-mediated panics about sex, reproduces a hierarchy of erotic value in which some forms of sex are more or less real than others. At the same time, I emphasize the ambivalence of this hierarchy: the mass public (that means us) takes pleasure in others’ sexual failures while also uncomfortably recognizing the ways failures of all sorts nestle, even if only virtually, within our own intimacies. The fears and pleasures associated with failure structure what counts as intimate sociality and operate to police the possible forms intimacy might take; they are the none-too-subtle reminders about what’s inside and what’s outside ideal relational forms (the couple, the family, the nation).

In chapter 2, I look to the intimacies afforded by and creatively retooled within the hugely successful, massively multiplayer online game *The World of Warcraft*. “Intimacies in the Multi(player)verse” narrates my own entry into this game world that, with more than eleven million players from around the world, is the most successful game of

its kind. Shadowing its success, however, are stories about addiction, alienation, breakups, and even death from overplay. However, I argue that intimacy, rather than extinguished by the game, is actually central to the experience of play. The game design in fact effectively requires that players play with one another to succeed; intimacy becomes transactional and instrumental, a necessary means to an end. I show how players interrupt this demand to be intimate in particular ways by using in-game chat channels to have virtual sex, transforming intimate sociality into a means *without* an end.

“Feeling Black and Blue” asks, What does it feel like to be black and queer in online gay sex publics? The answer: more than a little sore. Here, I detail my own experiences and those of other black gay men who have used online gay spaces for love and sex. Chapter 3 is organized around three dominant feelings: anxiety, paranoia, and optimism. Anxiety is a heightened, speculative form of attention, in this case, to the incomplete knowledge of how race might matter in virtual contexts. Paranoia extends racial anxiety into a more certain world in which race decidedly does matter, but only in the worst sorts of ways, as stereotype and cruel rejection. Finally, in my discussions of optimism, I try to recover something of the virtual’s openness, emphasizing the possibilities that, even in the face of racism or the failure to connect, still inhere in these online publics.

Chapter 4, “Justin Fucks the Future,” tells the story of Justin Berry, former underage “camwhore” turned anti-sex predator tech consultant. This chapter rehearses Berry’s narrative of abuse (his online performances for older men), underage sexual ambivalence (although he had sex with boys and girls, he really got online to meet girls his own age), and dangerous (because he was immature) tech entrepreneurship. This narrative was told and retold on the pages of *The New York Times*, Oprah, and CNN. My rehearsal of this story serves more queer purposes: I challenge Berry’s tale of innocence lost and redemption gained. I point to the tacit homophobia in media representations of his story and the ways in which anxieties about childhood sexuality are tied to fears of technological change to show the ways the figure of the Child, a virtual exemplar of moral purity and risk, fixes the limits of erotic possibility. Reading mainstream reports against the grain, drawing on counternarratives and legal documents, I suggest that Justin Berry’s abuse is altogether more complex than it appears at first glance and that his story is equally about public fascination with underage sex and overblown fears about technologically sophisticated gay predators.

Turning from the more critical tone of the last chapter, chapter 5, “The *Élan Vital* of DIY Porn,” gestures toward a more generous and open reading of intimate virtuality. In it, I playfully employ philosopher Henri Bergson’s notion *élan vital*, or vital force, to describe new online gay DIY porn. Situating these contributions to our collective, and increasingly digital, pornographic imagination within a larger history of gay porn, I suggest that DIY porn importantly challenges some of the organizing principles of commercial or industrial porn. I point to the ways DIY porn frequently operates in gift rather than market economies, cultivates the participation of ordinary people (as performers and as fans), interrupts the aesthetic banality of mainstream pornographic texts, and situates itself within explicitly political, pro-sex, feminist, and queer frameworks. In this way, porn, rather than functioning only as dead or deadening representations of sex, operates as a creative and enlivening practice of life in the twenty-first century.

This is a book that has since its inception risked being out of time, at arriving too late or missing the contemporaneity of its objects. The acceleration of media forms and the (often enviable) speed with which (largely nonacademic) commentators express their views on them means that the new media that shape the virtual intimacies I am preoccupied with have always risked becoming old media. But queer temporalities are extensive, attached to lengthy (sometimes lifelong) adolescences, to ephemeral presents, and to futures that often sidestep the promises and linearity of straight time, like the punctums of marriage and kids.²⁹ The ethnographic research that shaped this book took place online over the last ten years, but in that time, the digital landscape changed dramatically. Where IRC and other chatrooms were once the primary sites for interactive exchange, the boom of Web 2.0, in which user-generated content has played an increasingly important role, as well as new social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, have made interactivity central to the digital everyday. As Henry Jenkins and others point out, contemporary media ecologies are characterized by “convergence,” a central element of which includes the ways consumers become producers of content.³⁰ And while this book certainly attends to user-driven content and the technologies that enable them, technologies themselves are not its focus, but rather, the kinds of discourses in which technologies are situated and the contacts they afford.

Finally, a brief note on this book’s tone: I have sometimes been accused of not “sounding academic,” a phrase that arrives as a criticism

when followed by the word “enough” and as a compliment when it arrives from my students. I have written this book with students, my own and others’, in mind, while also trying to maintain the intellectual rigor of the concepts that I engage. I perform what Melissa Gregg, analyzing the work of Meagan Morris, describes as “a mundane voice.” This voice embodies a mode of critical engagement that draws on “anecdote, an affective tone, a colloquial focus” to humble cultural studies’ projects while still cultivating forms of curiosity and interest “with the aim of rendering legible new political performances.”³¹ It is a way of enacting how experiences, including those of the researcher or analyst, are nested in larger social worlds—what Lauren Berlant calls “theorizing in living,”³² thereby introducing complicating layers into the project of cultural analysis, and, I hope, minimizing the often unnecessary alienation produced by the use of jargon. And in its use of direct address, especially “you” and “we,” I mark the ways the public of this book is already shaped by factors of education, class, and social location (you bought this book, or you got it from a library), but I also use these forms of address to invite readers’ participation in the publics the book charts, publics readers might otherwise find alien or unfamiliar. By hailing readers in this way, I aim for the text to shrink the distance between the worlds the book describes and the one the reader finds herself in.

In this way, I hope for the book itself to function as an intimate gesture, one that through its attention to feelings and the worlds feelings build draws its readers close, encouraging them to reflect on the sorts of intimacies we have lived (and mourned or celebrated), and to the ones that tease the edge of our imagination, that stretch what we think is doable and ethical in our encounters with ourselves or others. This is not only to say that we need more or better, deeper or meaningful intimacies, or that this book presents any actionable self-help solutions to the problems that inevitably seem to attend our intimacies. Indeed, in its emphasis on the immanence of the virtual, it follows both the most normative beliefs in intimacy—especially the idea that intimacy, in the form of true love or a nourishing attachment is waiting, just around the corner—and their inverse—you don’t have to be close to feel connected or feel close to be connected. However, my emphasis on virtuality also serves less ambiguously as a reminder that intimacy is possessed of an inherent and generative capacity for change.

