VIRTUAL PEOPLE

HUMAN-IMAGE RELATIONSHIPS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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of the Australian National University

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DECLARATION

Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is the result of original work carried out by the author.

Stephanie Betz

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ABSTRACT

Images are proliferating in the world at ever-increasing speeds. As digital media become ever more deeply intertwined with our everyday lives, so too do the many figured images – such as fictional characters and personae – that inhabit that media. Given the increasingly significant role that media play in shaping our sense of self, other, and world, what effect could these figured images have in our lives and, more broadly, the world? This thesis explores the influence that figured images can have through an ethnographic study of the relationships conducted with and through fictional characters among fans of the *Dragon Age* series of computer games who use Tumblr, an image-heavy social networking site. It takes as its point of departure the understanding that we each live in an *image world* – a phenomenal world within the globalised mediascape that is shaped by the particular concatenation of media products we consume – and asks: a) Why do fans respond as if the computer-generated characters of *Dragon Age* are real? b) What effects do the relationships that fans develop with these characters have in their lives and identities? and c) How do these relationships orient fans in relation to the broader world?

Based on 14 months of participant observation on Tumblr, supplemented with an anonymous online survey, online interviews, and group meet-ups in six cities around the world, I argue that figured images can be powerful actants – what I am calling *virtual people* – in globe-spanning networks of images and humans. I argue that, rather than being mere vehicles for linguistic meaning, figured images evidence a form of agency that is virtually intersubjective in its address to the sociocorporeal perception of their beholders. Through this agency, images take an active and spontaneous role in people's lives, opening new personal horizons, refiguring our perspectives on social issues, and testing our ethical positions. The result is that we may not be quite the same person, or inhabit quite the same world, after our engagement with figured images.

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A Note on Names and Sources

The fast pace of technological development and the corresponding emergence of new social contexts mean that the bureaucratic machinery of institutional ethics committees often lags in its interpretation of ethical questions for contemporary social research. This is particularly evident in the digital context of the Internet, in which complex questions of what is public and private are constantly evolving. According to my institution's ethics committee, what is password-protected is private and what is not is public. By such a formulation, anything that takes place on Tumblr is public. It is my contention that this does not reflect the way in which Internet communication is experienced in practice.

Although more and more people are becoming aware of the risks involved with personal disclosure online, the value of personal disclosure in forming relationships and communities means that it will most likely continue, with both written and unwritten rules intended to limit its dissemination. The Internet, and particularly the emergence of social media, has blurred the boundaries of private and public such that they can no longer (if they ever could) be considered a static dichotomy (Sheller 2004). This is a state of affairs recognised by digital ethnographers Larissa Hjorth and Michael Arnold (2013), in their identification of 'intimate publics' as a new form of public sphere. Public and private exist on a "messy, breached, porous and shifting" (Hjorth and Arnold

2013: 10) continuum along which different contexts, activities, and content are dynamically located.

The breakdown of simplistic understandings of public and private is acknowledged by the Association of Internet Researchers' (Markham and Buchanan 2012: 7) guide to ethical decision making in Internet-based research, which notes that "social, academic, or regulatory delineations of public and private as a clearly recognisable binary no longer holds in everyday practice". The guide emphasises ongoing reflexive consideration of the research's impact upon participants throughout the research process by providing a series of issues for consideration rather than a definitive code of practice.[1] I have adopted this approach in considering the issue of privacy in the nominally public context of Tumblr.

Many fans wish to keep their fan practices and identity separate from what they often call their 'real life' identity, engaging in boundary work to keep fan contexts and 'real life' distinct (see Taylor 2009 on boundary work in virtual worlds). As Busse and Hellekson (2012: 39) note in their consideration of ethics in scholars' use of fan works, "a cardinal fannish sin is to publicly link a real-life name with a pseudonymous identity". There are many reasons that a fan may wish to remain pseudonymous:

> Fans' prose and images may be sexually explicit; some depict characters in situations or poses that might disturb or offend readers; and many rely on copyrighted or trademarked characters, the legal status of which is unclear to many fans, who are keen to avoid the interest of the property's owners and the cease-and-desist letters that may follow. Some have not shared their fannish interests with their families, much less their employers, and they wish to avoid their fan artworks [including fanfiction] popping up on Google searches of their names. (Busse and Hellekson 2012: 39)

[1] The Australian Anthropological Society's Code of Ethics similarly acknowledges that "consent in research is a process, not a one-off event, and may require renegotiation over time" (Australian Anthropological Society 2012, section 3.4(c)).

It is important to respect the wishes of fans in this respect. Protecting the identity of fans is nevertheless made challenging because, in practice, 'real life' and fannish practices cannot be strictly separated. The two necessarily blur in the interpretation of works, which are read partly through one's particular experiences, as is often made explicit by fans when disclosing personal details of their 'real life' to justify their reading of the games.

Acknowledging the complex issues of public and private communication online, I opened a conversation about the nature of Tumblr as a platform with my research participants. The overwhelming response that I received was that Tumblr is, and should be treated as, a public environment. Such a response indicates to me an increasing awareness of the visibility of online actions. However, even though fans broadly acknowledge Tumblr as a public space, I do not take it to mean that anything published on that site is fair game. Fans on Tumblr have developed their own customs for indicating the variable nature of the posts they make, with sensitive posts tagged with delimiting statements such as 'personal' and 'do not reblog', or with notes to themselves, such as 'to be deleted later', that indicate their intention to remove the post from the Tumblr archive. The community expectation was that these tags were to be respected by not reblogging (that is, further disseminating) these posts.

I regard the use of tags such as 'personal', 'do not reblog', and 'to be deleted later' to be clear in their intention to exclude posts from being part of the general conversation (and, in the case of 'to be deleted later', the permanent record). Acknowledging this intention, whilst recognising the importance of stories in ascertaining the often deeply personal significance that *Dragon Age* has for its fans, I have sought permission to use any posts tagged as such. Complementing this approach, I treat posts that are tagged for fandom-wide visibility, such as those that use

the tag ‘Dragon Age’ and its variants, to be intended to be publicly distributed and accessible. In these cases, where posts include personal details I have used pseudonyms (different to those used by fans) and paraphrased or combined quotations to make the post more difficult to find using search engines in order to protect the identity of the fan.

A second, related issue is the status of writing on the Internet and how scholars regard it. Can all writing on the Internet be regarded as publications in the traditional sense, and treated as such by scholars? As an ethnographer, I agree with Busse and Hellekson’s (2012: 39) assertion that “fans ought to be treated differently [than traditionally published authors] because real harm, such as loss of livelihood, could come to them if the researcher is not careful”. Given that much fan activity takes place on a public platform, how should we treat these communications? I have taken the position that the textual communication of fans on a site like Tumblr should be treated more like face-to-face conversation than traditional print publications, and I have not provided citations to individual posts. I have also silently corrected spelling and grammatical errors for the sake of readability. This decision is similar to that adopted by Busse and Hellekson (2012: 48) who argue against providing direct URLs to posts, noting that:

> Fannish blogs freely connect fan works, meta commentary, and an individual’s personal life. Thus, when a researcher sends someone to a fan’s site to source a fan artwork, anyone who follows the link may also come across deeply personal information. With enough clues dropped, and with publicly available information… it may be possible to infer identity…

However, Busse and Hellekson have chosen to cite fan *works* (such as fanfiction and fan art) by platform and pseudonym. This acknowledges the fan’s moral ownership of the work while trusting that the majority of readers will not care to put in the work to track down the original source. I have adopted this same approach for the reproduction of fan works throughout this thesis, and have sought permission to use such works in this manner wherever possible.

Figure 1: A screengrab of a series of moving images depicting a scene from the South Park episode, Imaginationland: Episode III (Season 11, Episode 12, 2007) Originally posted by marbledoll (Tumblr)

INTRODUCTION

> For one to whom the real world becomes real images,
> mere images are transformed into real beings.
> (Debord 1977: Thesis 18)

Early on in my fieldwork, a scene from the cartoon *South Park* was captured in a set of eight moving images and circulated among my friends on the Tumblr social networking site (see Figure 1 on facing page). In it, the character Kyle Broflovski is addressing a room full of people, arguing for the reality of fictional characters:

> I think they are real. It's all real. Think about it. Haven't Luke Skywalker and Santa Claus affected your lives more than most people in this room? I mean, whether Jesus is real or not, he has had a bigger impact on the world [t]han any of us have. And the same could be said for Bugs Bunny, and Superman, and Harry Potter. They've changed my life, changed the way I act on the Earth. Doesn't that make them kind of 'real'? They might be imaginary, but they're more important than most of us here. And they're all gonna be around long after we're dead. So in a way, those things are more realer [sic] than any of us. (Parker and Stone 2007)

A cartoon character arguing for the reality of other imagined people seemed to strike a nerve. It was shared, liked, and commented on almost 27,000 times, including by my friends, who are avid fans of the *Dragon Age* series of computer games. As I continued my 14 months of fieldwork among *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr, Kyle's argument frequently came to mind as I heard story after story about the active role that the fictional characters from the *Dragon Age* games played in people's lives. For some, the characters provided affection and companionship in a time of need; for others, routes to revisit and address past traumas; and for yet others, they provided models for

imagining a brighter future. The characters provided some fans of the game with a means of exploring their evolving gender and sexual identities, and provided others a way to grapple with complex issues such as terrorism, racism, and mental illness. For many, the characters opened their eyes to issues of social justice in the broader world. Both the *South Park* scene and the multitude of stories that I heard throughout my fieldwork raise interesting questions about the role that characters play in our lives, questions with broad implications when considering the extent to which communications media permeate contemporary society. As I shall argue in this thesis, the impact of characters is not constrained to the personal life of an individual; relationships with characters, even if they are considered to be fictional (a contestable category), reverberate out into the broader world with very real effects.

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the relationships conducted with and through characters among fans of the *Dragon Age* series of computer games who use Tumblr, a fast-paced, image-heavy social networking site. It emerges from 14 months of participant observation among *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr between 2013 and 2014, supplemented by an anonymous online survey, online interviews, and face-to-face meetings with fans in Australia, the United States of America (United States), and the United Kingdom.

Although fandom may, at first blush, appear to be a niche or even deviant phenomenon, it is my contention that fandom is a heightened form of a ubiquitous human relationship with images. As communication media become ever more deeply intertwined with our everyday lives, so too do the many fictional characters that inhabit that media. Studying fandom offers insights into the way that social forms are changing, as media images increasingly populate our lifeworlds through dense layers of communication technology. I am interested in what fan relationships with computer-

generated characters can tell us more broadly about human-image relationships in this highly mediated, and increasingly global, context.

In this thesis, I argue that characters are powerful actants – what I call *virtual people* – in globe-spanning networks of images and humans, and have real social effects in helping shape people's sense of self, other, and world. In the specific ethnographic context of *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr, my research asks: Why do fans act as if the computer-generated characters of *Dragon Age* are real? What effects do relationships with these characters have in the lives and identities of fans? and, How do these relationships orient fans in relation to the broader world?

The title of this thesis – *Virtual People* – refers to the person-like status and agency that the characters from *Dragon Age* exhibit in the lives of their fans as images. I am here drawing on the ambiguity of the term 'virtual', which derives from the Latin *virtus*, referring to strength, manliness, and (in the medieval period) virtue (Boellstorff 2008: 18-19, Ryan 2001, Shields 2003). Although strongly associated today with computer simulation[2], the term dates back to the 15th century in the sense of "that [which] is such in essence, potentiality, or effect, although not in form or actuality" (Oxford English Dictionary 2013: n.p.). In colloquial use, virtual is used to refer to that which is 'almost-so'. In each of these meanings, the virtual "connotes approaching the actual *without arriving there*" (Boellstorff 2008: 19).

My use of the term is intended to evoke three of the manifold meanings of the term: simulation, potential, and effect. In the first instance, the title refers to the

[2] The Oxford English Dictionary (2013) defines '*the* virtual' in the definitive sense as "that which is simulated by computer technology".

simuloids (Csordas 2002) – or simulated people – of the computer games. As I shall discuss in Chapter 3, many of the markers of personhood to which we respond in actual human beings are simulated in the digital images of computer game characters. In the second instance, it refers to the potential that is immanent in all images by virtue of their incompleteness. As I shall discuss further in Chapter 2, every image is a "knot of tendencies or forces" (Lévy 1998: 24) awaiting actualisation through the mysterious alchemy that is the meeting of image with spectator. This potential is distinct from what Deleuze referred to as "the possible" because it does not have a predetermined form (Lévy 1998: 24): it is coproduced by image and spectator in the moment of their encounter. Thus, the title *Virtual People* gestures towards the idea that the form that the simulated people of *Dragon Age* take is undetermined until the moment of their encounter with a fan. And finally, my use of the term *virtual* in the sense of effect, or 'in effect', references the person-like status and agency of the characters in the lives of their fans. Drawing on the idea that agency can only be assigned *after the fact* to people (or things) who have initiated causal events (Gell 1998, see full discussion in Chapter 3), I shall argue throughout this thesis that the influence that the character images exert in the lives of their fans is, in effect (i.e. virtually), that of another, actual person.

My use of the term 'virtual' puts into play the relationship between the virtual, the real, and the actual (Deleuze 1994). Along with the likes of anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2008), sociologist Rob Shields (2003), philosopher Pierre Lévy (1998), and narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan (2001), my research contests the opposition that is sometimes still made between the virtual and the real.[3] As Shields (2003: 19) notes,

[3] For example, visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999: 90, my emphasis) argues that, "*by definition* virtuality is an image or space that *is not real* but appears to be".

"'Virtual' is often meant to signify an absence, unreality or non-existence. Everyday talk in the media equates the 'real' with concreteness, embodiment, tangible presence and reliability." By emphasising the social efficacy of characters, I am arguing for their reality: their immateriality does not preclude a very real existence, with very real effects. As Deleuze (1994: 208, original emphasis) has argued, "[t]he virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual. *The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual*." The actual is that which has a concrete manifestation while the virtual is intangible, but both are forms of real existence.[4] While the virtual is sometimes used to refer solely to the intangible forms that are produced through computer simulation, my use of the term is intended to suggest the full range of immaterial cultural products that shape our lives. This brings virtuality to the heart of anthropological inquiry. As Boellstorff (2008: 237) notes, "Since humans are always crafting themselves through culture, they have always been virtual. *The virtual is the anthropological*."

This thesis speaks to concerns that are emerging across a range of fields within the social sciences, including non-representational theory (Thrift 2008, Vannini 2014), actor-network theory (Latour 1993, 2005), and affect theory (Ahmed 2014, Papacharissi 2015), through its focus on the agency of networked images in their affective address to the viewer's body. Affective relationships with figured images are a particularly important area of research because they are implicated, through their address to the body, in mediating and exploring political change, from the level of individual lives to the broader body politic (Mirzoeff 1995). As figured images become more intertwined

[4] When I refer to the colloquial use of the term 'real', such as in 'real life,' I will indicate this by using inverted commas. Discussion of the meaning of the colloquial term 'real life' can be found in Chapter 1.

with our lives, and ever more intelligent, these relationships will grow increasingly complex. It is important also, however, to note the limitations of this thesis.

