Play as Transgression: An Ethnographic Approach to Queer Game Cultures

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on an ongoing ethnography of a GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) guild in the MMOG *World of Warcraft*. Drawing on queer/feminist theory, the argument concentrates on sexuality as resource for 'transgressive play'. The notion of transgressive play is usually taken to mean play against the 'ideal' or 'implied' player of the game, of playing the game in ways not anticipated by design. For queer gamers, sexuality comes into play in ways that make visible the cultural norms of the ideal player – a player who is at least symbolically male and straight. This ethnographic work indicates that there are queer uses of game spaces that in significant ways make visible – and play around with – norms and expectations that are shaping what online game communities are, and what they could be.

Author Keywords

embodiment, ethnography, game studies, gaymers, queer theory, sexuality, transgressive play, *World of Warcraft*

INTRODUCTION: OF SEXUAL DISORIENTATIONS

> [Party] Dragonred: yack, 3 belf males, how gay :S
> [Party] Viljhalm: uhm
> [Party] Lulu: :)
> [Party] Viljhalm: :P
> [Party] Lulu: well you have no idea...
> Dragonred is now the group leader.
> [Party] Lulu: how gay this truly is
> [Guild] Ebon: hahaha nice said
> [Party] Viljhalm: hehe
> [Party] Lulu: lol
> [Guild] Ebon: he doesn't know that bears are even gay-er

This conversation took place late one evening when a group of players of the MMOG *World of Warcraft* from across Europe got together to defeat monsters and loot treasures in a high-level dungeon in Northrend. This land of the north is the most recent of continents, a snow-clad, frost-bitten landscape that draws heavily on Norse mythology, swept in musical references to, for example, the classical composer Arvo Pärt. Lulu is me, or rather my female blood elf death

knight, even if her proper name in the game is something different altogether. In fact, all names have been changed for the sake of anonymity. Lulu is my researcher character, but certainly also a co-player, as well as a member of a guild to which Viljhalm and Ebon also belongs. They are both male blood elves. Dragonred, together with a few other players (one of which was also a male blood elf), were picked up along the way. They didn't know us, and we didn't know them. One of the first thing Dragonred, a male druid warrior, said upon greeting us at the summoning stone was "yack, 3 belf males, how gay", finished off with a confused smiley ":S". (Male blood elves are routinely read along the lines of male femininity – or 'gay' – and as such cherished among queer gamers). This utterance gave rise to both slight hesitation, but mostly amusement, since it unwittingly with absolute pitch stroke the very chord that functions as the prime baseline for this particular guild.

Put differently, this is a GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) guild. In my writing, I have chosen to call the guild *The Others*. There is nothing innocent about the comment itself in its characteristic bordering on compulsory way of expressing homophobia in the game. The comedy of the situation sparks from the fact that the player of Dragonred has no clue that 'gay' is what binds these particular players together. Furthermore, it is unclear if s/he figures it out along the way, since my comment "well you have no idea... how gay this truly is" was left without comments. I got a supportive "hahaha nice said" from Ebon in guild chat (not shared by the full party), as well as the killer finale "he doesn't know that bears are even gay-er". "Bears" have a double function in this quote, both alluding to the bear shape which druids may shape-shift into, and simultaneously evoking gay male bear culture.

Queer gamers – or 'gaymers' – are a vibrant part of game culture [17, 18, 19], yet virtually invisible within game studies. To make visible that which is not fully of the norm, but which nonetheless is essential for the norm to work, is not merely writing from sexual margins. Far from being only of relevance to like-minded, queer sexuality and queer theory speak volumes about the configuration of hetero-normal bodies, games, and ethnographies. The term queer

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in this paper is used as shorthand for multiple ways of defining and positioning oneself as non-straight. It also signals an affinity with queer theory and ways of unsettling or troubling the stability of identity categories. Then again, there is always a risk with queer. While offering a critique of how straight norms produce a whole range of deviant sexual practices and oppositional others, these others may have little else in common, indeed their various ways of being other may make queer communities dense with tension. Elizabeth Grosz [5] discusses the usefulness "to talk about queerness, or even gayness when theorizing sexed bodies and their sexual relations" and argues for ways of "specifying at least broadly the kinds of bodies and desires in question." (p 219). It is thus my intent to make explicit some of the differences, specificities, and contradictions in relation to queer as analytical strategy.