Intimacies in the Multi(player)verse

In the overlapping fandoms of comic and gaming culture, a multiverse is comprised of many existing, sometimes overlapping, parallel universes. In different genres of fiction, these are speculative zones that allow creators and fans to ask and explore “What if?” scenarios in which they creatively reframe familiar characters, spaces, and relationships. To take a famous example from the world of DC Comics, in one universe Superman is married to Lois Lane and in another to Lana Lang. Sometimes an apparently minor difference can have significant, indeed, world-altering effects. And, of course, sometimes things bleed through, as when Bizarro Superman wreaks havoc in the world of the Superman we’ve grown used to. In another example, Philip K. Dick’s famous novel *Man in the High Castle*, the Axis Powers, having won World War II, exercise their hegemony in a conquered United States, which has been divided into puppet states governed by Japan and Germany. Now, a multiverse isn’t simply a flight of fancy, as any good geek will tell you.¹ More to the point, game designers have drawn on Neal Stephenson’s similar notion of the metaverse, first articulated in his novel *Snow Crash*: a virtual space in which a world operates as a metaphor and where humans interact with one another in the form of avatars. Although the idea of the multiverse stretches the Deleuzian notions of the virtual that inform much of my thinking, it is nonetheless also possible to think of the virtual as the actual’s multiple, mirror image; prior to its capture (when one relates a memory or a narrative of identity), the virtual is multiple, existing in many different states in a plane of immanence.

Here, I use this notion of the multiverse as a way to think through the different ways intimacies materialize in the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG), *The World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). *WoW* is multiple in many ways, not least of which because it is an actualization of not one, but many virtual worlds: the worlds of the fantasy, which inform its geography and play style, as well as the worlds of the millions of users who play it everyday. In what follows, I track notions of multiplicity and play in both dominant and minor forms of intimacy in *Warcraft*. In the first half of this chapter, I identify two of the most common forms of intimacy in the game world, group and solo play. While arguing that these forms of intimacy are largely instrumental, figuring sociality as a means to an end, I also begin to recuperate their immanent multiplicity through the intimate incursions gamers have made into *WoW*'s narrative universe and how they extend these intimacies toward other, more profligate ends. In the final section of the chapter, I use these forms of belonging and touch that escape instrumentality to figure virtual intimacy in a modestly hopeful register as a means *without* an end.

INSTRUMENTAL INTIMACIES IN AZEROTH

An elf was following me, annoyingly, repeatedly asking variations of the same questions:

“Will you be my friend?”

“Do you know where the druid is?”

“How do I get the quest?”

“Will you help me?”

“Invite me to a group?”

“Don't you want to be my friend?”

Finally, I'd had enough. “NO!” I shouted, “Leave me alone!”

Another nearby elf, laughing, intervened: “Why don't you just ignore him?”

After dragging my mouse over a series of interface options on my computer screen, I finally found what I was looking for. I pressed the “ignore” button and typed in my pursuer's screen name. The elf's speech bubbles stopped appearing, although he kept following me around for a while, standing in front of me and jumping up and down to try and get my attention again. Eventually he lost interest and wandered off, while I went about finishing my quest.

At my keyboard, I found myself anxious and frustrated. What was I supposed to do? Should I have talked with him longer or become his friend? After all, I had many of the same questions. I didn't know what I was doing in this new world; I barely understood how to move my avatar around. I was just following the advice of one of my students: "Just go around and click on the people with exclamation points over their heads. They're going to tell you what to do and where to go. Start there."

Beginning in the spring of 2007, at the urging of students, colleagues, and friends who were familiar with my interest in virtual intimacies, I downloaded a free trial of *The World of Warcraft* and began playing. Though I had occasionally played computer games as a child and adolescent, I don't identify as a gamer. Two weeks later, at the end of the free trial period and, I had assumed, my experiment with this virtual world, I dutifully entered my credit card information to activate a monthly subscription. "I need to do much more research," I told myself. It didn't hurt, of course, that I found the game enjoyable, or that the social networks it enabled, with my students and friends who played, opened up new opportunities for thinking through digitally mediated relationships. Indeed, many of those who encouraged me to immerse myself in *Warcraft* became my chief interlocutors, generously sharing their own histories with the game, as well as advice and support (and occasionally even a little in-game gold) as I tackled learning everything from basic keyboard commands, to traveling, to the game's sophisticated and massive economy.

Now, years later, I can't claim to have ever mastered *WoW*, although I have logged thousands of hours in game. Indeed, I play only sporadically now, during summers or when I teach a particular course. But I'm still thrilled when I game, although this excitement is only rarely tinged with the confused anxiety that marked my early weeks of play. Rather, it is the charge that comes with the feeling that when I log on, I enter a social world.

THE WORLD OF WARCAFT

The World of Warcraft is an elaborate fantasy playscape that takes as its inspiration fantasy literature such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. First released in 1994 as the real-time strategy game *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, it was



FIGURE 2.1. A map of the World of Warcraft as of the Cataclysm Expansion (this does not include the remnants of the Dranei planet known as Outland on which gameplay also occurs).

reintroduced as a massively multiplayer online game in 2004, going on to become, as of this writing, the most successful online role-playing game of its kind, with more than ten million players worldwide who pay subscription fees to play. As an MMOG, players do not just navigate the game content on their own, or with one or two other players, but rather with thousands of others.²

Warcraft is set in the worlds of Azeroth and Outland, two planets with expansive geographies as well as complex environmental and cultural ecologies (Fig. 2.1). Entering the game is not unlike entering a large-scale, historical role-playing game rendered in compelling three-dimensional graphics, though without the dice or the physical proximity afforded by games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* or by live action role playing (LARPing). Depending on the sort of character one creates, new users view a short narrative film that situates the particular race they have chosen in the game's larger narrative uni-

verse of the game. When, for example, I first created Ophele on the Aggramar server several years ago, this is the story that oriented me to the world and to her particular embeddedness within it, narrated in the gravelly, dramatic voice of movie previews:

For nearly seven thousand years, the High Elves cultivated a shining magical kingdom, hidden deep within the forests of northern Lordaeron. But five years ago, the undead Scourge invaded Quel-Thalas and drove the elves to the brink of extinction. Led by the evil death knight Arthus, the Scourge destroyed the mystical Sunwell, thereby severing the elves from the source of their arcane power. Although the scars of that conflict are evident, the remaining elves have banded together and retaken much of their homeland. Calling themselves Blood Elves, these grim survivors are committed to regaining the vast powers they once commanded. Inspired by the leadership of their beloved prince, Kael'thas Sunstrider, the Blood Elves now seek new sources of arcane magic and the means of defending their land against the undying horrors of the Scourge. As one of the few surviving Blood Elves, you must master your thirst for magic and shape the destiny of your people.

Again, this oriented me toward the story of the Blood Elves, but it also oriented me in the larger, then thirteen-year-old, densely storied world of *Warcraft*. This larger narrative is worth describing in greater detail because it is so elaborately developed, and, more importantly, in the context of the MMOG, because it implicitly situates the player in relationship to other players. From the moment I created Ophele the Blood Elf, I had a history, to my enemies the Undead Scourge as the story above notes, but also to other elves, to humans, demons, and so on. And many of these others, I knew, would be animated by other people, people I would come to encounter in the world.