Although concerned with people's relationships with characters from a video game, this thesis primarily engages with people's visual and textual practices on social media *after* having played the game rather than the process of playing the game itself. At the time that I started fieldwork in 2013, *Dragon Age 2*, the latest game in the series, had already been out for two years. Although some people were still playing the game, and new fans entered the discussion from time to time, the majority of my participants kept up their connection to the game through fan practices on social media. As a result, a phenomenological engagement with the process of playing the game, with all of its attendant dimensions of experience, is not within the scope of this thesis. This is not to suggest that these elements are not a crucial part of people's attachment to and engagement with the fictional characters from the games, but that these dimensions of experience were not available as an object of research except when fans raised them as a subject of discussion within the social media context. Unfortunately, perhaps in part due to the intensely experiential nature of these elements as well as the length of time that had passed since the game's release, they were not a common topic of discussion. Instead, it was the characters, in both pictorial images and narratives, that had longevity in fans' practices related to the games – and therefore are the focus of my thesis.

In this chapter, I firstly contextualise my research by considering how technological developments in the availability and distribution of images have altered our understanding and experience of the world. Secondly, I introduce the image theory with which I have approached this study. Thirdly, I address anthropology's engagement with images, and position myself within the existing literature. Finally, I outline the structure of this thesis.

THE INDIVIDUALISATION OF IMAGES

The increasing speed and scale by which images are able to be produced and distributed has had a profound impact, not only upon how we relate to such images, but also in how we understand and relate to the world that they both shape and reflect. In the last two centuries, communication technology has rapidly advanced from the printing press, camera, telegraph, and telephone, through film, radio, television, mobile phones, and the Internet. Each of these technologies has reduced the importance of geographic distance by allowing ideas, images, and symbols to easily cross the world – in more recent times, almost instantaneously. In the digital age, the density and speed of these communication networks has resulted in globalised media images becoming ubiquitous in our lives, such that the contemporary age is commonly characterised as being 'saturated' by a 'torrent' of media images (see Askew 2002, Calvino 1988, Gitlin 2001, Spitulnik 1993).

The increasing speed, scale, and geographic spread of image distribution is associated with profound social transformations. Drawing partially from Marshall McLuhan's (1994: 8) thesis that the "message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs," sociologist John Thompson argues that communication media are more than simple distribution channels for symbolic content. Instead, they involve "the creation of new forms of action and interaction… new kinds of social relationship and new ways of relating to oneself and others" (Thompson 1995: 4). One of the ways in which the density of communication technologies have changed our relationship with the world is through the development of what Thompson (1995: 34) calls "mediated worldliness," whereby "our sense of the world which lies beyond the sphere of our personal experience, and our sense of our place within this world, are increasingly shaped by mediated symbolic forms".

Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991: 4) has similarly argued that the global dissemination of media products has led to "mediated experience", with communications media providing the symbolic fodder with which we construct our understanding of self, others, and world. This is not restricted to Western, post-industrial societies: anthropologist Faye Ginsburg (2003: n.p.) has observed that:

> We live in a world in which increasingly, people learn of their own and other cultures and histories through a range of visual media – film, television, and video – that have emerged as powerful cultural forces in the late twentieth century.

Indeed, media anthropology has demonstrated that it is through mediascapes (Appadurai 1996) that people the world over – whether in an Upper Egyptian village (Abu-Lughod 1997), postcolonial Delhi (Mankekar 1999), the South Indian city of Madurai (Dickey 1993), or an email discussion list (Bird 2003) – construct and inhabit their particular "imagined worlds" (Appadurai 1996: 33).

This differs from earlier time periods because "as individuals gained access to media products, they were able to take some distance from the symbolic content of face-to-face interaction and from the forms of authority which prevailed in the locales of everyday life" (Thompson 1995: 180). The range of extra-local images available through the globalised mediascape means that identity increasingly becomes something that one must consciously construct, rather than simply receive. Giddens (1991: 5) argues that "against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience, self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour" and Thompson agrees, arguing that:

> In interpreting symbolic forms, individuals incorporate them into their own understanding of themselves and others. They use them as a vehicle for reflection and self-reflection, as a basis for thinking about themselves, about others and about the world to which they belong (Thompson 1995: 42).

The combination of all of these factors means that "we live 'in the world' in a different sense from previous eras of history" in the sense that "although everyone lives a local life, phenomenal worlds for the most part are truly global" (Giddens 1991: 187).

Writing at the very beginning of the mass adoption of personal computers and the Internet, Giddens' (1991) and Thompson's (1995) respective concepts of mediated experience and worldliness need to be adapted and extended for the contemporary age: we live 'in the world' in a different way in the 21st century than we did for most of the 20th century. Although there is a long history of the 'mediatisation' of society (Hjarvard 2013), the contemporary age introduces a different character to our experience of the world, brought about by the increasing ability to access highly individualised media sources.

For most of the 20th century, images were reliably consumed on a mass scale through newspapers, film, radio, and (later) television. While these mass forms of media are still critical sources of imagery[5], the lower cost of production and distribution associated with computers and the Internet have changed the media ecology, allowing for the flourishing of immense numbers of image sources with correspondingly small audiences. Decreasing costs have made the creation of narrowly-targeted media products financially viable, what Chris Anderson (2007) has called the rise of the 'long tail' of the media market, as well as enabled people to create and distribute their own media products outside of traditional media institutions.[6] The ability to pick and choose within this vast array of image sources means that the media images with which we construct our identities and worldview are becoming increasingly individualised. Media studies scholar Mark Deuze (2011: 139, original emphasis) has argued that:

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[5] McQuail (2010: 4) notes that "the mass media are [still] for most people the main channel of cultural representation and expression, and the primary source of images of social reality and materials for forming and maintaining social identity".

[6] The dynamics of social media mean that such independent media productions can sometimes achieve a reach comparable to that of high budget production companies.

> In today's media culture… people increasingly move through the world (more or less deliberately) assembling a deeply individualised media system – in other words: living in their own *personal information space*…

Rather than conceptualising this experience within the rather abstract terms of an 'information space', I suggest that we are living within increasingly individualised *image worlds*.

I define an image world as the phenomenal world within the globalised mediascape that is shaped by the particular concatenation of media products an individual chooses to consume. I find it fruitful to compare my notion of image worlds with Arjun Appadurai's concepts of mediascapes. Appadurai (1996: 35) describes mediascapes as "large and complex repertoires of images, narratives, and ethnoscapes" that provide much of the symbolic resources (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which people imagine their lives and that of others. My notion of image worlds is closely related; however, where the notion of mediascapes seems to suggest, by its very construction, a wide view (as in a landscape) of the media as a globalised background to people's lives, the concept of the image world is intended to offer a closer picture. I use 'image world' to point to the cross-section of the global mediascape as an individual experiences it, according to the particular conjunction of media they access.

My formulation of 'image worlds' differs from Appadurai's (1996) concept of 'imagined worlds' in that it departs from the collective foundations of Benedict Anderson's (2006 [1983]) 'imagined communities'. Appadurai (1996: 33) defines imagined worlds as "the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe," and explicitly positions them as an extension of Anderson's imagined communities. Imagined communities are groupings of individuals who share a sense of identity based on mass media consumption, in spite of any geographic and social distances, and Anderson's

prototypical imagined community is that of the nation-state. Where Appadurai's concept of imagined worlds therefore implies a collective sense of identity established through the mass consumption of media, my use of 'image worlds' attempts to highlight the individualised manner in which we navigate globalised mediascapes today.

While the concept of individualised 'image worlds' might suggest a further exacerbation of the atomisation and societal fragmentation that has been associated with media since the late 19th century[7], they do not preclude the formation of collectivities. Indeed, the disjunctures between an individual's image world and those of the people in his or her immediate environment can be seen as a generative form of tension that impels individuals to seek out collectivities that are founded upon the portions of their image worlds that they share with others.

Whereas the original imagined community identified by Benedict Anderson (2006 [1983]) was the large and robust imagined community of the nation-state, emerging from mass forms of media such as the newspaper, radio, and television, the individualised image worlds of the digital age encourage the flowering of a multitude of small and, in many cases, transient imagined communities that last only for as long as the particular media in question is consumed and valued. When involving popular culture, these imagined communities are often called fandoms, but they similarly exist for news media (Gray 2007), 'high' culture (Benzecry 2011, Pearson 2007, Tulloch 2007), and even academic scholarship (McKee 2007). Within an increasingly

[7] The majority of social theorists from the late 19th to the mid-20th century argued that mass media, in conjunction with national institutions, encouraged the emergence of an atomised and alienated 'mass' society with weak social ties that could be easily manipulated (e.g. Kornhauser 1959, Mills 1956). For an updated version of this thesis, which brings it into the digital age, see Nie and Erbring (2000) and Putnam (2001).

globalised mediascape, these new forms of imagined communities are frequently transnational, involving participants from many different geographic locations. The patchwork nature of image worlds and the fractional way in which they overlap encourages the individual to identify with multiple imagined communities, both face-to-face and telemediated, impeding the kind of collective imaginary that would allow for the formation of an 'imagined world' in the same sense as an 'imagined community.' The result is that our sense of inhabiting a shared world is likely to be at least partially disembedded from local face-to-face contexts, only to be re-embedded in multiple, geographically-disparate communities founded on overlapping image worlds.

The figured images that populate image worlds – such as fictional characters and celebrities – have, I would suggest, a greater and more direct influence upon our lives in this context than in the earlier age of mass media. As 'limited effects' research showed in the 1940s (see Chapter 2), mass communications meant that images were received and interpreted within the social context of an individual's face-to-face environment, diffusing their influence. With the increasing individualisation of images, and the resulting detachment of people's image worlds from their local context, images are increasingly encountered on their own terms – as virtual people – rather than being directly subject to the interpretive frame of an individual's immediate sociocultural environment. Small, multiple, and transient imagined communities do not reconstitute the mediating effect of the face-to-face environment in the mass communication era as they are partial, often disembedded, and predicated upon the participants finding value within those same media images.

Although human-image encounters are always pre-figured to some extent by the broader visual culture of which the individual is a part, it is my argument in this thesis that the contemporary environment leaves the intrinsically ambiguous shape of images

especially open to introducing new and unpredictable forms of value. In these circumstances, people's relationships with virtual people extend the sociocultural milieu beyond both face-to-face and telemediated relationships, introducing a *virtual milieu* that is active in the constitution of the broader world.

THE AMBIGUOUS SHAPE OF IMAGES

My use of the term 'image' in this thesis is carefully considered – because of, rather than in spite of, its profoundly polysemic nature in both popular and academic discourse. In 1986, W.J.T. Mitchell, a leading scholar in the interdisciplinary field of visual studies, noted that "we speak of pictures, statues, optical illusions, maps, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, spectacles, projections, poems, patterns, memories, and even ideas as images" (1986: 9); later also recognising relatively new forms of DNA modelling as a type of image (Mitchell 2005). This diversity in the common usage of 'image' is reflected in the Oxford English Dictionary's entry for the same, which includes 11 different definitions.[8] Following Mitchell, I understand images in the broadest sense of the term, as a 'far-flung family' that incorporates all of these diverse

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[8] According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2009), 'image,' taken as a noun, can refer to:

1. A representation of the external form of a person or thing in art;
   - 1.1. A visible impression obtained by a camera, telescope, microscope, or other device, or displayed on a computer or video screen;
   - 1.2. An optical appearance or counterpart produced by light from an object reflected in a mirror or refracted through a lens;
   - 1.3. *Mathematics* A point or set formed by mapping from another point or set;
   - 1.4. *Computing* An exact copy of a computer's hard disk, made for backing up data or setting up new machines;
   - 1.5. A mental representation or idea;
   - 1.6. A person or thing that closely resembles another;
   - 1.7. Semblance or likeness;
   - 1.8. An idol;
2. The general impression that a person, organisation, or product presents to the public; and/or
3. A simile or metaphor.

usages, and more. It is important to recognise that media do not need to be purely of one form or another in order to contain images: “all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no 'purely' visual or verbal arts” (Mitchell 1994: 5).

I have approached the characters from *Dragon Age* through this broad concept of images because of the way in which it captures the continuities and disjunctures of people’s relations with media as technology has developed. While recognising that computer game characters are complex constructions made up of visual imagery and associations, animated gestures, vocal tones, social scripts, and genre conventions, among other elements, I suggest that the overall effect of their presentation is the production of an *image*: that is, an *impression* of a character. In deploying images as a heuristic, I am explicitly drawing connections between people’s engagement with the digital images of contemporary computer games and aesthetic responses to static imagery in quite different contexts and earlier ages. Doing so allows us to discern the distinctive elements of people’s relationships with *digital* images by contextualising them within a longer history of aesthetic response.

Understanding images as impressions elides the common-sense distinction between pictorial and non-pictorial images, captured in English in the definitional separation of *pictures* and *images*. ‘Pictures’ are images that are embedded in a visible medium, such as paintings, photographs, films, or computer screens, whereas the broader term ‘image’ refers to the existence that escapes this physical, visible manifestation. The image is the impression, not necessarily visual, in the consciousness of the beholder. When Mitchell proposed this distinction, he emphasised the immateriality of images compared to the materiality of pictures:

> I take [the English-language distinction between *picture* and *image*] in a vernacular, common-sense way, to designate the material object that contains the picture [sic], and the image itself. There is a sense in which the image is immaterial: it is the name of an

> apparition, a phenomenon, or maybe a relationship that occurs to a consciousness. It is an image for somebody, of something. But the picture is the material realisation: an actual photograph, a painting, or – to stretch the language – a statue. We can say in English, "You can hand a picture," but we don't hand an image. You can cut a picture in half, but what does it mean to cut an image in half? (Mitchell, cited in Elkins and Naef 2011: 28)

In other words, a picture is an image manifested in an object (the medium) that renders it visible: the image is *virtual* while the picture is *actual*. The picture does not encompass the image; images are "something inward and invisible" (Mitchell 1986: 39) that infuses but simultaneously escapes the materiality of a picture. This immateriality means that images are intermedial; they can move between and amongst pictorial and non-pictorial media, and are not restricted to the medium in which they are first encountered.[9]

This is not, however, to suggest that images are autonomous and free-floating phantasms; although images are immaterial, they are also always embodied – either in the artificial body of a picture or, as Hans Belting has astutely pointed out, "our bodies themselves operate as a living medium by processing, receiving, and transmitting images" (Belting 2011: 5). To implicate the body as the living medium of image is to embed images firmly within cultures. For an image to be actualised as an image requires a spectator to perceive it; to animate it, and allow it to move into our bodies. This is a profoundly symbolic act that is, as Belting (2011: 11) reminds us, "guided by cultural patterns and pictorial technologies" specific to our visual culture. In return,

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[9] It is perhaps significant that the immateriality or virtuality of the image is being recognised precisely when digital technology has destabilised notions of images as fixed objects. As Hansen (2004: 8) has argued, "following its digitisation, the image can no longer be understood as a fixed and objective viewpoint on 'reality'… since it is now defined precisely through its almost complete flexibility and addressability, its numerical basis, and its constitutive 'virtuality'". However, the intermediality of images does not mean that they remain unchanged between media. As Belting (2011: 5) has noted, images "may accumulate features and traces of several media in one and the same place".

through the act of image perception, images virtually colonise us. Mitchell (2005: 87) has memorably described images in this capacity as "quasi life-forms (like viruses) that depend on a host organism (ourselves), and cannot reproduce themselves without human participation". Since every picture is at the same time an image through the act of perception, and images are always embodied in artificial media and the living medium of the body, it is difficult, if not impossible, to maintain a conceptual distinction between them and, for the purposes of this thesis, I find it largely unproductive to do so.

