The Rendered Body: Queer Utopian Thinking in Digital Embodiments

by

Alison Lanier

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Abstract

The rendered body is pure possibility, but it has been treated with an imaginatively limited lens that belies its potential for radical reimagining. I want to challenge those imaginative limits, especially in regard to gender and how gender is read on digital bodies. In order to do this, I will draw on video game studies' rich field of avatar and body theory, queer theory's concepts of gender instability and failure, animation's tools of abstraction and imagination, and sf studies' figuring of radical possibility.

Thesis Supervisor: T. L. Taylor
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Introduction

"Ultimately, it is in the body that queerness meets video games…bringing the queer body—its desires, its loss, its expression of self—to press up against a game, to see where the two attract and where they repel, to form an intimate, erotic, and often subversive connection between the experiences of queerness, the beauties and dangers of LGBTQ lives, and the medium of video games."

- Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*

The rendered body is a fantasy. Between the player and the avatar is a gulf of unbeing that the player's intuition leaps across with seemingly automatic ease: I am Lara Croft, and her actions are mine, but my finger isn't pulling a trigger. My legs don't look that good. And I'm not a denizen of ancestorial wealth or the British aristocracy. So what is the player to this iconic, decades-old character? Some kind of parasitic mind puppeting a surrogate second body? A tourist, along for the ride?

While the player's relationship to their simulated second body is a maze of active scholarly questions (Halberstam 2011, Klevjer 2012, Shaw 2015), what *is* certain is that the player can clearly *read* the body conjured on screen: most avatars are read reliably as representations of human beings. Lara Croft, for instance, is read as a highly typified humanoid female, with significant emphasis on secondary sexual characteristics even in early versions of the character that were little more than a collection of cones and cubes.

The rendered body is pure possibility, but it has been treated with an imaginatively limited lens that belies its potential for radical reimagining. I want to challenge those imaginative limits, especially in regard to gender and how gender is read on digital bodies. In order to do this, I will draw on video game studies' rich field of avatar and body theory, queer theory's concepts

of gender instability and failure, animation's tools of abstraction and imagination, and sf[1]
studies' figuring of radical possibility.

The goal of this analysis is to arrive at a conception of radical possibility in regard to how binary, biologized understandings of gender can be disrupted in digital spaces. As games scholar Gabriela Richard writes so concisely, "The gender binary is a pervasive and limiting construction of desire and sexuality"[2]; that dynamic statement implies a vast and wonderfully messy argument. What imaginative scope is denied players and designers by their mutual preoccupation with biologized readings of gender?

This introduction will lay the groundwork for how the thesis will discuss gender and gendered bodies. I will lay out the theorists I draw on and their contextual role in this argument, as well as acknowledging the other, tandem conversations in avatar and game studies—as a process of exclusion, in order to clarify my own topic.

Video game scholar Adrienne Shaw describes in *Gaming at the Edge* (2014) that digital bodies demonstrate the range of people and bodies that social agents are able to conceptualize: "[Digital representation] provides evidence of what could be and who can be possible."[3] Digital representations make space for conceptualizing new, livable realities. I am far from the first to remark that games are a space of imagining, and playing at, different ways of being. Games scholar Bonnie Ruberg writes "Queerness and video games share a common ethos: the longing to imagine alternative ways of being and to make space within structures of power for resistance

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[1] Throughout this thesis, I follow the examples of Fredric Jameson in using the umbrella term "sf" to represent speculative fiction and science fiction broadly as an inclusive category of study.
[2] Richard, *Queer Game Studies*, 167
[3] Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, 41

through play."[4] This dreaming difference is echoed in cornerstones of queer literature like José Esteban Muñoz and Jack Halberstam's *Cruising Utopia* (2009) and *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) respectively: imagining queer futures is defined by dreaming difference, by conjuring alternatives to the systems of capitalism, growth, and profit that define what Muñoz calls "straight time."[5] Queer studies in video games reaches for moments of breaking, moments of difference in practice and imagining. Ethnographer Sonnie Nordmarken describes instances of gender instability generally as "a hopeful crack in a seemingly solidified oppressive system, a fissure in which possibilities for a more just society can be imagined and developed."[6] Such cracks lead toward the yearning for or sense of a radical breaking, a deep and structural utopian longing that fuels descriptions of queer futures.

My argument is focused on the digital body and how it is read and imagined specifically in regard to gender. I want to clarify that I am not approaching this topic in terms of, say, a cis straight player stepping into the shoes of a canonically queer character and walking a few digital miles. That belongs to what Lisa Nakamura calls "identity tourism": the sense that identities like race "can be customized, changed, and taken on or off as easily as one pops the head off a Barbie doll."[7] Ruberg similarly notes, "queer games today are being mislabeled as 'empathy games,' encouraging straight, cisgender players to engage in a kind of queer tourism."[8] The imaginative value of video games' representation does not reside in the ability to take a field trip via the digital body and story of, for instance, a trans person. Questions of players' identification with avatars are addressed in this thesis, but they are not the focus.

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[4] Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer,* 88
[5] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 22
[6] Nordmarken, "Queering Gendering," 43
[7] Nakamura, "Headhunting in Cyberspace," 10
[8] Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer,* 429

That is to say, I am expressly not going to enter into the lively current conversation about how a player relates to or identifies with their avatar. Rather, I am interested in the avatar itself. Since the early days of twentieth-century animation, character bodies have been conjured with rich imaginative freedom that nonetheless holds persistent ties to essentialized, biologized, binary gender. The goal here is to find the breaks, the moments of queer imagination, that open video game avatars to radical possibilities that abandon logics of gendered embodiment. This is an application of queer studies and body studies to avatars, rather than to game studies in a broader sense.

As I noted earlier, moments of fracture and uncertainty are ripe for queer thinking in digital realms. Nordmarken's destabilizing breakdown of recognizable gendered signifiers is key to digging into queer futurity and utopian thinking. The power of destabilizing hegemonic meanings with a kind of playful, joyful excitement is at the heart of how Muñoz describes queer futurity[9]: the continual potential to imagine and inhabit another way of being which is not dominated by heterosexual, cisnormative, capitalistic ideals that bind life experience to goals of production, reproduction, and progress.[10] I believe that video games are an extraordinarily promising arena within which to address questions of gender disruption. One not-insignificant reason for locating this debate in the realm of rendered bodies is that the digital realm displaces such gender arguments from the physical bodies of trans and gender-nonconforming people, who are so often positioned on the frontlines of such debates. In some of the most egregious cases—the North Carolina Bathroom Act, the attempted ban of trans servicemembers in the United States military, and trans athletes barred from competition in overly-biologized categories—made more visible and open to harm physical bodies of trans people who publicly disrupted the

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[9] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1
[10] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 17, 25

gender binary. As Nordmarken writes in their discussion of trans communities, "[the act of undoing gender] can exacerbate inequality for the individuals who evoke it—visible gender minorities are often punished."[11] To be a living, physical body at the intersection of public debates around gender is to become a site for debate, for conflict, for unwanted public definitions. "What bodies come to matter—and why?" asks Judith Butler;[12] my hope is that this question can eventually be meaningfully considered without endangering people living their day-to-day lives in these contested bodies.

What am I seeking in this exploration? In short: an alternative, queer, radical way of being which shirks the binaries and confinements that define life, time, and being in a capitalistic world. Such a mode—or a yearning for it—has been expressed beautifully many times over—sometimes with a sacred valence, as with *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa, and sometimes with clear, revolutionary, and intellectual vigor, as with Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*. It is the escape from Muñoz's "straight time," from the confining binaries and categorizations that fuel a thought-world waiting to be exploded into radical newness. In a nutshell, I will bow to Muñoz's sterling phrasing: "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality…We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality."[13] *Queerness* here is a stand-in for a vast landscape "of worlds proposed and promised" gesturing us into "forward-dawning futurity." Muñoz expresses a freedom and novelty of thought that is more, at this moment, a sensation or a yearning than a definable path.

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[11] Nordmarken, "Queering Gendering," 65
[12] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3
[13] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 1

Queer futurity is an amorphous and poetic concept that stands in opposition to clear-cut lines of growth, progress, and control that are mandated by capitalistic logic. Muñoz writes, "Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present."[14] Queerness in this frame of thought is aspirational, utopian, and undefinable. In thinking about a radical, queer futurity, I am reaching in this exploration toward the sense of the not-yet-imagined, the marginal spaces in our discussions of digital embodiment. As Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw write in *Queer Game Studies,*

> Games in all of their manifestations are a powerful place to imagine a queer utopia, not by simply imagining a better world but by giving players/makers/scholars the tools for enacting new and better worlds. Queerness, as its heart, can be defined as the desire to live life otherwise, by questioning and living outside of normative boundaries.[15]

Queer futurity forms the heart of the conceptual apparatus for this thesis. In the next sections, I will build a contextual framework of relevant contemporary conversations in queer game studies. I introduce these examples with the intention of expanding from them: acknowledging the questions of queer game studies, player identification, and player embodiment—and then, ultimately, bypassing them to deal directly with the study of the avatar itself as a subject.

Gender, as it is commonly discussed in the field at present, is as an ongoing reproduction of norms and values that continue to create an epistemological divide in which some humans are defined as male, female, or otherwise depending either on biology or self-identification. Judith

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[14] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 1
[15] Ruberg and Shaw, *Queer Game Studies,* x

Butler writes that gender is "the tacit agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them."[16] Butler puts an emphasis on gender as a "cultural fiction": a narrative told over and over, such that it takes on the appearance of perennial truth. Arguably that same statement could be made of any cultural norm, e.g. everyone has been wearing clothes for so many ad nauseum generations that not to do so would be a radical departure from the cultural narrative everyone else is taking part in. Like wearing clothes, gender also encompasses legal categories into which human bodies are defined on records including birth certificates, drivers' licenses, and medical records.[17] Legal as well as social punishment reinforce these cultural fictions in a process of negative reinforcement explored in extravagant length by Foucault and his followers.

In "Doing Gender" (1991), Candace West and Don Zimmerman present another performance-centered definition for gender as "a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment" which is "undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production."[18] The term *hostage* is a nice keystone here: there are implied, disastrous consequences for violating the rules of—or trying to escape from—a hostage situation. "Doing gender," write the authors, "involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures.'"[19] Gender is continually enacted and reinforced by social agents within a preexisting discourse of meaning defined by gender, in a circular logic loop of

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[16] *Queer Game Studies,* 29

[17] Although to some degree, we are currently witnessing the breakdown of such rigidity within at least some legal structures, such as Massachusetts' allowance of a nonconforming *X* gender marker on residents' drivers' licenses.

[18] West and Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," 13-14

[19] West and Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," 14

training and reproduction, what Butler terms "reiterative citational practices."[20] If one's *competence as a member of society* is hostage to obeying and reinforcing the existing societal discourse, gender nonconformity or disruption has enormous stakes in the physical world—one more reason why digital realms are a useful testing ground for these messier concepts, where the real, lived experience of real, living people is not directly impacted.[21]

Additionally, gender in the physical world relies on physical traits and acts of presentation that are subject to only laborious, expensive, and/or medical changes. Returning to Butler, gender is "manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the *gendered stylization of the body*"[22] (emphasis mine). Such stylization is epitomized in Butler's own famous example of drag queens' performativity and costuming. The visual "stylizations of the body" are core to my thinking regarding avatars here; visual markers, as will be explored in chapter 1 and chapter 3, carry on traditions of gendered embodiment and caricature that are useful to define in order to dismantle.

In the most fundamental terms, three-dimensional avatars are both tools for embodying player actions in video game worlds and aesthetic subject-objects, as described by Jesper Juul and Rune Klevjer (2016); they are both aesthetic representations of a controllable character and a manifestation of player actions within the game.

Juul and Klevjer describe tensions between these two states in the history of video game studies: "A key issue in academic research has been the relative significance of the avatar's

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[20] Senft, "Performing the Digital Body," 14
[21] The magic circle begins to rear its conceptual head. I will address questions of the separability of games from non-game life shortly.
[22] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv

appearance versus its capability through players' engagement with avatars, particularly the question of whether single-player game avatars like Mario or Lara Croft should be conceptualized as vehicles of agency rather than objects of representation, as *tools* rather than as characters in the traditional sense."[23] Is the aesthetic more notable than the mechanical function of the avatar? Some theorists, like Espen Aarseth, swing for the figurative fences on the purely ludic side of the debate with claims such as "the dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently. When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it."[24] Henry Jenkins and Mary Fuller (1995) describe avatar protagonists in narrative games as "little more than a cursor."[25] In such strains of logic, the humanness of the avatar is irrelevant: a player might as well be a rhino or a UHaul truck as a curvy, scantily clad Lara Croft.

However Juul and Klevjer describe the middle-ground position that, much like psychology's nature-nurture debate, the action-versus-aesthetic aspects of an avatar are mutually significant to the play experience. This mutuality is central to what they call the "dual nature" of the avatar.[26] The appearance of the avatar isn't the end-all, be-all of the play experience, but neither is it disconnected; when I, a queer ciswoman, play *The Witcher III* (2015) as a straight, grizzled, and surly cisman with cat eyes and play *Ghost of Tsushima* (2020) as a young Japanese cisman: the characters are the embodied presence of me, the player, in the game world. The fact that they are not representative *of* me makes them into characters separate from myself— narratively significant personalities within their stories.

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23 Juul and Klevjer, "Avatar," 3
24 Aarseth, *Genre Trouble*, v
25 Fuller and Jenkins, "Nintendo and New World Travel Writing"
26 Juul and Klevjer, "Avatar," 3

A helpful parallel here is the beloved *Choose Your Own Adventure* series that many in my generation "played" before they ever encountered a computer game. The second-person storytelling model cast the reader in the role of "you"—although the "you" represented in the story was often an explicitly a nonmatching race, gender, background, or other biographic descriptor to the reader. For instance, in the first book in the official series, *The Cave of Time* (1979), the protagonist is portrayed clearly as a white male child in numerous illustrations and in the text. However, the reader/player still inhabits the role of *you* in the story and makes decisions to guide the character *you* from one page to the next. In either case, the player controls an in-game character with specific identity and appearance, but with the implication that the reader is in a sense in their shoes.

In the context of the ludic-vs-narratology debate, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body provides useful analysis of bodily intentionality, bodily space, and bodily extensions (2002 [1962]). Paraphrased by Klevjer in the context of gaming, "Because [avatars] act as *proxies* or stand-ins for our own body within the gameworld, prosthetic avatars are crucially different from more familiar kinds of bodily extensions, like tools or musical instruments."[27] Klevjer goes on to argue that the in navigable 3D environments, "the main 'body' of the avatar, in the phenomenological sense, is not the controllable marionette itself[…] but the navigable virtual *camera*, which becomes an extension of the player's locomotive vision during play."[28] In this way the avatar is both an indicator of presence and a tool for orientating the player's view onto the perceived gameworld.

Being *in* digital space is a tricky proposition all its own. Janet Murray helpfully nutshells the sense of experiencing navigable space in her book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* as encyclopedic

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[27] Klevjer, "Enter the Avatar," 1
[28] ibid

and immersive.[29] There is a deep field of thought here exemplified by Sara Ahmed's phenomenological understanding of orientation as bodies in motion, so that orientation becomes a spatialized, advancing series of movements and moments.[30]

Although the experience of digital space will not be my focus in this project, I must acknowledge the contextual importance of Murray and Ahmed's theories of how one inhabits and moves through digital spaces in an avatar embodiment. Similarly, I introduce the ludic-vs-narratology debate and the question of being "represented" within the game as a frame for the discussion of gendered digital bodies more specifically. Again, these contextual debates are important to note for this argument, to situate it in the current field of queer game studies. However, I will ultimately focus on how the digital body itself is imagined. This argument does not exist in a vacuum, and the contextualizing foundations of these other arguments are both necessary and enriching.

Vital instability

"Those who are deemed 'unreal' nevertheless lay hold of the real, a laying hold that happens in concert, and a vital instability is produced by that performative surprise."
– Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, x

In Nordmarken's vision of abolishing gender, the body becomes an illegitimate signifier,[31] which cedes authority to the linguistic self-declaration of the individual. As Butler and Nordmarken both remark, though, the reading of biologized, binary gender often prefigures an individual's expression or rejection of it. Privileging linguistic practice over bodily "reading"

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[29] Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*¸ 113
[30] Sara Ahmed. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, 6
[31] Nordmarken, "Queering Gendering," 63

is a promising avenue toward new gender epistemologies, liberated from the confines of immediate binary hegemonic assumptions.

The dangers of being on the frontline of such disruptions, as noted above, is not negligible. The bodies that cause such disruptions in many cases become the targets of exacerbated gendered readings, particularly because they attempt to disrupt such readings.[32] Nordmarken remarks:

> "Redoing gender" seems to describe situations where individuals who, based on their biology, are assumed to be members of particular sex categories, but who remain accountable to enacting certain roles associated with these categories. Even if all other gendered social expectations were to dissipate, as long as individuals remain accountable to performing certain socially prescribed reproductive activities, gender will not have been abolished. This view suggests that gender cannot be done away with because it assumes that social actors will hold each other accountable to entrenched gender norms; thus, gender cannot be 'undone'—it can only be 'redone' according to evolving norms.[33]

Nordmarken is referring here to the performative concept of gender, crystalized in West and Zimmerman's writing. One way of breaking "assumed...sex categories" is to "exceed binary expectations,"[34] in the sense of biological perception: a body that provides unstable gender signifiers thus undermines binary assumption and prevents expectations of performance. Raewyn Connell similarly describes "a turn away from a focus on identity and the assumption of gender intransigence and toward feminist social science as a vital resource for understanding gender diversity, trans politics, and the realities of practice and process in the interactional achievement of gender"[35] Connell and Nordmarken relocate the achievement of gender from the visual to the linguistic. However, in the realm of animation, such as video games, the rendered body is a

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[32] Nordmarken, "Queering Gendering," 65-66
[33] Nordmarken, "Queering Gendering," 40
[34] Nordmarken, "Queering Gendering," 40
[35] Connell, "Transexual Women and Feminist Thought," 857

deliberate act of visual representation. In the vast majority of cases examined in this thesis, the visual is the primary signifier of gender.