At first glance, the story *Warcraft* tells might appear familiar to anyone with even passing knowledge of the tropes of epic fantasy: a long-running conflict between the forces of good and evil. In this instance, The Alliance and The Horde represent these forces, respectively. Since the introduction of the first *Warcraft* game in 1994, the story of the planet Azeroth has been consistently expanded with new games and, more recently with “The Burning Crusade,” “The Wrath of the Lich King,” and in December 2010 “Cataclysm.” These “expansion packs” create new content, open up new areas of the world, and afford users the opportunities to utilize new races and character classes. In earlier

iterations, the Alliance was initially figured as a band of heroic humans who fought bloodthirsty orcs. Yet, the story became increasingly more complex, especially as gamers began to play other races rather than merely fight them. The orcs, it turned out, were not initially a violent culture, but a shamanic one that had been enslaved by the demonic powers of the Burning Legion. They eventually freed themselves from the Legion's demonic influence and redeemed themselves through the sacrifice of one of their great leaders, who gave his life to destroy one of the demon lords. In "The Burning Crusade," Alliance and Horde work together (though they are still opposed in other ways) to fight invading demons in the landscape of the Outland, the fragments of a destroyed planet held together by the magic of the Twisting Nether.

Each playable race likewise has a story, and it is a truncated version of this story that players encounter when they first create a new character. I've mentioned only a small portion of the stories of three of the twelve playable races, and my own narrative barely scratches the surface of the storytelling at work in constructing the world of Azeroth, a world collectively imagined and constructed by thousands of people for more than fifteen years across the different media of computer and card games, comics, novelizations, and, soon, feature films. All of this is to point to the ways identity in this multi(player)verse is constructed like those in the worlds we typically navigate: many aspects of our identities are preformed for us, situating and binding us to the narratives of the past, to inheritances of class, gender, and race, as well as to particular constellations of intimacy.

CONSTRAINING PLAY

Part of *WoW*'s pleasure has to do with the way the world's expansive and elaborate scale affords opportunities for creative exploration, an exploration made vital with a promise of freedom from the doldrums of everyday life. Indeed, "explorers" are the sorts of gamers who "come to see what is [in a world] and to map it for others. They are happiest with challenges that involve the gradual revelation of the world. They want the world to be very big, and filled with hidden beauty that can only be unlocked through persistence and creativity."³ I found the scope of exploration seductive, and the spaces, cities, and landscapes evidenced a sophisticated philosophy of design. The architecture of Silvermoon City and the forests of Lordaeron were inspiring, and I was amazed that Ophele could move through these spaces in a way

that reflected their scale; running or, later, riding a range of mounts, required patience as well, since it took time, sometimes lots of it, to traverse these virtual geographies. As well, the more she accomplished, that is, as she leveled up, the farther she could travel, and the more of the world I could see through her eyes. This movement moved me; it affected me in the sharp contrast it offered to my other, also recently adopted, home in upper Manhattan. Exploring this fantasy world was a welcome respite from my new responsibilities as a full-time professor and a pleasurable escape from an inhospitable New York winter.

Yet, even as this experience of encountering the “hidden beauty” of the world was affecting, I also learned that *WoW* is also a profoundly *closed system* insofar as game developers, programmers, and administrators set the terms and limits of gameplay, effectively producing particular forms of intimacy as more or less important to the world. These limits became apparent when, in my early travels, I tried unsuccessfully to go places that looked interesting; Ophele would simply stop, as if encountering an invisible wall. This world had scale, but not infinite scale, and its scope was subject to rules other than my own desires.



FIGURE 2.2. Character creation. One of the first screen new gamers view. Here, a male Draenei Shaman has been selected.

From the point of view of character creation (Fig. 2.2), users' choices are constrained by sex, race, and class (though not in the usual sense meant by academics who use these words, or certainly not only). That is, users can choose to belong to one of the two factions, Horde or Alliance, they can choose to be either male or female, and select from different races.⁴ And while gamers can and do create multiple characters, once they create an avatar they cannot significantly modify it except by leveling up, adding equipment such as armor or weapons, or by paying a small fee in an in-game "barbershop" in which they can change minor details such as hair style and skin tone; they cannot change their gender or adjust the laughably exaggerated sexual dimorphism of their avatars.

Equipment and weapons, or "gear," are virtual items players use to equip their characters, and which make possible and improve game play. Gear is essential for an enjoyable experience in game. Without it, it's not possible to move beyond particular areas or defeat monsters (although players' avatars are essentially immortal, resurrecting when they are killed). As players quest and obtain experience, they "level up," becoming more powerful and enabling them to acquire more health (more health means surviving battles longer), advanced gear, and travel to more places. The necessity of leveling up and acquiring gear represents, then, another central constraint.

Finally, given the time necessary to level up and equip a character, or to reach endgame content (currently level 85 with the new expansion set), most casual gamers focus on one or two avatars or "toons" at a time. This is in large part because, as anthropologist Tom Boellstorff observes in his study of another virtual world, *Second Life*, time resists virtualization in ways that space does not. Entering into a virtual world does not also mean one enters a virtual, otherworldly time even if the experience of time *appears* to contract or expand. A day does not suddenly become twenty-six hours, and there are only so many hours a day in which one can play the game. Hence, temporality is another central limit to gameplay.⁵

CONSTRAINING BELONGING

The cooperation in games such as *Warcraft* and other MMOGs represents a shift in the history of gaming. Indeed, this shift came with earlier games, though not "massively multiplayer," in the role-playing communities found in MOOs and MUDs, and some games on the

Game Boy console; these represented key imaginative and technological changes in game play.⁶ While most games that allowed players to play simultaneously pitted gamers in battles against one another, most of the new generation of online role-playing games have built collaboration into the architecture of the game world.⁷

Just as characters have choices about the sorts of avatars they might become, they have choices about the sorts of intimacies they might engage in. But these choices are largely limited by the game's overall structure. Being with others is conceived as essential to gameplay in *WoW* but it is also constrained or channeled into very particular forms of relation and tied to achievement. Though distinct from other games in the sense that it requires collaboration, *WoW* is still a game that abides by a logic of success and failure.

In the remainder of the chapter, I focus on two of the most common forms of intimacy in *Warcraft*, group and solo play. I suggest that most forms of intimacy in *Warcraft* are instrumental; intimacy functions as a necessary means to an end, and that end is advancement according to the logic of game play. In this way, *Warcraft* reproduces intimacy in ways that have by now become familiar: namely, as a normative script in which one's connectedness is constrained by normative aspirations and ideals, especially to forms of material success.

PLAYING WITH OTHERS

As I have argued elsewhere in this book, intimacy figures centrally in narratives of a life lived right. Outside of the intimate life dwell the lonely, the abject, and the queer. What critiques of solo play highlight is the sensibility that playing by or with oneself casts aside the responsibility *to be in relation with others*. One of the responsibilities of a human life lived right is an obligation toward intimacy. This imperative to be intimate is, of course, only one way in which a meaningful or proper life is produced through different vectors of culpability, through responsibility and obligation to others, or the demand to be intimate. Genuinely solo play, I have argued, is exceedingly rare in *WoW*, and the rules of the game world itself do not allow for an absolute rejection of all forms of culpable sociality. In fact, the life of an avatar in *WoW* looks a lot like the idealized life path set out for most of us. The noob, or "newbie," leaves childish things, such as undirected play and exploration, behind; the player gets a job, participating in the economy, consuming, producing, and saving resources; s/he engages ideologies

of achievement and merit, in which gear functions as both material and symbolic capital; and, perhaps most importantly, s/he produces a largely persistent and stable identity, one that is projected as more or less reputable and dependable.