This paper is based on an ongoing ethnography in *World of Warcraft* with a focus on embodiment and sexuality. The argument moves between self-play and the play of others, and concentrates in particular on sexuality – understood as actions and desires that shape and orient bodies – as resource for 'transgressive play'. There is a tendency within game studies and queer theory alike to favor a player/subject who is active, creative, unruly, transgressive (be it in relation to the game as norm or to heteronormativity). While this paper certainly invests in the promises of transgression, it simultaneously explores its limits.

The notion of sexuality as forms of action that shape and direct bodies toward certain objects (and not others) is informed by Sara Ahmed's [2] queer phenomenology. Ahmed takes up the question of 'orientation' in 'sexual orientation'. She articulates how bodies are turned toward the objects around them, and how this (sense of) direction matters in understanding orientation. Our actions create lines of direction that shape our perception and how we orient ourselves. Different objects create different lines of direction. Lines of direction are neither neutral nor originary, and yet heterosexual orientation creates 'straight lines' of direction as if this process was nothing but natural. Ahmed speaks of this naturalization in terms of 'straightening devices', which comes close to Adrienne Rich's [12] 'compulsory heterosexuality', and Judith Butler's [3] 'heterosexual matrix'. What happens, then, if our orientation turns our bodies in ways they are not supposed to be turned, toward the objects that are not supposed to be there? What happens when our bodies are not in line with the dominant lines of direction – when they wander off line, as it were? The straightening devices of heterosexuality sometimes fail to regulate bodies. New lines of direction are formed when bodies make contact with objects that are not supposed be there – such as (other) queer bodies. Pulled by desire, and through their contacts with other objects, the orientations of bodies shift. As such, queer bodies and queer sexualities are re-orientations that shape and direct bodies differently.

At the moment of writing, the ethnography in *The Others* has been going on for eight months. It is primarily an in-game ethnography, but it also includes the web forum belonging to the guild (as well as the official *World of Warcraft* forums and other communities where intersections of sexuality, queer perspectives and gaming are explored). More specifically, it consists of field notes from sessions of play, chat logs, screen shots, and informal interviews. Despite the growing body of ethnographic research on online games, and despite decades of self-reflexivity in qualitative research, few game researchers appear to discuss their own roles as co-players and co-producers of knowledge based on fieldwork [15]. Within my work, I am to perform, balance, and take into account at least four types of subjectivity or presence in the game: as researcher, as non-straight, as woman, and as player. These different modes of moving through and playing the game operate as principles of difference, but also of sameness (and sometimes in unpredictable ways). Simply put, the positions as non-straight and as player are what most clearly bind me to this group, whereas the fact that I am a female player, as well as a researcher, most of the time marks me as different.

It may be useful to point out that this ethnographic work is preceded by a one-year ethnography exploring queer moments and strategies in more mainstream *World of Warcraft* contexts. The focus of the initial ethnography was on ways of exploring the game world and leveling up, on solo play and play in smaller groups, and came to concentrate on the critical potentials of affect, desire and closeness for ways of knowing online game cultures [13, 14]. The players I encountered and played with at this earlier stage had little interest in fast leveling, even if leveling up certainly was part of the draw. They took pleasure in explorative movements and detours through the gamescape. They took their time, and so did my ethnography. My current guild/ethnography is different. Although there is a lot of room for casual play, questing and leveling, this guild is more aimed at high-level content and experiences.

TRANSGRESSIVE PLAY

The concept of transgressive play is usually taken to mean play against the 'ideal' or 'implied' player of the game, of playing the game and bending the rules in ways not anticipated by design [1, 10]. Transgressive play is play as innovation and, possibly, subversion, of finding, exploring and exploiting loopholes in the game fabric. Espen Aarseth [1] uses the notion of transgressive play to address the tension within game studies between a critical humanities approach to the player as implied in or as a function of game aesthetics, and a social sciences' interest in the social practices of (potentially disobedient) 'real' players. While statistically unrepresentative, moments of transgressive play are crucial to understand game culture, Aarseth argues, since they challenge the kind of player always already inscribed in the game: "Transgressive play is a symbolic

gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game, a (perhaps illusory) way for the played subject to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself." (p. 132). If the critical, aesthetic take on games makes the relationship between player and game primarily production-led with an emphasis on the game as the dominant partner, ethnographic approaches to 'real', situated players tend take into account a wide range of practices and strategies, more clearly allowing for player creativity and potentially subversive instances of play. The tension between these two directions in game studies, between games as mechanical-aesthetic objects and games as social practices, echoes the kind of friction between 'playing the game' and 'being played *by* the game' characteristic of any act of game play.