The fuzziness of the term 'image', as compared to the seeming straight-forwardness of 'picture', is fitting as it accurately reflects the ambiguous edges of the images themselves, which always seem to creep out beyond the boundaries imposed upon them by either producers or receivers. Images are never complete in and of themselves; they act as nodes in a much broader network of human-image and image-image relations that make up our image culture, drawing on symbolic associations that, in their complexity and spontaneity, ultimately escape the control of producers and receivers alike. Pictures – the capturing of images in artificial bodies – can be read as an attempt to pin images down, to cut their dense network of associations and restrict their meaning to a definable association. But there is always, as Mitchell notes, a 'surplus' that escapes the boundaries drawn around images, and it is this nebulous and expansive quality of images that concerns me, as I shall argue (starting in Chapter 2) that it is the source of the social efficacy of images themselves.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENTS WITH IMAGES

Anthropology has always been concerned with images. Images, understood in the broadest sense, have been at the core of anthropological projects to understand the

phenomenal worlds of the cultural 'other'. From totems as collective images that make social life possible (Durkheim 1995), to the image of the witch, which explains and provides a way for the Azande to act in the face of misfortune (Evans-Pritchard 1976), to the treasury of images with which the bricoleur partakes in his cognitive projects (Lévi-Strauss 1966), anthropology has always been concerned with the power and efficacy of images. While, as discussed above, our relationship with images has changed alongside evolving media and communication technologies, a significant development that both deserves and has received anthropological attention (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1997, 2005, Appadurai 1996, Bird 2003, 2010, Dickey 1993, Ginsburg 2005, Ginsburg et al. 2002, Horst 2012, Mankekar 1999, Peterson 2003, Postill 2014, Spitulnik 1993), humanity's fundamental need for images as virtual partners with which to explore and represent self, other, and world has remained constant.

When we investigate the images that make up people's life-worlds, we are inquiring into their subjectivities. Previously, this has taken the form of structural analyses of particular societies but, although individuals' inner consciousnesses have largely remained *terra incognita* to anthropology (Rapport 2008), it is becoming increasingly necessary to investigate the individual permutations of a globalised imaginary in order to understand the way in which phenomenal worlds are organised in contemporary society. As discussed above, the difference that contemporary media and communication technology has brought about in this regard is not just that the repertoire of imagery that is 'ready to hand' (Heidegger 1962) for the intellectual bricoleur is now far greater in scope than it once was, but that people's image worlds are becoming increasingly individualised.

Concomitant with the increasing number of images available, there is an increasing plurality of social groupings – transient, fragmentary, and disembedded – as

people seek out imagined collectivities based upon shared fractions of their image worlds. In the reverse direction, these collectivities "have the additional complexity that, in them, diverse local experiences of taste, pleasure, and politics can crisscross with one another, thus creating the possibility of convergences in translocal social action that would otherwise be hard to imagine" (Appadurai 1996: 8). This mixing of local and transnational imagery gives the contemporary world of global flows the dynamic character that it holds today. Anthropologists have been involved in investigating these new forms of sociality since their early days, and interest in digital forms of ethnography is burgeoning (e.g. Baym 1999, 2010, Bird 2003, Boellstorff 2008, Coleman 2010, 2014, Escobar 1994, Gray and Driscoll 1992, Hakken 1999, Hine 2000, Horst and Miller 2012, Kelty 2008, Marshall 2007, Miller 2011, Miller and Slater 2001, Nardi 2010, Taylor 2009, Wilson and Peterson 2002).

Continued anthropological engagement with images is especially valuable at this point in time. In particular, the rich intellectual history of anthropology can help us to contextualise contemporary phenomenal worlds within a much broader archive of cross-cultural and historical analyses of cultural imaginaries. This perspective highlights both the continuities and discontinuities between past and contemporary social imaginaries, allowing us to take the measure of recent media and communication technology as only the latest evolution of a relationship with images that goes back to the dawn of human history. It also allows us to view Western cultures with the same anthropological eye as those of the other: "making the familiar strange and the strange familiar" (T.S. Eliot, cited in Spiro 1992: 53).

By positioning Western relationships with images as only one instance of a universal human behaviour, as John Caughey (1984) and Alfred Gell (1998) have independently done in their pioneering work in this area, we can peer past the Western

cultural myth that imagery has little to no power in contemporary society to acknowledge the very deep commonalities we share with human groups once considered primitive. It will also, I hope, challenge the notion that the particular types of relationships with images that I am studying – fans' relationships with figured imagery – are somehow deviant or pathological rather than a heightened form of a ubiquitous human relationship with images.

THESIS STRUCTURE

In Chapter 1, I introduce my fieldsite and outline my methodological approach based on the ethnographic observation that the convergent environment of social media sites like Tumblr challenges common-sense distinctions between fiction and fact, online and offline, image and reality. Reworking the concept of 'context collapse', I argue that the cultural logic of Tumblr implicitly posits a radical equality between images that flattens the distinctions of their originating contexts, revealing the complexity of the individualised image worlds by which we come to perceive and understand contemporary life. This demands a methodological approach that is flexible enough to 'follow' the network of images across traditional divides, such as genre and medium. I do this by following individuals' relationships with the character images from *Dragon Age* through social media and into a broader mediated worldliness.

In Chapter 2, I examine the way that media relationships have previously been analysed in scholarship, tracing the shifting location and understanding of agency in relation to producers and receivers, as technology has developed and intellectual paradigms have changed. Locating my perspective within the 'pictorial turn' (Mitchell 1994), I argue that images themselves exhibit agency by intervening in producer-receiver relationships. Despite evidence of the everyday workings of this power, I

argue that it has largely been ignored by media scholars who tend to view images only as passive carriers of encoded messages or, conversely, has been over-determined, with some commentators giving media images the ability to force people to act in certain ways – as in the debate about violent video games. Drawing on scholarship in art history and the anthropology of art, I articulate an alternative theoretical framework that acknowledges the limited agency of images, attributing it to our spontaneous, bodily responses to images as though they were actual people.

In Chapter 3, I expand upon this theoretical framework in the context of the new media environment. Exploring the strong emotional attachments that fans develop to the characters in the *Dragon Age* games, I argue that digital technology has fundamentally altered the image by allowing it to become truly interactive, magnifying the potential agency of images through their ability to *respond* to the spectator through their incorporation into the confines of the game. I argue that the social intelligibility of characters encourages fans to respond bodily to the person that appears to be (or to have left their trace) within the image. At the same time, the relatively limited agency of the player when engaging with the social contingencies of the game works to confirm the social realism of their virtual partners, encouraging fans to respond as though they were engaged in an intersubjective relationship.

I take this insight with me into Chapter 4, in which I examine how fans' relationships with the virtual people of *Dragon Age* provide an avenue for imaginatively reconfiguring their sense of self by offering a mirror with which to reflect on their past, present, and projected future. I argue that the 'double consciousness' with which fans regard the characters – that is, fans' bodily responses to the character images combined with the cognitive awareness that they are simulacra – creates the simultaneous identification and distanciation that is necessary for this reflexive identity work to take

place. In this capacity, fans' relationships with the characters confer an increased narrative agency upon the fan, often in the face of trauma, and therefore have profound and very real effects upon fans' lives.

Building upon these individual relationships with character images, I then zoom out to Tumblr, where fans re-imagine and re-image the characters from *Dragon Age*, who act as nodes in an online network of fans. In Chapter 5, I consider how the virtual body of Fenris, one of the characters from *Dragon Age 2*, becomes contested ground between fans as they debate embodied and linguistic understandings of self-identity. I argue that Fenris's virtual body mediates the actual bodies of fans as they debate the construction of transgender identity in contemporary society. Rather than functioning as a mere sign in an abstract debate, I argue that fans' autonomic perception of the character images means that the debate enters into their bodily self-perception as they unconsciously take Fenris's body into their own.

In Chapter 6, I continue to explore the way in which human-image relationships travel from the fictional world of the game into the broader world. I examine how different responses to the character of Anders are taken by fans to reflect divergent moral positions on the issues of terrorism and minority rights. I argue that the relationships fans develop with the virtual people of *Dragon Age*, and their ability to intervene in the game's world, heighten the moral stakes of the game, presenting a thought experiment through which fans can contemplate complex ethical questions. However, the partial nature of images means that this world is not shared equally by all fans of the game: as images address themselves in different ways to different fans, the game can appear quite differently to different spectators. The resulting conflicts between fans are often shockingly intense, reflecting the blurring of personal and

character identities as the hybridised characters/identities function as proxies for values and beliefs that are contingent upon fans' personal contexts.

Zooming out once again, in Chapter 7, I consider how relationships with fictional characters reflect on the relationships we may develop with distant others whom we only know through the globalised mediascape. Comparing fans' responses to the shooting of African American teenager Michael Brown with that of the systematic oppression of elves in *Dragon Age*, I argue that the distinction between fictional and non-fictional suffering is blurring as we encounter both through the same globalised communication networks. I suggest that the similarities between fan responses to these events result not from a naïve misapprehension of the fictional as 'real', but due to the similarities in the symbolic potential of these representations. However, the possibility for both fictional and non-fictional images to incite action raises questions about the potential for intersubjective encounters through transmitted imagery. Images of suffering run the risk of either becoming hyper-adaptable to the circumstances and issues privileged by distant receivers, leading to unpredictable results, or else falling flat. Either response, I suggest, indicates the limited and highly contingent potential of images to promote truly intersubjective relationships that span the globe; although we may share many of the same images, we do not live within a global village (McLuhan 1962, 1994).

I conclude my thesis by bringing these threads together to consider the broader implications of human-image relationships in the digital age. I argue that the agency exhibited by images challenges us to take them into account in anthropological analyses, going beyond both face-to-face and telemediated contexts to incorporate a *virtual* milieu. This is an undertaking that is becoming increasingly urgent as developments in machine learning enhance the social intelligence and responsiveness of

images. I briefly survey the nascent possibilities of human-image relationships in line with these technological developments, and suggest a number of directions for future research. Finally, I consider how this research reflects on the broader question of the relationship between images and humanity, arguing that people and images coproduce both one another and the world. Rather than providing an escape from the world, images are profoundly part of it – and anthropology must engage with this virtual milieu in order to come to terms with contemporary forms of subjectivity and relationality.

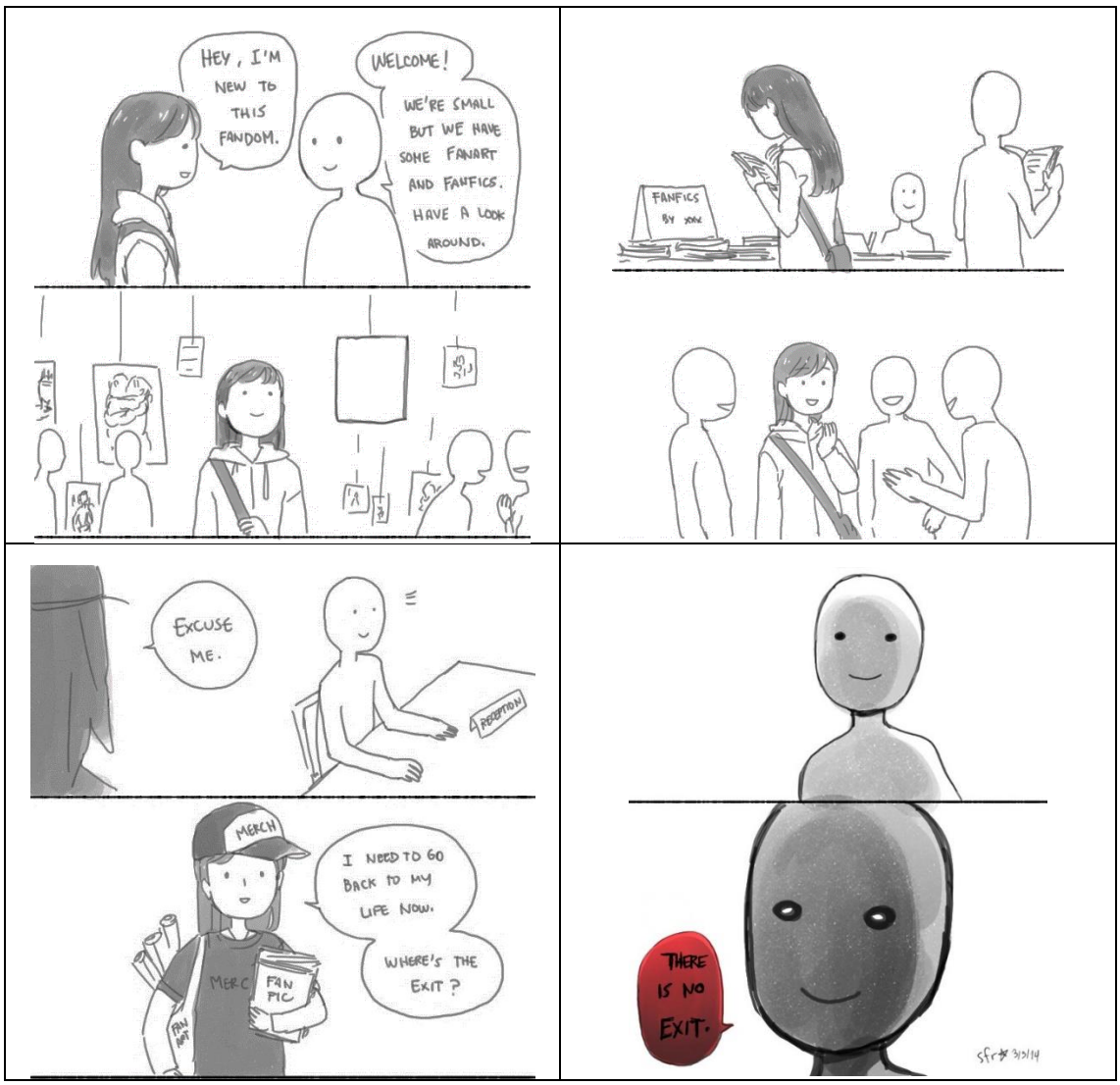

Figure 2: Untitled comic depicting entry into fandom, by Starfleetrambo (Tumblr) (One panel has been excluded for space)

1 THERE IS NO EXIT

There are jokes among fans on Tumblr about how fandom takes over your life. The comic in Figure 2 (on the facing page) highlights the innocence with which someone can enter into fandom only to find that, like the Hotel California, they can never leave. On one level, this jokingly refers to how fandom can quickly become an all-consuming hobby, with large amounts of time spent thinking, talking, and writing about the characters from a particular media franchise – sometimes to the detriment of other activities, such as work or study. On a deeper level, however, it is suggestive of the way in which passionate engagement with a media franchise can transform your perception and understanding of self, other, and world, such that it become an integral part of your life. As such, there is no leaving fandom to return to your 'real life' – it has become part of you.