While it is possible to advance in the game without interacting with others, in general players must work with other players. In early play, other gamers, along with official and unofficial online forums and wikis, aid the noob in learning the lay of the land. This is done by using in-game chat channels, including private and public chat, as well as by using a range of add-ons built into the game or provided by third parties.

As a gamer advances, this need for instrumental intimacy intensifies; there are many quests that only a very few players could manage to accomplish on their own, or “do solo.” Moreover, much of the most useful (and cool) gear come from multiplayer “instanced dungeons,” advanced areas in which “elite” monsters are harder to kill and the loot is much better. Insofar as instances are designed for multiplayer groups, typically for groups of five, ten, twenty-five, and up to as many as forty players, it’s essential that one engage with others, cooperating toward a shared goal: again, more and better stuff.

Even as group play is constructed as essential to successful gameplay this does not mean that its instrumentalization results in the desired ends. Although Blizzard has with recent expansions and updates corrected one of the most frustrating elements of group play—the need to wait in queues or actively seek out other gamers for instance, an often time-consuming process—finding other players is no guarantee of success. Even as groups are automatically constituted, players come with widely different levels of experience. Because classes of characters are intended to play highly specific roles, these differences in experience can mean success or failure in a dungeon. Moreover, these play groups are fragile. If a particularly self-interested gamer accomplishes the goals or quests s/he has entered the dungeon for, or if mom calls a player to dinner, then players sometimes simply disappear, leaving the group a player or more short. And although groups can sometimes continue without one member, at other times this is not possible and the team will need to wait until a replacement can be found or end its efforts.

Nonetheless, given the ways instances are so important to the overall experience of the game—they provide cooperative opportunities to obtain experience, gold, and gear—most players suffer the frustrations of the process even as considerable drama can ensue. In

earlier incarnations of the game, players were frustrated when they were removed from groups as more desirable players (or friends of group members) were identified and invited into the group.⁸

Group leaders are empowered to add and delete players from groups. Being removed from a group, or “booted,” is not an uncommon experience, as most gamers will attest. It is also often very frustrating for those who have waited to join a group only to be kicked out with little or no explanation: “needed a higher level toon,” “gotta have heals,” “sorry my friend wanted to join.” While it’s customary to provide some sort of rationale, it is by no means universal. Being kicked out of a group “feels a bit like being dumped,” as if one’s avatar, and by extension, oneself, had not yet reached an appropriate developmental stage or level of success. The disappointment that accompanies the rejection is often paired with anger as well, not just at the group leader who did the booting, but toward gamers who approach the play experience as a set of calculations, thereby “perverting” the ethos of fun that draws players to the game in the first place.⁹

Although friendships can and do form from instanced groups, it’s just as common that experiences in a group might help one identify players to avoid in the future. Given the rationale with which many players approach the necessary intimacy of instanced groups, it’s not surprising that these relationships are temporary and tenuous, highlighting as well the ways that intimacy is a form of relating constructed in part through “tacit obligations to remain unproblematic.”¹⁰ Instrumental gamers frequently ignore the protests of those they’ve booted from a group; indeed, they ignore all but the most necessary communication. Another gamer is, for these players, simply another tool, along with their weapons and gear, to help them achieve what they want. Self-interestedly determined to actualize their own potential, the instrumental gamers permit only those forms of communication and togetherness that make the fewest demands on them. And most gamers, although they complain loudly and frequently about the struggle to work with others (especially, though not always, with strangers), have little hope that these temporary forms of belonging will be constructed otherwise.

GUILDS

One way in which even casual players do manage to more easily form groups for dungeons is by belonging to a guild. Guilds are much

larger groups that gamers can become a part of (sometimes easily and sometimes only through an occasionally complex application process). Of varying sizes and durations, guilds sometimes attract only a handful of players and last for a few days or weeks, while others may have hundreds of players. Some, like The Tribe on the Aggramar server, have existed since the game's earliest online version. Like regular team play, guilds benefit players by providing material resources: money, advice, gear, and cooperation. Belonging to a guild also makes things such as raids possible, in which groups of as many as forty players team together to fight powerful monsters. Raids provide "legendary" equipment dropped by a slain endgame monster that is usually awarded to players based on a complex system of points.

Insofar as guilds provide opportunities for players to assemble groups and complete challenging quests, guilds are effectively an extension of the instrumental forms of intimacy I have discussed thus far. Yet unlike instanced group play in which gamers assemble a small group of players they may have played with before or whom they select randomly for a few hours at a time, the duration of some established guilds provides opportunities for other, multiple forms of intimacy to emerge (a point I elaborate in greater detail below). But in brief, the public of a guild allows many different forms of contact and encounter to blossom between players, certainly including those modes of intimacy that simply allow players to "get things done," but that can also transform into on- and offline friendship and romance.¹¹

While many media accounts focus on the dangers online games like *Warcraft* pose to relationships (see, for example, the mini-docs such as "Warcrack" found on YouTube and the documentary *Second Skin*), there are as well many accounts of intimacies that begin in the game world.¹²

For others, though, *WoW* relationships, which have produced lively discussion threads on blogging sites such as LiveJournal, are simply embedded within larger contexts of love and relating. In one LiveJournal thread, for example, a user laments the ways she and her boyfriend are framed, respectively, as slut and homewrecker, after she and her former undead warlock boyfriend broke up. The post, tantalizingly headlined "Looking for love in all the wrong 'races,'" highlights the ways relationships that begin in game mirror many of the complexities that couples face in their everyday lives offline.

I am an undead warlock and 2 years ago, while playing with my favorite guild, I met a fellow undead warlock who

lived rather close to me. We got to talking and ended up really liking each other. We had a great 2 year relationship which ended a few months back when we decided we were leading different lifestyles and it was best to just be friends.

This is where it gets a little weird for most people. After we had broken up, another undead warlock in a guild I had recently joined started talking to me. He definitely sparked my interest and somehow we hit it off (even though he lives across the country from me). We didn't tell anyone because my ex was in the same guild with us, and we all knew how much drama that would cause. Eventually, my ex decided that he would quit before the rumors would start to spread and it would get too uncomfortable for him to play (it's not like he cared much for the game anyway).

Soon enough people were finding out and while some didn't care, even my friends were saying really random things. It goes from silly things like "oh well, now I know who's the better warlock" and "lol, you soul drained your ex" to bad things like "sloppy seconds" and "how does it feel to have your [censored] tossed around between all the [undead] locks in the game." A lot of people felt "disappointed" in me, as if I did something really wrong (maybe they think I cheated on my ex for him, but I'm not sure). A lot of people think I'm just weird and way too into the game. (http://community.livejournal.com/wow_ladies/5346472.html)

Here, what is initially the amicable ending of one relationship and the beginning of another is filtered through the same misogynist worldview familiar to middle schoolers and feminist theorists alike, one that identifies women who have more than one relationship as sluts. Certainly, I don't intend to valorize this worldview, but both the sexist language and the therapeutic self-expression of these experiences are characteristic of larger cultural values and patterns pertaining to intimacy. Outside of taking place in virtual contexts, what is it that makes this sort of relationality virtual? For the poster, at least, the distinction likely does little to mitigate her feelings of victimization.