Aarseth models his idea of the implied player on Wolfgang Iser's [7] notion of the implied reader of reader-response criticism in literary theory. To Iser, literature is not so much an object as a set of effects controlled by the text, and the implied reader is the kind of reader that the text calls for. 'He' is a hypothetical, presupposed figuration, representing a set of cultural norms and expectations that the text needs to achieve its full potential. In this paper, I use the notion of transgressive play similarly but not identically, by departing from a slightly different understanding of what constitutes the ideal player. In Aarseth's line of reasoning, there is a clear difference between games as aesthetic objects and games as social practices, even if he concludes that the study of games needs both perspectives, since "games are both aesthetic and social phenomena" (p. 130). In online games, aesthetic and social dimensions are certainly integral to an understanding of the phenomenon. The question is if these two dimensions can be distinguished from one another in a meaningful way. Online games are games where the aesthetic and the social are becoming increasingly entangled, where social dimensions are a vital part of the game interface. Meeting other players and playing together is part of the backbone of the game. In this sense, online games such as *World of Warcraft* consists of a certain type of 'social aesthetics' which makes it hard to talk about the implied player (and possible transgressions of this implication) without taking into account the kinds of social positions, norms, and expectations that are of the game, but that perhaps also exceed or extend the game towards those multiple localities in which it is played.

The game world is always already populated with other players, which renders unstable the distinction between the 'implied player' of the game and 'actual players'. As a player of *World of Warcraft*, you are certainly positioned in particular ways by the game (and not others). But being positioned by the game not only entails positioning in relation to game mechanics and game aesthetics in a more narrow sense, but also by a wider game culture in ways that plays with, for example, gender and sexuality in certain ways (and not others). The design of avatars – how they look, move, feel, fight, jump, speak, laugh, flirt, dance etc.

– speaks volumes about social and cultural perceptions of sexed bodies [4, 13]. But equally important are the ways in which players are collectively imagining who 'the player' is, and how such fantasies are connected (or disconnected) with the politics of the interface. The player required by the game, a player who embodies the cultural norms necessary for the game to achieve its full potential, does not necessarily involve 'actual' players. Nonetheless, this ideal or implied player is certainly socially and culturally informed, and as such housing expectations and preconceptions dominating the game industry and player cultures alike.

For queer gamers, sexuality comes into play in ways that make visible the cultural norms of the 'ideal' player – *a player who is at least symbolically male and straight*. Even if the group of female players of online games is significant, the ideas and ideals of (straight) femininity seem to collide with the ways in which gaming is habitually coded as a masculine activity. Female players testify to frequent situations of fleeting play (i.e. pick-up groups) where they are assumed to be male by their co-players, no matter if they play female characters. As long as the fantasy of 'the player' is intact, the game works smoothly. But once a player is unwilling or simply unable to embody 'his' position, the fantasy cracks. Similarly, even if queer players have a vivid presence in online communities, to 'come out' in the game, or simply express an inclusive attitude in terms of sexual orientations, has proved to be enough for exclusion. Furthermore, the recurring use of the word 'gay' in derogatory ways is a clear sign for gay-mers that players are assumed to be straight. Thus, another potentially transgressive, disobedient, unsettling figure is the non-straight player – male, female or in-between – who makes explicit how sexuality comes to matter in online game cultures.

COMING OUT AND COMING HOME
It was a dusky evening in November, and I had anew grown tired of the pubescent quality in guild chat in my most recent guild. They claimed to have an age limit, but clearly such ways of speaking are not only related to age. I searched the web for an alternative, perhaps a group where it would not be necessary to remain in the closet, so to speak. Having a hard time convincing some of my co-players that I was 'truly' a woman, it became clear to me that being different in yet another way would be pushing it. Well aware of the Sara Andrews case in early 2006, which gained a fair amount of media coverage [8], and the possible peace offering from Blizzard (the production company behind the game) as part of the Valentine special the same year, I was curious about the status of queer sexualities in *World of Warcraft* a few years later.