I discovered *Dragon Age* fandom in 2011, after the release of the second game in the series. I had played *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009) two years previously and had been looking forward to its sequel, so when *Dragon Age 2* (BioWare 2011) was published in March 2011, I immediately started playing it. Halfway through the game, however, I found myself disappointed. Sara Hawke, the character I was playing, was largely unremarkable. Instead of fighting to defeat a great evil, like the protagonist in the first game, her concerns were much closer to home: everything Sara did was focused

on providing safety and security for her family and friends. It was a significant departure from its predecessor, a more traditional swords-and-sorcery tale, and I found myself comparing it unfavourably. At that time, I never would have imagined that I would spend years of my life exploring the game and the meaning it holds for its fans. *Dragon Age 2* was a game that crept up on me as I explored its world and slowly became attached to its colourful cast of characters. My opinion of, and feelings for, the game suddenly crystallised into outright enthusiasm when its dramatic climax forced me to re-evaluate everything that had come before. Sara's search for security, I belatedly realised, was central to one of the game's key tensions: the rights of the individual versus the greater public good. I became a passionate advocate for the game and tried, largely unsuccessfully, to convince my partner and friends of its value.

My enthusiasm for *Dragon Age 2*, and the relative lack of it exhibited by my partner, pushed me to search for others who had played – and enjoyed – the game. I wanted to discuss in detail the events of the game, the decisions that you as the player are forced to make, and their implications. Thankfully, I did not have far to look: an old Internet-based friend of mine was writing *Dragon Age* fanfiction[10], and introduced me to the fandom on Tumblr. I still remember the first time that I logged in. Conducting a simple search for 'Dragon Age', my screen was suddenly awash with fan art, fanfiction, and fan videos about the characters from the game. There were long posts exploring the events of the game from a multitude of angles, moving images capturing minute details of characters' gestures for analysis, videos juxtaposing footage from the game with popular songs, and stories that extended, deepened, or provided alternatives to the

[10] I am using 'fanfiction' rather than 'fan fiction' (with an internal space), as this is the preferred spelling in *Dragon Age* fandom, as well as most other fan communities (Klink 2017).

game's narrative. I was amazed. I had had no idea that this wealth of activity was taking place in relation to the games. Although I considered myself to be a fan, I was not what is sometimes called a *fannish* fan: I had not been involved in any of the communal activity that surrounded the games on the Internet. It quickly sucked me in.

Prior to entering fandom, I had not thought very much about fans and, when I did, I tended towards stereotypical views. I had the vague sense that fans were uncritically 'obsessed' with media products and had lost a clear distinction between fiction and reality. Time spent in fandom forced me to reconsider those views. Rather than being uncritically infatuated, many fans were – as the scholarship has long documented (e.g. Ang 1989, Bacon-Smith 1992, Fiske 1992, Jenkins 1992) – highly critical consumers of media, with their enthusiasm balanced by a well-honed awareness of the flaws and unconscious biases evident in their 'favourites'. But more than that, fans were not myopically focused on their media of choice: through their engagement with the games, they were developing a media literacy that pushed them to question and contest the images that shaped their broader understanding of reality.

I spent two years in *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr before I started my PhD research. From the moment I discovered it, I knew that I wanted to study this phenomenon and toyed with the idea of how I should approach it. I started my fieldwork focusing upon people's affective engagement with the fictional world of *Dragon Age* but, over time, I realised that this engagement was occurring primarily through the medium of the game's characters. These characters were most obviously engaged with through visual means – fans produced art, screenshots, GIFs, and video of the characters at an astonishing scale – but they were also intermedial, present in fans' stories, poetry, songs, scents and tastes (several fans made perfumes and teas based on the characters). Despite the various forms in which characters appeared, there was an

overarching fannish commitment to remaining true to the character's core identity. To do otherwise was to risk the label that someone was 'out of character' in your portrayal. This unity seemed to be based around the impression, or *image,* of the character that people had gained from both their experience of playing the game and their exposure to other fans' interpretations on social media. This impression could remain intact despite different mediums and different contexts.[11]

The intermedial nature of the characters as cognitive (as well as often visual) images meant that they could go to some surprising places. Through the practice of 'following the thing' (Marcus 1995) – in this case, the character images from the games – I was led out from the fictional world of the game, through social media into what Internet denizens call 'real life'. Through discussions about the game's content, fans from differing cultures, backgrounds, ages, and races engaged with complex issues that ranged from the highly personal (death and grief, sexuality and marriage) to the highly political (terrorism, minority rights, intersectionality).

Yet the point was not simply that fictional scenarios can inform our understanding of real ones: instead of there being a clear distinction between the imagery of the game and the 'real' issues under discussion, many of these 'real' issues were themselves only known about through images encountered via film and television. Following the character images into 'real life' thus led me to more images – a world

[11] For example, 'Alternate Universe' is a genre of fan works that place characters in settings and situations removed from the original context in which they were encountered. These can be temporal dislocations, such as a 'Modern AU', which places the characters in contemporary times and locations, or metaphysical alterations, such as a 'Vampire AU' that portrays some of the characters as vampires, among many others.

constructed of and through images (Baudrillard 1994) – as people attempted to make sense of the highly mediated world in which we live.

Dealing with images that open out to yet more images problematises many of the simple dichotomies with which we would like to be able to organise the world – fiction and fact, image and reality, online and offline. This has implications for the sorts of questions that images raise, and the kinds of research that we do to answer them. In my case, it led me to approach the human-image relationships in *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr by focusing on three intertwined image contexts: the computer game *Dragon Age*, the social network of Tumblr, and 'real life' as it was refracted through people's engagement with the games and Tumblr.

In this chapter, I introduce the three different contexts of my fieldsite and outline my approach to *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr, based on my ethnographic observation that 'real life' cannot be conceptually separated from the image worlds of the game and social media. I begin with *Dragon Age 2*: I introduce readers to the plot of the game and argue that the depth of engagement it encourages with the character images, as well as its unconventional themes, is pertinent to the importance it has for fans.

Following the character images, I then turn to Tumblr, the social media network that was the focal point of my research. In this section, I explore how Tumblr's affordances place images as central to users' networks and performed identities, and introduce the *Dragon Age* fans with whom I conducted my research.

In the third section, I address my attempts to access 'real life', the world supposedly outside of images that was nevertheless brought into constant relationship with the characters and plot lines from *Dragon Age*. I argue that 'real life' operates conceptually as a form of 'magic circle' (Huizinga 1949) intended to cordon off the realm of images from that of reality, but that this distinction breaks down in practice,

with ‘real life’ functioning more as a genre of image than as a category radically outside of them.

I bring these observations together in my final section, where I argue that the cultural logic of Tumblr implicitly posits a radical equality between images that undermines ontological distinctions between fiction and fact, online and offline, image and reality. As I shall demonstrate throughout this thesis more broadly, the collapse of these different image genres in social media practice reveals some of the complexity of the individualised image worlds by which we come to perceive and understand contemporary life, as well as the agency that images can exert in these circumstances.

Dragon Age

With the dark horde bearing down upon our small village, my character, Sara Hawke, and her family had barely enough time to gather their most valuable possessions before fleeing what had been our home for the last ten years. We were late in leaving, having waited desperately in the hope that the King’s army might prevail. But it did not: deserting soldiers brought the news that the King had died in battle, the army overrun. On the dry and dusty road heading North, we find other refugees and decide that it would be wisest to travel together to fend off the bandits and stray monsters preying upon the fleeing survivors.

With no home to which we could return, we make the decision to leave the country of Ferelden and head for the distant city-state of Kirkwall, where we have family. When we make it to the coastal city of Gwaren, the docks are congested and sweltering. It is some time before we can purchase passage on a ship and, when we finally do, it costs us all of the valuable possessions we had been able to carry.

Upon our arrival in Kirkwall, the situation is scarcely any better. The docks are crowded with other refugees who have made the same trip and the gates to the city are guarded by taciturn officials who gruffly declare Kirkwall to be 'full'. It is only through our family connections that we are able to arrange entrance to the city at all. But the security that Sara and her family had been hoping to find in Kirkwall is not to be. Our once-wealthy family is impoverished, and Sara's services are bonded to an unscrupulous mercenary company who paid the bribes necessary for our entry. Things grow yet worse: as we become increasingly familiar with our new home, deep social divisions become apparent. With citizens pitted against refugees, priests against magic users, and humans against elves, the city is a powder keg awaiting a spark… So begins the game of *Dragon Age 2*.

The first context within my fieldsite is the fictional world of the computer game *Dragon Age 2* (hereafter *DA2*), by the Canadian game developer BioWare (2011). *DA2* is a single-player game in which the player takes on the protagonist role in a fictional world populated by computer-controlled characters. While, as Ginsburg et al. (2002: 19) note, "the 'ethnography of media', as a category of media studies, involves decentring the textual content of media technologies in favour of analysing the social context of their reception," the nature of the game is significant for the audience it attracts and the relationships that people develop with the character images within it. I will therefore briefly describe the context in which players initially encounter the characters with which I am concerned in this thesis.

DA2 is a single-player fantasy roleplaying game in which the player takes on the role of Hawke[12], a newly-arrived refugee in the city-state of Kirkwall, who gains power and influence, and ends up intimately involved in the deep cultural, political, and religious divisions that scar the city. Although it has elements of the typical rags-to-riches story, and in many ways conforms to the fantasy genre, the world and story of *DA2* subverts a number of tropes that have been common to fantasy media since Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1968).

The game is framed as the unreliable recollection of Varric Tethras, one of Hawke's closest friends, as he is interrogated about Hawke's involvement in the bombing of Kirkwall's church (known as the Chantry), an act which set off a continent-wide war between magic users and priests. The central narrative focuses on the treatment of magic users, known as mages, who are widely feared and subject to strict religious supervision that sees them confined for the safety of the general populace. In a story that contrasts the devastating potential of uncontrolled magic alongside the systemic abuse that is inflicted on mages in Chantry institutions, the player is asked to decide on one hand whether it is acceptable to restrict an individual's freedoms for the greater good, and, on the other, whether violence against civilians is ever a justified response to structural inequities.

At the end of the game, the 'Hero's Journey' (Campbell 2008 [1949]), with which it seems to begin, is subverted: despite accumulating wealth and influence,

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[12] The protagonist is referred to throughout the game as 'Hawke,' regardless of whether they are male or female. The player can choose Hawke's first name, else it defaults to Marian (for a female) or Garrett (for a male). When I use my character's first name, Sara, throughout this thesis, I am intending to indicate that I am drawing upon my particular experience of playing the game, according to my choice of actions, rather than a generic rendition of the game. See Chapter 3 for a discussion of *DA2* as a new media performance.

Hawke is ultimately unable to prevent the devastating conclusion to the tensions building within the city and the player can only decide how they are going to pick up the pieces. Smaller subplots concern racial oppression between humans and elves, and xenophobic reactions to foreign immigrants. These are unconventional plots for video games, and provide compelling hooks for fan activity.

Players of *DA2* have a deep and prolonged engagement with the fictional world of the game and the computer-controlled characters within it. A single play-through of *DA2* takes approximately 40 hours – longer than many television series – and many people play the game more than once. In a survey I conducted of more than 1,500 *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr, my respondents had spent an average of 212 hours playing *DA2*. As a narrative-based game, *DA2* arguably has more in common with a novel than it does with the earliest computer games, such as *Pong* or *Space Invaders*. This is not something that has gone unnoticed by the game developers themselves: Mike Laidlaw, Creative Director of the *Dragon Age* series, likened single-player computer games to a novel in an interview with *Wired* magazine UK, which was subsequently circulated amongst *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr:

> The difference with a single-player game is that, in the same way you lose yourself in a good novel, you can lose yourself in a single player story… It lets you go inside for a little while and, well, not hermit up necessarily, but be in another place and time for awhile. (Laidlaw, interviewed in Kamen 2014: n.p.)

Janet Murray has argued that this type of immersive experience is a form of virtual reality, a state that emerges from the narrative experience rather than the medium through which it is communicated:

> A stirring narrative in any medium can be experienced as a virtual reality because our brains are programmed to tune into stories with an intensity that can obliterate the world around us… We refer to this experience as immersion… We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. (Murray 1997: 98)

Immersion is one of the great pleasures of single-player roleplaying games like *Dragon Age*, and many fans manipulate their environment to encourage the greatest possible degree of it. When I asked about the environment in which they played the game, many fans described their routine for settling down to play in terms of reducing external distractions. This included practices such as turning off lights, using headphones, playing in a room separate from other household members (or waiting until they went to bed), and having refreshments near to hand so that they would not be interrupted by hunger or thirst. Some fans said they used special scents that they associate with the game or its characters to invoke the right mood, while others used recreational drugs to encourage a relaxed and immersive mindset. These conditions limit the attention they pay to outside stimuli and allow them to more fully 'give in' to the playing experience and be overtaken by the fictional world of the game.