These lengthy quotations all angle toward the instability of the body as signifier, a recurring point in animation: an artform in which bodies can be made flexible and ambiguous with artistic license.

In Chapter 3, I will explore bodily instability via the avenue of animation—a basic component of video games' visual language. Halberstam has remarked at length on the queer potential of animated bodies in his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, but himself applies this potential to video games in a separate writing. "While digital worlds draw from both the elongated possibilities of animated bodies and the pliability of coded realities," writes Halberstam in *Queer Game Studies*, "we might consider the bendiness and shiftiness of both genres in terms of a queer orientation to reality that requires improvisation, physical stretching, and a recoded sense of being. Queer subjects constantly recode and, within limits, rebuild the worlds they enter."[36] Gender as a free-floating entity sits at the confluence of many malleable, social agreements and conventions—re-enacted or disrupted by the bodies onto which gender is read. "Like the Internet," writes Theresa M. Senft, "for certain feminist theorists, gender is not a thing, but rather the performative effect of multiple calculations,"[37] which she echoes by citing that "Butler argues that '[gender] performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate act."[38] There is no neat moment when gender occurs, where it is clearly and absolutely decided; those moments of slippery unsettledness are the moments when imagining difference and disruptions can occur, both digitally and in the physical world.

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[36] Halberstam, *Queer Game Studies,* 187
[37] Senft, "Performing the digital body," 14
[38] Senft, "Performing the digital body," 15

Body studies

Body studies as a field has existed ambiguously in conjunction with video game studies for roughly a decade, as Derek A. Burrill describes.[39] In his summary of the field as it stood in roughly 2015, he derives body studies' basis and standing both on foundational queer theorists such as Judith Butler, but more fundamentally on the postmodernist lens of Foucault: "Hence, queer theory and theories of the body are derived from common ground and concepts—difference, subjectivity, discourse, and power."[40] Burrill is more preoccupied in his approach with the dangers of hegemony, erasure, and satiation than I will be here, but his commentary rests of the idea that "Queer games theory should be prepared to not only analyze and critique games and gaming, but to lead in the fabrication and development of concepts, games, and worlds suited for queer bodies, the queer community, and beyond."[41] This is a production-oriented[42] vision of guiding future games' creation, of dreaming of possible digital worlds in which queering is explicitly enacted against dominant hegemony. He calls for a "Mulvey moment" in re-articulating how digital bodies function as Foucaultian discourse.

I, conversely, think at that at the time of Burrill's writing—well into the #GamerGate controversy—the Mulvey moment of gaming had come and gone. This point is pretty well supported by GamerGate's triggers: content such as Anita Sarkeesian's "Tropes vs. Video Games" series was doing exactly the Mulveyesque work of dismantling the presumptions of gaze and visual pleasure. Video games are not separate from preexisting studies, including feminist

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[39] Burrill, "Queer Theory, the Body, and Video Games." *Queer Game Studies,* 26
[40] ibid
[41] Burrill, *Queer Game Studies,* 31-32
[42] "Oriented" here is a loaded term in terms of embodiment in game studies, especially queer game studies, in the vein of Sara Ahmed's excellent work on digital bodies' spatialization through movement and relativity. The term is fitting here because Burrill is explicitly writing to Ahmed's theory.

film studies, of visual pleasure and objectification. Lara Croft was already a Mulvey-meme of visual pleasure by the time she was embodied in the flesh by Angelina Jolie; in the original games' initial wash of success, Helen Kennedy noted fan responses that "signal Lara's status as an object of sexual desire, a factor which the marketing/advertising of Tomb Raider was keen to reinforce."[43] Kennedy expounds that Lara is a clear example of "Mulvey's argument that the female body operates as an eroticized object of the male gaze and the fetishistic and scopophilic pleasures which this provides for the male viewer" as well as Mulvey's point that "'active' or 'strong' female characters signify a potential threat to the masculine order."[44] Scholars, marketers, and gamers knew what they are looking at and how they are looking at it. *It* being pixels in the shape of a AFAB body, with conventionally feminine primary and secondary sexual characteristics.

Where things get tricky is in the call for queer guidance in video game production in Burrill's writing. It echoes what Adrienne Shaw describes as putting the onus on queer people and people of color to somehow disrupt the hegemonic power of game production from inside massive companies.[45] What is more true-to-life, in my view, is a product like *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020): a game that markets a pseudo-queerness—binary, skinny, and marketable—that aims to appeal to a newly-ish recognized audience and their wallets. Simple inclusion of explicitly queer characters in games, in short, is not the end goal—at least not if we're talking about radical possibility and disruptions of gendered discourse.

Intervention: Jameson and Radical Imagination

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[43] Helen Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?" 2002
[44] Ibid
[45] Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge,* 169

Alongside Muñoz's queer utopian thinking, I want to bring utilize another, complimentary strand of critical utopian theory: Fredric Jameson's concept of a radical break. Specific aspects of imagined futures, postulated through sf, have been recognized by multiple scholars as influential either in popular thought or in technological innovation of subsequent years. As Sandy Alexandre writes[46] the influence of speculative fiction on progressive technological innovation can be traced through numerous instances:

> The World Wide Web is famously said to have been inspired by Arthur C. Clarke's short story 'Dial F For Frankenstein' (1964). Whatever the truth is[…]It's more than a little reasonable to assume that we can trace the lineage of communication platforms and devices back to well-crafted works of the language arts.

As well as individual technological innovations, Jameson expands this point, describing "an sf novel, from which, as Lionel Trilling once put it, like so many raisins and currants [technologies] are picked out and exhibited"[47] from authors such as Verne and Wells. How the future is imagined takes shape through progressive innovations, leading inexorably toward a recognizable, comprehensible future.

However this is precisely the kind of "history of ideas" thinking that Jameson—and I, drawing on his essay "Progress Versus Utopia"—push back against. In Jameson's formulation, the "history of ideas" is a restrictive, historicized myth of progress that creeps tentatively forward with concrete moments of innovation and invention. Jameson formulates futurity as a "radically distinct" way of being, separate "from our own experiences of the object-world of the present."[48] His concept of the utopian imagination, "the imagination of otherness and radical

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[46] MIT News, "3 Questions: Sandy Alexandre on the literary roots of technological innovations," June 1, 2020.
[47] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 282
[48] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 284

difference,"[49] demands a dynamic, continuing forward momentum, to push toward a future we, the residents of the present object-world, are not equipped to imagine. We cannot actually envision the content of a radically different object-world.

In order to achieve a radical break, one must first disrupt, destroy, or at least profoundly change existing systems of socioeconomics and gendered/racialized thinking—among countless others—which is one of the profound barriers to actually imaginatively formulating a radically different world. Jameson calls the prerogative of this kind of utopian imagination "to succeed by failure…and thereby [become] unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute limits."[50] He calls for imaginative forward momentum, by which I mean here for a desire for difference; however, Jameson neglects to describe who specifically must do the imaging and the desiring. Here, though, Jameson meets nicely with Muñoz: the utopian urge is the thing itself, the clear and spirited forward momentum toward a desired difference that demands radical destabilization and transformation. "We are not yet queer" says Muñoz, nor does he say in what moment we might finally become so. Both Muñoz and Jameson write toward an aspirational horizon which would be cheapened or diminished by actually reaching that horizon itself. Instead it is a guiding light, a magnetic pole for imaginative thinking—while recognizing with intellectual patience and humility that one cannot actually reach or define it.

The charge of this thesis is to use avatars as a site of radical imagination in regard to gender: how does the rendered body in video games give opportunities to view gender queerly?

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[49] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 289
[50] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 289

What's the matter with utopia?

Utopia can be a tricky term, especially in the context of using technology to imagine better futures. Thomas Malaby writes that utopian "exceptionalism" is a counterproductive force to serious and fruitful game scholarship:

> What we must realize is that the older and still extant marginalization of games and its contemporary, almost utopian treatments are actually two sides of the same coin; they both follow from an exceptionalist position: that games are play and therefore set apart. This perspective allows some to hold games at arm's length from what matters, from where "real" things happen, whereas others cast them as potential utopias promising new transformative possibilities for society but ultimately just as removed from everyday life.[51]

Exceptionalist here smacks to me of the fraught and much-abused concept of the magic circle. Malaby is quite right in stating that games are not completely disconnected from the society and culture that creates them; I do not think even Huizinga would step onto that hill to defend it. The magic circle, as T. L. Taylor writes, is permeable.[52] Frankly, if the magic circle were airtight, the core of this thesis would deflate: messy concepts of gender and imagination flow in from the sociological nuances of the living, physical world—tangled with the experiences of biological bodies living out their biological and social lives in the context of culture. Digital bodies are a site for investigation into that nuance—not a magical nowhere in which play and imagination somehow operate vacuously by logics all their own, as Malaby intimates.

What I'm trying to underscore here is that *utopian* and *separable* are very much not the same things in this argument. Muñoz and Jameson are very far from trying to wrest utopia from the jaws of lived reality. Utopia in Muñoz, Jameson, and this argument, as described above, is a

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[51] Malaby, "Beyond Play," 97
[52] T. L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds*, 13-14

cognitive and imaginative leap from the status quo—not a promise of perfection, but of reinvention. I want to imagine radical utopianism, not divorced from the realities of the physical world but with the clarity and precision of what kind of imagination can be fostered or imagined. A game certainly is "socially legitimate."[53] Utopian thinking is no less so. There is no definite separation of game life from social life, or at least, more broadly, from the cultural context of the game and the player.

Choice of Subject Matter

And if this imagining is conjured via a multi-billion-dollar industry rife with all the hallmarks of exploitation one might reasonably hope to see eradicated in a radically reinvented future—well. We imagine with the tools we have, as Jameson expounds.[54] I have chosen to examine blockbuster, mega-profit AAA games for much the same reason that Jack Halberstam chose to focus on Disney/Pixar animations in his admirable *The Queer Art of Failure*. As Halberstam writes:

> While many readers may object to the idea that we can locate [queer, disruptive] alternatives in a genre engineered by huge corporations for massive profits and with multiple product tie-ins, I have found that new forms of animation, CGI in particular, have opened up new narrative doors and led to unexpected encounters between the childish and the transformative and the queer.[55]

One can look to the early days of Disney animation and Walter Benjamin's utopian hopes for it to get a sense of animation's long tradition of challenging and reinventing mimetic forms.[56] The

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53 Malaby, "Beyond Play," 106
54 Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 285
55 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure,* 20
56 Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure,* 21

resources of AAA blockbuster games are fertile ground for innovations in rendering and modeling technology, and thus a reasonable place to look for moments of technical innovation.

It is important here to emphasize that the argument I am making is one about possibility: I don't believe a truly radical approach to gender has been achieved in AAA games.

Structure of thesis

In the first chapter, I will explore the case of *Cyberpunk 2077*, the major 2020 title from CD Projekt Red that made vast promises about nongendered character bodies in-game and which boldly disappointed on almost all aspects. However, community-imagined and fan-theorized metatexts give a hint of what the game's failure can tell us about yearning toward moments of radical difference and be productive in wider thinking toward queer futurity in video games.

Chapter 2 explores the case of worldbuilding in *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) and the boundaries of imagination in conjuring diverse bodies in "new" gameworlds. Dealing with raced bodies in terms of visual signifiers deliberated disconnected from their signified meanings, the game reveals itself to be bounded by the limitations of the object world in which the gameworld is imagined.

Chapter 3 zooms out to talk about what I call "muddied" instances of gendered bodily signifiers in video games: instances where gendered bodies are conceptualized as deliberately unstable indicators of binary gender.

The Curious Case of the Uncritical Cyberpunk

"[Digital representation] provides evidence of what could be and who can be possible" – Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edges* (41)

"Different versions of [cyberspace] support different kinds of dreams. We choose, wisely or not." – Steven Johnson, *Interface Culture* (6)

Cyberpunk 2077, with its genre roots in the titular cyberpunk movement, is a particularly striking case of imaginative failure—but an illuminating failure, framed in the light of queer utopian yearning. *Cyberpunk 2077*, released after many delays into the pandemic landscape of 2020, is a videogame adaptation of the tabletop roleplaying game *Cyberpunk*, written by Mike Pondsmith and first published by R. Talsorian Games in 1988. Both games' premises are nakedly linked to *Neuromancer*, the massively influential 1984 novel by William Gibson which is popularly credited with creating mass media conceptualization of a digital world and how inhabiting such a world would work. The computer-dominated dystopia of *Neuromancer* has explicit echoes in many descendent properties, like *The Matrix* (1999), and predictions of personal computing.[57] The 2020 video game took the tabletop game's classic premise of gritty science fiction noir and set it in the year 2077, in the urban wilds of Night City, a massive South California metropolis defined by rampant inequality, sex work, crime, and wealth concentrated in the hands of mega corporations.

Cyberpunk the video game, in development for the better part of a decade, promised a tremendous range of character customization, from voice to genitals, with no cisnormative

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[57] Featherly, K. "Neuromancer." Encyclopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Neuromancer.

constraints: rather than starting with a binary male or female option, any avatar could have any sexual characteristics, voice, and pronouns.[58] The hype was, predictably, rampant. IGN reported in August of 2019 that "CD Projekt Red is doing away with traditional character gender options in *Cyberpunk 2077* to keep with the ethos of the game" in an effort to make the game, in the words of senior concept artist Marthe Jonkers, "really inclusive."[59] Forbes called the adjustment a "no-brainer accommodation" in a game that revolves so closely around body modification, adding that the predictable pushback from gender-essentialist commentators was just a sign that "People feel that if others get something they want, it somehow compromises the thing they already have."[60] Critical gaming sources reported the news of a genderless creator, not with speculation about how such a thing could be possible, but with an apparently clear and immediate vision of the mechanics of genderless virtual embodiment.[61] The radical vision of abolishing gendered character creation in a game so extensively focused on the rendered body's customizability seemed, in these reports, to be treated as both fitting and timely.

Unfortunately, the actual game didn't deliver: instead of messy, genderless character creation, what players ended up with is a game where the experience of the story is determined solely by whether the player selects a typically masculine or typically feminine voice.

I want to use the game's failure as an opportunity to examine how persistent gendering in digitally rendered bodies rears its ugly head, even in ostensibly progressive projects. But further,

[58] GameCentral, "Cyberpunk 2077 Gamescom 2019 Interview – 'We Paint a Picture and We Let the Player Interpret It'," Metro (Metro UK, August 23, 2019), https://metro.co.uk/2019/08/23/cyberpunk-2077-gamescom-2019-interview-paint-picture-let-player-interpret-10618408/.

[59] Matt Kim, "Cyberpunk 2077 Dev Explains Why There's No Character Gender Option Anymore," IGN (IGN, August 28, 2019), https://www.ign.com/articles/2019/08/28/cyberpunk-2077-dev-explains-why-theres-no-character-gender-option-anymore.

[60] Dave Thier, "Here's Why 'Cyberpunk 2077' Gender Controversy Is Manufactured Outrage," Forbes (Forbes Magazine, August 30, 2019), https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidthier/2019/08/30/heres-why-cyberpunk-2077-gender-controversy-is-manufactured-outrage/.

[61] Matteo Lupetti et al., "Cyberpunk 2077 Doesn't Adhere to the Gender Binary - It Revels in It," Gayming Magazine, December 22, 2020, https://gaymingmag.com/2020/12/cyberpunk-gender-binary-non-binary/.

I'd like to use *Cyberpunk* as an example of a work in which the radical possibility of its mission was best achieved in fan-made metatexts. A truly genderless version of the game does exist: but it isn't the version you can buy in the PlayStation store.

In *that* version of the game, the character creator uses the familiar initial RPG male- or female-bodied choice, dividing the screen in half, with each binary option clearly labeled—precisely the mechanism CD Pojeckt Red claimed that they were doing away with.

Such a mechanism is a telltale fingerprint of the "particular method of embodiment for [a game's] users [that] explicitly fostered *specific*
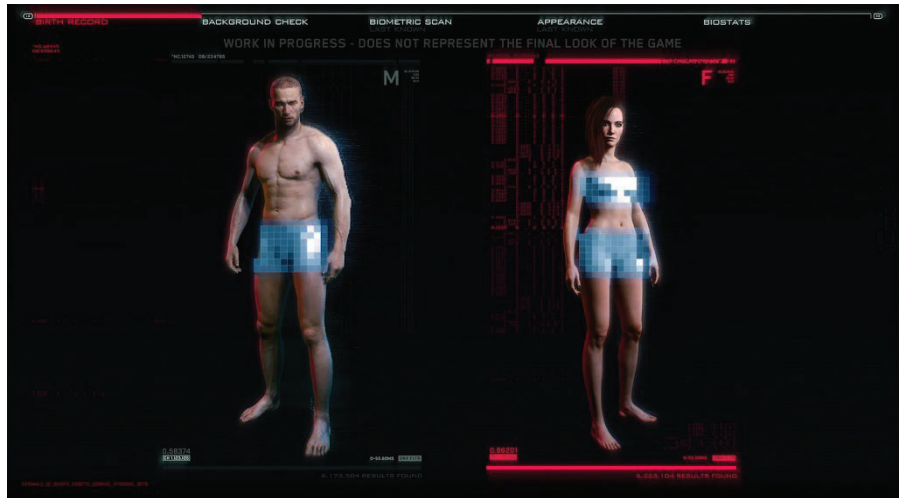
1 *Cyberpunk 2077 character creation screen (identical options presented at the beginning of every game iteration).*

social interactions and engagements through it."[62] For instance, T. L. Taylor explains how societal binary gender and body standardization becomes encoded in the persistent, virtual world experienced by the player: "No children, no physically challenged, no short, no tall—all the bodies you saw in this world were similar in stature and implied age. The system enacted an embodiment norm through standardization and in turn formally structured the kinds of identities and interactions possible in this space."[63] The same aspects of standardization hold true many years later in *Cyberpunk*.