In brief, Sara Andrews made an announcement in the public chat channel that her guild was 'GLBT-friendly', which rendered her a warning by an in-game administrator. The reason (or so she was told) was Bizzard's policy to protect

players from harassment due to sexual orientation. Andrews did not withdraw, and found herself threatened to be banned from the game (this, the argument continued, was because of her explicit use of language which could be put to use against her). The threat of expulsion, due to the mere mentioning of the term 'GLBT-friendly', is a powerful straightening device. Andrews pointed out that many players use homophobic language in the game, without this being acknowledged. She received massive support from the queer gaming community, and Blizzard was forced to apologize. A few weeks later, the Valentine special "Love is in the Air" was introduced with an intriguing bisexual twist. Part of the plot was to stock up on perfume, cologne and love tokens from local innkeepers to seduce NPCs (non player characters), either successfully or with your character's heart broken as a result. Jennie Lees [9], blogger at wow.com, explains: "Simply apply cologne or perfume to yourself […]. Perfume makes you appealing to male NPCs and cologne makes female NPCs swoon at the sight of you, regardless of your actual gender." Even if the scents themselves are conventionally sexed (a female NPC will not bother if your female character wears perfume), possibilities of 'cross-scenting' gave characters a bisexual potential. As long as my ultra femme female blood elf smells 'like a man', she may well make the hearts of female NPCs beat faster. On gaygamer.net, 'Xarro' [20] comments (in 2007) on 'his' experiences in Stormwind: "Last year I was playing a male character in the Alliance and I assure you that I made out with each and every male Stormwind guards. :) It works!"

When searching the *World of Warcraft* forum pages for a GLBT/gay/queer guild, there appears to be quite a few options on US servers, but much less on European realms. In this sense, *The Others* is quite unique. The guild is medium-sized, with approximately 200 registered members, of which about 30 are active and visible. The number of people logged on at the same time varies, but it usually does not exceed 20. The members come from all over Europe (Denmark, Serbia, Sweden, The Netherlands…), but there is a clear dominance of people from the UK.

Coming to the guild – with the previous experience of playing in more mainstream guilds – felt a bit like coming home, even if 'home' in queer circles may be ambivalent. Sexuality functions as a tie that binds people together (people who may otherwise have had little in common). Sharing a passion for games, as well as sharing experiences of moving through life, and through the game as non-straight, forms a clear sense of togetherness and belonging. Finding this guild was similar to the feeling of traveling with your lover to places where public handholding and kissing is difficult, and of locating a gay/lesbian bar where you can relax and stop pretending. Moving through mainstream *World of Warcraft* culture as a transgressor of the straight lines of direction has a lot to do with acts of passing and blending in (or with public display, if you are willing to take the argument). The basic assumption in *The*

Others is instead that you are queer, or by other measures non-straight. Then again, this is not a separatist environment. Everybody is welcome, as long as they are aware of and respect the specificity of the guild (and thus, there are occasional straight men as well as one or two more regular straight women). The borders of the guild are fluid. Yet, as will become clear, this fluidity is not without limits.

The feeling of entering the guild was one of relief and happiness. It was a feeling of relief related to no longer having to worry about covering up bits of your life that would not fit in, or would even be regarded as 'inappropriate' in the game environment. It was a sense of happiness in experiencing the warmest of welcomes imaginable. The guild is strikingly male dominated, but the handful of women that are active make up for in expressiveness what they lack in numbers. Two women immediately took me under wing, let's call them Anna and Sara, and I learned quickly that they were a couple. Anna was the most verbal, charismatic, and curious of the two, and Sara the more low-voiced, yet noticeably outspoken. I immediately liked their dynamic. At this point, I was leveling up a new character as a member of the guild, and Sara offered to boost me (help with leveling) through low-level dungeons: "If you want a paladin Anna is your girl, and if you want a crazy hunter girl, I'm that girl". "Well, I like all kinds of girls", I had to admit. At this point in the conversation, a fourth person, Matt, spoke up in guild chat: "Omg, I log out for five sec, and when I log on the lesbians have taken over". "Get used to it Matt☺", Anna replied.