Like many other games developed by BioWare, *DA2* is unusual amongst so-called 'AAA' (high development budget) computer games for the depth and realism of its characters.[13] As Hawke, the player gets to know a number of special characters, known as 'companions', with whom they can develop deep – and potentially intimate – relationships. There are six key companions in *DA2* (see Table 1 on page 35): Anders, an illegal and undocumented mage (known as an apostate) who is possessed by a spirit of justice; Aveline, a widowed soldier and fellow refugee who becomes the Captain of the City Guard; Fenris, a supernaturally enhanced warrior and escaped elven slave; Isabela, a roguish pirate captain who is down on her luck; Merrill, a sweet elven mage

[13] BioWare has a critical reputation for dedication to character development and romance subplots (e.g. Burks 2016, Loomis 2015), and has also received academic attention on the same point (see Jørgensen 2010, Kelly 2015, Waern 2015).

who was exiled for studying forbidden and dangerous blood magic; and Varric, a congenial dwarf with dubious business connections who is also the unreliable narrator of the game.[14]

Table 1: Key companion characters from *Dragon Age 2*

Anders, illegal mage (romanceable)	Aveline, City Guard Captain	Fenris, escaped elven slave (romanceable)
Isabela, pirate captain (romanceable)	Merrill, elven blood mage (romanceable)	Varric, dwarven entrepreneur (narrator)

[14] In addition to the six main companions, there are three additional companions who can accompany Hawke in some parts of the game: Hawke's remaining sibling – either Bethany (a mage) or Carver (a warrior), depending upon the player's choice of class – and Sebastian Vael, a romanceable character added by the *Exiled Prince* expansion.

By making choices about how the protagonist interacts with these characters, the player can influence the type of relationship they have. Different characters respond to different approaches. For example, the flirtatious Isabela appreciates a Hawke who responds in kind, Anders is partial to sentimental declarations of love, while Merrill falls in love with a Hawke who supports her to achieve her goals. Companion characters also have opinions about decisions that Hawke makes when interacting with the other characters within the fictional world – for example, the self-centred Isabela does not see the point in assisting others without financial remuneration, whereas Guard Captain Aveline appreciates any attempts Hawke makes to restore order in the city.

The resulting relationships can run the full continuum of emotion: from enmity to indifference to love.[15] The four potentially romanceable characters in the base game – Anders, Fenris, Isabela, and Merrill – are all available to player-characters of either gender, and the fictional world shows little evidence of homophobia, allowing homosexual relationships to occur between them and Hawke with little comment. In contrast, Aveline and Varric brush off any romantic overtures from the player-character, and make clear that their relationship will remain purely platonic.[16]

Relationships with the companion characters are an integral part of *DA2*. Whether one enters into a romantic affair with a companion character or not, developing a relationship with them allows the player to learn more about the character's past and

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[15] An interesting design choice in *DA2* was that romance can happen between Hawke and a companion character at either extreme of this love-hate continuum, but the relationship that unfolds is qualitatively different, being marked either by aggression and rivalry or tender affection.

[16] The characters also have their own relationships independent of the player-character. For example, if neither Fenris nor Isabela are romanced, they will enter into a relationship together in the third act of the game. The player can also choose to encourage Aveline's relationship with a fellow guardsman, which can potentially result in her second marriage.

influences how they will act in the future. It also ties the player into the narrative events of the game. The relationship that the player develops with Anders will implicate Hawke in his scheme to destroy the Chantry and start a mage revolution, and the relationship that the player develops with each of the other companion characters over the course of the game determines whether they will support Hawke in the final battle or turn against them. In this way, relationships with the companion characters are woven into the very fabric of *DA2* and cannot be avoided or considered to be an optional extra.

The relationships that fans have with the characters from the *Dragon Age* are also fundamentally generative: by and large, fans reported that it was the affective intensity that they experienced in these relationships that drove them to find others who had similar responses to the game. In the following section, I introduce Tumblr as a fieldsite, with a focus on how imagery and identity intersect within its digital spaces.

TUMBLR

On any given day of fieldwork, I would sit down at the computer in my office, a cup of tea by my hand, and open Tumblr in my Internet browser. The distinctive blue background would pop up along with a series of posts from the people whose blogs I follow (see Figure 3 below), and I would begin scrolling down the posts: liking, replying, and reblogging as I went. There were always more posts than I could possibly get to within a day, with more being added to the top as I scrolled down, so it seemed endless.

The posts that filled my Tumblr 'dashboard', the equivalent of a Facebook or Twitter newsfeed, were a diverse mixture. Although everyone I followed was a fan of *Dragon Age*, they generally did not restrict their blogs to this subject. As a result, in between posts about *Dragon Age* and its characters were posts about a diversity of other

topics: other media franchises (such as the Marvel films, the Sherlock, Doctor Who, and Supernatural television series); posts advocating against sexual assault and rape culture; many jokes, often involving the short, looping, moving images known as GIFs; posts educating people on sexism, racism, homophobia, and ableism; cute pictures of cats; personal posts about difficulties in people's lives; information about current political issues and how to take action; images of beautiful places in the world; and content that was just bizarre – such as a video of an ostrich dancing seductively to a tin whistle rendition of a song from the *Lord of the Rings* movies (an actual post).

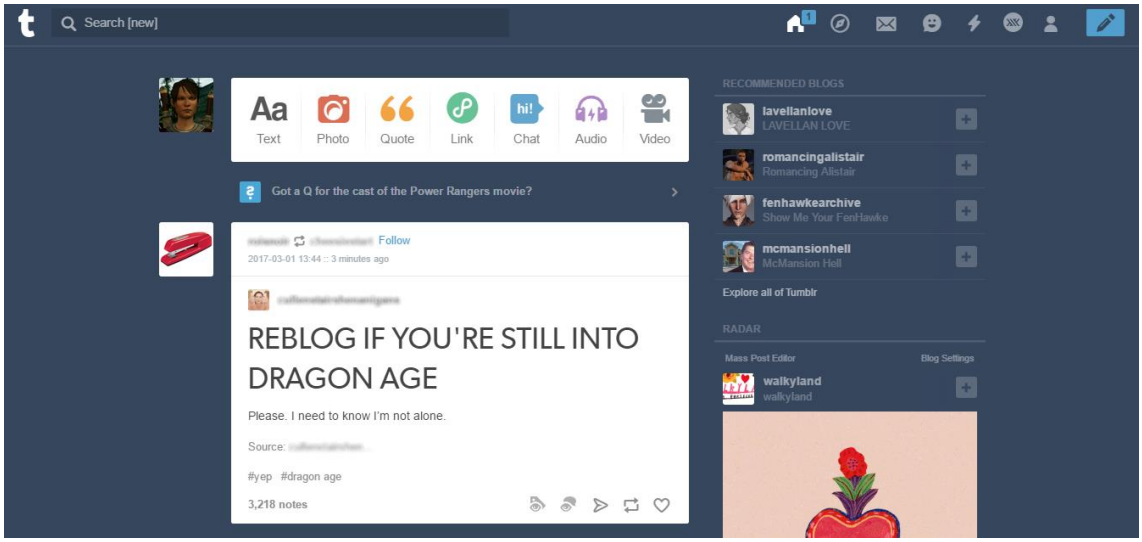

Figure 3: A screenshot of Tumblr, as it appears to a logged-in user

The serious, the humorous, the sublime, and the bizarre collided on a daily basis on my Tumblr dashboard as I scrolled. A great many of the posts involved images, and the scrolling nature of Tumblr was one of the reasons for this. With so many posts to get through, it was easy to scroll past those that merely had black and white text. Images not only attracted attention, but could be quickly consumed before the spectator moved on. And there was something hypnotic about the endless parade of images. As I turned the wheel on my mouse, the posts would slide up and then off the screen, like I was unspooling an endless reel of film. Occasionally, an especially striking image would arrest my attention, and I would pause in my scrolling to scrutinise it more

closely – perhaps reblog it onto my own Tumblr blog, if I wanted to keep it – but most of the time I could keep moving through the images at a steady pace. Movie stills. Fan art of *Dragon Age*. Funny GIFs. Cartoons about gender identity. Photographs of unnamed tribespeople with life lessons for all of us. Screenshots of characters from *Dragon Age*. Photographs of ancient art. Detailed examinations of characters' armour from *Dragon Age*. Videos of pranks gone wrong. Fiction. Reality. Somewhere in between.

Tumblr is the second context of my fieldsite; a highly visual social media platform that could, in the words of one critic, be the love child of a *ménages à trois* between Wordpress, Facebook, and Twitter (Warner 2011). I spent 14 months involved in intensive participant observation on Tumblr (from September 2013 to November 2014), engaging in a number of different pursuits that are common to *Dragon Age* fans. At the most basic level, I logged onto Tumblr each day and scrolled through my dashboard as described above, reblogging and responding to posts of interest to me. Through this process, I met and interacted with a number of *Dragon Age* fans: in total I 'followed' (in Tumblr parlance) 256 individuals who formed the core of my research, and kept broadly across a greater number by checking the generic 'Dragon Age' tag on a regular basis. Around 370 individuals followed my blog in return, where I kept them up to date on my research progress. Mindful of the challenges inherent in keeping one's research identity visible on social networks, my username and personal blog highlighted my research role and I incorporated explanatory 'About' and 'Research Methods' pages on my blog to inform other users about my research activities.

I participated in *Dragon Age* fandom by writing and sharing fanfiction and analytical 'meta' analyses about the games, as well as creating and sharing fan videos. I joined in on community-wide events, such as the 'Dragon Age Big Bang' and

'Reverse Big Bang', which involves pairing fan artists with fan writers to produce collaborative works, and I contributed back to the community by organising an independent fanfiction-swapping event. I also volunteered as an editor of the (sadly now defunct) daily BioWare newsletter, which involved manually aggregating news, fanfiction, and fan art about BioWare computer games, including *Dragon Age*.

Engaging in these activities gave me a greater appreciation of *Dragon Age* fandom than would have been possible by observation alone, allowing me to learn, through trial and error, many of the unspoken norms that governed fan behaviour. However, it also presented limitations: Tumblr is not the only social media site where fans of *Dragon Age* congregate[17], but, just as Tom Boellstorff (2008: 7) found when he studied residents of the virtual world *Second Life*, it did not prove feasible to conduct ethnographic research across multiple sites, as engaging deeply with Tumblr was a full-time occupation on its own.

I chose to study Tumblr over other social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, or the official BioWare forums, because of the vibrancy of the interactions that took place there, and because it had recently emerged as a key location for fandoms of all stripes. During my fieldwork period, *Dragon Age* was among the most popular video game fandoms on Tumblr[18] and inspired some of the liveliest debates that I have seen there. This decision has shaped my research: the particular affordances of Tumblr,

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[17] In a survey I distributed via Tumblr, respondents (n=1,595) reported using 26 additional social media platforms in order to engage in *Dragon Age* fandom. The other key sites used by my Tumblr participants included the official Bioware forums (used by 46% of Tumblr-based fans), fanfiction sites Archive of Our Own (49%) and Fanfiction.net (38%), and DeviantArt (45%).

[18] The Tumblr blog, *Fandometrics*, has been tracking the popularity of different fandoms on Tumblr since late 2014 by calculating the amount of activity associated with tags for different media franchises and ranking them according to media type. *Dragon Age* fandom was consistently in the top 10 video game fandoms in 2015 and 2016 (Fandometrics 2017).

as well as the particularities of the sociality that they have encouraged, have made a site that is more welcoming to some types of fans than others, and has produced a fan culture that is quite distinct from that on other sites of fan activity.

Tumblr was founded in 2007 by the 20-year-old David Karp (2017: n.p.) to "make space for each individual's full range of expression," as he described in a retrospective 10 years later. Describing how he saw "the wide-open and whimsical frontier of the World Wide Web… being reshaped by strict, narrow platforms," he conceived of a multi-media platform that would be a solution to the fracturing of digital identities, which he saw accompanying the segregation of different mediums (pictures, videos, music, links) across different platforms at that time. Karp sought to develop a convergent platform that would allow individuals to "create something that truly represents themselves and that is truly unique," by combining different forms of media on the same blog. Touting itself as a social network that lets its users "effortlessly share anything" (Tumblr 2017), Tumblr was one of the first platforms to offer rich capabilities for quick and easy multimedia distribution, including text, photos, music, and videos. It is a capability that has proven popular: in September 2017 it was the 7th most visited social networking site in the world (SimilarWeb 2017), claiming 313 million blogs with a total of 139.1 billion posts and a daily posting rate of 42.6 million posts (Tumblr 2017).

Tumblr is particularly well suited for interest groups with a visual focus. In 2014, a survey of 586.4 million posts on Tumblr found that slightly more than 78% were photo posts (Chang et al. 2014: 22), and Tumblr is best known for media fandoms, visual memes and GIFs (moving images), and pornography. This may partly be because, as Renninger (2015: 1520) notes, Tumblr has historically had "lax policies for regulating posts that are pornographic or that potentially infringe copyright".

As a platform for media fandom, Tumblr has taken over from older social networking platforms that privileged text over images, such as LiveJournal.[19] This follows the same trajectory that media studies Professor John Hartley identified when he argued that:

> Increasing pictoriality is a precondition for the popularity of every medium; success and survival depend on popularity and that depends on pictures. Thus all of the popular media have, over the last two or three hundred years, tended to become ever more pictorial, with whole media declining in popularity when something more visual comes along (print giving ground to cinema and television)… (Hartley 1992: 6)

Indeed, as the visual capabilities of other social networking platforms have caught up with Tumblr, and new predominantly visual platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat have been developed, anthropologists Daniel Miller and Jolynna Sinanan (2017: 1) have noted that "social media has transformed human communication precisely by making images as much a part of human communication as text or speech".[20]

However, it is more than just Tumblr's multimedia capabilities that have given rise to the particularities of what is commonly known as 'Tumblr culture'. Media studies scholar Alexander Cho, in his thesis on queer men of colour on Tumblr,

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[19] LiveJournal is a publishing platform that was launched in 1999 (and so belongs to the so-called Web 1.0). Unlike Tumblr, it has no native image or video hosting capacities, which means that images and videos must first be uploaded to a third-party website that allows them to be remote loaded onto other websites. However, it is better at organising text posts, especially when there are a number of replies to them, so that the entire conversation is in clear chronological order.

Prior to 2007, LiveJournal was one of the dominant platforms for fandom activities but from May-August 2007, LiveJournal suspended over 500 user accounts, many of which belonged to fans, for impermissible content. Although many of these accounts were restored, it undermined fans' sense of having a safe space in which to congregate and this event is generally regarded as being the beginning of the end for LiveJournal. Over the following years, there was a gradual exodus of fans from LiveJournal to the growing site of Tumblr, as well as the fan-owned LiveJournal clone, Dreamwidth (Romano 2012).