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[62] T. L. Taylor, "The Social Design of Virtual Worlds: Constructing the User and Community Through Code." *Internet Research Annual Volume 1: Selected Papers from the Association of Internet Researchers Conferences 2000-2002*. M. Consalvo et. al. (eds). New York: Peter Lang, 2004. P. 262.
[63] Taylor, "Social Design of Virtual Worlds," 264.

The masculine and feminine body with the binary choice of a gendered male or female voice are forms of standardization and encoded values that undermine any actual fluidity by embedding binary standardization into the character bodies. Notably, the character, V's, pronouns are determined exclusively by voice, rather than physical presentation, behavior, or styling, with no nonbinary pronoun options available.

Assumptions of gendered behavior are also impacted by these standardized bodies. Taylor further details that "The look of the avatars seems to have some real effect not only on how other players interact with and perceive female characters, but the degree to which women are able to identify with them."[64] I am not concerned with the question of player identification with their avatar here. However, character appearance affecting the perception and interaction with differently gendered characters is another slippery and revealing point in *Cyberpunk*'s standardization of gender. The male and female-gendered voices for V deliver the same lines and with very similar tone, according to my own gameplay, with minor variations for gender-specific romance scene options. However, the world of the game obeys clearly gendered behaviors, making the gruff, assertive behavior of the female-voiced V disconcertingly masculine. Jack Halberstam has explored the concept of female masculinity at length and how "this culture generally evinces considerable anxiety about even the prospect of manly women."[65] V's masculine performance of femininity is a jarring disconnect in the game, not because of transgressive crossing of gendered behavior boundaries as Halberstam imagines, but because V's femininity is merely an aesthetic gloss to a character whose behavior is fundamentally and reliably gendered as male. The anxiety surrounding this masculinized character is not Halberstam's productive exploration of shame surrounding female masculinity and gender

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[64] Taylor, "Social Design of Virtual Worlds," 265.
[65] Jack Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, xxiii.

ambiguity; rather, it establishes masculinity as the embedded standard of behavior for the character, regardless of other binary gendered aspect of V's voice and appearance. Personally, I found the markedly masculine behavior of the female-gendered protagonist jarring, especially in context of clear stereotypical female-gendered behavior in other main characters, including Evelyn Parker, a cookie-cutter femme fatale, and other hyper-feminized women.

The gender binary is central to how the game world is realized, and how the player's avatar embodiment exists within that gameworld. Fredric Jameson speaks to the boundaries of imagining new realities: What assumptions and boundaries are built into the game? And what concepts of being lie beyond those boundaries? Jameson wrote that the truly utopian desire is encapsulated by what the text constitutively cannot say or render. To explore the utopian potential of the game, I will first explore the conceptual boundaries of how gender is imagined in technological simulations, and how the restrictive gender binary is reproduced and encoded as a conceptual hurdle.

I want to proceed to the Jamesonian limits of how simulated gendered bodies hit the boundaries of conceptual thinking. Here the terminology of the technonormative matrix of domination becomes useful. This concept is based off Judith Butler's now-classic concept the heteronormative matrix of domination. Sasha Costanza-Chock writes about the technonormative matrix as the sociotechnical reproduction of the gender binary.[66] Costanza-Chock, a nonbinary, femme-presenting scholar, describes the experience of stepping into millimeter wave scanner at an airport and having their body flagged as "anomalous" "because of the particular sociotechnical configuration of gender normativity (cis-normativity) that has been built into the scanner, through the combination of user interface design, scanning technology, binary gendered

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[66] Costanza-Chock, "Design Justice, A.I., and Escape from the Matrix of Domination"

body-shape data constructs, and risk detection algorithms."[67] While Costanza-Chock does not use the phrase technonormative matrix, she packages this complex intersection of gendered assumptions under the "matrix of domination," a term coined by Patricia Hill Collins for various intersecting oppressions that affect a group or individual. Collins notes, Constanza-Chock emphasizes, "that additional systems of oppression structure the matrix of domination for other kinds of people."[68]

Constanza-Chock's application of the matrix of domination analysis to the millimeter wave scanner speaks directly to what has been called the technonormative matrix of domination—in which various intersecting oppressions are codified and reified in computer systems that then in turn reinforce those gendered proscriptions. "[W]hen I entered the scanner," writes Constanza-Chock,

> the TSA operator on the other side was prompted by the UI to select 'Male' or 'Female.' […] [T]he three-dimensional contours of my body, at millimeter resolution, differ from the statistical norm of 'female bodies' as understood by the dataset and risk algorithm. […] If the agent selects 'male,' my breasts are large enough, statistically speaking, in comparison to the normative 'male' body-shape construct in the database, to trigger an anomalous warning and a highlight around my chest area. If they select 'female,' my groin area deviates enough from the statistical 'female' norm to trigger the risk alert, and bright yellow pixels highlight my groin, as visible on the flat panel display.[69]

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[67] Costanza-Chock, "Escape from the Matrix of Domination"
[68] Costanza-Chock, "Escape from the Matrix of Domination"
[69] Costanza-Chock, "Escape from the Matrix of Domination"
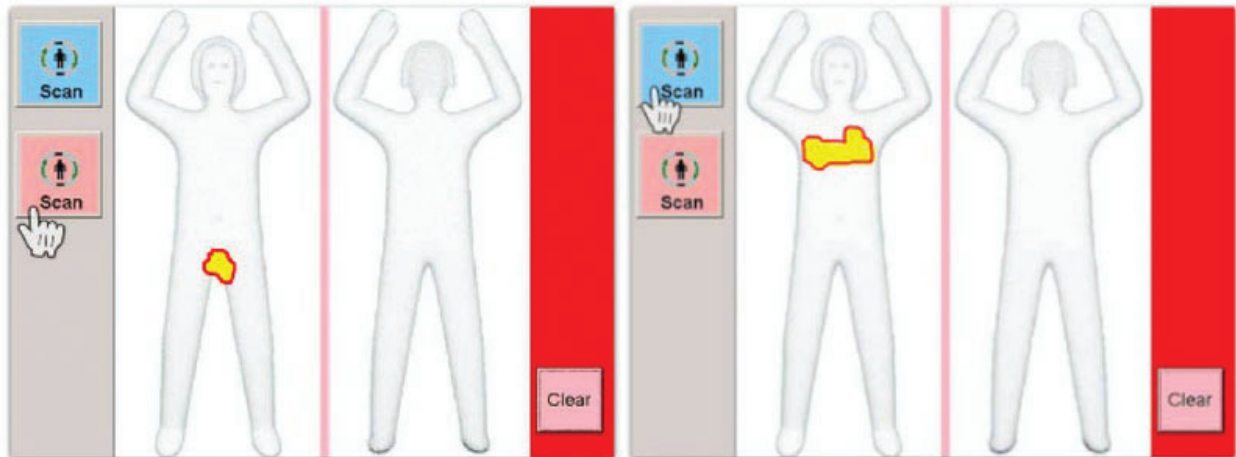
2. Reproduced from "Design Justice, A.I., and Escape from the Matrix of Domination"; [original graphic: Costello, Cary Gabriel, 2016. "Traveling While Trans: The False Promise of Better Treatment," in *Trans Advocate*.]

The technology reproduces and mandates the binary, biologized definitions of gender be written even onto ambiguous bodies that do not comply with such essentialized categories.[70]

This mismatch of social concepts of binary gender encoded in technology and the actual, living, non-conforming bodies of people who encounter that technology is fundamentally a question of authority and defining. Heath Fogg Davis explores the phenomenon of "the administrative discretion to decide who is female and who is male" in *Beyond Trans: Does Gender Matter?* (2018). Davis offers a much more macro view of what he calls "sex-identity discrimination,"[71] which encompasses such moments as the TSA millimeter scanner: instances in which an employee or official is given the power to evaluate if an individual's gender reads, to the evaluator, as 'correct.'[72] The act of defining gender, especially binary gender, at all is a "political, practical, and ethical" process, says Ed Schiappa, speaking to the fraught process of

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[71] Heath Fogg Davis, *Beyond Trans: Does Gender Matter?* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018), 10.
[72] Where Constanza-Chock's account is most useful to consider here, tied as it is to technology's embedded social values, Davis's text gives a strong account of the corresponding human, out-of-game act of evaluation undergone by folks "whose appearance…challenged prevailing gender norms" (3). Davis provides a useful bedrock to understand the depth of the biologizing, binary gendered thinking that becomes encoded in technology such as the millimeter scanner and character creation screens.

creating and applying definitions. He writes, "Though cultural understandings of what it means to be a woman or a man have gone through times of reconsideration and debate, it is arguably the case that at no other point in recent history have the definitions of 'woman' and 'man,' 'male' and 'female,' 'masculine' and 'feminine,' been more up for grabs than the present."[73] This instability of gendered definitions, combined with the institutionalized authority of public servants like Constanza-Chock's TSA inquisitors to apply such definitions, have their mirror in the encoded definitions as they are applied in *Cyberpunk*. Gender is immediately and unanimously read by all other characters in-game based solely on the voice of the character and its immediate definition as masculine or feminine, with no variation and no opportunity for self-identification.

In their landmark essay "Doing Gender," Candace West and Don Zimmerman depict the continually, self-fulfilling prophecy of gendered bodies and performances: an expectation of behavior, appearance, and general mode of being is anticipated by a gendered society, and the person within it then accomplishes gender by fulfilling those expectations.[74] This cycle of gender accomplishment is useful in the discussion of avatars in the sense that West and Zimmerman's theory of gender accountability and accomplishment is reliant on the community practices in which gendering occurs. What *community practices* police gender accomplishment in the gameworld? The most obvious answer is the programmed allowances of gender expression in the game world and players' binary interpretations: for instance, the prescription to select a male or female body character as the first stage of a character creation screen. These biologized options are ingrained and inescapable within the game where—in order to set foot, as it were, in the

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[73] Edward Schiappa, *The Transgender Exigency: Defining Sex and Gender in the 21st Century* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), 1.

[74] Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender." *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): 125–51. http://www.jstor.org/stable/189945.

gameworld—one must select an essentialized, biologized gender to embody. This closely mirrors the programmed gender binary to the millimeter scanner's male-or-female typified and inflexible body expectations. Binary gender readings and gender attribution are alive and well, even where gender identity is not. Those binary readings are codified by their respective mechanisms, an expressly essentialized dual category with no wiggle-room in between.

T. L. Taylor writes that "code brings with it values, and within those value systems are particular forms of embedded control, regulation, and interaction"[75] using the framework of Langdon Winner:

> technologies are ways of building order in our world. Many technical devices and systems important in everyday life contain possibilities for many different ways of ordering human activity. Consciously or not, deliberately or inadvertently, societies choose structures for technologies that influence how people are going to work, communicate, travel, consume, and so forth for a very long time[76]

Technologies including *Cyberpunk*'s gendered character creation and the TSA millimeter scanner encode a concept of binarized, biologized gender as the only legitimate outcome of their respective systems. In this way they solidify the socialized concept of binary gender within their mechanism.

Sonny Nordmarken speaks to this phenomenon of "figuring a merged 'sex/gender' as binary, fixed, and biological.[77] This paradigm reflects epistemic assumptions about how gender *can be known*—holding that social actors are able to determine others' gender identities (and appropriate gender pronouns) based on their own sensory perceptions of others' bodies."[78]

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[75] T. L. Taylor. "Intentional Bodies: Virtual Environments and the Designers Who Shape Them*," International Journal of Engineering Education*, Vol.19, No.1, 25-34. Great Britain: 2003. P. 25.

[76] Langdon Winner. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus* 109, no. 1 (1980): 121–36. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024652.

[77] Sonny Nordmarken. "Queering Gendering: Trans Epistemologies and the Disruption and Production of Gender Accomplishment Practices." *Feminist Studies* 45, no. 1 (2019): 36–66. https://doi.org/10.15767/feministstudies.45.1.0036.

[78] Nordmarken,"Queering Gendering," 44

However, disruptions of such assumptions are possible through consciously refusing biologized assumptions. For instance, Nordmarken discusses how the trans communities they studied relied on linguistic proactive practices of asking pronouns that made the person's self-declaration, not their body's appearance, the primary authority on their gender.

Cyberpunk's designers sought to frame transness within a flexible, rendered body that allowed for player control and manipulation. However, the limited movable pieces in this game were extremely pointedly limited to binary genitalia and voice options. Takes as a contrasting case a much earlier instance of virtual genderplay described by Taylor[79]: the text-based LamdaMoo, where the Spivak neopronoun set e, em, eir, eirs, and emself was introduced in the late 1980s. This new pronoun set followed the preexisting two binary gender options available to players. As Taylor writes, the designers "did not want to prohibit people from trying different forms, just doing so within appropriate bounds."[80] "Appropriate bounds" in this context implies the technical functionality of the game: can a character-avatar be identifiable by other players? What are the possible permutations of character creation and how would that number impact functionality on various accounts—ie would two avatars per account be sufficient to allow genderplay for a user? LamdaMoo and its introduction of Spivak pronouns is an excellent example of gender fluidity through mechanical changes in the game. Spivak pronouns specifically legitimize within the world of the game that binary gender, while available, is not actually a limitation.

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[79] Taylor, "Intentional Bodies," 32
[80] Taylor, "Intentional Bodies," 31

3. The intention for but technical absence of character expressions

In contrast, the limitations of *Cyberpunk*'s ideas via its technical aspects appear over and over again throughout gameplay. One prominent example is the game's use of mirrors: mirrors appear throughout the game as interactive objects. The primary utility of in-game mirrors is to 1. see the appearance of the player's first-person avatar and 2. to make different expressions (smile, scowl, frown, etc) with the character's face. However because of the character's face design and clothing options, the expression changes are barely discernable.[81] The function technically existed but was basically intangible in game. In a similar way, although a trans body is a *technical* possibility within *Cyberpunk*, such new bodies are poorly realized in terms of gender fluidity when compared with the simplicity of allowing nonbinary neopronouns.

4. An in-world ad, leaked ahead of the game's release

To make things worse, a leaked advertisement from the world of the game made clear how fetishistic the game's approach to non-cisgender bodies was going to be.[82] One commentator in *PC Gamer* noted that although technically a player could create a trans character, the game's setting itself was overwhelmingly binary and almost completely devoid of trans people.[83] There is one canonically trans NPC, who presents as a traditionally passing feminine person with a feminine voice, who bears no actual meaningful markers of trans identity except for a trans flag on the back of her beloved racing truck.[84]

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[83] Stacey Henley, "My Character Was Trans in Cyberpunk 2077, but the World Wasn't," pcgamer (PC Gamer, January 28, 2021), https://www.pcgamer.com/my-character-was-trans-in-cyberpunk-2077-but-the-world-wasnt/.
[84] To my eye, this lone trans character reads as a flagrant display of tokenism; the character seems included to check a box rather than to have a meaningful plot or presence, especially since her plotline can so easily be ignored by uninterested players. As Ellen K. Scott writes in her exploration of token inclusion ("Beyond Tokenism," 2005), such instances of tokenism do not support "sustained ideological commitment" (232) to diversity in a given forum.

5. Claire, the lone explicitly trans character in the gameworld, and the lone visual cue to her identity as a transwoman

The world of the game only made trans and gender-nonconforming people visible in a single case of fetishization, such as the aforementioned ad, or in the player's customized experience. That is to say, the default state of the game is a sanitized, cisgendered world, in which trans people are a sexualized and exoticized rarity. Regardless of whether this maneuver had a verifiable market impact—a question complicated by the bad publicity the game received on many fronts—the binary, biologized gender that dominates *Cyberpunk* establishes a clear standard of gender essentialism.[85]

CD Projekt Red was playing two sides of gaming discourse at once with this hypocritical marketing maneuver. On one hand, Projekt Red appeared to embrace what Helen Kennedy calls "opportunism" in crafting their game content to the contemporary zeitgeist.[86] Kennedy was

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[85] The games' much-critiqued foibles included, but were not limited to, a plethora of embarrassing gameplay glitches upon release that ultimately resulted in its being pull entirely from the PlayStation store in a stunning indictment of basic quality testing. There was also the claim from the creator that the game "wasn't political" (which is frankly a hilarious claim for something with punk in the title). (Mahmoud, "Cyberpunk Is Not a Political Statement," July 2020).

[86] Helen Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis." *Game Studies* no 2, (2, 2002). http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/

referring to Lara Croft's novelty as a female lead character in a major video game as a marketing ploy to capitalize on the "girlpower zeitgeist" of the 1990s; similarly, Projekt Red offered nominally progressive, queer-friendly innovation with one vein of marketing, appealing to a leftist, forward-thinking domain of players. Simultaneously, the company insisted that the game was apolitical and simply a technical accomplishment—appealing more to conservative, GamerGate-minded audiences who find the injection of real-world sociological questions into their perfect magic circle to be unbearable.[87]

Cyberpunk's challenges embody the binary hang-ups that are so indicative of the imaginative limitations Jameson discusses in "Progress Versus Utopia."[88] Basing the game's deployment of gender around binary ideas of male or female, *Cyberpunk* tried to articulate gender fluidity without actually approaching any kind of nonconformity. The game did not challenge binary gender assumptions or essentialized embodiment, a stark contrast to the cyberpunk as a genre's being "best known for its rejection of embodiment and embrace of an existence in cyberspace."[89] *Cyberpunk*'s most radical achievement happened quite by accident: when cisgender players accidentally left the character-creation screen thinking they'd created a

jack @ venat protection squad
@vesaldi

Cyberpunk 2077 having your pronouns tied to your vocal pitch... time to rename this game Misgendering Simulator 2077.