I was 'out' in the game, and yet still closeted in other ways, having chosen to spend a week or so in the guild before asking permission to do research and declaring my identity as researcher. A more extended discussion of this second coming out process, one that you will have to do over and over again as new people enter the guild (much like in your everyday life when finding yourself in new social situations) will have to take place elsewhere. For the time being, it may suffice to say that I did get permission from the officers (those in charge), as well as posted a short note on the front page of the guild forum, declaring "Jenny needs you!", as well as a longer note in the forum presenting my project and myself. A couple of players wanted to be left out of the study, but the majority welcomed me with open arms.

QUEER PLAY
Even if game cultures rarely encourages non-normative or anti-normative ways of doing gender and sexuality, there are ways of playing, interacting and coming together in the game that could be termed transgressive – or queer. In *The Others*, sexuality as principle of orientation is entwined with gaming and with community in several ways. There is a broad range of sexual practices and desires that in various ways enter play sessions, stretching from 'vanilla' (sex without twists or kinks, a definition that is definitely fluid) to SM. SM in this context stands for Sadism and

Masochism. Then of course, in *World of Warcraft* terminology, SM is the abbreviation for the dungeon Scarlet Monastery, which can be a subject for endless amusement. The same goes for the achievement "Going Down", which means falling 65 yards without dying, and nothing else. What is perhaps most striking when entering the guild, after having played elsewhere, is how queer sexuality and queer desire operate as explicit, humoristic, sometimes flirty resources in guild chat as well as in instances of co-play. One example is when game related terms intermingle with queer culture and take on unexpected meanings:

> Dorian: Anna do you use Bartender
> Corky: no I drink from the bottle
> Dorian: haha funny
> Corky: I did, but didn't like it
> Corky: you?
> Dorian: did it screw with the keybindings in the wow menu?
> Corky: can't remember what it screwed and how, it got me drunk
> Lulu: that's a good add-on
> Slap: lol
> Corky: lol
> Dorian: I use it and never had any problems with bindings
> Corky: what kinda ropes do you use?
> Dorian: omg, someone needs to get laid
> Corky: yeah I know lol
> Ilshenar: go watch some Nigella!
> Corky: ok ok I will lol
> Corky: she'll marry me one of these days I tell ya
> Lulu: . o O (you plus a chocolate fudge cake)

Starting from the top, Bartender is a so-called add-on (user interface modification to enhance game play), which has to do with the player's action bars (command shortcuts linked to abilities and spells). To the question of whether she uses Bartender, Corky plays on its literal meaning, "no I drink from the bottle". Key bindings are keyboard shortcuts, or so called hot keys. Dorian says that he "never had any problems with bindings", which Corky counters with "what kinda ropes do you use?", moving the conversation from technical terminology to SM practices. This move from the technical to the sexual becomes evident in Dorian's comment "omg, someone needs to get laid", which prompts a third character Ilshenar exclaim "go watch some Nigella!", throwing the queen of gastro-porn – Nigella Lawson – into the mix. Corky flips the argument by claiming "she'll marry me one of these days I tell ya", a comment caught by myself pondering ". o O (you plus a chocolate fudge cake)". What this excerpt captures, apart from its clever twists and turns between technology and sexuality, is the type of atmosphere typical of the guild. Sexual connotations are foundational – as is pace, timing, playfulness, and wit. Part of the comedy in this exchange has to do with how Nigella is positioned as something of a gay icon among the British men (in particular) of the guild. Nigella is a phenomenon of the British TV world of cooking – a saucy, beautiful, ironic 'domestic goddess' – with a sensual relationship to cooking and eating, as well as

a flirtatious rapport with the camera. The draw for a gay audience may be femininity as excess, bordering on drag. But it may also be her quite vulnerable, human side and way of being nothing but a 'real' woman, coupled with a shameless pleasure in outrageously rich, creamy, buttery food. The amount of fat in her food is in and of itself a clear break with health norms and as such bound to appeal to other norm breakers.