In a very different context, anthropologists Daniel Miller and Don Slater suggest in their essay "Relationships" that computer-mediated communications are simply more recent iterations of established cultural patterns of relating. They make this argument not to counter the widespread belief that somehow virtual technologies or communications

are somehow less real than other, face-to-face means of communication, or that virtual technologies are in fact real, but, instead, to argue that the opposition of real and virtual is a kind of theoretical and methodological dead end. As they put it, “the opposition of real and virtual . . . completely misses the complexity and diversity of relationships that people may pursue through the communicative media that they embed in their ongoing social lives.”¹³ It’s not hard to agree that relationships are complex and diverse, or to critique casual oppositions of the real and virtual. Here, Miller and Slater ignore the historical and philosophical articulations of the virtual as an ideal space of potential, which nonetheless has meaningful and concrete effects. They also miss the ways intimacy is always already virtual, tied to fantasy and longing, but also enabled through forms of presence that can be intensified by distance as much as by proximity.¹⁴

One way the shared experience of presence is produced in *WoW* guilds is through some prior affiliations and affinities. While many guilds attract users because of their size and longevity, some users employ other, identitarian means to identify and assemble guilds. Sara Andrews, in a story widely reported in media sources such as the BBC and the online technology magazine CNET.com, used an in-game chat channel to seek members to join her GLBT-friendly guild, Oz. An administrator initially threatened to close her account if she did not cease her solicitation of guild members, which the administrator claimed violated Blizzard’s anti-harassment policy.¹⁵ Andrews challenged the threatened ban, in part citing the hypocrisy of using an anti-harassment policy to ban behavior whose end result would have been to create a harassment-free environment in a game world where “gay” and “fag” are two of the most widely and casually circulated epithets. Andrews’s rejection of the administrator’s logic, as well as the swift response by gay activists, gamers, and media, led Blizzard to offer her a formal apology and provide sensitivity training to its game administrators. Yet since then, only a handful of explicitly GLBT guilds have emerged, including Stonewall Alliance and Spreading Taints.

THE DEATH OF THE AMAZONS

As of this writing, my highest level toon, my Blood Elf rogue Oph-ele, still belongs to The Amazons of Kalimdor, a GLBT-friendly guild on the Aggramar server. The Amazons is a female toon-only guild,

meaning that while men and women can belong to the guild, they can only do so if they game with a female avatar. My earliest *WoW* interlocutor recommended this guild to me, and after much trepidation about joining a guild at all, I finally contacted one of the guild officers and became a part of this small, close-knit group. I enjoyed my short time in this guild and found all of its members very helpful in learning to play in what is, as I've indicated, a very sophisticated virtual world. Yet, the guild has died; it's relatively small member base increasingly pushed more members to join other guilds where they can find more people to play with. A handful of players, myself included, remained for a while, attached in different ways and for different reasons (female empowerment, nostalgia) to this group of Amazons. Speaking with other guild members before and after they've left for other guilds, they described a sense of loss characteristic to intimacy, or rather, to its absence or failure. As in other instances in which a closely knit group comes undone, ongoing feelings of connectedness and belonging mark the power of the intimate to endure: "I had to move my toon to another guild. It just wasn't possible to do some of the really advanced stuff in the game. But I keep an alt [alternative avatar] here and check in. It's nice to know there are still some people trying to keep it alive." On the one hand, this guild member's story indicates the ways that feelings of shared belonging caved in and gave way to instrumental forms of play. Yet, the fact that she continues to keep an "alt," a secondary, often lower-level character, in the guild attests to her ongoing attachment to this fierce group of female toons.

SOLO PLAY

Solo play represents the other dominant mode of intimacy in *WoW*. In this case, however, intimacy refers not to a feeling of shared belonging but to that which is "most inward," those qualities of selfhood that are essential, persistent, and often hidden from others, the "'inner-self' [that] is not defined by achievements or knowledge or accomplishments but rather by the personal style of our approach to existence."¹⁶

Within the context of the game world, many players spend most of their time working on their own, in the repetitive destruction of mobs or skill training known as "grinding," only occasionally working with others whether in or outside the context of a guild. Indeed, while players alone cannot obtain much of the choicest gear in solo

play, they can accomplish a good deal: after two or three or six or ten hours of play, a gamer can earn money and acquire gear and loot without ever needing to engage another person.

Although profoundly productive, even necessary, for success in the game, playing solo is precisely the sort of play most frequently identified as dangerous in everyday discussions and in media accounts. When media refer to MMOGs like *WoW*, solo play figures as central in narratives of gamers gone wild. In these discourses, solo play represents intimacy not in its normative form, as a mode of relating with others, but in its pathological form as an excessive inwardness, an inside gone rotten. This has been famously documented and widely reported in the case of a South Korean man who died of exhaustion in 2005 after fifty hours of nearly continuous play.¹⁷ The trope has become increasingly well-worn: long hours of solo play have led to alienation and a disavowal of the ordinary world in favor of a more pleasurable and immersive one, one in which it's possible to be both engaged and in control in ways distinct both from many of the demands of everyday life by work or family and from interactions with other forms of media. This is intimacy figured as an especially hazardous form of masturbation, as nonreproductive, obsessive, and narcissistic, the turning over of the self to a machine.

This is the form of play associated with *otaku*, a Japanese term used to describe hardcore gamers and fans. Increasingly the term has gained purchase in the United States, though some of its specific valences have been lost. In Japan, the term has both positive and negative meanings, referring to the “the national obsession with techno-constructed realities” that is a source of pride and accomplishment for many Japanese, and the ways that “*otaku* [have] also been associated with pathology and violence.”¹⁸ In the United States, *otaku* is an increasingly self-employed term gamers and fans use to describe their financial and affective investments, as well as their frequently stigmatized behavior. Worn as a badge of honor, American *otaku*, including hardcore *WoW* gamers, illustrate a new cultural sensibility in which “geek is the new chic.”¹⁹

The trope of technologically produced atomism isn't a new one of course, and is tied to longstanding narratives about the depersonalizing, addictive qualities of all technology and media. What's especially noteworthy about how these discourses circulate around *WoW* and other games, however, is the way that they are so frequently tied to relationality:

“Say goodbye to your boyfriend for a month or two.”

“The computer made us break up.”

“He’d rather play the game than have sex with me.”

The danger of gaming, it seems, is that the pleasure (usually male) gamers experience in their intimacy with the game world will exceed the pleasure they take with their other relationships, including what should be their most significant ones. While implicit in the many political efforts to frame games as dangerous, efforts that rely on particular understandings of the mimetic power of game violence, others, such as those posted by the founders of the *WoW* Widows group at Yahoo! and Gamerwidow.com, make the threat games pose more explicit:

Gamer Widow is a term for those who have a relationship with a Gamer (one who plays video games, be it on a console or on the computer) who pays more attention to the game than to their partner . . . thereby making their partner a “gamer widow” (female) or “gamer widower” (male). In general we say “gamer widow” and encompass both male and female community members.

GamerWidow.com is a place for all sorts of Gamer Widow(er)s to come together and discuss their experiences, learn about other “widows” and also learn about the games that their gamers are obsessed with. Gamers who want to quit or are trying to quit or want to learn more about us are also welcome! (<http://www.gamerwidow.com/>)

Curiously, the founders of these sites seem to miss the point that many critics of online sociality make, namely, that online sociality is itself inherently lacking or addictive or atomizing. Arguably, they have simply enabled another sort of virtual intimacy: the fantasy of a community that will, miraculously, never tire of one’s complaining.