11:40 AM · Jun 26, 2020 · Twitter Web App

178 Retweets   16 Quote Tweets   531 Likes

6. Screenshot of tweet labeling the game a "Misgendering Simulator"

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[87] Bonnie Ruberg helpfully shorthands such players as "reactionary." *Video Games Have Always Been Queer,* 147
[88] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), 211.
[89] Sherryl Vint. *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity, Science Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. 104.

cisgender character, only to realize later they were playing as a masculine-presenting person with a vagina, or some similar non-cisgender mismatch. Those players bemoaned their unwanted rendered body on Twitter, which gave *Cyberpunk* the brief, half-humorous online mantle of a dysphoria/misgendering simulator. In a poetic twist, *Cyberpunk* the game followed in cyberpunk the genre's awkward and faltering footsteps:

> [Bruce] Sterling, the [cyberpunk] movement's most vocal promoter during its inception, has argued for the subversive potential of the genre, its allegiance with the hackers and rockers who challenge the socio-economic status quo. However, critical assessment of the genre…suggests that the subversiveness of cyberpunk lies more in its style than its substance.[90]

Cyberpunk the game is populated with outlaw rockers and rebel hackers, underworld guns for hire and corporate villains. But in the end, its rebellion fell short in the face of what those characters supposedly stand for: the game is devoid of tangible challenges to existing systems or institutions, but continually alludes to bucking the rules and other cliché-but-nonspecific forms of rebellion. There is no articulation or imagination of living differently, the fundamental ingredient of utopian thinking as described by Ernst Bloch and Ruth Levitas, among others. Or, as Karen Cadora said of the cyberpunk genre itself: "Rumor has it cyberpunk is dead, the victim of its own failure to live up to its extravagant pretensions."[91] In the tradition of Bloch, Darko Suvin frames the failure of style over substance in technical terms of sf scholarship, describing it as an ineffective novum[92]: "An aesthetic novum is either a translation of historical cognition and ethics into form, or…a creation of historical cognition and ethics as form."[93] In other words, its failure lies in the fact that it simply reformulates and regurgitates present empirical manners of

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[90] Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow,* 102

[91] Cadora, Karen, "Feminist Cyberpunk," *Science Fiction Studies*, 3.22, 1995, 357.

[92] The "novum" in sf texts is defined by Darko Suvin (*Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 1978) concisely as a novelty or innovation on the part of the author, in the sense that sf is "distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional 'novum' (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic" (63).

[93] Suvin, *Metamorphoses,* 80

thought, rather than imagining truly new or radical ways of being. Rather than conjuring the new, cyberpunk—in Cadora and Vint's summation—has an imagination that dwells in the historical present rather than the ever-receding horizon of sf futurity. Such failure of genre carries over to the titular game: rather than imagining alternative ways of being, *Cyberpunk* simply fed back a heightened present.

Cyberpunk, again like its genre namesake, became a conceptual battleground in which promises of utopian gendered thinking were nurtured—but in this case, only in the critical discourse from players and critics who began to do the labor of imagining what such a AAA game would look like and stand for. For my own part, I find the particular style of *Cyberpunk*'s failure to be rather fitting. The game depicts a vast, capital-driven urban landscape lush with racially diverse characters, sexual liberation, and queer overtones. However, the world of the game is definitively dystopian—made so by massive inequality and crushing late-stage capitalism that relegates the vast majority of its denizens to eking out a living in the Night City underworld (Jameson in fact argued that cyberpunk as a genre "offers the cognitive maps that [he] calls for in *Postmodernism*, helping the human subject orient him- or herself[94] to the world of late capitalism").[95] The game builds a visibly queer world whose progressive promise is cheapened by the rule of profit-driven mega corporations. The setting seems like a nice parallel, to me, with the aspirational promises and material shortcomings of the game. As such a spectacular and expensive queer failure, *Cyberpunk* illuminates the boundaries of imagination and representation that robbed it of its dreamed-of potential to break those very boundaries.

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[94] Eyeroll
[95] Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow,* 103

Embodied thinking

Cyberpunk, true to its *Neuromancer* roots, leans heavily on ideas of consciousness

(including memory, individuality, and identity), embodiment, and how the two relate.[96] As Vint

writes, "Gibson's definition of cyberspace in *Neuromancer* has by now become widely

repeated[,] and I will not break tradition by failing to quote it."[97] Nor will I. Gibson writes that

cyberspace is a "consensual hallucination" into which a disembodied consciousness is projected

independently of its body. In the game, consciousnesses can leave their physical bodies and enter

cyberspace or be saved into pseudo-Cloud storage as a program version of their previous

personality, immortalized in code. Barbara Browning writes:

> When it was first hypothesized in the early '80s, whether by William Gibson's
> *Neuromancer* or by the theoretical propositions of cyber enthusiasts like Donna
> Haraway, cyberspace appeared to be the allegorical representation of a
> simultaneously utopian and dystopian world of undecidable identity.[98]

Browning is writing in response to Haraway's landmark 1985 "Cyborg Manifesto": "the

imagined reconfiguration of the boundary between nature and technology…also brings into

question other boundaries: those between genders, races[,] and cultures."[99] In Browning's

writing, there is the challenge of pinpoint where *identity* lies: in the body in front of the

computer, or in the rendered digital body?

> The relationship between your on-line hair, face shape, eyes, happy expression,
> and of course genitalia—and your real world self can be read as either a
> hypothetical, imagined identity or a prosthetic one—one which is an extension of
> your 'real' self. Unless your 'real' self turns out to be both hypothetical and
> prosthetic.[100]

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[96] Cynthia Davidson, "Riviera's Golem, Haraway's Cyborg: Reading "Neuromancer" as Baudrillard's Simulation of Crisis." *Science Fiction Studies* , Jul., 1996, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Jul., 1996), pp. 188-198

[97] Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow*, 103

[98] Barbara Browning "When snow isn't white," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 9:1, 35-53, DOI: 10.1080/07407709608571249. 36

[99] Browning, "When snow isn't white," 36.

[100] Browning, "When snow isn't white," 41

Browning's framing points to a pervasive but productive difficulty in talking about identity at all: to say that one has a concrete identity in the "real" world is a massive, reductive simplification, before one even begins to address the question of avatarial, online identity. If no identity is innate but rather "both hypothetical and prosthetic," where do we begin to define the project of understanding avatars? I don't have an answer to that question. However, we can follow the thread of avatar as "prosthetic identity" into more recent scholarship. Vicki Kirby's concept of digital space as an arena "where the perfect body is paradoxically acquired through an annihilation of the flesh"[101] is a useful bridge to more contemporary discourse: far from "annihilation," modern online incarnations lend a multiplicity of bodies, adopted and abandoned at will, into which a player can "jack in" in *Neuromancer* terms—not annihilating their organic body, but accumulating additional alternatives. For Vint, cyberpunk and its plethora of bodily options "appeals to the (impossible) desire to escape the vicissitudes of the body and occupy the place of self-mastery."[102]

Bodily control is a difficult subject here, and one that Vint explores admirably in her analysis of *Neuromancer*'s initial moment of narrative jacking in: the protagonist tries for a moment to control his physical body, before adjusting and assuming complete mastery of his digital one. The cyberspace consciousness/body are one in the same within the canonical logic of *Neuromancer*. The protagonist, Case, thinks of physical versus cyberspace with quips like "relaxed contempt for the flesh" and "the bodiless exultation of cyberspace," or even "The body

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[101] Vicki Kirby, *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2004. 132
[102] Vint, *Bodies of the Future*, 104

was meat. Case fell into the prison of his own flesh."[103] The body, as Vint points out, is far from

irrelevant—in fact its needs are the driving forces behind the plot—but it is certainly a realm of pronounced limitation. The mind is in complete control of the actions of the digital self, in a way impossible in physical space. This point is encapsulated in the disturbing holographic performance by Peter Riviera in the novel, in which digital bodies are erotically pieced together and pulled apart in turn.[104] The mind becomes intention, becomes experiences reality— even if there is an acknowledged reality waiting patiently underneath.[105]

7. "Meat" as limitation in *Cyberpunk*'s in-game advertising vs. in-game visions of cyberspace

The radical possibilities of embodiment implied within cyberspace— bodies redesigned, disassembled, and even shared by multiple consciousnesses at different points in the novel—makes the gendered insistence of the body in *Cyberpunk 2077* all

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[103] William Gibson, *Neuromancer: 20th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Ace, 2004. 1, find page for last quote
[104] Gibson, *Neuromancer*, cite page
[105] There are hints within this this disembodied, virtual state of being that find echoes in Lisa Nakamura and The Precarity Lab's excellent *Technoprecarious*; specifically, in the allusion to the "dream of the superfluous body" or at least the "irrelevant" body: a commoditized digital identity with an endlessly malleable presentation. While *Technoprecarious* presents this vision of disembodiment in the context of ableism, the framing speaks directly to the relation of the body to its digitized consciousness, whether for play (as in *Cyberpunk*) or for labor (as in *Technoprecarious*). (51-52)

the more baffling. In theory, V's customizable body should be a site of vast personal freedoms; instead, it becomes a limiting tether—an embodiment that defines an inflexible binary gender identity.

As an aside, in *Neuromancer*'s old-school cyberspace thinking, "jacking in" becomes a wonderfully pertinent parallel to what Rune Klevjer calls the "paradox of the prosthetic avatar":[106] "How can avatarial embodiment be both a kind of *extension* and a kind of *re-location* at the same time?" How does a player act as the character from within the game while also acting from outside it, thumbs on joysticks and fingertips on buttons? These concurrent states of being—and the parallel of how cyberspace was imagined in *Neuromancer*—closely mimic Klevjer's thinking about avatars themselves as the player's physicality and intention are manifested vicariously onscreen. The player is both physically outside but consciously inside the matrix/cyberspace, in the parlance of the novel. Or, in the parlance of *The Matrix* (1999)[107], your consciousness enters cyberspace as a simulated embodiment, mimicking what the movie calls an individual's "residual self image." However, this simulated embodiment, which Klevjer also indicates as a tempting solution to the extension/re-location problem, does not quite tic all the boxes: a player doesn't lose control or awareness of their body while playing via the threshold device of a controller. There are two embodiments at once—not one embodiment forfeited in favor of the simulation.

All this becomes pertinent in regard to *Cyberpunk*'s much-labored issues of inclusive embodiment: what are the limits of how such prosthetic/superfluous/secondary bodies can be

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[106] Rune Klevjer, "Enter the Avatar: The phenomenology of prosthetic telepresence in computer games." *The Philosophy of Computer Games*. eds Hallvard Fossheim, Tarjei Mandt Larsen, and John Richard Sageng, 17-38. London & New York: Springer, 2012. 5
[107] *The Matrix,* with its jacking-in alternate reality and refuge city of Zion, has more than enough *Neuromancer* references to go around.

imagined in relation to the social signifiers that make them identifiable? Much deeper investigations have been forayed by theorists including Klevjer, Helen Kennedy, Jack Halberstam, and Adrienne Shaw[108] toward understanding the avatar in terms of a mind *as* body, among other theories of in-game embodiment. While such mechanical fascinations are certainly linked to my argument, they become peripheral as I pivot to primarily face the aesthetic/representation questions of the avatar's dual nature. However, I want to make one more pit stop with theories of embodiment: in a first-person game like *Cyberpunk*, wherein a player only reliably sees the avatar's hands and sometimes their face in occasional reflections, it could reasonably be argued that issues of representation are not so terribly significant. The avatar body is, after all, for the most part hidden after the character creation screen.

However, as Merleau-Ponty writes, the body is "our general medium for having a world"; Klevjer explicates this theory succinctly: "The invisibility of the body, as 'that which sees and touches,' also includes movement and the body's ability to move other objects. The intentionality of the body, Merleau-Ponty explains, is a 'motor-intentionality.'"[109] *Cyberpunk*'s experience of avatar-embodiment is a straight mimic of this theory of the body as the "thing for which there is a world."[110] The invisibility of the body does not change its function as a bridge to the world, in this case the gameworld. It is present, functional, and meaningful, even if largely unseen, in the sense that it defines action and mediates experience.[111]

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[108] Klevjer, "Enter the Avatar"; Kennedy, "Lara Croft"; Halberstam, "Queering Games" in *Queer Game Studies*; Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge.*
[109] Klevjer, "Enter the Avatar," 8
[110] Klevjer, "Enter the Avatar," 8
[111] In *Cyberpunk*'s case, there is in a sense a reversal of the usual cyberpunk-genre de-emphasis on the body in favor of the cyber. With the extended focus on implants and physical fitness, for instance, the game makes the body a primary site of narrative and imaginative focus, paradoxically bringing the emphasis back on the "meat" that the genre famously eschews.

Productive failure

Returning to *Cyberpunk*, the game's, failure helps to examine the potential imaginative leap that would have made the game truly a queer gesture. Binary gendered characters are only one aspect of that failure; another is the expansive, cisnormative world in which the story is couched. The next question to ask: Is this failure productive? By productive, I mean in Halberstam's sense of failure as a "rejection of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing"[112] Yes, *Cyberpunk* clearly failed in the narrative it set up for itself: it was not a revolution in AAA videogames either technically or in thinking about gendered bodies, but a fumbling of moving parts that nonetheless relied heavily on essentialized, binary gender signifiers. If we approach that failure via Halberstam, though, can it be salvaged toward queer possibility? The irony of the situation is, first and foremost, that the game's narrative of queer inclusion was in pursuit of profit, of pure capitalistic marketing logic. So its failure fits very neatly within Halberstam's definition, if unintentionally.

I would argue that yes, the game's failure is productive within Halberstam's framing, though there are aspects of its productivity that fall outside Halberstam's thinking. Fundamentally, *Cyberpunk*'s disappointingly non-queer world illustrated in absentia all the queerness hyped-up critics and audience members envisioned. In the imaginative space between expectation and the final product, the audience had already created the desired, queer, radical version of the game. I will utilize theory around sf as a genre and the function of audience imagination as text, before returning to how such theory can help to inform Halberstam's concept of productive failure and Jameson's concept of a radical break.

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[112] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure,* 12

As a starting point, Kathleen Spencer's "'The Red Sun Is High, the Blue Low': Towards a Stylistic Description of Science Fiction" (1983) and Peter Fitting's "Positioning and Closure: The 'Reading-Effect' of Contemporary Utopian Fiction" (1987) are helpful. Both these writers address *how* readers come to and understand sf as literary texts, an analysis that I believe is also usefully applied to video games of the genre as texts. Spencer writes that the sf reader generally expects of the genre:

> That the story will happen *somewhere else*—that time, or place, or circumstances will be significantly different from their "empirical environment"; and (2) that the environment of the fiction will be interpretable by cognitive processes—that is, that it derives from or is related to our own environment in some logical way, and that it is bound by natural laws as our own world, though those laws may differ from the ones we know.[113]

That is to say, as Tom Moylan interprets it in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, that an sf story must both be satisfyingly familiar and satisfyingly new, "'irrealistic' in that it needs to deliver an alternate world…that truly constitutes a totalizing break with the empirical world as it is lived or known" but also "realistic" insofar as it is "internally consistent and knowable by the reader."[114] This generative space between the seeming contradiction of recognition and estrangement, comprehension and unknowability is where sf imagination bears fruit.

In *Cyberpunk*'s case, the world of the game presents gender as both known, familiar, binary, and cognitively familiar—and as a site of potential disassociation from concepts of the reader/player's lived empirical present. Sincerely or not, CD Projekt Red's marketing primed that disassociation—estrangement and unfamiliarity—with the binarized concepts of gender that define the vast majority of AAA character creation screens. Though the game itself presented an encoded binary-gendered world, in which one is a man or a woman but nothing else or in-

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[113] Spencer, "The Red Sun Is High," 38
[114] Thomas Moylan, *Scraps of The Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*. London: Routledge, 2000. 52.

between, the game world was also informed by the marketing zeitgeist that informed how players approached the game as text. The discourse around *Cyberpunk* and gender would not exist, in all likelihood, had the game simply been released without that specific marketing context. But as it is, the insistent "realistic" aspect of the game—in the sense of recreating recognizable social norms—pointedly overpowered the hype around its "irrealistic" aspect. The game presents a potential novum, a concept to tear the game world satisfyingly free of the highly gendered and binary reality which many players experienced out-of-game. The sociological aspects of the empirical, lived world, rather than being made strange and unfamiliar via a flight of sf imagination, were simply repackaged, failing to satisfy the expectations of sf as a genre.

Fitting's concept of closure from an sf reader perspective becomes useful here. Fitting proposes closure as a "reading protocol" for sf, as Tom Moylan terms it.[115] For Fitting, closure happens for the reader between the realistic and the irrealistic, between the known logics reproduced in sf and the expectation of the unknown, the push beyond the empirical present.[116]

That space of closure, of imaginative accomplishment, does not necessarily imply the imagination of a concrete future state.[117] Such concrete imaginings are antithetical to the open yearning for alternative ways of being implicit in utopian imaginings. In this model, I place that point of productive utopian yearning, as Fitting describes, within the process of closure with which the reader parses the familiar and the strange as it is offered on the page.

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[115] Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky,* 52

[116] Peter Fitting, "Positioning and Closure: On the 'Reading Effect' of Contemporary Utopian Fiction." *Utopian Studies*, no. 1 (1987): 23–36. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20718883. 35.

[117] There is a vast wealth of writing on this point, extending from Fitting's definition, on the function of closure in utopian fiction. Phil Wegner writes in his later work on "eventual utopia" that such utopia can only cohere outside of narrative closure and the textual frame. The spirit of that argument is tangible here: whatever utopia *can* be, it belongs to a realm of yearning and potential outside whatever concrete realism is possible via the narrative.