[20] Indeed, in the book which summarised and compared the nine different social media projects undertaken as a part of their 'Why We Post' research project, Miller et al. (2016) note that "the growing popularity of platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat has shown that social media can work effectively where the core content is photographic and text is relatively peripheral or… what we have previously thought of as conversation can be almost entirely visual".

described Tumblr as 'disorienting', arguing that the site's affordances – or lack of them – ignores established conventions for the Internet, and social media sites in particular:

> Tumblr, especially in its early days, seemed impenetrable, ruled by a code and norms that were never explained anywhere officially, only intuited. There was no real search function that produced usable results until very recently; unlike traditional social network sites such as Facebook, users are anonymous, the platform doesn't reveal a user's list of connections, and users can change their usernames – the only persistent identifier on the site – at their whim… Tumblr feels almost as if it purposely gave the middle finger to established conventions of indexing, search, and persistence on the Internet. (Cho 2015: 8)

Cho argues that it is these very user-*un*friendly characteristics that make Tumblr attractive for the people who use it, who tend to belong to marginalised and/or misunderstood groups These include queer men of colour (Cho 2015), young people of colour (Uruchima 2016), transgender people (Fink and Miller 2014), feminists (Connelly 2015), self-harming youth and survivors of self-harm (Seko and Lewis 2018), people who identify as asexual (Renninger 2015), people who take and post sexy images of themselves (Tiidenberg 2016), and media fans.[21]

The difficulty of navigating the site and its high barrier to casual entry, its pseudonymity and relatively relaxed attitude towards censorship make it suitable for images and conversations that could be considered risky in other forums – particularly ones where unsympathetic family members, colleagues, or schoolmates might find them. Many of the fans who I interviewed expressed concern about being identified, or 'outed', as a fan in their professional capacity, and purposely did not link their 'real life' identity to their Tumblr identity. [22]

[21] These groups are by no means mutually exclusive, although users may segregate their participation in these different activities by operating multiple Tumblr blogs under separate usernames.
[22] I discuss considerations around privacy in detail in A Note on Names and Sources from page xiv.

Tumblr is often compared favourably to Facebook as a place in which you can be your most effusive, emotional, and vivid self. Figure 4 below likens the relationship between the different selves presented on Facebook and Tumblr as that between Bruce Wayne and (his alter-ego) Batman. Whereas Bruce Wayne represents the socially acceptable version of the self – wealthy, well-dressed, and professional – Batman is the inner self: passionate, outrageous, and slightly ludicrous. It is difficult to say which, out of each of these two identities, is the most 'real' (Turkle 1995) even though one involves a physical mask.

Figure 4: The self on Tumblr vs Facebook, by williamdaniel (Tumblr)

The pseudonymous nature of Tumblr is important to users' experiences of it. Unlike Facebook, which tries to force people to use their real name, people who sign up to Tumblr can choose any kind of username and it can be changed at will. Creating a profile is also not part of signing up; there is no pre-generated form that lays out information to be entered, such as one's age, gender, or location. Instead, Tumblr blogs are entirely customisable in their form and content, allowing users to personalise them in any way that they wish with text, images, and pages containing static information

(such as an 'About' page). Any personal information is offered voluntarily and defined entirely by the user. This leads to many creative and idiosyncratic self-descriptions (such as being a sentient robot or manic pixie dragon), even as some reasonably common trends have emerged among fans on Tumblr, such as indicating your preferred pronouns, cultural heritage, general location, and the fandoms with which you are involved. The lack of emphasis on 'real life' identity allows fans to position themselves in ways that exceed the strictures of work, school, and family – encouraging highly creative individualised explorations of self.

Not only is a Tumblr user's identity obscured, but so are their connections to other users. Similar to other social media sites, Tumblr users can establish non-reciprocal social networks by 'following' people – doing so populates the 'dashboard', similar to a Facebook or Twitter newsfeed, with posts from these users – but the list of people you follow is not automatically visible to others. In many ways, therefore, Tumblr does not fit the definition of a social network originally articulated by boyd and Ellison (2007: 211) as:

> web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Since that time, boyd and Ellison (2013: 152) have offered a revised definition, which acknowledges that as social media sites "proliferate and evolve, defining what constitutes a social network site becomes increasingly challenging". Their 'definition 2.0' highlights the increasing emphasis upon interacting with multimedia content streams, and is a much better fit for Tumblr:

> A social network site is a *networked communication platform* in which participants 1) have *uniquely identifiable profile*s that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; 2) can *publicly articulate connections* that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with *streams of user-generated content* provided by their connections on the site. (boyd and Ellison 2013: 158, original emphasis)

The most important aspect of this definition is the third part: that people can consume, produce and interact with content streams. Because Tumblr provides no automatically-generated clues to the identity or networks of its users, one of the key ways that people acquire a sense of who other users are and where they fit into the broader network is by looking at the acts which Tumblr does make visible: who and what they *reblog*.

Reblogging is one of the most crucial practices on Tumblr. For most users, Tumblr is far more about content *curation* than content *creation*. Unlike other social networking sites, such as Instagram, where the emphasis is on the production of original content, the engine room of Tumblr is the circulation of existing content. One of the first things that struck me when I entered *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr was the quantity of high quality images of *Dragon Age* characters that were circulated daily. These images are usually posted by the artist, or an admirer, in the public *Dragon Age* tag, however the image will only appear once in the tags: at the time of posting. Longevity of the image is achieved through reblogging.

Reblogging is similar to retweeting on Twitter; it copies an existing post to your blog and rebroadcasts it to your followers along with any comments that you have added. Reblogging a post is easy. At the bottom of every post is a small bank of interaction buttons (see Figure 5 below): an arrow (to share the post on other platforms), a conversation bubble (to reply without reblogging), two arrows circling one another (to reblog), and a heart (to like). Clicking on the arrows circling one another brings up the reblog dialogue box. It includes the original post, a space to add commentary, and a space to add tags. If you don't want to add any comments or tags, you can just hit 'reblog' and it is copied to your blog and rebroadcast to your followers. Many of the fans with whom I interacted made reblogging even easier through the installation of

third-party browser extensions, such as xKit[23], which turn it into a single step process. The convergent nature of Tumblr, in which it is possible to upload, receive, and recirculate all manner of content in a few simple steps, affords a low barrier to entry for this form of participation on Tumblr.

Figure 5: Interaction buttons on Tumblr

Reblogging plays a number of important roles in *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr. It is the primary means for engaging in public conversation, and the nature of its distribution method shapes the nature of those discussions and drives much of the vibrancy of Tumblr. In order to respond publicly to a post, a user reblogs it and adds their comments to the bottom of the post. This copies the post to their personal blog, and rebroadcasts it to a new audience in the form of their followers. As the post continues to be reblogged, comments begin to be threaded below the original post, building up as the post is circulated among users. Through this process, users who may not be directly connected to one another can contribute to a conversation that spans the sprawling network of *Dragon Age* fans. The satirical news site, Clickhole, satirised the agglutinative nature of these comments in an article entitled 'Anthropologists are on the verge of figuring out how you're supposed to read Tumblr comments', illustrated with Figure 6 below, a screenshot of a typical Tumblr post.

[23] xKit is a third-party browser extension that adds many features to Tumblr that improve accessibility and functionality, including providing a record of outgoing private messages, blocking certain posts from appearing on your dashboard, marking read posts, and improving font size and contrast. Over time, many of xKit's features have been incorporated into the Tumblr site.

Figure 6: Typical Tumblr post with threaded comments (Clickhole 2014) [24]

As posts accumulate audiences through this snowball-like method of distribution, reblogged conversations quickly escape the original interlocutors and fracture into multiple threads. With the entire conversation reposted each time a user replies, it reaches an ever-widening audience. The constant reblogging of the conversation, particularly if a user is following more than one of the interlocutors, surrounds users with a sense of vibrant activity, similar to the buzz of voices in

[24] In this post, a screenshot of a Facebook status update has been posted to Tumblr and responded to by a number of Tumblr users. The comments are intended to be read diagonally, from the top-rightmost comment ("He's figured it out") down to the bottom-left ("WITH BIG POCKETS"). A line is intended to connect each comment with the username of the person who made it, but can be easily misread. Tumblr changed the formatting of reblogs in 2015 so that comments descend in one uniform column, making them easier to read in chronological order.

conversation at a party. This is similar to what boyd et al. (2010) found when exploring the practice of Twitter's 'retweets':

> While retweeting can simply be seen as the act of copying and rebroadcasting, the practice contributes to a conversational ecology in which conversations are composed of a public interplay of voices that give rise to an emotional sense of shared conversational context… Because Twitter's structure disperses conversation throughout a network of interconnected actors rather than constraining conversation within bounded spaces or groups, many people may talk about a particular topic at once, such that others have a sense of being surrounded by a conversation, despite perhaps not being an active contributor… (boyd et al. 2010: section 1)

However, where Twitter has a tight limit on the number of characters allowed in its posts[25], Tumblr has no such limit and conversations can become very lengthy and involved.

Reblogging is also a key way of making and identifying connections between fans. When you reblog a post, Tumblr notifies the person you reblogged it from, and displays their name on the copy of the post on your blog. This functions as an implicit endorsement of both the person and the content, unless otherwise stated, and also serves to send a signal that you are following them and interested in their content. If you then open the 'notes' link on a reblogged post, it contains a list of every other user who has reblogged that post, who they reblogged it from, and any comments they added (see Figure 7 below). This makes visible the connections that users have made to other users, which are otherwise hidden, and are often used to find other people to follow. For example, in the image with which I illustrated Tumblr at the beginning of this section (Figure 3 on page 38), the first visible post asks people to "Reblog if you're still into Dragon Age" as a means for finding other active fans of the series.

[25] In September 2017, Twitter doubled the character limit from 140 to 280 characters (Solon 2017).

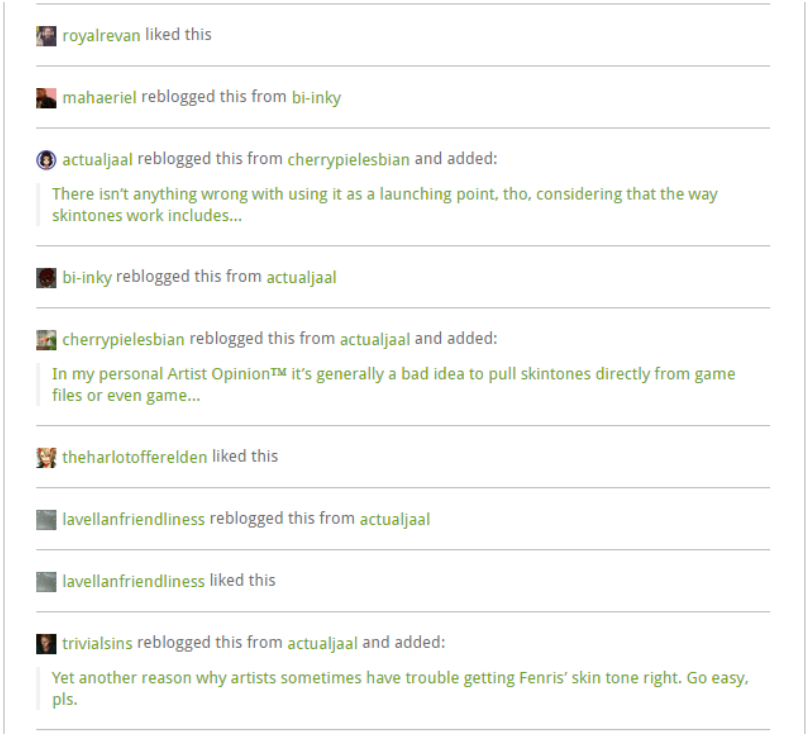

Figure 7: Notes from a post about characters' skin tones in *Dragon Age 2*, as viewed on my blog

Over time, through the repetition of reblogging posts on the same subjects, these networks of links can 'surface', in Ahmed's (2014) sense, clusters of users who are attached to the same games, characters, and relationships. This enables fans to identify and virtually 'move' towards other users who have similar interests (and will therefore provide desirable content) by subscribing to their individual blogs. This practice manifests an 'affective public' of *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr.

Communications Professor Zizi Papacharissi (2015: 125) defines affective publics as "networked public formations that are mobilised and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment". Predicated on sharing, affective publics are "powered by affective statements of opinion, fact, or a blend of both, which in turn produce ambient, always-on feeds" (129) that "sustain publics convened around affective commonalities" (131). The affective commonality among *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr is, of course, the series of games and, more specifically, the characters that inhabit them. Within this broader network, there are also subnetworks or smaller

publics that are focused upon one particular character or one relationship ('ship') between game characters. The kind of reblogging that produces this affective public is not limited to text-based conversation; indeed, a lot of reblogging does not use words at all. Reblogging evocative imagery is a socially significant practice among fans that creates and visibly enacts relationships – both between a Tumblr user and characters from *Dragon Age*, and within the affective public of *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr.

Reblogging is vital to the agglutinative process of identity formation and staking your position within affective publics like *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr. Reblogging copies a post onto your own blog and the ease with which it can be done makes this a common method of saving images that appeal to the fan in some way. Through this process, large numbers of images accumulate on a fan's blog over time without the fan having to really think about it, and going to their blog reveals the variety of images that they have saved – often in the thousands. (I have, for example, made over 10,000 posts on my primary Tumblr blog, and I am far from being a heavy user.)

Although some people solely reblog *Dragon Age* content, most fans use their personal Tumblr blogs to capture images and information from a range of different sources, about a range of different issues, and with a range of different tones.[26] This differs from more professional forms of curation, in which the range of images that is included is often strictly delimited in order to craft a professional identity (Scolere and Humphreys 2016), and suggests a more holistic approach. Layer upon layer, the images reblogged by a fan reveal something of the fan's connections and identity as they

[26] Many fans also run 'side blogs' that collect images and information on a particular theme. For example, there are a range of 'Fuck Yeah [Character Name]' blogs that curate images about the character in question.

respond to images that speak to them and combine these on their blog in a visual mosaic. These images are in conversation with, and usually trump in the case of conflict, the reflexive identity descriptions that many users include on their blogs.

The resulting 'image collage' (Castells 2010) is believed to be a window into their particular image world, and a key resource for fans to get a sense of other people's affective investments, such as when deciding whether it would be worthwhile to follow them or not. For example, if someone were to look at my blog right now, they would find some of the most recent images to be: fan art of Fenris from *DA2*, vintage photographs of topless women fighting a duel, a post analysing different characters' skin tones in *DA2*, fan art of Fenris and male Hawke, fan art of Daenerys from *Game of Thrones* in the style of Gustav Klimt, and fan art of Anders and male Hawke. From this small selection, it would be reasonable to assume that I am a fan of Fenris and his relationship with Hawke, I am interested in issues of race in *DA2*, I am LGBTIQ+ friendly, and I am on neither side of the Fenris vs Anders debate. This should give other *Dragon Age* fans a reasonable idea of whether they would be interested in following me, although of course the polysemic nature of images makes it hard to determine whether they would know anything of who 'I' am, especially from such a small sample.

Reblogging images is a fundamental part of the cultural logic of Tumblr-based fandom. Through this act, users create themselves in the affective public of *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr by enacting social ties. These images – although not often photographs of the people themselves – become traces of the individual on Tumblr. This is very similar in function to the 'home page', which was a key locale for online identity building in the 1990s, as described by Sherry Turkle:

> On the Web, the idiom for constructing a 'home' identity is to assemble a 'home page' of virtual objects that correspond to one's interests. One constructs a home page by

> composing or 'pasting' on it words, images, and sounds, and by making connections between it and other sites on the Internet or the Web... one's identity emerges from whom one knows, one's associations and connections (Turkle 1995: 258).