Sometimes the queering of sexuality and desire in the guild goes full circle, and ends up looking amusingly straight, at least on the surface:

> Stalagmite: Anna!
> Stalagmite: where you been all my life?
> Lulu: :)
> Corky: haha =)
> Corky: F R A K
> Lulu: huh
> Lulu: the lock?
> Clym: u ok anna ?
> Corky: yes THE LOCK
> Corky: I am officially OWNED for the 10th time
> Stalagmite: i thought you were owned already? :D
> Corky: he has full set of arena clothes on the coward!
> Stalagmite: or is our love affair just a farce?
> Stalagmite: TT
> Corky: haha no but you own me in a good way, not in the affliction way
> Stalagmite: but i certainly afflict things on you *waggles eyebrows*
> Corky: ;P

This scene is played out primarily between a man and a woman who have a standing joke about being 'married' to one another in the game (which in and of itself is a rather queer, given that same-sex desire is the ground rule). Since Anna has a girlfriend in the guild (Sara), there will be occasional bursts of pretend jealousy on the part of the man, and threats of breaking into the two women's wedding in the style of the vicar from the BBC series "The Vicar of Dibley" performing Yvonne Fair's "It should have been me". This is the background to the greeting "Anna! where you been all my life?" answered with a laugh. Then, the dialoged turns, "F R A K" (a modified version of 'fuck' borrowed from the Sci-Fi series Battlestar Galactica, which cleverly slips by the in-game censorship of 'bad' words) explained by the situation of being "officially OWNED for the 10th time" by a "lock". The server in question is of the player versus player variety, and hence allowing combat between players. The player repeatedly attacking Anna is apparently hard to beat, due to the character – a warlock – carrying powerful armor ("a full set of arena clothes"). "I am officially OWNED" is immediately picked up by Stalagmite's "i thought you were owned already", reminding her of who has a claim on whom, "or is our love affair just a farce?". The answer to this, "you own me in a good way, not in the affliction way" throws in the term affliction (which is a particular build for warlocks), only to

get it back with the flirty backspin: "but i certainly afflict things on you". At first look, such male on female flirtations may seem nothing but straight, but in the context of this guild they become something different altogether. The basic understanding is that these flirts have little bearing on 'reality', and it is precisely this loose connection with the 'real' that makes such moments safe in a way they would not have been otherwise.

The Others is in many ways a safe haven of sorts, a home away from home in *World of Warcraft*, a place with warm hearts and sharp tongues. It is a place with plenty or room for queerly playing up against, or transgressing the implied or ideal player. Then again, queer runs the risk of loosing its critical potential if no distinctions are made between different ways of embodying – or playing – queer. Within the guild, sexuality is performed as a playful point of connection between players. At the same time, sexuality operates as a community border practice, as continuous negotiations of belonging (and of not belonging). No matter how GLBT-inclusive, this place is not without its own norms, regulations, and expectations. As a female player of *World of Warcraft*, you quickly get used to being mistaken for a 'dude' in random play situations, no matter the shape of your on-screen body. You are the exception that proves the rule, but in embodying that exception you simultaneously prove the rule wrong. The situation in *The Others* is of course very different, and yet in terms of gender, there is an interesting similarity. As a queer woman, it becomes evident that you do not embody the imagined *gay*mer:

> Lulu: how do you like your warrior?
> Beastlord: who? lol
> Lulu: Foliage, sorry
> Beastlord: he is a rogue
> Foliage: I'm a she and a rogue

This scene could have taken place just about anywhere in the game, and it is indicative of the default mode in terms of gender. If in mainstream *World of Warcraft* culture, the ideal or implied player is a player who is male and straight, in *The Others*, you are often assumed to be a gay man (until proved differently). Or, you run the risk of being referred to as "one of the boys":

> Brazil: the shaman in my group whispered me "is your guild nice? can i join" and I'm like "it's kinda a special guild" "whaddya mean?" "let's just say unless you've searched precisely for it, you don't wanna join"
> Ilshenar: =P
> Shylanderan: want me to make it clear to him what kinda guild it is brazil :P
> Brazil: he was so shocked that someone actually came to help out
> Fudgefatale: normally when someone asks me, i just ask them "you like to kiss other boys too?"
> Lulu: or girls! geeeeeeeee