In *Cyberpunk*'s case, that productive closure occurred *ahead* of the audience's actual encounter with the game/text. The paratext of advertising and narrativization of the game as genderless created a space of utopian yearning with which hyped-up audiences performed the imaginative labor of closure, undertaking the utopian project of imagining and pursuing difference even though the tangible text of the game itself fell far short of the imaginative labor already built around the game as potential.

As an allegory: In the novel *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976),[118] Marge Piercy depicts a woman who is classified as insane as she imagines the utopian possibilities of the future—futures that she will never live to see but can help to bring about. The novel leaves unclear at its conclusion if her visions are real or an escapist delusion. However, in a sense, it does not matter whether or not the visions are actually true: it is enough that the dream of them exists, the yearning for the utopian world from the depths of a dystopian present. The yearning itself is the thing, rather than the concrete advent of the utopia, as Muñoz describes in the spirit of yearning toward the horizon of queerness, difference, and disruption.[119]

In that spirit, *Cyberpunk* did not actually have to deliver on its grand promises: the yearning that it helped frame, for genderless digital bodies and freedom from the matrix of domination, is the meaningfully productive aspect of its failure.

In the introduction to the twentieth anniversary edition of *Neuromancer,* Gibson reflects that modern audiences just coming to the novel can realistically have no idea what he intended for the quality of silver he describes for "the sky above the port" in the book's first line:

> "It took at least a decade for me to realize that many of my readers, even in 1984, could never have experienced *Neuromancer*'s opening line as I'd intended them to. I'd actually composed that first image with the black-and-white video static of my childhood in mind, sodium-silvery and almost painful. A whomping anachronism, right at the very start of my career in the imaginary future, but

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[118] Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1984).
[119] José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1-3.

an invisible one, interestingly. One that reveals an imaginary grace enjoyed by all imaginary futures as they make their way up the timeline and into the real future where we all must go. The reader never stopped to think that I might have been thinking, however unconsciously, of the texture and color of a signal-free channel on a wooden cabinet Motorola with fabric-covered speakers. Readers compensated for me, shouldering an additional share of the imaginative burden and allowed whatever they assumed was the color of static to take on the melancholy of the phrase 'dead channel.'"[120]

Gibson speaks to a core of imaginative difference: the reader, thanks to the developments of television as a medium in the years between Gibson's childhood and *Neuromancer*'s publication, had no way of accessing the experienced visual Gibson was intending to evoke. However, they "compensated," yearning for a "melancholy" sizzling silver for the sky of the cyberpunk future. This imaginative barrier is a useful and whimsical parallel for the larger idea of a radical break, in Jameson's formulation.

For Jameson, the answer to "Can we imagine the future?" (the alternative title to his major essay on progress vs. utopia)[121] is a soft and qualified *no*: a person with the cognitive and imaginary tools of the present cannot reasonably be expected to be able to conjure the quality of a radically different way of being. Jameson was talking about a radical break, the definitive fracture between the exigent mode of being and a future in which basic assumptions, institutions, and logics are changed. Stacy Schiff gives a useful example in her book *The Witches: Salem 1692* (2016)[122]—although she asks us to imagine past a radical break in logic and worldview to try to grasp the feeling of seventeenth-century New England woods, rather than a leap into an imagined future:

> "[The darkness of 1690s New England], however, was a very different dark. The sky over New England was crow black, pitch-black, Bible black, so black it could be difficult at night to keep to the path, so you might find yourself pursued after nightfall by a rabid black hog, leaving you to crawl home, bloody and disoriented, on all fours. Indeed eyeglasses were rare in

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[120] Gibson, *Neuromancer,* i

[121] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007), 211.

[122] Stacy Schiff, *The Witches: Salem, 1692* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016).

seventeenth-century Massachusetts. Hard cider was the drink of choice. Still, the thoughtful, devout, literate New Englander could, in the Salem courtroom, at times sound as if he were on a low-grade acid trip."[123]

Specifically, the radical shift in worldview between literal Puritan experience of night spirits and a reader in 2021, who lives in a more secular, reliably illuminated world of highway headlights rather than devils in the dark, prevents a true imaginative grasp of the mode of being in 1690s Danvers. However, a reader yearns toward imagining that darkness, grasping the Schiff's atmospheric descriptions as a guide.

In a similar sense, *Cyberpunk*'s paratext and community commentary becomes a guide for queer, radical imaginings of nongendered digital bodies. Imaginative yearning toward the freedom from the binary-gender matrix of domination—even with that matrix programmed into the gameworld and thus inflexible as an aspect of the gameworld experience—is meaningfully productive as a push toward utopian possibility.

In that spirit, *Cyberpunk* did not actually have to deliver on its grand promises: the yearning that it helped frame, for genderless digital bodies and freedom from the matrix of domination, is the meaningfully productive aspect of its failure. Queerness in this case is not only a case of representation but of ontological possibility.

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[123] Schiff, *The Witches: Salem, 1692*, 8

Surviving Civilization:
Embodied Worldbuilding and Queer Utopianism in *Horizon Zero Dawn*

"When imaginaries intersect with politics, power determines which imaginaries matter."

– Eric Gordon, *Activating Values in Urban Transitions*, 69

"Reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream." – Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible,* 1986

If the first chapter looked at how digital embodiments encounter imaginative boundaries in regard to gender, then this chapter explores attempts to evade bodily significations of physical difference in terms of racialized readings. Drawing on the ideas of utopian closure from the first chapter (Fredric Jameson's formulation that utopia cannot be imagined concretely because of the limiting ontologies and ideologies of the present), this chapter examines imaginative barriers in relation to the notion of how readings of bodily signifiers can be disrupted in sf, specifically in the 2017 game *Horizon Zero Dawn*. This chapter will address race at the level of an abstracted visual set of signifiers. As Ed Chan writes, "Among its many and overdetermined functions and guises, race operates semiotically. It signifies."[124] As with the discussion of gender in the previous chapter, I will be dealing with visual signifiers associated with gender/racial identity, rather than with gender/racial identity as an experienced reality. While this reading is certainly on some level reductive and overdetermined, it is appropriate for the argument at the level of semiotic thinking and disruption in visual media. I will first examine *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s plot and its various threads of utopian imagination, before moving to address its most radical

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[124] Ed Chan, *The Racial Horizon of Utopia*, 86

imaginative move, the designification of racialized markers on digital bodies. How does such disruption of bodily signifiers in this utopian narrative follow the tradition of utopian novels in gesturing toward a radical break?

A quick note on my use of the word queering in this chapter: I am drawing on "queering" as a concept of fundamentally oppositional, disruptive reading of bodies, that is, as an impetus to unfold alternative meanings and modes of being. In my argument, I am using *queering* as an umbrella to refer to oppositional readings of gendered, sexual, and raced aspects of digital bodies.

Game overview and critical conversation

Horizon Zero Dawn (*HZD*) is a story of utopian dreaming: in this massive open-world 2017 title, a player explores a vast, habitable world of radical possibility. The game is set in the far future, a vast wilderness of roughly Iron Age-level technology and tribal societies—with the small detail that massive, hostile robotic creatures roam the landscape, created by ancient automated systems beyond the comprehension of the gameworld's human occupants. The ruins of what the player recognizes as their own contemporary world rot under centuries of plant life, erosion, and decay. The game premise is gradually

2 Concept art (above) and screenshot (below) of "Old World" ruins in HZD

revealed: thousands of years ago, militarized, self-replicating robots destroyed all life on Earth. Thousands of years later, when the robots had run out of fuel, biological life was regenerated through automated systems installed by the last, doomed generation of humanity.

Invoking core aspects of sf genre conventions as described by Ruth Levitas, Tom Moylan, and Fredric Jameson,[125] this gameworld literally re-envisions our exigent, contemporary world in an alternative mode of being whose most radical potential is defined by absence—in this case, the absence of race as a concept. Over the course of dozens of hours, the player navigates *HZD*'s digital landscape and gathers clues as to the history and nature of the gameworld. Through disparate data points presented in narrative sequence—recordings in forgotten bunkers, notes and letters lingering in digital archives—the player engages in what Moylan terms an imaginative process of closure: the audience of this sf text builds meaning by intuiting what lies in the gaps between those data.

Within that work of closure, the audience takes part in a utopian queering of the bodies in the gameworld. *HZD*'s process of queering digital bodies is subtle and arises from its expert deployment of utopian framing. At its core, the game imagines radical difference: a different mode of being, with a fundamentally different ontological approach to the bodies encountered during gameplay. Such a shift in ontology is not explicitly stated but intuited through patient exploration and the instinctive process of narrative closure.

This process of closure works on a visual and narrative level in *Horizon Zero Dawn*. Moylan draws the concept of closure from Peter Fitting's 1987 "Positioning and Closure," who in turn adapts it from feminist film criticism. In Fitting's framing, as Moylan explains:

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[125] Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method*: *The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Thomas Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2000); Frederic Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future,* (New York: Verso, 2005).

Fitting focuses on the resurgence of utopian writing as it developed within the sf genre in the 1970s, and he directly connects this body of work with the social upheavals and political movements of the time. He suggests that this "literature of alternatives" offers radical utopian themes but also, and more subversively, produces a "poetics of the future" that links up with a "politics of the future" by way of the form of these fictions and the reading processes they inspire… In his examination of the utopian works of Delany, Le Guin, Russ, and Piercy, he argues that these new utopias constitute a "didactic and committed art" that interpolates the reader as a politically aware and possibly engaged person by way of two reading conventions: one that revolves around the "positioning" of the reader in the text; the other around the apparent "closure" of the narrative and the work it does on the reader. These conventions, according to Fitting, allow texts such as these to "break out of the passivity and illusionism of the traditional reading experience in an effort to push the reader to work for change."[126]

This mouthful of a quote is useful for situating this chapter. A gameworld like *Horizon Zero Dawn* is communicated through an immersive process of closure, the imaginative work of sensemaking based on the discrete data provided through narrative. At its outset, the game's loading screen states that "in the far future" humanity lives in "primitive" tribes. In this case, political and ecological disaster that destroyed our present society are evidenced to the audience through clues like the ruins of cars and crashed planes—unintelligible for the characters, but legible to the player. The player and their insights into the familiar-made-strange are active in understanding this narrative setting. The game is already several steps beyond the "passivity" eschewed by Fitting because it is an interactive text, by nature of its medium. But centrally, in formulating its radical break, the game positions the player as imagining a radically different *past* alongside the game characters, who in turn occupy the radically transformed future. Sports stadiums are now fortresses; metal itself is a precious and somewhat mysterious commodity. The player must accept the ontological differences between the characters' reality and their own immediate recognition. The act of closure in this sf text is interactive, imaginative labor that asks

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[126] Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 54.

the player to conceive of vast, radical differences: understanding what familiar meanings no longer apply and what new meanings lie in their place.

To what extent does this reimagined world achieve some approximation of a true radical break? And in that context, what is the significance of interactive process of closure that gives the gameworld coherent narrative meaning to the player?

The goal here is to examine how this ontological break between player and gameworld affects the raced and gendered digital human bodies that populate it. The game emphasizes the player's knowledge

3 Concept art of a crashed plane in HZD (via Guerilla Games)

of the contemporary world as a key to narrative closure. How does that active process of filling in the blanks make a radical queering of bodies more—or less—accessible?

To explore these implications, I will examine the game in three parts:

First, why do the utopian visions within the game matter and how they can be understood through queer yearning? Narrative imaginaries of various, competing modes of being grow within the game, focusing on cultural continuity despite planetary disaster. Memory and erasure, continuity and disruption are all positioned within queer sf analysis. What is the underlying logic of the game's imagined future(s), and how does it draw on the genre to achieve its vast imaginative differences from the present?

Then I will look at the gameworld broadly, through the lens of Fredric Jameson and Tom Moylan's analysis of literary utopias. Where does its imagination fall short of conceiving something truly new? Where does it succeed?

Finally, I will build from those moments of success to show how the game gestures toward a true radical re-conception of bodily representation.

Why it matters

Why does *Horizon*'s vision of potential futures matter? In its most basic sense as a story of science fiction, *HZD* clarifies a deep and important function of the genre. As Jameson describes, "One of the most significant potentialities of sf as a form is precisely this capacity to provide something like an experimental variation on our own empirical universe."[127] The parallels of drone warfare to the militarized robot apocalypse and ecological devastation to climate collapse are both fairly on the nose. But the in-narrative total loss of the planet and all its forms of life present an urgency to the act of imagination itself: we must imagine and anticipate the future *now* in order for it to exist at all. The force of this narrative carries some of the same imperative as the premise of Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time.*[128] The future, in an existential sense, always relies to some degree on the present moment. But *HZD* and *Woman on the Edge of Time* both foreground the dramatic impact of a given present in extreme and visceral ways on the future. In *HZD*'s case, the future must literally be engineered into existence through mechanical fallbacks, with the knowledge that it is discrete from and intangible for the dreamers

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[127] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 270.
[128] Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1984).

of the present. The people who enable this future will never experience it nor will they have any conscious bearing on it once time marches on.

In this imaginative exercise, *HZD* fulfills one of the most basic functions of the genre: drawing on the empirical present and extracting from it an imaginative alternative. It is not a prediction but a dream, within which yearning and imagination for what comes next invoke an experience of the future.

The yearning for an intangible future also has an inherently queer ideality to it. José Esteban Muñoz writes that the queer is "an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world," enabling us "to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present."[129] We may never "touch" queerness in Muñoz's formulation, but we are always imaginatively striving toward a state of difference, of alternatives and opposition to the ontological structures of capitalistic oppression of the present. Queer futurity and queer utopianism are rooted in this yearning for difference—often inexpressible new ways of being, which are so distinct from the here and now that the present imagination is insufficient to conceive their particulars. Munoz discusses queerness as a yearning for difference, of sensing messy possibility as the spirit of future-vision: what can be desired is more important than what can be concretely imagined. The desire is the thing, not any mandate to produce the yearned-for state. Similarly, "the core of utopia," Levitas writes, "is the desire for being otherwise, individually and collectively, subjectively, and objectively."[130] The possibility of and desire for difference also sits at the core of queer theory: bell hooks frames the third gaze as oppositional, defining queerness as "queer not as being about who you're having

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129 José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.
130 Levitas, *Utopia as Method*, 90.

sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live."[131] Jack Halberstam discusses reaching for difference and yearning for an alternative way of being.[132] And Jameson, as quoted previously, describes utopian sf as imagining an empirical alternative to the experience of the present. This group of utopian and queer theorists is akin to a carnival house of mirrors: the same spirit reflected and transmuted across academic disciplines.

Again, as in Chapter 1, the achieved, perceptible future is not present. Utopia is yearning rather than content. My mission here is to use sf theory around critical utopias to approach *Horizon Zero Dawn* as an engine of possibility. As Ursula K. Le Guin writes, "Einstein shoots a light-ray through a moving elevator, Schrodinger puts a cat in a box. There is no elevator, no cat, no box. The experiment is performed, the question is asked, in the mind."[133] Put *HZD*'s utopian-dreaming narrative in a box and don't peek inside: it's a mental exercise of searching for the bright, intangible possibilities of utopian imagination as potential inside this complicated example of yearning for—and then inhabiting—a "better" world.

To imagine difference has an inherent and powerful queer impulse, especially in the context of imagining a world that understands and treats bodies in a radically different way than the ontology of the present. In the context of defining that difference, it is useful to back up and look at the game holistically. But first, I will define more precisely the treatment of racial semiotics in this argument.

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[131] bell hooks, "Are You Still A Slave? Liberating the Black Female Body" (The New School, NYC, 2014)

[132] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke, 2011)

[133] Usula K. Le Guin, "Is Gender Necessary?" in *Aurora: Beyond Equality*, ed. Susan J. Anderson and Vonda McIntyre (New York: Fawcett, 1976).

Queering race

In pursuing imagined differences and possibilities, I want to turn to Edward Chan's work on race and utopia in his 2016 book *The Racial Horizons of Utopia.* Chan explores utopian novels of the late twentieth century, tracing the underlying ideologies of democracy and homogeneity

4 The protagonist, Aloy, with an early secondary character (Screenshot via Guerilla Games)

that impose imaginative boundaries on the utopian thinking of late-twentieth century sf. Citing Jameson, Chan emphasizes how the fundamental thinking of the present prevents narrative conjurations of a radically different future. Especially in regard to race and raced bodies, Chan explains how the utopian novels he studies "attempt to erase racial inequality by erasing the history and the experience of bodies that are so marked."[134] In a so-called colorblind maneuver, Chan describes how these narratives make race invisible or unspeakable to the characters within the narrative's utopian society. "Each novel," writes Chan, "attempts to imagine new forms of racial identity by disrupting what I call the conventional racial semiotic and thereby decoupling racial identity from racial markers." Race is not only absent but impossible within the logic of utopian narratives such as Chan's novels and *HZD*: the signifiers that generally indicate racial identity are implied to lose their associated signifieds.

At a level of semiotic readings of bodily representation, Chan summarizes: "[Late twentieth-century novels'] utopian visions all engage race at the level of signification: the connection between *racial signifiers* (in other words, racial markers like skin and other physical

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[134] Edward Chan, *The Racial Horizon*, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2015, 16

features, cultural practice, names, and so on) and their complementary *racial signifieds* (in other words, racial identities)."[135] I will return to Chan's writing on racial semiotics and utopian disruptions of those semiotics later in this chapter, in context of race in *HZD*. But first, I will explore the premise of the game and its various utopian underpinnings as a whole.