Central to the anxieties surrounding solo play, then, is the frightening notion that one can be intimate with a machine and with oneself and leave other people behind altogether. Of course, this might be quite utopic for some who prefer the feelings of achievement and power they obtain in a virtual world, or for others for whom

most human relationships are altogether too awkward or constraining. Anne Allison, describing conditions of life in millennial Japan, calls this “intimate alienation,” an experience of “connected disconnectedness.”²⁰ In *WoW*, playing solo is still to play with others; even if one avoids communication or cooperation, other gamers will continue to share the same world. At the same time, this experience of connected disconnectedness, in which users are proximate to one another yet simultaneously distant, is tied to the ways solo gamers create a world of their own choosing, or, rather, put the world to their own uses. In fact, the many thousands of players in a realm, whether or not they play together, effectively create their own worlds, transforming each realm into a multiverse. Gamers’ experiences bond them to the world in unique ways, surely, but they are also creating private worlds, singular “fenced-in paradises,” within the broader public.²¹

INTIMACY AND MULTIPLICITY

Thus far, I have largely focused on intimacies as they function in the context of *WoW*’s game world, although in important ways, these intimacies have already been seen to exceed the limits of the game world (in the death of the South Korean man or among *WoW* widows). As well, I have described how game intimacies are instrumental or transactional, arguing that they are essentially means to an end, namely, in game material and symbolic success and power. Here, I want to examine some of the ways other, perhaps less instrumental, intimacies emerge in the bleed between actual and virtual, as well as the ways they can jump from one world to another, propagate, and multiply.

NAKED NIGHT ELVES

In one of my earliest experiences as a *WoW* noob, I witnessed a parade of nearly naked, dancing night elves. Even though I had spent time in other virtual spaces such as AIM and the chatrooms at Gay.com where sex and corporeality were very much foregrounded, I was not yet equipped with the conceptual tools to make this encounter meaningful. I certainly didn’t grasp what appropriate comportment looked like in this virtual world as compared to those others, where “sup” and “a/s/l” (age/sex/location) might be the extent of one’s (pre-sex) encounter. Was it, for example, appropriate to remove most

of one's clothing to experiment with different looks? If I could get naked, could I also have sex?

While I came to learn that this parade of dancing, nearly naked night elves was likely a group of devoted Horde players looking to have a little fun at the expense of Alliance players (Night elves, are, again, one of the races that make up The Alliance) before engaging in a raid,²² the event still stands as a reminder of the embodied anxiety I frequently experienced when I first began to play, as well as the confusion I felt about in-game propriety and etiquette. Now, though, I think of these things—my anxiety and confusion as well as the thrill of seeing naked digital bodies—as the sorts of more corporeal forms of contact the game affords. Indeed, users have shown creativity and resourcefulness in creating erotic lives in a world that doesn't, strictly speaking, enable eroticism between avatars. One's avatar can point, wave, sit, kneel, laugh out loud, purr, flirt, and even kiss, but not fuck. Users, though, in playful and sometimes inspired ways, have made use of chat and voice features to have liaisons in and out of character, as well as in and out of world. Indeed, as scholars of virtual worlds have observed, and as the stories about relationships I discuss above illustrate, in-game encounters and romances can lead to face to face encounters and real world intimacies: from just fooling around to marriage.²³

Two other examples are illustrative here: one, an interlocutor's narrative about a truncated real world encounter, the other, a thwarted rendezvous between two Night Elves in the game. In the first instance, a gamer who helped me navigate much of my early experiences in *WoW* described how an in-game relationship characterized by flirtation and, eventually, by more erotic exchanges in private chat channels, led to an in-person encounter. Unlike some stories that circulate about marriages that result from in-game relationships, in this instance, although they met at a hotel, their relationship remained unconsummated—their chemistry in the game didn't translate; they “just didn't feel it.”

The other encounter, also marked by failure, is altogether more dramatic even though it takes place entirely in *WoW*. Using an underground tram to travel between two major cities, a dwarf named Gedran accidentally discovers two nude Night Elves engaged in a tryst in the seclusion of the tramline corridors. Importantly, this event takes place on a Role-Playing (RP) server in which users speak and act in accordance with their avatars' identities. The dwarf, upon seeing the

couple, jumps from the tram and hides behind a pillar, still privy to the intimate conversation (really, they're "emoting," a type of textual interaction where an /e command allows the character to communicate in "emotions" rather than "chat") taking place between the two elves:

Artemisa groans softly, biting your neck softly, her breath hard against your neck, "Oh . . ."

Inotep smiles and his fingers move in a [*sic*] circular motions.

"Sounds like someone is enjoying herself"

Artemisa squirms against your hand, softly whimpering, "Maybe . . ."

Inotep smirks and lets a finger slip inside you, at the same time, he leans forward and kisses you deeply.

Artemisa's gasp is muffled by the kiss, and her nails dig in slightly into your arm.

"That's not playing fair . . ."

Inotep grins and withdraws his finger.

"My apologies"

The dwarf, intrigued and amused, interrupts their encounter, albeit still within the parameters of role-playing:

Gedran reveals his head from the shadows and begins to unzip his pantaloons.

Gedran removes his Dwarven Hand Cannon and begins to stroke the barrel ever so slowly.

Gedran lets out a quiet gasp as the cannon begins to expand in his hand.

The couple's erotic moment disturbed, they do not respond well,

Artemisa growls menacingly at you.

Inotep growls, “You need to leave”

Playful, corporeal, if ultimately failed or thwarted, both of these examples show in different ways how erotic exchanges are potential forces waiting to be actualized, or, in Gedran’s words, “expand.” They show as well the creativity players use to push against the constraints of the intimacies tacitly and explicitly endorsed by the programmers of the game world.

In the dominant modes of *WoW* gameplay I describe—group and solo play—intimacy, and perhaps desire more generally, is both instrumental and linked to ideologies of success and failure. For scholars trained to think through intimacy and its institutions under late capitalism, this is familiar territory. Intimacy, again, is a set of normative ideals and aspirations tied to achieving capital and corporeal achievement; it is a central feature of the teleological life lived right. Intimacy in this way operates as one among other postmodern flows, fast and flexible with its deleterious but unavoidable effects on selfhood: alienation and anxiety, along with the sensual folding over of the commodity into experiences of interiority.²⁴ Even as intimacies in *Warcraft* depart from one key aspect of the metanarrative of intimacy, namely, the couple form and the child, they are still tied to other expressions of power, including the acquisition of goods and symbolic capital. This is normative intimacy minus the kids; the culpable self that employs intimacy as a means to an end.

In the encounters described above, however, we can begin to recuperate intimacy’s virtuality, that is, its potential prior to capture, over or alongside its instrumentalization. Intimacy as playfulness, as friendship, or as sex is intimacy figured as a world-building project, something that might include instrumental iterations of desire but that also exceeds them. This is connectedness imagined as multiplicity or as multiverse where pleasure and consumption and production are folded into and over themselves and where emergent desires (whether from the past or the future) are nascent forces. In this modestly hopeful view of intimate virtualization, goal-oriented gameplay conditions but does not determine possibilities for creative engagement with the self and others.