This is a rather sweet story about an encounter in a temporary group of players. By being kind and helping out, Brazil apparently made an impression on a particular player in this group, which gave rise to the question "is your guild nice? can i join". Brazil answered in a rather veiled manner "it's kinda a special guild […] let's just say unless you've searched precisely for it, you don't wanna join", which made Shylanderan wonder if he should "make it clear to him what kinda guild it is". This, in turns, prompted Fudgefatale to speak up about his own strategy "normally when someone asks me, i just ask them 'you like to kiss other boys too?'", at which point I could no longer stay quiet: "or girls! geeeeeeeee". In this exchange, not only are every other player assumed to be male, but the guild itself is defined as a place for boys who like to kiss other boys. Female players, along with girls who like to kiss other girls, are not even on the map. It is important to point out that *The Others* is not an environment that is hostile toward women. I, or someone like me, will most likely feel welcome, even wanted. There is also a certain amount of pride in having a few powerful female players, and "pretty lesbians". But it is equally important to point out that gender makes a difference to queer cultures, desires, and orientations. Not everything is fluid. In the above example, male players are oriented toward each other, drawn to each other, desiring each other. As a woman, you are automatically less interesting (and yet interesting, since you are different). A woman does not enter the picture as love interest, neither as sex object, but perhaps as friend. She is one of the boys – yet different from the boys. The objects of our orientations matter to how we turn and to whom, they matter to how we move through and inhabit the (game) world.

AT THE LIMIT OF REBELLION

> Slap: well, gotta go, gonna meet a lesbian couple who is gonna talk about how they got pregnant, a red quest. guess i'm one of few lesbians who are not into babies. babes on the other hand…

With a few keystrokes, this excerpt establishes talking to lesbians about pregnancies as "a red quest". Quests are assignments that characters need to accomplish to advance in the game, and the color red is an indicator of the most difficult level of quests for a character. To define talk about pregnancies with (other) lesbians as the most difficult of tasks is explained by the utterance: "guess i'm one of few lesbians who are not into babies. babes on the other hand…" This comment reads as an oppositional, queer strategy within a lesbian community where queer uses of time and place run side by side with assimilation, reproductive sexuality and family-making. Queer theorist Judith Halberstam [6] writes about queer timelines and queer spatialities as those alternative ways of leading lives that breaks with the heterosexual imperative of marriage, respectability, reproduction, longevity, and economic safety. In contrast to gays and lesbians choosing to raise children in ways that mimic those of the heterosexual

nuclear family, there is the stretched out 'adolescence' of queer cultures. To be in your forties (as is the case with Slap), and more interested in 'babes' than 'babies', is using ones time differently. It is a use of time that goes against the idea of 'the biological clock', a time that instead of being reproductive would easily be deemed un-productive or counter-productive by majority cultures. Similarly, one could argue that playing games is a queer use of time, a time that invests in playful pleasures for their own sake, a use of time that would be considered un-productive or counter-productive by majority cultures.

Transgressive play is crucial to understand game culture, Aarseth [1] argues, since it is "a symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game, a (perhaps illusory) way for the played subject to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness" (p. 132). In a similar way, I would like to argue that queer play is critical to understand how sexuality comes to matter in game cultures. Queer play is a symbolic act of rebellion, of disobedience, of deviance from dominating ways of inscribing and imagining 'the player'. Queer play is a (perhaps illusory) way for players that are 'out of line' to regain a sense of identity and belonging. Queer play is evidence of how the straightening devices of online games, such as *World of Warcraft*, sometimes fail to regulate playing bodies. As such, queer play reorients players, desires, and shapes the bodies at play differently. Then again, there is doubtlessly a danger in being seduced by transgression. At the end of her essay "Is Transgression Transgressive?" Elizabeth Wilson [16] concludes: "We transgress in order to insist that we are there, that we exist, and to place a distance between ourselves and the dominant culture. But we have to go further – we have to have an idea of how things could be different, otherwise transgression is mere posturing." (p. 116). Wilson argues for political strategies that not only aim to transgress rules and norms, but to *transform* them. Queer play in guilds such as *The Others* may not profoundly transform the game world. On the other hand, *The Others* is not a self-contained universe. There will always be 'queer leakages' [11] into more mainstream game contexts. What this ethnographic work suggests is that there are queer uses of game spaces that in significant ways make visible – and play around with – norms and expectations that are shaping what online game communities are, and what they could be.

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