Premise

Players explore the games' post-apocalyptic world as Aloy, a white cisgender young woman who faces off against robotic monsters with a spear and bow. Humanity is organized into what the opening loading sequence calls "primitive tribes," with minimal non-powered mechanical technology and superstitious reverence for the traces of the "Ancient Ones"—the ruins clearly recognizable to the player as everyday landmarks of our own contemporary world. Much of the game has to do with memory: Aloy is on a quest to uncover her own past, as well as investigating the—to her—haunting and unexplained remnants of the world that came before. The player recognizes rusted and ruined cars, traffic lights, sports stadiums, and other debris of the "Ancient Ones." These familiar modern elements are made strange through the mystifying lens of the far-future. A collector in the game's major city covets (what the player recognizes as) novelty mugs, with anthropological aspirations to understand the role of these abundant items to ancient people. Aloy, through her apparently innate mastery of ancient technology, has unique access to this past world's memories, via recordings and hidden sites. Aloy herself is something of a memory made material: she is a clone of the scientist who conceived and executed "Horizon

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[135] Chan, *The Racial Horizon,* 85

Zero Dawn," the planned extinction of life on Earth and its subsequent resurrection via automated systems and AIs.

But the core moment of memory and forgetting in *Horizon Zero Dawn* occurs before the events of the game begin: the "Ancient Ones'" technology rocketed out of control, an unstoppable force of intelligent, militarized machinery that consumed biomass for fuel, a robotic apocalypse labeled the Faro Plague. Facing extinction, humanity turned to the "Zero Dawn" operation, in which a team of experts first built AIs to repopulate and revegetate the dead Earth after the machines eventually run out of biomass to consume, and second, compiled all recorded human knowledge and preserved it for the resurrected human race in an AI called "Apollo." Humanity sought to crystalize and store vast knowledge to pass along to the new, resurrected world, from technical insights to artistic standards. But something obviously went wrong: humanity inherited none of the vast historical, artistic, and scientific data they were meant to. The story presents humanity remade in a vacuum of history.

History, here, is privileged knowledge: the scientific, material contextualization of the storyworld gradually revealed to the player/character versus the more pervasive and uncritical mystical explanations held throughout the rest of the gameworld. In the mystical worldview, software becomes magic, AIs become the voice of the gods, and ancient ruins are sacred and unknowable. In an illustration of Arthur C. Clark's famous dictum "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic," the game depicts those to access to history as the only meaningfully capable agents, while those clinging to the ideology of mysticism and mythology are uncomprehending impediments to meaningful action.

Establishing a break

The complete destruction of all life on Earth—plant, animal, and otherwise—is a catastrophic basis for a story of utopian dreaming. As Jameson reflects in the context of another epic, world-making story: "the framework of crisis and catastrophe which structures so many of Kim Stanley Robinson's novels enables the deployment of an immense variety of ingenious and often Utopian solutions."[136] Catastrophe in this sense is an open door to a radical break: with the destruction—in this case, the complete eradication—of what came before, there is space for something entirely new.

In Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars* trilogy, which Jameson draws upon repeatedly as a literary example, human explorers leave behind Earth and its torrid conflicts, with the explicit premise of founding and forming and new society on a new planet. What *is* the utopian—or at least, the best possible—direction that the settlers can take? Martian independence or unity with Earth? What is the greatest promise for humanity's future—terraforming the planet or extending the human lifespan? Much of the books are a push-and-pull among many contending, imagined futures, a nonlinear vision of utopian yearning.

The same premise of competing utopian visions is framed more starkly in Donna Barba Higuera's *The Last Cuentista* (2021), which similarly takes interplanetary colonization as its starting point. In Higuera's novel, however, Earth is annihilated in the wake of the colonists' departure, making the decisions of the colonists more definitive: they are, after all, the whole of the remainder of humanity, as in *Horizon Zero Dawn*. In this story, the space colonists are torn between the imperative to remember history so as not to repeat it and a radical movement to erase all human memory and individuality in an effort to prevent humanity's atrocities and failures from taking root on a new world.

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[136] Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 218

In the case of *Horizon Zero Dawn,* the catastrophic premise and its gesture toward a radically different way of being are as deliberate and contentious as in the *Mars* trilogy or *The Last Cuentista.* It is eventually revealed that the Apollo archive of human knowledge was deleted—and its architects murdered—by the game's self-absorbed evil tech bro, Ted Faro, who created the planet-killing technology in the first place. Much like in Higuera's novel, the decision to eradicate all of human knowledge in *HZD* is a gesture toward creating a new beginning of history, untethered by the past in any way. Humanity would emerge as a tabula rosa of pure potential. A more deliberate and pointed attempt at a radical break is difficult to conceive of.

But the break isn't achieved, in the game's narrative or at a meta-level of implied possibility. Binary, biologized gender reappears, unscathed, in the resurrected human species of *HZD*. So do monogamous marriage, capitalistic markets, and state religion. The world is recreated in the image of the old one—but the logics that underpin that continuity are elusive, and hunting for them can help to illuminate the queer utopian possibilities of imagined futures. The ontologies of the past are recreated, it seems, even without the repository of memory to preserve them. Many of the most obvious continuities are situated on the games' digital bodies: binary, biologized gender, for one, is a direct and absolute recreation of contemporary/"Ancient Ones'" gendered ontology. In that sense, there is no radical break. A complete shift in mode of being has not occurred, despite Faro's yearning for erasure in pursuit of radical difference. Many of these continuities are troubling on a deeper level, as I will explore shortly, but first I will address the effective aspects of the gameworld as a critical dystopia.

Effective dystopia

There are effective aspects of *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s critical dystopia, if not its utopian yearning. Tom Moylan reflects on Lyman Tower Sargent's term, critical dystopia, describing it as "a textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on the present system and offers not only astute critiques of the order of things but also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration."[137] That definition provides a toolbox with which to dissect the *dystopian* efforts of the game. While utopian yearning calls for a radical break, a deeply different mode of being and thought, dystopian narratives—according to Moylan's definition—rely on contextualization and exaggeration rooted in the political consciousness of the present.

HZD clearly draws on the Silicon Valley-typified weapons-race of militarized technology, as the Faro Corporation produces an array of unmanned military drones, vehicles, and other devices to propel warfare past the need for human sacrifice or even human engagement. War offered as an automated system of purchasing power and deployment lays bare the underlying mechanism of warfare: the collective engagement of one party's material resources against another's for the presumed eventual benefit of one side. Discovered through fragments and hints throughout the game, the pre-collapse era of Faro robots reads as truly dystopian according to Moylan's definition, unfolding the present-day systems of automated, drone-heavy warfare driven by capitalist institutions and logics of growth. It additionally spotlights industrial "progress's" existential environmental toll, as the human species engineers itself past the breaking point of the planet's ability to maintain life. Simultaneous to Faro's war profiteering in *HZD*'s flashbacks is the domestic, personal side of the technology: in a thinly

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[137] Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky,* xv.

veiled facsimile of a mega-corp like Apple or Microsoft, Faro also supplies personal devices which support entertainment and communication.

Representation of the "oppositional spaces and possibilities" takes the form of Dr. Elisabet Sobeck, a contemporary Ancient Ones roboticist with an altruistic streak and a deep concern for technology's ecological impact. As a foil to Ted Faro, she continually imagines differently, envisioning a world of supportive and accessible technology, rather than Faro's profiteering militarism. Elisabet is the critical eye, the genre-typical estranged dissident who sees her broken world for what it is. As Jameson argues in "Progress Versus Utopia," the player's present is conceived of literally as history in the world of the game—but also more seriously positioned within historicity rather than as an uncritical ongoing moment.

There is, however, no "next round" of political activism: the dystopia must simply accept its own dysfunction and destruction at the end, both as a social structure and as a living population. Thus begins the game's strange shift between dystopian and utopian storytelling: Faro and Elisabet actively imagine, express, and design for a resurrected human race. Elisabet's vision is practical: she prioritizes the fundamentals of ecological life, habitability, and continuity of knowledge. Faro's is the more utopian in a technical sense: he leaves the actual processes of terraforming and repopulation to others but conceives of a human population freed from knowledge of their own history, a blank-slate sentient species with no bad examples to emulate.

From this perspective, competing utopian visions jostle between erasure and continuity. How the game depicts those two visions is where productive analysis around the new world's bodies as social objects can emerge.

Many and varied utopias

Central to this analysis is the repeated emphasis that utopia cannot be singular. Moylan speaks to this multiplicity: "Utopia will consist of utopias, of many different and divergent communities in which people lead different kinds of lives under different institutions."[138] The underlying logic here is that a singular, uniform way of being cannot possibly be utopian for everyone, and it cannot endure without totalitarian oversight to keep every member in line. Divergent thought would inevitably arise; in that moment the society ceases to be utopian.

In Elisabet's utopian vision of the future, free will exists in a broad sense: the new human species is gifted all the knowledge of their ancestors, but the implication is that the new generations will be free to choose their own path, their own plans of governance and social organization, in the context of all this knowledge. In the absence of the knowledge of history—in Faro's vision—history repeats itself. This model apparently treasures free will of the new human species on the surface—with any path possible from the starting point of tabula rasa. However, predictable patterns of force, crises of resource hoarding, and clashes of varying faiths push the new species into battling "tribes," as noted above.

None of the city-states of the game can rightly be called utopian. Rather, they are nationalistic, restrictive, and dominated by deterministic social conventions such as the importance of lineage, wealth, gender, and social standing. Jameson discusses the dangers and necessity of a type of pseudo-nationalist federalism, which embraces the spirit of a united state without the vicious tendencies of full-fledged nationalism. In Jameson's argument, the "dangerous and necessary" aspect of nationalism is its necessary sense of cohesion—of nationhood—and its dangerous aggression toward perceived others/outsiders; utopian community, he writes, supports cohesion, but not its associated aggression.

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[138] Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, 217.

In one of the game's most flagrant moment of failed utopian yearning, Faro's "fit of nihilism"[139] imagines that lack of knowledge of social histories will make the resurrected human species immune to its previous patterns of social organization. In fact, humanity has re-invoked nationalistic pride to the point that some tribes are regarded as "savage" while others wage war for the glory of their local god, in a relatively faithful reenactment of early societies in the Middle East and Mediterranean regions during the late Bronze Age and early Iron Age. That is to say, during what would in context of the Abrahamic Old Testament be termed "biblical times."

The path of survival, shelter, and reproduction ensue yet again as they did in humanity's initial formation into early societies. Erasure is imagined by Faro in *Horizon Zero Dawn* as a freeing from previous ontologies. With no reference to emulate, the idea is apparently that humanity can take another roll of the dice, begin again.

Discounted in this utopian projection is the sociological patterns of human resource seeking, tribal organization, and leadership structures. It is worth noting at this point the fraught, entangled history of utopianism and sociology. At the dawn of the twentieth century, H.G. Wells stated that "the creation of utopias—and their exhaustive criticism—is the proper and distinctive method of sociology"[140] According to Levitas, the "institutional development of sociology" forced the separation of utopian and sociological thinking, especially in the shifting sociopolitical landscape of the twentieth century. Sociology and utopianism were divided, respectively, between the empirical and the normative, between what *is* and what *ought to be*.[141] However, Levitas specifies, "the hermeneutic and constructive methods are connected, for the imaginary reconstitution of society is always essentially an attempt to establish the institutional

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[139] That's what the Wikipedia plot summary calls it anyway.
[140] Levitas, *Utopia as Method,* 65.
[141] Ibid

basis of the good life, of happiness, and the social conditions for grace."[142] In that context, there is a layer of rich irony to Faro, a scientist, embracing the normative vein of utopianism and neglecting the institutionalized, research-driven social science.

Narratively, Faro's anti-sociological dream of humanity as a tabula rasa is presented as naïve to the point of idiotic. In the game's logic, there can be no true break, no real fresh start. Humanity endures in its "natural" patterns, binding the bodies within it to gendered roles and stations.

Therein lies the game's real problem: the implication that all this emerges naturally. That given a blank slate, human social norms around gender and sexuality would reassert themselves in familiar shapes (never mind that gender and sexuality have never been remotely static across biology, history, or national-ethnic customs). This is the opposite of utopianism. It takes the Western narrativization of history, of a single reality, and replicates it as the only feasible mode of being in another.

The children are our future

The presence of utopian yearning in *Horizon Zero Dawn* emerges only to be crushed by the seemingly "natural" reemergence of gendered discrimination, heteronormative family structures, and free market exchanges.

With its preoccupation with memory and lineage, *HZD*'s future is a picture-perfect realization of Lee Edelman's concept of neoliberal cultural continuity, which he describes via the emblem of the Child.[143] The survival of the world is contingent on the continuation of a single lineage, a reincarnation in the form of a clone of Elisabet. The world is saved by the children

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[142] Ibid
[143] Lee Edelman, *No Future* (Durham: Duke, 2004).

continuing the work of their parents. Broadly, Edelman writes that the neo-liberal, status-quo emphasis on protecting children, on creating and sheltering the next generation, is a fundamentally capitalistic, heteronormative stance that serves as the highest of rallying calls—*protect the children, save the children*—broadcast as a call to social ethics and responsibility. The future—the children—are a material continuation of the present, a biological and ideological claim on the future as well as a symbol of it. Edelman describes "the child as figure for the universal value attributed to political futurity" and seeks "to pose against it the impossible project of a queer oppositionality that would oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics."[144] The figure of the Child in Edelman's argument encompasses the capitalistic drive to produce and reproduce, to give rise to a future that obeys the growth-logics of the present. The child is an "emblem of fantasmatic futurity"[145] that symbolically ensures "consistency of cultural structures."[146] An explicit extension of capitalistic, heteronormative control in which the highest drive is to maintain, to continue, to produce, to confine within, the ontologies of the present.

This figure of Aloy as the Child is particularly logical in *HZD*'s gameworld: the great disaster of all human life and achievements erased and now potentially erased again is the Worst Possible outcome. Aloy is a tool of restoring the march of human generations, of parents and children, memory and continuity. Sf theorist Rebekah Sheldon uses Edelman in a very similar application in her book *The Child to Come*: the child held up as an emblem of the enduring Earth in the face of ecological collapse and Anthropocene disaster.[147] The child, like the figure of Aloy, has to endure as both a promise and an asset. Aloy's "mother"—in a matriarchal tribal setting in which "motherless" is a grave insult—is the combined technology and knowledge of

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[144] Edelman, *No Future,* 19.
[145] Edelman, *No Future*, 21
[146] Edelman, *No Future,* 19
[147] Rebekah Sheldon, *The Child to Come*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016)

the past, mechanized into an AI. Where the world appeared poised for a radical break, complete erasure and reset, Aloy is the Child figure anchoring it to what came before. That act of cultural continuity is heroic, in this story.

Edelman's despised valorization of production and continuity is bitterly realized in *HZD*: even after the death of the whole species, the world keeps turning, and eventually humanity in its "tribal" social structures resurface. But there is a fundamental disconnect in its resurrection. All across the world of *HZD*, the player encounters binary gender, down to taboos around upper-torso nakedness. Monogamous marriage and nuclear family units appear to be universally accepted as the norm. Labor for payment, with a standardized currency, is the rule across every region of the map.

In these details lies the deep betrayal of any overarching potential radical break this created world could have achieved. This capitalistic hetero-cisnormative society appears to arise *naturally* in this "primitive" stage of human society. The grimy implication being that this state of social organization is the natural path for humanity—humanity with no context, no history, no structure will automatically adopt such a structure. As if it is the only route possible. As if all these ontological contemporary realities are so naturally recurring they survive even the apocalypses of all Earthly life.

Whatever wasn't defined as different was replicated. This says more about imaginative boundaries than anything else. Existing systems carry on in narrative because an alternative mode was not explicitly defined.

The game also recreates the pervasive contemporary mode of what Ruth Levitas calls as a "knowledge economy": "the distinctive feature of knowledge in the contemporary global

economy is its commodification."[148] Aloy embodies this truth of knowledge as capital: every narrative clue, every scrap and artifact recovered, add to her value—making her a more adept hacker, a more capable fighter, and generally elevated above the underclasses of unknowing, technology-worshipping proletarians massing around her and her distinctively individual worth, agency, and purpose. There are only a handful of other humans in the gameworld that can begin to approach her level of knowledge-worth—and none of them, even the arch-techno-shaman Silas, can actually attain the same level of knowing.

Here we return to Edelman's point again: Aloy as the child, as the biomaterial continuation of the past into the future, gives her a unique commodified value. She is the bridge of continuity from the dead world to the new one, the promise of past systems into the present. The past systems in this case, as noted above, have determined the future. Therefore, her natural access to that foundational knowledge value of the world is determined by her status as continuous—a descendent, rather than a member of the new species. Such knowledge commodification becomes part and parcel of the enduring, generational logic of production and value-making.

The game as possibility

In the last section, I explored how *HZD* failed to launch from neoliberal narratives of continuity and control, reproducing rather than expanding the structures of our exigent present.

Now I will turn from an analysis of the gameworld as it *is* to the gameworld as radical possibility. Following Dan Hassler-Forest's example in *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics*, I

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[148] Levitas, *Utopia as Method,* 185.

will approach this storyworld as home to "the important cultural work of imagining viable political alternatives."[149]

This may feel like the act of salvaging scraps, given what's come before about the un-radical sensibilities of the game's story. However I'd prefer to think of the story's potentialities as the meat of the game's imaginary: unfolding new avenues of thought and being even in its failure to fully articulate them. In the game, the world re-vegetated by AIs grow incidental, unplanned metal flowers out of the Earth, encoded with poetry. This technological imaginary itself is seeded with unintended and wonderful consequences.

The utopian dreaming within the game—the dueling visions of Faro and Elisabet—work as a thought exercise in Le Guin's formulation: there is no cat, no box, no elevator, but there is imagined difference extrapolated from the present of our world. Unfortunately, as noted above, the extrapolations fall short. There is a wealth of societal norms uncritically reproduced into the imagined far-future, with no underlying reasoning as to *why*, besides the icky implication the straightness and binary gender are just so natural that there are no alternatives.