The failure in each of these events to achieve understanding or to consummate an encounter should not be understood to represent closure. Rather, the gestures toward which these energies are oriented,

propriety and eroticism alike, can be used to refigure intimacy as a means without end.²⁵ In this sense, then, intimacy is not what some have called “heteronormative straight time” whose telos is successful coupledness and reproduction, but something 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.²⁶ What is being (queerly) supported and endured is, of course, desire itself, which rather than operating as something that merely produces a self through a series of successful achievements (understanding and consummation, or marriage and kids), allows selves to experience themselves as singularities that interface with other singularities, whether the singularity of the game world, or singular encounters with others.

For Deleuze, singularities are at once uniquely concrete and universal; they are universalized in themselves. As cultural critic Steven Shaviro puts it, “The singular directly touches the universal, without the mediation of any intervening terms.”²⁷ What this might mean in *WoW* is that players, through their avatars and through face-to-face encounters, are shaped by the force of desire in concrete events and circumstances that index their particular histories, circumstances, and social locations—all that has come before. No other arrangement of desire, subject, time, space, event will yield the same result. In this way, singularities actualize an immanent or virtual capacity—they do not take any form, but only the forms they were potentially capable of, that they had a tendency to take. The virtual capacity of desire to *not follow* the general rules of a socially sanctioned form (coupled, straight, monogamous, “real”) or particular teleology is a testament to the scope of tendencies intimacies are capable of. In *Warcraft*, then, intimacy’s teleological endgame is interrupted insofar as the only progeny are fields of relations (whether instrumental or not) and the self itself, a convergence of pixelated image and en fleshed matter that endures and multiplies in its encounters with others as one avatar body among many in a multiverse as rich with potentiality as it is saturated by instrumentality.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Gilles Deleuze, “Immanence: A Life,” in *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 31.

2. Lauren Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue,” in *Intimacy*, ed. Lauren Berlant (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1.

3. For a history of religious opposition to interracial and same-sex marriage, see George Chauncey, *Why Marriage?: The History Shaping Today’s Debate Over Gay Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2005). For the usefulness and limits of the analogy between miscegenation and gay marriage, see especially pages 157–65.

4. Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barana, and David Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 3–44.

5. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 80n2.

6. Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

7. Then there are also the many ways the promise of cyberspace has been drawn into capitalism’s grasp, although this is not a focus of this book. As Jonathan Zittrain makes clear in his book, *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It*, the Internet is returning to models of gated communities (like AOL and Facebook), and the generative and collaborative sharing represented by the Free and Open Source software movement, by filesharing, or the now ubiquitous Wikipedia are being eclipsed by tethered proprietary devices (Apple’s iPhones, for example) that can be modified only by the corporate

manufacturer or its partners. These devices as well as Web 2.0 platforms such as Facebook not only restrict the abilities of users to create changes in the software but also increasingly engage in various forms of surveillance and data mining among its users. See Zittrain, *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). The book is also available for free under a Creative Commons License; it can be downloaded here: <http://futureoftheinternet.org/download>.

8. Kathleen Stewart, "On the Politics of Cultural Theory: A Case for 'Contaminated' Critique," *Social Research* 58, no. 2 (1991): 395–412.

9. Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 111.

10. See Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1999) and the film *Gay Sex in the '70s* (Joseph Lovett, dir., 2005).

11. Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s–1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1.

12. *Ibid.*, 2.

13. *Ibid.*, 3.

14. Alexander Galloway, "Networks," in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 283.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Marnia Robinson and Gary Wilson, "Straight Men, Gay Porn' and Other Brain Map Mysteries," *Psychology Today*, February 3, 2010, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/cupids-poisoned-arrow/201002/straight-men-gay-porn-and-other-brain-map-mysteries>; accessed May 19, 2011.

17. Gilles Deleuze, "Immanence: A Life," 31.

18. See Kathleen Stewart, "Weak Theory in an Unfinished World," *Journal of Folklore Research* 45, no. 1 (2008): 71–82; and *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

19. Rob Shields, *The Virtual* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

20. Among others, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World: 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), and the essays in David Higgs, ed., *Queer Sites: Gay Urban Histories Since 1600* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

21. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

22. Psychoanalysis, for example, which has inspired me in many ways, but does not centrally figure in this book, has robust conceptions of fantasy and haunting that resonate with my own use of virtuality.

23. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

24. Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

25. Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

26. Homonationalism describes the ways nationalist ideologies recruit homosexuality into their image of “progressive” and “democratic” freedoms; the fact that gays are not stoned or are permitted some of the rights of their hetero compatriots operates as an alibi for imperialist projects and the permanent “war on terror.” See Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

27. This homonationalism is evident in recent debates about the relationship between homosexuality and broader global politics. For example, Israeli leaders, Toronto’s mayor Rob Ford, and porn mogul Michael Lucas have scolded the activist group Queers Against Israeli Apartheid for misrecognizing their political objects. Sexual politics, the former argue, is not geopolitics. Of course long histories of queer political engagements give the lie to these arguments, whether we think of anticensorship work, support for the end of American apartheid (past and present), health care, or the ways progressive left queers vocally objected to the illegal invasion of Iraq.

28. Jason Pine, *The Art of Making Do in Naples* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

29. See Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

30. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

31. Melissa Gregg, “A Mundane Voice,” *Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2/3 (2004): 364.

32. Imgoen Tyler and Elena Loizidou, “The Promise of Lauren Berlant,” *Cultural Values* 4, no. 3 (2000): 505.

CHAPTER ONE. THE VIRTUAL LIFE OF SEX IN PUBLIC

1. Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), 67.

2. See Lauren Berlant’s introduction in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 2, where she focuses, in part, on the ways “a sentimental account of the social world as an affective space where people ought to be legitimated because they have feelings and because there is an intelligence in what they feel that *knows* something about the world that, if it were listened to, could make things better.”

3. In *Virtually Normal* (New York: Vintage, 1996), Andrew Sullivan challenged both established models of gay politics and state policies that would deny gays and lesbians the right to marriage and military service. See

between these two terms, as evidenced in an interview Mark Foley gave a year before his resignation on an MSNBC program in which he praised the work Perverted Justice and TCAP were doing to stop the sexual victimization of children online.

17. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and "The Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

18. Chris Hansen, "Expensive Home Rich with Potential Predators," July 26, 2007; www.msnbc.msn.com/id/19961209/page/2/.

19. I am inspired here by Judith Halberstam's discussion of failure in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 3–5.

CHAPTER TWO. INTIMACIES IN THE MULTI(PLAYER)VERSE

1. Scientists, at least some of them, take the notion of the multiverse seriously too—there are several competing theories, including "bubble theory," "the many worlds," and "string theory"—although scientific views on multiple universes aren't within the scope of this chapter.

2. Gameplay is largely organized around "questing," adventures where one battles monsters (or "mobs" for "mobile objects"), acquires goods (from gold to herbs), and develops skills (enchancing, leatherworking, tailoring). The objective of questing is less to reach the end of the game (there isn't strictly an end; more on this below) than to cultivate a meaningful life in the game world, a process that involves, essentially, becoming more powerful by gaining more experience and goods, and through engaging in forms of (largely) responsible sociability with others.