People's personal Tumblr blogs are, in many ways, an updated version of the home page. It still consists of incorporating words, images, sounds, and connections that speak to your identity. However, I would argue that the speed and ease of reblogging images onto your individual blog tends to favour an unconscious process of identity construction, rather than the highly self-reflexive mode in which one creates a stand-alone web page (or 'About' page[27]). This is partly evidenced in the language used – Turkle talks about 'constructing' a home page. Few users would consider themselves to be 'constructing' a personal Tumblr blog unless they are using it for professional purposes. While images may be reblogged by individuals who "actively assess a media text, deciding who to share it with and how to pass it along," as Jenkins et al. (2013: 19) characterise the process of content sharing, the speed of Tumblr and the ease with which images can be reblogged makes this accumulative form of identity construction more of an unconscious-emotional than a reflexive-cognitive process (Giddens 1991). As Clay Shirky (2009: n.p.) has argued in the case of Twitter, "As a medium gets faster, it gets more emotional. We feel faster than we think."

The reblogging of images may not even be entirely up to the user. While I do not subscribe to the idea that "the spread of ideas and messages can occur without users' consent and perhaps actively against their conscious resistance," as exemplified in Douglas Rushkoff's book *Media Virus* (1996), there has perhaps been – in Barthes'

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[27] In the case of a perceived conflict between a user's self-description, such as in an 'About' page, and their reblogged content, fans tend to favour the story that the reblogged content tells about the user with the implicit assumption that it unconsciously reveals the user's biases (and therefore identity). I have witnessed this occur in cases where a Tumblr user has claimed a marginalised identity position that is undermined by casually racist, homophobic, or ableist content that they have reblogged.

(1981) vocabulary – an overemphasis on the *studium* of images to the detriment of the *punctum*. In other words, maybe there is an affective intensity to the images themselves, something unconscious, that we can't entirely name – especially in figured images, such as images of the characters from *Dragon Age* – that appeals to the user and influences our decision to share them as a trace of ourselves. If we follow this idea, it suggests that social media such as Tumblr is, in many ways, a hybrid network of humans and images acting together – an intriguing image that I will leave hanging, for now.

MEET THE FANS

What kind of people frequent a site such as Tumblr in order to engage in detailed discussions about a computer game like *Dragon Age*? The fans with whom I conducted this study may not be quite what you had in mind when first thinking of 'video game fans'. Although survey studies, such as the most recent report by the Entertainment Software Association (2017), emphasise that the average gamer is 35-years-old (4), that 41% of gamers are women (7), and that women aged 18 years and older represent "a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population than boys under age 18" (4), there are still many misconceptions about who plays computer games.[28]

The pseudonymous and rhizomatic nature of Tumblr meant that it was impossible to determine precisely how many fans of *Dragon Age* were present on Tumblr, or their characteristics, from observation alone. In order to obtain a broad

[28] This misconception mirrors others that have been explored in fandom scholarship. For example, despite the male 'geek' stereotype for fans of *Star Trek*, women have always made up a significant proportion of fans and were involved in setting up many of the first fan clubs (Bacon-Smith 1992, Jenkins 1992).

understanding of who was using Tumblr to engage with *Dragon Age* fandom, I developed an anonymous survey[29] and distributed it through my follower network at the same time that I publicised it through key *Dragon Age* tags on Tumblr. From more than 1,500 responses, I found that the average respondent to my survey was a straight white woman aged between 18 and 24 years old who lived in the United States of America. This may be surprising enough for people who believe that women don't play computer games, however this average description disguises even greater diversity, which was evident in my survey results.

Although the majority of people who responded to my question on gender (n=1,574) identified as female (73%), there was significant representation by men (18%) and other gender identities (9%), including genderqueer, agender, and transgender.[30] Respondents to my question on age (n=1,577) also suggested a greater spread than might at first be assumed: while the majority (59%) were aged between 18–24 years, a significant proportion (31%) were aged between 25–34 years, while smaller proportions were aged between 35–44 years (6%), and 45 years and older (4%). There was also significant diversity in sexuality: of the 1,558 who responded to this question, less than half (44%) identified as heterosexual. Almost a third (32%)

[29] The survey was self-selecting and conducted through the Australian National University's online polling service. It remained open for a month and a half and received 1,577 responses from individuals who identified Tumblr as their primary platform for engaging with other *Dragon Age* fans. From my observation of the number of responses made to other fans' posts seeking other *Dragon Age* fans, this seems to be a reasonably large sample, although it is impossible to determine if it is representative.

[30] Some of the wording I used in the survey unfortunately may have decreased participation by transgender fans of *Dragon Age*. Despite my attempts to ensure that I captured transgender participation, providing 'trans*' as an option alongside 'male,' 'female,' 'genderqueer,' and 'non-gendered'. I was rightfully criticised for mixing up sex and gender terms, and unintentionally implying that transmen and women could not identify themselves as an unqualified 'male' or 'female'.

identified as pan- or bisexual, while 13% identified as being on the asexual spectrum, 9% identified as homosexual, and 2% defined their sexuality in another way.

There was quite a range in countries of residence identified by my respondents. Despite the majority (58%) of respondents (n=1,560) living in the United States, reflecting Tumblr's high level of United States participation (SimilarWeb 2017), the remaining 42% reported living in 50 other different countries. The countries with the highest representation, apart from the United States, were the largely Anglophone United Kingdom (8%), Canada (8%), and Australia (6%), with the remaining 47 countries each accounting for less than 3% of respondents.[31] Unsurprisingly, these countries of residence were mirrored in the strong European ancestry of those surveyed: of the 1,407 people who responded to this question, 80% identified as being of European ancestry, 8% identified as being of mixed ancestry, 5% identified as being of Asian ancestry, with the remaining 7% constituted of people who identified as being of Hispanic or Latino (3%), African American (2%), Jewish (1%), Indigenous (1%), or Arabic (<1%) descent.

To supplement my survey and participant observation, I conducted 22 semi-structured, individual interviews and six group interviews with 24 fans with whom I was a 'mutual' (that is, we followed each other on Tumblr). Among this group, there were some consistent themes in biography. These fans tended to be women aged 25 years and older, most of whom were married, identified as either bisexual or straight, and had some level of tertiary education. Many were working in education or

[31] The relatively high proportion of respondents from anglophone countries is also likely to reflect the fact that the survey was conducted in English.

information technology roles, and/or were undertaking further study, and most lived in either the United States, the United Kingdom, or Australia. The voices of these women are one of my key focuses throughout this thesis.

The diversity evident in age, gender, sexuality, and country of residence for fans of *Dragon Age* has implications for people's experiences of the *Dragon Age* games, as will be discussed throughout my thesis. Each person's particular standpoint influences their understanding of the game such that, although the same media functions as a thread connecting all of these individuals, they may as well have experienced different games. These differences in fans' experiences of the game world mirror differences in individual fans' image worlds and, as I shall demonstrate, conflict about the events in the game often fell along biographical differences among the fan base. In the following section, I turn to 'real life' as a layer of the broader image world and the way in which it is implicated in the activities on Tumblr.

'Real Life'

Figure 8: Fandom vs Real Life, by William Rotsler, sourced from Zeldes (2013)

The third layer of my fieldsite is 'real life', a category of existence that fans juxtapose to fandom and Internet-based sociality more generally. I use inverted commas to indicate that this is an emic rather than an etic term because, as Deleuze (1994: 208) has argued,

the virtual is not opposed to the real but to the actual. The use of 'real life' as an antonym to Internet-based sociality implies that the latter is somehow *not* real, even though "what happens in virtual worlds often is just as real, just as meaningful, to participants" (Taylor 2009: 19), and that the former gains its reality by virtue of its electronic absence, which is also increasingly untrue. Although 'real life' is often used to loosely correspond to the actual, in this section I will demonstrate that it functions as a boundary marker rather than referring to a privileged sphere of existence.

Early on in my research, I was persuaded by the arguments of scholars such as Miller and Slater (2001: 5) that "we need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces," by which they primarily meant face-to-face interactions, and I arranged to meet as many *Dragon Age* fans as I possibly could in 'real life'. I arranged to meet 24 fans across six different cities: San Francisco, Seattle, and New York in the United States, London and Cambridge in the United Kingdom, and Melbourne in Australia. Following practices used by fans when they occasionally visited other cities, I organised group meet-ups in each of these locations.

Much to my surprise, while these meet-ups were a lot of fun, they were also disappointing in research terms. The fans I met were, in person, extremely similar to how they comported themselves online, and within only a few minutes we were continuing the conversations that we had had on Tumblr in 'real life'. But without the functionality of the Internet, the confessional atmosphere of posts, and the wider network of fans in which we were embedded, these face-to-face conversations lacked some of the verve of Tumblr. Online, we could research what we wanted to say, illustrate our points with images and videos, link in other (geographically distant) people who could contribute to the conversation, and engage in the type of soul searching that comes about when a person sits in front of their computer screen alone.

In the restaurants and cafés where I met fans face-to-face, this same sociality was not possible. It was, surprisingly, a flatter form of interaction than that conducted online – even with the addition of body language and vocal tones. It was with a sneaking feeling of relief that I could retreat back to Tumblr after the meet-ups, where we posted pictures of us together and circulated them amongst our friends. In some ways, those pictures seemed to be more significant than anything else that we exchanged in 'real life'.

My flat experience of 'real life' fieldwork is not a unique phenomenon, but one that has been experienced by other anthropologists engaged in digital fieldwork. Media anthropologist Nina Mollerup (2017) has written about how co-location does not always entail co-presence, which may necessitate being engaged in the same digital activities, and media anthropologist John Postill observed that he could often be a more active participant remotely than when he was 'in the field' in Malaysia:

> Interestingly, during several breaks from 'the field' back in England, I was often actually able to be a more active participant with a broader range of residents via the lively Web forum than when I was physically in Subang Jaya, where I was busy interviewing people and attending events with narrower segments of the population and the local elites… Oddly enough, I felt closer to the local residents when I was 6,500 miles away than whilst physically 'being there'. (Postill 2015: n.p.)

Yet it was not a wasted trip – the experience made me realise the richness and deep texture of the life we lived with each other online. It also made me realise that, by insisting on exploring 'real life' as a location from which to understand people's actions on Tumblr, I had fallen into "the received anthropological… assumption that unmediated physical co-presence is inherently superior to, or more legitimate than, other forms of being there" (Postill 2015: n.p.). While I recognise the "importance that place – both lived and imagined – takes in informing [social] media practices" (Hjorth and Arnold 2013: 3), the vast majority of fans would never meet their fellow fans in 'real life'. Indeed, by organising these meet-ups I introduced a number of fans to each other who had not previously met despite living in the same city! Much of fandom is

focused on an imaginary place – the fictional world of the games – rather than a physical one. As a result, I agree with Eichhorn's argument that

> In a world where people's experiences of community and culture increasingly exist across geographic and temporal boundaries, ethnographers committed to understanding people's everyday experiences on an in-depth level may need to abandon their commitment to place and face-to-face encounters… [U]nderstanding how people live may sometimes require us to engage with people in the textual and technologically based communities they inhabit, even if this requires the ethnographer to commit the heretical act of staying at home. (Eichhorn 2001: 577)

The trip also made me realise that I had fallen into the trap of taking an emic category – 'real life' – for granted and acting on that basis, instead of subjecting it to interrogation.

You may already have a sense of what 'real life' means as it is commonly used on the Internet: the mundane realm of bills, work, grocery shopping, taxes, medical appointments, and family responsibilities (amongst other things). It is a term that may once have been used to demarcate "those experiences that occur offline" (Markham 1998: 115), but the domestication of the Internet has blurred this association[32]: although many of these mundane tasks can and do take place in the physical realm of face-to-face interaction, they are also increasingly being conducted via the Internet – grocery shopping can be done online, medical appointments via Skype, family obligations met through Facebook, and many forms of work involve significant amounts of time online. Instead of being an actual space, I therefore contend that 'real life' functions as a

[32] The blurring of the categories of 'online' and 'offline' has been well-explored through existing literature (e.g. Bakardjieva 2005, Bakardjieva and Smith 2001, Hine 2000, 2015, Hjorth and Arnold 2013, Markham and Baym 2008, Taylor 2009, Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2008, Wilson and Peterson 2002). Tom Boellstorff (2013: 41) has, however, challenged this research, arguing that, rather than being a scholarly conceit, the boundaries between the online and the offline are "ontologically consequential gaps" and hence "vital topics for anthropological inquiry." I agree with Boellstorff that ontologically significant boundaries are being drawn by users of virtual spaces, but disagree with him that they are being drawn along the lines of online/offline. My research has suggested that they are increasingly being drawn between different online platforms, such as between Tumblr and Facebook, in which different identities are performed (see Figure 4 on page 41).

discursive boundary intended to cordon off a realm of play/make-believe from everyday life, similar to Huizinga's notion of the 'play-ground':

> All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course… The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen… all are in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (Huizinga 1949: 10)

Huizinga described the 'magic circle' as one form of play-ground, and the term has been picked up and used in digital game studies to explore the way in which play is framed within games. For example, in their textbook of game design, Salen and Zimmerman (2004: 96) describe the 'magic circle' as a frame in which "special meanings accrue and cluster around objects and behaviours. In effect, a new reality is created, defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players." Within the 'magic circle' of fandom, fans go along with the fiction that game images are alive and communicate important things to their fans. In 'real life', these images threaten to lose their power, becoming – after all – mere simulacra. In Table 2 below, I have articulated some of the key associations of the dichotomous categories of fandom and 'real life' as they are loosely used by fans on Tumblr.[33]

Table 2: Fandom versus 'Real Life' categorical associations

Fandom	**Real Life**
Fun	Boredom
Play	Work
Magic	Mundanity
Freedom	Responsibility
Emotion	Logic
Fiction	Non-Fiction
Tumblr	Facebook
Online	Offline

[33] Anthropologist of games, Professor Thomas Malaby (2007), has compellingly argued that the magic circle metaphor posits a false dichotomy between work and play, and between play and 'everyday life' (see also Taylor 2009: 151-155). It is important to note that the ontological division represented here is a *cultural accomplishment* (Malaby 2007: 96) of fans, and not an inherent characteristic of Internet sociality, images, or games more broadly.

While games studies scholarship focuses upon the creation of the play space, the 'magic circle' has two effects, and it is important not to emphasise one over the other. In the same move by which the term 'real life' isolates fandom as a special arena of 'image play', it also implies that there is an aspect of our lives that is outside of the influence of images. This is the same process described by Baudrillard when he writes of Disneyland being set aside as a realm of the make-believe to assure us of the existence of the real:

> Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation. (Baudrillard 1994: 12)

Disneyland, in this respect, is analogous to fandom: a world of fictional character images where one can play in 'unreality'. Through the very existence of this 'unreality', we are assured that there is a 'real life' beyond the gates, an existence outside of the image world.