But there is one exception to the awkward resurrection of familiar social formations of gender, sexuality, etc. Race does not appear as a topic at all in-game. Nowhere in the script or the story is race implied as a distinguishing feature. Phenotypic facial features and skin and hair coloring that generally define our present determinations of "racial" appearances are diverse across the world. The Nora tribe, for instance, have a vast spectrum of skin tones and facial structures. The Osoram tribe appear generally lighter-skinned, but even within that trend their appearances are what the player would recognize as "diverse" according to today's raced bodies. Although the audience is aware of a diversity of racial representation in the game, that

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[149] Dan Hassler-Forest, *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Politics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 18.

understanding of racially diverse characters is based on the present ontological understanding of race. That is, within the ontology of the game, the player understands through narrative closure that, like the mystery of novelty mugs and the mythologizing of skyscrapers, "racial" features do not have the same meaning in-game.

To call this queering a body might sound anti-intuitive, but I think it is appropriate in the sense that it sets up an alternative, oppositional mode of being to the present ontologies that the player brings with them into the game. What vast imaginative options can we conceive of around bodies using absence as a marker in building sf worlds, as building livable alternatives experienced by the player as a denizen of the world? There are a number of challenges readily apparent in such an imaginative leap, not least of which is the neoliberal, racist phenomenon of "colorblindness"

The absence of racial thinking is so striking in this case because firstly, the storyworld has been established as a future version of our own present where many familiar social norms are recognizably reproduced and secondly, because the player must realize and incorporate that absence without guidance from the story. The heft of the imaginative labor is entirely on the player—implicitly.

There is a grand leap of imagination within the gameworld itself that encourages, through the apparent absence of race-based perception or comments, the player to conceive of the gameworld as explicitly "post-racial." A host of problematic barriers immediately present themselves to such a framing, not least because the game is inadvertently stained with the racial legacies of language and material culture that any contemporary Western player might recognize. For instance, the least-technologically-advanced tribe, the Nora, refer to their hunters as "braves," a callback to derogatory language used toward Indigenous American people. The racist

language and imaginative barriers are a direct result of the cultural context in which the game was created. In another example, the extremely white-presenting protagonist, Aloy, wears her ginger hair in tight braids for the duration of the game, a fact that did not escape players. However, all this becomes an issue within contemporary ontology of bodies. Within the world of the game, bodies, much less hairstyles, are not raced. So while Aloy's braids are certainly inappropriate from the perspective of a modern player's social context, the in-narrative universe has no particular reading attached to the combination of skin color and hairstyle.

That is at least one in-narrative successful erasure from the Ancient Ones' past: true erasure of physical features as raced signifiers. A destruction of memory, a noncontinuity, an opposition in the vein of Edelman's queer oppositional view. The virtual bodies of the game are not raced. Of course, it matters who is inhabiting the world to perceive those bodies. In this case, players who are also unfortunately immersed in a deeply and violently raced reality. Is absence enough in that context to responsibly and convincingly portray un-raced bodies? I do not have a clear answer to that. It is a question that lives in the realm of possibility and imagination. It's the cat, the box, and the elevator: is the player able to join in the in-game ontology of unraced bodies, when so much else about those bodies is simply reiterated from their present ontology?

In a precise echo of *HZD*'s severing of racial signifiers from raced meaning, Chan's formulation of "decoupling racial identity from raced markers" elucidates the reductive failure in sf to actually address race, instead erasing the potential for bodies *to be* raced in utopian futures.

HZD, as visual media, illustrates Chan's point all the more clearly, moving from the verbal/descriptive signifiers to visually mimetic ones. The game portrays pointedly, diversely raced bodies that are clearly recognized *as* raced by the player. However, in the narrative context—and to the players themselves—such signifiers are clearly meant to be able to be read. It's a paradox: expecting racialized readings from the players but insisting that those racialized meanings do not exist in-narrative. A world innocent of racialized identity and markers? How is such a thing possible when those bodies are represented to an audience of players whose social reality is deeply racialized?

5 A gallery of HZD side characters, via Guerilla Games

The game occurs within the social context of the player's world, and *HZD* evokes those socially defined racial signifiers that the game uses to race bodies. The "seemingly radical strategy" that "disrupts the signification of race," writes Chan, "actually reinforces the primacy of the abstract Subject of liberal democracy, rather than expressing an anticipatory illumination of the 'not-yet-conscious' and the 'not-yet-become'" postulated by Jameson.[150] Consciously retooling signifieds as they correspond to racial identity would necessitate a true vacuum, a true magic circle of

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[150] Chan, *The Racial Horizon,* 85-86

absolute reimagination, to be effective. That is not to say such retooling is not worth the attempt: in the critical exploration of these signifiers, there is a productive conversation around racial semiotics to be had. However, such retooling, as noted above, courts erasure—an awkward and destructive blind eye toward racialized identities even in the face of their lived reality.

Collecting clues, building narrative

Now there is a lot more to dissect here about, narratively, why binary gender and monogamous, heteronormative marriage persisted in a vacuum, but racial signifieds did not. I am not ruling out the possibility that the absence of race as a topic in-game was largely incidental.[151] But the fact remains that the game allows the potential for the player, mired in the ontological limitations of the present, to enter a space in which those limitations are simply not applicable.

Moylan describes the process of building an sf world as an accumulation of clues and closure by the audience, the imaginative labor with which the audience accepts these fragments and weaves their understanding of the text-world into a whole. In this broad process of closure, the closure is around absence rather than presence of a clue. Did the player unconsciously (or consciously) provide the gloss of racial thinking over the gameworld where it isn't narratively indicated? In many ways, it's a subtle absence: no dialogue draws attention to it or implies that lack of racial thinking. It is simply absent.

Taking this absence as one of Moylan's clues, how does such an absence figure into closure? When the player becomes aware of it—which is by no means guaranteed—the absence of racism becomes one more alchemical element in the player's internal, imaginative conception

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[151] I am basing this possibility on the less-than-inventive replications of binary gender and sexism elsewhere in the game. That is: I don't have faith that such an explicitly radical move would be made consciously by the studio who made these previous choices. But that is my own opinion.

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of the gameworld in which they are immersed. A radical counter to present conceptions of human identity must be accepted and enmeshed into the immersive world by the player inhabiting it. It is an unconscious, absolute demand: an act of out-of-game erasure within the player's own thinking. A specific aspect of the player's mode of thinking around human identity must be consciously or unconsciously made as meaningless as one of the game's ancient novelty mugs. The paradox here is that the player will know what one of those mysterious novelty mugs are on sight, even if that knowledge is lost to the ages in the game.

Defamiliarizing Gender:
Rendered Body as Bridge to Radical Possibility

Digitally rendered bodies are spaces of pure possibility. Aside from conventions and technical precedents, the limitations of a virtual body are virtually nonexistent. A digital body can be anything from the hyperrealistic renderings of mo-cap actors as in *Death Stranding* (2019) to the massive, insectoid monoliths of *Mass Effect 2* (2010) to the ephemeral ribbons of wind-as-avatar in *Flower* (2009). What a digitally rendered "body" can be is as diverse as the narratives and worlds dreamed up for them to inhabit.

More often than not in AAA games, the bodies we see are recognizably human. There is a vast depth of inquiry waiting to happen on that front. Perhaps it has to do with the intuitive sense of controlling a second, digital body that resembles the player's own physical one, at least in the sense of intuiting basic motor functions. Perhaps it has to do with the sense that, as Gray Graffam writes, "taking the form of an avatar represents—however fleeting—a means of seemingly overcoming a number of inadequacies in real life."[152] The ableist under/overtones in that statement are deserving of their own essay exploration. However the statement is a useful gate for considering avatars as idealized social bodies: prototypical norms of the gender binary, for instance, presented as a choice of "male-or-female" as the first decision in most RPG character creation screens.

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[152] Graffam, Gray. "Avatar: A Posthuman Perspective on Virtual Worlds." In Human No More: Digital Subjectivities, Unhuman Subjects, and the End of Anthropology, edited by NEIL L. WHITEHEAD and MICHAEL WESCH, 131–46. University Press of Colorado, 2012. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt4cgr5j.10.

As easily as digital bodies can typify gendered bodies, there is also rich opportunity to made transgressive and oppositional choices that undermine such binary bodies. As Jack Halberstam writes, "While digital worlds draw from both the elongated possibilities of animated bodies and the pliability of coded realities, we might consider the bendiness and shiftiness of both genres in terms of a queer orientation to reality that requires improvisation, physical stretching, and a recoded sense of being."[153] Halberstam here is expanding on his exploration of animated bodies: he writes that "the wizardry of CGI" and "the shift from analog to digital, from linear to fractal" enabled "queer forms, queer beings, [and] queer modes of play."[154] Halberstam here quickly shifts from embodied possibilities for new narrative and beings to a broader discussion of gaming as ideology: "How does queer theory help us to rethink
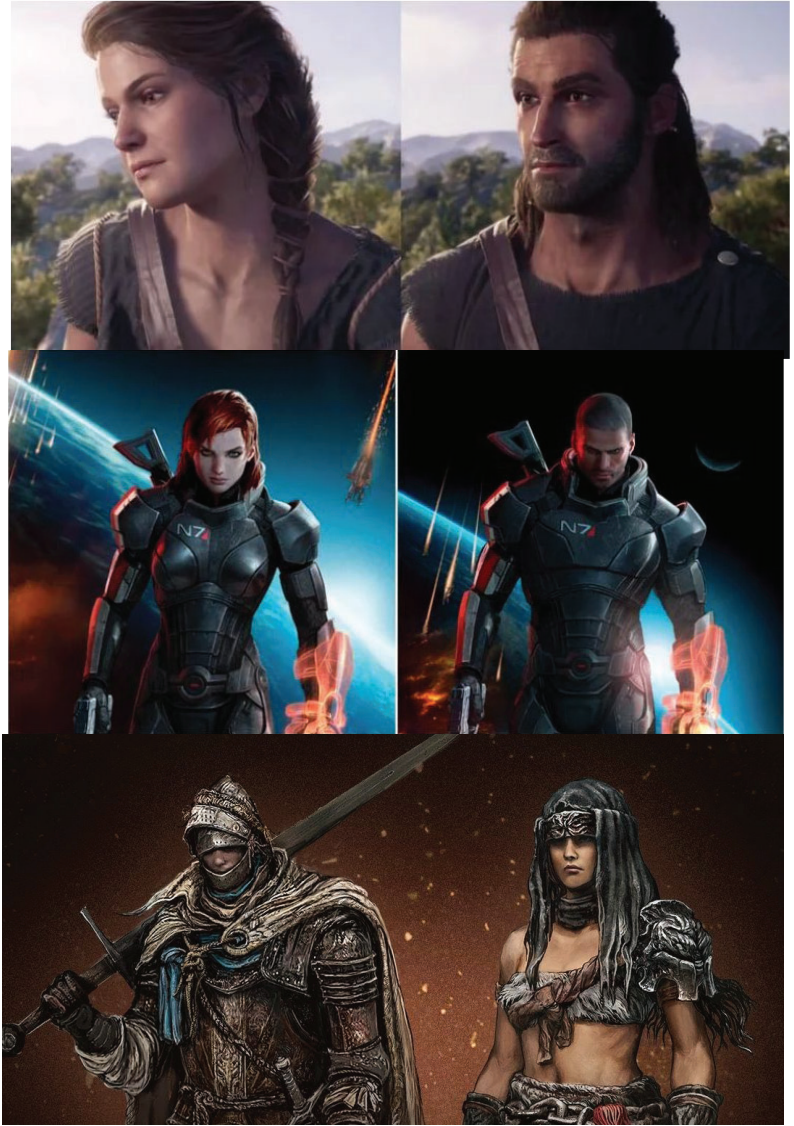
1. Examples of binary "male or female" character options in various RPGs (*Assassins' Creed: Odyssey* (2018), *Mass Effect 3* (2012), and *Elden Ring* (2022))

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[153] Jack Halberstam. "Queer Gaming: Gaming, Hacking, and Going Turbo." *Queer Game Studies.* Eds. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 187.
[154] Halberstam, 188-189

the concept of gaming, the notions of success and failure that inhere to gaming, and the relations between the player and the surrogate figure that represents the player?"[155] However I want to remain with Halberstam's brief consideration of a "recoded sense of being" based on the visual "bendiness and shiftiness" of in-game embodiments. Rather than consider questions of how the player relates to or with their avatar embodiment, I want to focus on the flexibility of in-game digital bodies and their representations of gender.

In this chapter, in line with Halberstam's concepts of "bendiness and shiftiness," I will put pressure on the weak points of visual gendered markers on digitally rendered human bodies. The goal of this approach is to mark out moments of possibility in which the vast potential of digital embodiment can point to more fluid representations of gender.

The components of digital bodies are encyclopedic, to use the terminology of Janet Murray's foray into digital narratives.[156] "Encyclopedic" in this sense means that there are a defined, finite number of options available to draw from, usually tagged with definitional values (a "female" hairstyle, for instance). *Encyclopedic* implies a human-made compendium of existing knowledge. Nothing there is beyond the scope of human description or awareness, just as nothing in a virtual world is beyond human ability to represent. To explore this concept of encyclopedic visualization, I will take a quick detour from digitally rendered bodies to digitally rendered spaces. Digital spaces are by definition calculable and bounded: they have limits. The Athens in *Assassins' Creed: Odyssey* (2018), for example, is a finite approximation of a space the player will perceive as ancient Athens. It is an excellent example of the encyclopedic aspect of Murray's definition. What can be provided? Ancient statuary lost to time and described only

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[155] Halberstam, 189
[156] Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 113.

in ancient prose take shape digitally in their places around the city[157]. The massive bronze sculpture of Athena stands at the center of the city, which archaeologists know served as a gleaming Statue-of-Liberty-esque beacon for sailors coming home. "Even the trees are right," says Lynch.[158] Mark Stansbury-O'Donnell's recreation from literary sources of the painted scenes in one covered stoa is realized precisely in its proper place at the edge of the agora.[159] And yet: the fabric in the stalls is folded in identical stacks. There are a limited number of hairstyles which are repeated among NPCs. There are three distinct height options for all the digital humans, those historically accurate trees repeat, and all the stall posts in the markets are always tilted at precisely the same angle. The limits of this world's details are self-evident.

Similarly, visual options for digital embodiment are limited, and those limitations are legible on digital bodies. A character creation screen offers a limited number of hairstyles and clothes options, stocked by the game developers. These encyclopedic options can be expanded via DLC purchases, as in loot boxes containing new armor sets, etc, that can be bought for out-of-game currency. Options can also be expanded outside the boundaries of the officially

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[157] Kathleen Lynch, "An Archaeologist Reacts to Assassin's Creed Odyssey (Complete)." Cincinnati Art Museum. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QDFMYkCTNu4.
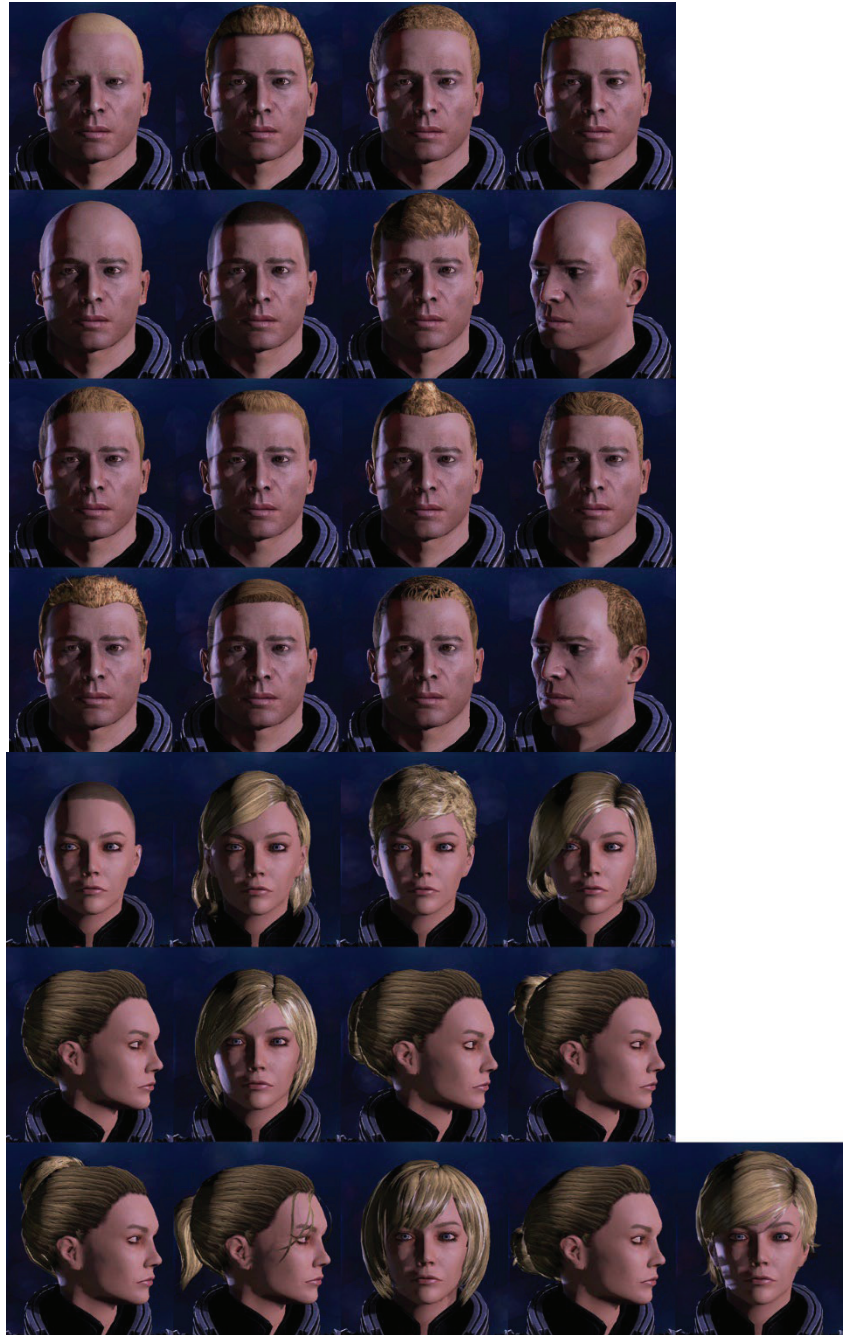
[158] Ibid

[159] Mark Stansbury-O'Donnell, "The Painting Program of the Stoa Poikile," in J. M. Barringer and J. M. Hurwit (eds.), *Periklean Athens and its Legacy. Problems and Perspectives* (Austin, 2005) 73-87.

sanctioned parameters, as with the tens of thousands of custom-content mods available for download from *Sims* fan sites.