When players first download the game, they select a server—the combination of software and hardware that allows users to connect remotely over a network. In the case of *WoW* and other MMOGs, servers are owned and hosted by the company that has created the game, in this case, Blizzard Entertainment. In *WoW*, servers are referred to as "realms," and each realm contains a copy of the game world (a literalization of the notion of the multiverse). While there are millions of *WoW* users, they can't all be in the same place at the same time, even virtually. There are therefore many realms because of the technical limitations that arise when trying to host more than a few thousand players on the same server at the same time. Players can interact with all the other players on their server, but not across servers. As well, players can move between servers only under special circumstances. Finally, while the world on each server is the same, they do differ in regard to the kinds of play they afford. There are two main realm types, Normal, or Player versus Environment (PvE), in which players focus on working within and against the game environment through quests and fighting monsters or "mobs." The other realm type is Player versus Player (PvP), in which there is

ongoing conflict between factions. In these realms, players of differing factions can attack one another, adding an element of danger, as well as making some of the game content more challenging to accomplish. Finally, there are also Role-playing (RP) servers that feature either PvE or PvP gaming content. The key distinction in PvP servers is that gamers must speak and behave as their character would, that is, they engage in fantasy historical role play.

3. Bartle, in Edward Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 72.

4. Race in the game refers to one of the now fourteen races available for game play, including humans, dwarves, night elves, and orcs among others. Class refers to the type of adventurer a player becomes; mage, priest, warrior, hunter, rogue, and so on. One's racial choice also determines the available classes. Blood Elves for example can be hunters but not shamans. The racial politics of the game are evident in two other ways. First, players are able to select from a range of hues for some in game races; but these choices don't, for example, enable a player to apply Asian or black features. Second, and more problematically, several *WoW* races are clearly racialized. Trolls, for example, are a mashup of African diasporic peoples; they speak with Jamaican accents, yet talk about voodoo and practice the Brazilian dance/martial art *capoeira*. The Tauren, a race of minotaur-like creatures, likewise condense a range of stereotypes about indigenous peoples; they greet others with a solemnly inflected "How," live in longhouses, and articulate a noble but "primitive" respect for the natural world.

5. Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 102.

6. See T. L. Taylor for a historical discussion that situates MMOGS in the larger histories of multiuser "persistent environments" in *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 21–28.

7. Anne Allison describes how designer Tajiri Satoshi challenged dominant trends in game design for players to only compete or battle one another by conceiving of another model of connection between players: cooperative trading. Eleven of the total 151 original Pokémon on the original Game Boy console could only be acquired through connecting a cable to another gamer's console. Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 201.

8. The two essential classes, for instance, are "tanks," usually warriors or other well-armored, heavy damage-dealing classes, who serve as the main frontal attack of a group, and "healers," usually priests who keep tanks and other players alive as they struggle to defeat the tougher-than-average creatures found in dungeons. These classes are so in demand that some players sell their services for in-game gold, agreeing to participate in a group only on the basis of payment, a participation clearly representative of a transactional approach to collaboration.

9. See, as well, Taylor's discussion of instrumental play and power gamers, *Play Between Worlds*, chapter 3.

10. Lauren Berlant, in Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 214.

11. For an excellent discussion of intimacy conceived as "contact and encounter" and how these intimacies are impacted by neoliberal development, see Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

12. Interestingly, some long-term gamers are completely unfamiliar with this phenomenon. At a 2008 conference on virtual worlds at the University of California at Irvine, a scholar and *WoW* gamer of four years claimed she had never known anyone to engage in in-game intimacies beyond the scope of friendship or the instrumental intimacies I described above. Immediately, though, another conference participant chimed in, "Oh no, it happens all the time. We've had big scandals about this in our guild."

13. Daniel Miller and Don Slater, "Relationships," in *The Anthropology of Media*, ed. Kelly Askew and Riachard R. Wilk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 187.

14. See Esther Milne, "Email and Epistolary Technologies: Presence, Intimacy, Disembodiment," journal.fibreculture.org/issue2/issue2_milne.html. Milne argues that disembodiment is paradoxically necessary to certain, intense modes of intimacy. The experience of being apart, she says, whether from oneself or from another, enables "a fantasy of bodily proximity or presence." And this fantasy, as it is activated in Milne's study through letters, postcards, and e-mail, has a charge that other forms of intimacy, including face-to-face intimacy, might not produce.

15. BBC News, "Gay Rights Win in Warcraft World," February 13, 2006. news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4700754.stm; accessed December 8, 2012.

16. John Armstrong, *Conditions of Love: The Philosophy of Intimacy* (New York: Norton, 2003), 50.

17. Gregory M. Lamb, "Are Multiplayer Online Games More Addictive?" *USA Today*, October 12, 2005. www.usatoday.com/tech/gaming/2005-10-12-mmorpgs-addictive_x.htm; accessed December 8, 2012.

18. Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, 85.

19. See, for example, MSNBC, "Why Are Geeks the New Chic?" December 12, 2007. www.msnbc.msn.com/id/22219377/; and the *New York Times*, "The Alpha Geeks," May 22, 2008. www.nytimes.com/2008/05/23/opinion/23brooks.html?ref=opinion.

20. Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, 72–73 and 84–85.

21. Citing a study on Japanese consumer trends in which users were asked to imagine their "dream houses," Allison describes how the imaginary dwellings, which were clearly intended to be occupied by one person and their things, indicated a desire to "protect one's own space without interfering

with others.” Researchers found these solitary, but often very bright, spaces “autistic.” Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, 88.

22. Players will sometimes create low-level avatars on an opposing faction to harass members of that faction.

23. See Taylor, *Play Between Worlds*, especially chapter 1; and Lori Kendall, *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

24. See Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, especially chapter 3; and John and Jean Comaroff, *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

25. Here, I borrow liberally from José Esteban Muñoz’ discussion in his essay, “Cruising the Toilet,” *GLQ* 13, nos. 2–3 (2007): 353–67.

26. Agamben, in Muñoz, “Cruising the Toilet,” 360.

27. Steven Shaviro, “Interstitial Life: Novelty and Double Causality in Kant, Whitehead, and Deleuze.” www.dhlgren.com/Othertexts/New.pdf; accessed March 18, 2012.

CHAPTER THREE. FEELING BLACK AND BLUE

1. Shaka McGlotten, “Virtual Intimacies: Love, Addiction, and Identity @ The Matrix,” in *Queer Online: Media Technology and Society*, ed. Kate O’Riordan and David Phillips (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 123–37; Shaka McGlotten “Ordinary Intersections: Speculations on Difference, Justice, and Utopia in Black Queer Life,” *Transforming Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (2012): 45–66.

2. See José Esteban Muñoz’s Blochian-inspired discussion of futurity in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

3. I am, however, still very sympathetic to some of these utopian or optimistic impulses. See especially Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); Allucquère Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

4. For a handful of examples, see Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman, eds., *Race in Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002) and *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Cameron Bailey, “Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace,” in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. Mary Ann Moser and Douglas MacLeod (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 29–49; Andil Gosine, “Brown to Blonde at Gay.com: Passing White in Queer Cyberspace” in *Queer Online: Media Technology and Sexuality*, ed. Kate O’Riordan and David Phillips (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 139–53; Shaka McGlotten “Ordinary Intersections.”