All of these encyclopedic options have definitions and tags within the visual language of the game. A hairstyle might be tagged as feminine; a given armor set in *Assassins' Creed* can only be worn by the female lead character, not by the male. *The Sims 4* is again a useful example: the tags for masculine and feminine visual styles are visible to the player as they navigate character creation options: the game makes explicit what the definitional boundaries of "male" and "female" styling are in the context of the game. There are also exceptions, where these gendered tags are notably absent, such

2: All male (top) and female (bottom) gendered hair options in ME1; note the lack of overlap and gendered norms obeyed in each case.

as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons.* Here, any hairstyle or clothing can be worn by bodies of any gender. However such nongendered aesthetic options are the exception rather than the rule,

standing in contrast to decades of male-or-female options assigned to *World of Warcraft*, *Mass Effect*, *Assassins' Creed*, and other blockbuster franchises dominated by the gender binary.

These encyclopedic details paint a portrait of how digital bodies are gendered more broadly. Each option within an encyclopedic set has a definitional value in terms of gender, and thus the visual language of binary gender is reproduced in virtual worlds. Consider the nearly ubiquitous starting point of a character creator: select a male or female version of a given avatar. The biologized, binary gendered aspects of these contrasting bodies are broadly uniform: breasts and curves for the female bodies, and more muscular, broader bodies for the male. The definitional boundaries for gendering digital bodies are clearcut, reproducing the concept of binary gender in the physical world. As T.L. Taylor writes, "Code, graphics, systems architecture—all of these arise from somewhere, from human agents…Code embeds possibilities and constraints."[160] The encyclopedic gendered options of body types and attendant visual markers are coded restraints on how bodies can be visualized, inextricably binding these representations to societal constraints of gendered thinking.

Another frame for this same point is Lev Manovich's "myth of interactivity": Manovich describes, in interactive media "we are asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations." Even in apparently open-ended "blank page" moments, interactive media presents a set number of choices with pre-coded, associated meanings that are fixed and narrow the possibilities of expression. For instance, click on one of two body types, each clearly typified according to ideals of binary gender. In that moment, other options for embodiment are eliminated—no bendy in-betweens, no variations. This is a stark example, but emblematic of the kind of narrowing effect that a set number of encyclopedic visual options induce.

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[160] T. L. Taylor, "Intentional Bodies: Virtual Environments and the Designers Who Shape Them." 25.

3. Screenshot, *Tomb Raider,* 1996, Eidos Interactive

Rendered video game bodies are mimetic representations of the organic bodies humans inhabit in the physical world. And for many years, even the most advanced avatars have been very far from exact.[161] The old cliché of "cubes and cones" is best summarized by the 1990s rudimentary rendering of Lara Croft. There's a lot of imaginative labor on the part of the player, reading abstract signifiers that rely on the dominant cultural reading to translate cones and cubes into *woman*.

A helpful parallel case here is Judith Butler's discussion of drag queens. In Butler's argument, drag employs exaggerated, humorous performance markers of femininity or masculinity. How different is this argument from the cones and cubes of the abstracted female form? Gender is defined in these digital realms using the same physical and performative markers as are generally used to gender organic bodies. Even if digital mimesis has become more exact, as you can see with the evolving portrayal of Lara Croft to more believable human proportions, the basis of how gender is written on the digital body remains clear.

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[161] In recent years, high-fidelity renditions of actors in games like *Death Stranding* and *Hellblade 2: Senua's Sacrifice* seem to promise more precision. Although, similar accolades were showered on *LA Noire*'s facial-capture technology, which to our eyes today seems grossly rudimentary. Claims to exact mimesis will always fade in the face of future advances.

Systems of meaning are explicitly reproduced in simulated realities that have no organic reason for doing so beyond preserving the language and concept of the gendered body. Gendered, visual encyclopedic markers are read by the player as indicating binary, biologized gendered bodies within a given set of socially defined restraints, reproduced in code.

However, in the space of visual closure that bridges "cones and cubes" to *woman*, there is room for Halberstam's "bendiness." I will explore two instances of how these gendered visual markers have been muddied in recent years. By muddied, I mean a disruption in the clear reproduction of gender via the standard visual encyclopedia of gendered markers.

The first of these instances is a game mentioned earlier in this chapter: *The Sims 4*. In addition to the transparency of the character creator's tags—showing individual tags for "masculine" or "feminine" clothing and styling options—the game undermines its decades-old binary gender selection with additional options. While the same male-or-female essentialized gender choice remains, a 2016 update the game removed gendered restrictions to allow for any digital body, regardless of its binary gender choice, to have any physique or voice.[162]

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[162] Andrew Webster. "A huge Sims 4 update removes gender restrictions from character customization." *The Verge* (2016). https://www.theverge.com/2016/6/2/11838356/sims-4-update-gender-hairstyles-voice-clothing-options

Additionally, a new menu introduced with the same mod allowed further specifications within the character creator screen, including the option to choose if the Sim stood or sat to use the bathroom, could become pregnant or could get others pregnant, and what gendered style options—masculine, feminine, both—would be automatically offered in the creator.

That menu enables precisely the kind of "muddying" of virtual gender that I am seeking to explore. These details of character behavior and presentation had been implicitly coded into the initial "male" or "female" character creator choice in all previous versions (e.g., a female-gendered Sim would be able to become pregnant and would sit to use the bathroom, while a male-gendered Sim would not). Making such normally essentialized and biologized behaviors explicitly visible and malleable disrupts such encoded binary assumptions.

There are a few stumbling blocks to this gender-queering of digital bodies. The player can always forego the 2016-update menu and continue to use the default, binary options as they previously were. Indeed, cisnormative character creation is still the norm, unless the player chooses to access the new menu. Consider if the player had to manually select cisnormative options—ability to become pregnant, etc—in the process of each character creation. Such a process would consciously emphasize to the player the number of biologized assumptions regularly made in the process of gendering bodies according to a binary. Instead, the "bendiness" of embodied possibilities is allowed to remain implicit for those who do that wish to engage with them. While the 2016 update was a productive step toward disrupting the biologized assumptions around digital bodies, it did not erase such assumptions as the norm for such bodies, thus retaining the encoded binary ideology of gender rather than reflecting the diversity and flexibility such bodies make possible. Additionally, the game does continue to use binary he/him or she/her series pronouns exclusively for its characters, so that while biologized assumptions of

binary gender may be undermined, there is no linguistic option outside of binary gender identity for a given character.

The second instance of "muddying" is the physical appearance of the character of Abby Anderson in *The Last of Us, Part II* (2020). Pictured below, Abby is a very muscular young cisgender woman. Her body was modeled on actor and CrossFit athlete Colleen Fotsch, pictured below in a now-deleted Instagram post from a Naughty Dog developer. Abby's physical

4. Left: Instagram post of Fotsch as body model for Abby; right: promotional image of Abby (Naughty Dog)

appearance was remarkable not only because she was not designed to be overtly feminine. Non-hyper-femininized female bodies were present in the game already: Ellie, the young female protagonist of the first and second games, is depicted as a lean, not-very-typically-feminine figure who mostly wears baggy clothes. There are a diversity of women's bodies portrayed in *Last of Us Part II:* when Abby appears beside other, less muscular women, the contrast between

5. Abby beside another lead female character (screenshot)

their bodies is striking. The importance of Abby's design is the way in which her body pointedly blurs the typically masculine frame of broad shoulders, square torso, muscular arms, and negligible hips onto an explicitly female character, transgressing the long-held binary of the male-or-female body character creator screen.

That "bendiness" led to a number of transphobic outbursts on Reddit, with (mostly male) Reddit users decrying that Abby could not be a woman because of her muscular frame. Even now, two years later, there is confusion online if Abby *is* in fact trans among otherwise well-meaning posters, while others insist that the trans comments were a "joke" or simply maintain the transphobic line that she is impossibly, "miraculously Buff" for a woman. (All this, despite the very public acknowledgement of Fotsch, a highly visible professional athlete, as the living, breathing female body that Abby was modeled on.)
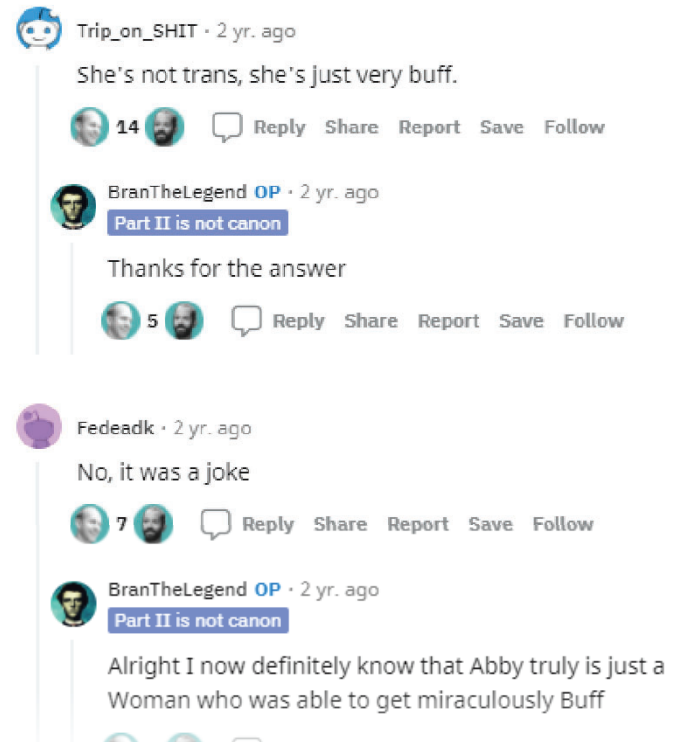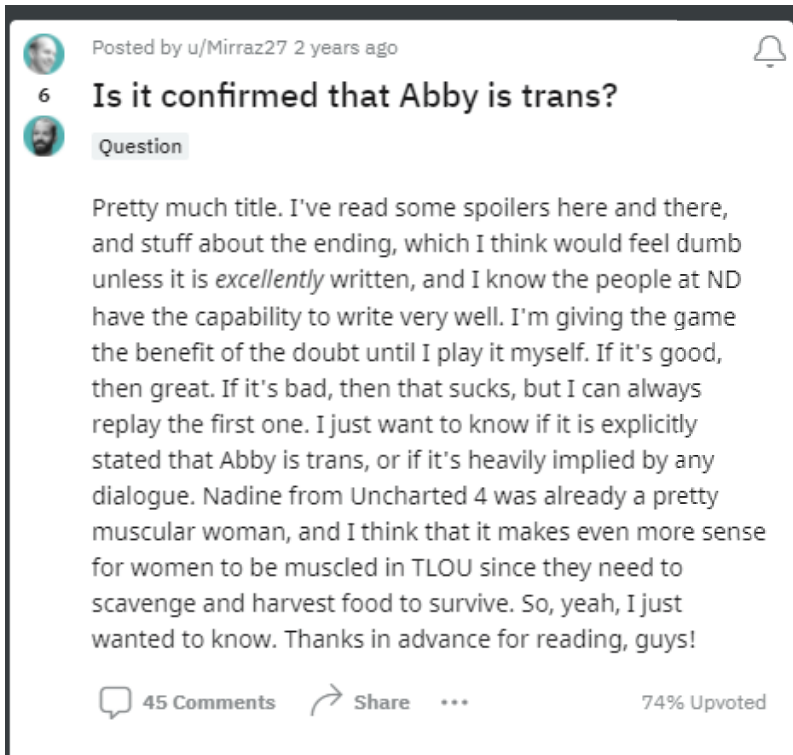
There *is* a trans character in the game: a young man named Lev, thirteen years old, is introduced as an explicitly trans character. His identity is central to his character plot, as an outcast from his less-than-accepting community.

One clear counterpoint to this kind of "muddying" is the mash-up of extremely gendered characteristics for humorous effects. For example: a muscular male avatar in a tiny pink bikini, as I have seen as a punchline in Twitch fan art. Or mods to dress Alexios, the male protagonist in *AC: Odyssey*, in his sister's "Amazon" armor (screenshotted below). The humor of this relies on the gendered definitions of the various encyclopedic visual options. The "fun" is that they are clearly not within the same gendered category.

With the truly "bendy" examples of *The Sims 4* and Abby come from pushing at the definitional boundaries of gendered encyclopedic markers. Blurring visual standards of digital bodies open the imaginative possibilities for how bodies are depicted and interpreted in regard to gender.

The instability of body as gendered signifier can be carried to a productive extreme in virtual worlds. Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* draws attention to the instability of organic bodies as a prelude to establishing the "bendiness" of animated ones. In his argument, he focuses on Diane Arbus's famous photograph *Naked Man Being A Woman*: Arbus "records the representational instability of the body itself, the fact that it cannot function as a foundation for order, coherence, and neat systems of correspondence."[163] Arbus makes explicit the subject's body while rejecting a gendered reading, occupying a subtle and defiant in-betweenness in which the gender binary is helpless to define. In a Barthian sense, the punctum of the image is that ambiguity itself: the pointed unreadability of biologized signifiers. The provenance and narrative of the photograph, however—its metatextual life—repeatedly genders the sitter as a man, specifically as the brother of Brooks Wright, a man who later saw the photo and identified Bruce Wright as the subject.[164]

Digitally rendered bodies, by contrast, stop short: as imaginary artifacts, they do not incorporate the underlying fact of a living body. While in cases like Abby's, where an identified, living models underly the character design, the avatar itself is not strictly defined or limited by

163 Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 102-3
164 James Sullivan, "The Untold Story of a Legendary Diane Arbus Photograph," *LitHub*, 2016
https://lithub.com/the-untold-story-of-a-legendary-diane-arbus-photograph/

the model's identity. In that sense, as artistically rendered portrayals of a body, with open-ended potential for gender to be written onto it. An opening to imagine a body without gendered reading, with no instinct to recourse to biologized assumptions.

A useful metaphor here is "model sheets" used in traditional 2D animation. As media historian Heather Hendershot describes, "Model sheets serve as design guidelines for the 'inbetweeners', the workers who draw the images that go in-between the key images drawn by the animators. Like a blueprint, the model sheet gives the exact dimensions of a character from different angles, and these dimensions must be followed by the staff of inbetweeners."[165] The function of these boundaries is to create recognizable forms, in the same way that encyclopedic markers of gender create legible points of consensus for how a body is gendered. To occupy the boundaries of these definitions, to push them beyond certainty and into the "bendiness" of how gender is read, transgresses the defines what a form *is* to a viewer. Making illegible—or ambiguous—the relied-upon markers of gender is a powerful tool is pushing past the reiteration of gendered bodies in virtual worlds.

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[165] Heather Hendershot. "Secretary, Homemaker, and 'White' Woman: Industrial Censorship and Betty Boop's Shifting Design." Journal of Design History 8, no. 2 (1995): 117–30. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1315978. 117

Conclusion

Over the course of this thesis, I have explored the rendered body as a site of radical possibility. While there is no true landing point for this argument—it is, after all, a polemic toward yearning, dreaming, and imagining, rather than anything as cut-and-dried as a blueprint— I hope there is a sense of momentum. I am entirely hopeful, for myself, that within the next ten years this text feels quaint and antiquated, that enough steps are taken toward that yearning horizon to give a richer and more ambitious shape to queer futurity in video games. I have no idea what that transformation might look like. We can only look out from the present we inhabit, as I have said many times over in an echo of Jameson's description of imaginative boundaries.

There are untold small moments of promise in the video games of the present, and as the metaverse rears its hydra-ish heads, questions of virtual embodiment and inclusion will become all the more relevant and prevalent in the lived experience of networked people. As I noted in chapter 3, nothing in virtual worlds is beyond human capability to anticipate and represent; thus the "who can be possible" of Adrienne Shaw's framing will expressly define visible signifiers of identity in the metaverse. What bodies will actually be able to be present? And how restrictive and damaging will this corporatized representation of reality be? After all, in the metaverse (supposedly), your avatar is meant to represent *you*. In an escalation from the messy question of "real names" on Facebook, Meta the company will define how one is able to construct one's "own" body in virtual space.

Virtual worlds are and will continue to be corporate landscapes. They do and will continue to operate around logics of profit and marketing, defining viable audiences for inclusion in the interests of inclusively making sales. As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, this

context is adamantly not utopian. But I do think that in powerful industries like this one, in which utopian dreaming does not figure at all prominently in the guiding forces of what works are funded and which aren't, that actively mining for the moments of possibility, of flexibility, can bring utopian spirit to games even ex post facto. (Or, in the case of *Cyberpunk 2077*, before the fact.)

The best that anyone can do is to carry a spirit of possibility forward with us into new virtual worlds and to the bodies dreamed up to populate them. Such dreaming can only drive virtual worlds toward a radical horizon—be it as the voice of a market audience or as an act of community imagination. Queer bodies will always make space, and I believe that will continue to be true even in coded realities of pre-ordained visual signifiers, through the imaginative power of a networked global audience of players and dreamers. Such dreaming propels the arc of imagined worlds and virtual bodies towards ever-greater flexibility and inclusivity, greater potentiality for worlds that reflect the exciting, messy, fantastic complexity of the world off-screen.

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