As I shall unpack throughout this thesis, the discursive demarcation between fandom and 'real life' does not at all reflect the way in which fans constantly bring the broader world into relation with *Dragon Age* on Tumblr. Images from the games and 'real life' were constantly juxtaposed with one another, suggesting not only that fandom and 'real life' are (predictably) leaky categories but also, more radically (and in line with Baudrillard), challenging the conception that a life outside of images exists at all. Through the practices of fans, 'real life' is revealed to be understood and constructed through images: news images are treated as though they are the things they represent, personal stories are told through collective imagery, and both fictional and non-fictional people act as symbols for causes greater than themselves. It is thus my argument that, rather than being dichotomous, 'real life' and fandom are, in practice, overlapping categories of images that are revealed to be radically equal when brought together in the convergent realm of social media.

CONTEXT COLLAPSE

'Context collapse' is a concept that has been used in social media scholarship to refer to the effect of social media platforms to "flatten multiple audiences into one" (Marwick and boyd 2011: 123). This use of the concept refers to the user's experience of recognising that "the images, actions, and words [they transmit] can be transported to anywhere on the planet and preserved (the performer must assume) for all time," such that the user "must address anybody, everybody, and maybe even nobody all at once" (Wesch 2009: 23). I would like to flip this concept to focus, not on the users, but on the images that are thus transmitted.

The philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin perceptively recognised that, in an age of the technological reproduction of art, artworks would swiftly become disembedded and decontextualized:

> [T]echnical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room (Benjamin 1969: 220f).

In the age of digital reproduction (Davis 1995), never mind the age of biocybernetic reproduction (Mitchell 2003), the distinction between the original and the copy is a lot more hazy, if it exists at all. Yet it remains clear that images can be disembedded from their original context, including medium, genre and claim to reality, and re-embedded into a new set of relationships that may be wildly different, as I experienced each time that I logged onto Tumblr. The resulting confusion of images evidences what Benjamin (1969: 223) called "the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction."

In other words, in contemporary 'convergence culture' (Jenkins 2006a), images are treated as if they are all equal: differences between images in terms of their content or original contexts, including genre and claim to reality (which may once have been signified by their contextual frame), are flattened through the act of being disembedded and brought into relationship with one another when reproduced on a single convergent platform, such as Tumblr. This practice renders the distinction between certain ontological categories – such as 'high' and 'low' culture or fact and fiction – invisible and, perhaps, increasingly irrelevant in this so-called 'post-truth' age.[34] According to the logic of post-industrial capitalism, all that matters is whether media 'spreads': "if it doesn't spread, it's dead" (Jenkins et al. 2013: 1). This applies to all forms of media, as Jenkins et al. (2013) note:

> [M]uch of what is being exchanged at the current moment is entertainment… Yet what we say about the spread of entertainment content also increasingly applies to news, branding and advertising, political messages, religious messages, and a range of other materials… (Jenkins et al. 2013: 9)

In this environment, the images that spread are those that 'have legs', to use the (somewhat unfortunate in this context) advertising trade jargon. These are images that, as described by Mitchell (2005: 31), "have a surprising capacity to generate new directions and surprising twists… as if they had an intelligence and purposiveness of their own". These images can emerge from a range of different contexts, with radically different claims to reality. All that matters is that they 'speak' to the person in such a way that it motivates their circulation. While this can suggest a democratising of cultural products, it can also be subject to cynical manipulation. We have already seen

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[34] United States' President Donald Trump's use of Twitter to make political announcements is one high profile way in which news and social media are blurring. Facebook's alleged involvement in the distribution of 'fake news' during the presidential campaign is another. See Marchi (2012) for a discussion of how the convergence of news and social media has altered teenagers' perspectives on journalistic objectivity.

this in action with the rise of ‘fake news’ during the United States’ 2016 Presidential Election, in which social media was used to spread false and partisan information: the provenance of the stories was hidden through their incorporation into the convergent platforms of social media, where they captured attention through astonishing headlines that motivated users to recirculate them without investigating further (Smith 2016).

The outcome of this kind of context collapse is that, at the same time that our understanding of the world is “increasingly shaped by mediated symbolic forms” (Thompson 1995: 34), it is becoming increasingly difficult to judge the claims to reality of these same images. Geoff Sharp (1993: 231) has argued that developments in communication technologies are reflected in concomitant changes in “the way of taking hold of, the way of appropriating and constituting, the real,” and the ubiquity and liveliness of the different images brought together in social media blurs the distinction “between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’” (Baudrillard 1994: 3) in a quite literal way. These are categories that are crucial to the modern Western construction (and subsequent negotiation) of the world as a rational object, but in the contemporary period they are becoming harder and harder to tease apart. In these circumstances, perhaps there is something comforting about the way in which fandom, on face value, seems to promise that it is a realm of play and *not* reality, even though the distinction collapses upon close examination.

NO EXIT

In this chapter, I have argued that there is no escaping the world of images. Old categories used to understand the Internet, such as distinctions made between ‘online’ and ‘offline’, ‘virtual’ and ‘real’, have little salience when we acknowledge that symbolic media of all stripes shape the world as we understand and experience it. Just

as Boellstorff (2008: 5) found within his study of the virtual world, *Second Life*, "our 'real' lives have been 'virtual' all along," something that is only being revealed, and not created, through the radical equity of images that has accompanied the convergence of media and digital reproduction. It therefore makes sense to study the image worlds that people are creating and sharing through social media "in their own terms" (Boellstorff 2008: 4) and in their "own context" (Hjorth and Arnold 2013: 4), as there is no getting beyond mediation for a better vantage point.

Anthropologists are increasingly adopting approaches that traverse the traditional boundaries with which we once sought to define the field, utilising social media, broadcast media, face-to-face interaction, and tele-presence to 'be there' in the multiple ways that people inhabit the contemporary world (Postill 2015). By adopting the anthropological practice of participant observation, which has been utilised in digital-based research for approximately two decades now (e.g. Baym 1999, Bird 2003, Boellstorff 2008, Hine 2000, Nardi 2010), my research focuses on the image worlds that are communicated and shared – to varying degrees – through the practices of fans of *Dragon Age* on the Tumblr social media network. Such a fieldsite is necessarily transient – it exists only so long as fans continue to engage with *Dragon Age* and its characters – but it can tell us something important about how our deep engagement with images, regardless of genre, shapes our experience and understanding of the world in which we live. Ultimately, we each have to decide to which images we are going to respond and, in the process, to which communities we are going to belong in our own ever-unfolding image world from which there is, after all, no exit.

In the following chapter, I outline existing approaches to the study of media images, with a focus on the shifting location and definition of agency among producers, receivers, and images.

Figure 9: ***Everything is going to be okay*****, by romangodfrey (Tumblr). A series of screenshots of a looping image that depicts a succession of fictional characters embracing a woman (clockwise from top left: Dean Winchester (from** ***Supernatural*****), Sherlock Holmes (from** ***Sherlock*****), Harry Potter, and Doctor Who)**

2 The Agency of Media Images

Everything is going to be okay.

This is the message that fictional characters have for their fans, according to a popular image posted on Tumblr. The image in question is a short, looping image, or GIF, showing a downcast-looking woman being embraced by a succession of popular fictional characters (see Figure 9 on facing page). The image was annotated by the artist, of which the following is an excerpt:

> When people turn to fictional characters, it's often because they want an escape. The stories of these people shelter us from the storm of our daily lives; they save us, if only for a little while. But when we really give in, become invested, let ourselves be vulnerable, something changes. We begin to feel that we know them. It's no longer just an escape, but part of us, something that makes us who we are… (romangodfrey, Tumblr)

The image and its annotation struck a nerve. It was posted in February 2013 and, as of writing this in November 2017, has received almost 560,000 shares, likes, and comments. The image made the rounds among fans of the *Dragon Age* series of computer games even though it does not depict any of the characters from those games. "This is so beautiful I almost cried," said Renegon, one of my *Dragon Age* friends, in her comments when reblogging the image. "This is true for BioWare [developer of *Dragon Age*] characters too!" said another fan, referring to the fact that the image only showed characters from *Doctor Who*, *Sherlock*, *Supernatural*, and *Harry Potter* – the most populous fandoms on the Tumblr social networking site.

The image and its annotation succinctly capture one of the key themes that emerged in my fieldwork with fans of the *Dragon Age* series of computer games: the important role that relationships with fictional characters play in the lives of their fans. The annotation accompanying the image reflects fans' general awareness of the common-sense explanation for their attachment to fictional character: that it is simple 'escape'. However, whilst agreeing with that sentiment to some extent, it attempts to deepen this narrative, shifting from impersonal third- to subjective first-person pronouns in order to underscore the personal transformation that can occur when fans 'give in', or become vulnerable with, fictional characters. The importance and power of fictional characters emerged as a consistent theme throughout my fieldwork among *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr. All of the fans I spoke to had stories about the transformative role that the characters from the *Dragon Age* games had played in their lives, involving fans from 18 to 60 years of age. These accounts enact the central problematic of my thesis: the powerful, virtually human force that media images have in the hearts, minds and lives of their fans.

In this chapter, I will argue that images, such as those from the *Dragon Age* games, exhibit intersubjective agency in people's lives but, despite everyday evidence of this power, it has been downplayed by media scholars in favour of analysing the agency of producers or receivers. Conversely, where the agency of images *has* been acknowledged in popular and academic literature, it has tended to be over-determined, with some commentators arguing that media images *cause* people to act in certain ways – such as in the debate about violent video games. As Mitchell (2005: 77) has observed, in Western society images are characterised either as "all-powerful forces, to blame for everything from violence to moral decay – or they are denounced as mere 'nothings', worthless, empty, and vain". Both such approaches miss the way that images are both sources and targets of agency, and I turn to art history and the

anthropology of art to construct an alternative theoretical approach to media images in contemporary society.

I frame this chapter by considering the image(s) and annotation with which I began: How would they be understood according to the different paradigms of media scholarship? I begin by briefly reviewing the history of media studies scholarship, tracing the changing understanding and positioning of agency as technologies have developed and paradigms have shifted. I argue that in the process of articulating the complex relationship between producer and receiver, the imagistic material in question has tended to remain an inert and passive element of much media analysis. I compare such approaches to an alternative and ancient thread of media scholarship that alleges that images pose a moral threat to society, from Plato's warnings about epic poetry in the 5th century BCE through to contemporary concerns about violent video games. Although such scholarship acknowledges the active role that images can play in the world, I argue that it over-determines their influence: images are ultimately too nebulous and polymorphic to pin down to specific effects.

I then turn to consider the way in which relationships with images are typically considered to be a sign of deficiency in Western societies, with fans functioning in contemporary normative discourse as a warning akin to the idolater, the image-addled fanatic. Opposing this construction of fandom as deviance, I draw upon art history, the anthropology of art, and Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic aesthetics to argue that images have always exerted a primordial power over their beholders. In Western societies, knowledge of this power is repressed and displaced onto others as a way of upholding the rationality that is so central to Western conceptions of the self. Locating this power in the bodily attributes of figured images and their surplus of non-discursive

meanings, I argue that our engagement with images is akin to an intersubjective encounter – with results that cannot be determined in advance.

SHIFTING PARADIGMS IN MEDIA SCHOLARSHIP

Scholarly analyses of the media, understood here in Mitchell's (2005: 198) sense of "the whole set of material practices that brings an image together with an object to produce a picture," encapsulate the tension between structure and individual agency that has animated debate in the social sciences for decades. Over the course of the 20th century and into the 21st century, in concert with developments in communications technologies, the understanding and location of agency has shifted within media scholarship, from early accounts that emphasised the representational power of monolithic media institutions, to more recent arguments for the hermeneutic agency of increasingly active 'users' of communication technologies. In this section, I sketch the major movements in these paradigmatic and technological shifts, applying each as a lens through which we can read the annotation to Figure 9 on page 68. I argue that, although each era has opened a different avenue of approach to the media, the majority of such scholarship has retained a characteristically modern emphasis on rationality and control over what is often called media 'messages'.

"When people turn to fictional characters, it's often because they want an escape." The first sentence of the annotation for Figure 9 can be read differently depending on which strand of media scholarship you draw upon. In the early 20th century, the new mass media technologies of film and radio – used as channels for propaganda during the first and second World Wars – aroused concern about the power of media institutions to reproduce and reinforce ruling ideologies. The political-cultural economy approach to media locates agency, understood in this context as ownership of

the means of mass producing and distributing representations, firmly within media institutions, as is exemplified in Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002 [1944]) famous essay, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception'.

Discussing the 'system' of film, radio, and magazines that was used to distribute propaganda during both World Wars, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002 [1944]) argued that powerful, centralised media institutions use these technologies to distribute standardised but arresting media images into the homes and hearts of their audience, suppressing critical thinking and supporting the capitalist status quo. That people appear to want these media images is, for these critics (2002 [1944]: 96), "part of the system, not an excuse for it". By their analysis, mass entertainment is an institutionally manufactured response to the capitalist-generated need to (feel that one can) escape the mechanised labour process. The inability to *truly* escape through media was, for them, evident in the re-creation of capitalist labour processes in both the formulaic construction and routinised consumption of these media products. They theorised that people were transfixed by the technical capabilities of film, unaware that "the machine is rotating on the spot" (2002 [1944]: 106), endlessly reproducing the same "rigidly repeated, threadbare and half-abandoned content" (2002 [1944]: 108) that represents the least amount of risk for the media industry.

Through such a lens, the 'escape' referred to in the opening sentence of the image annotation is a futile hope, a new opiate for the masses that provides only a temporary alleviation of the pressures of capitalist society. Agency rests entirely with the media institutions, who they perceived as creating both the audience and the demand for media images that they subsequently fulfilled. The nascent technology of television, understood by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002 [1944]: 97) to be a "synthesis of radio and film," only seemed to them to promise an intensification of this process.

A similarly structural approach, although with a different ideological angle, was adopted by communications researchers in the United States of the 1920s and '30s, who investigated the hypothesised 'direct effects' or 'hypodermic needle' model of communication. Similar to Horkheimer and Adorno, the rise of the mass communications technologies of film and radio, and their subsequent deployment in propaganda and advertising, alarmed scholars who believed that they had the ability to directly alter people's political opinions. Both Hitler's use of mass media to spread Nazi propaganda in Germany and the more benign 'fireside chats' of President Franklin D. Roosevelt were, to scholars at the time, suggestive of the immense influencing power available to those who controlled the new mass communications technologies.

The audience was entirely passive within this model; influenced by both behaviourism and 19th century European social theory (Bineham 1988), scholars believed that the mass media had "straightforward, predictable and automatic ('hypodermic') effects on their audiences" (Morley 2006: 39). Agency, understood here as control of the means of message creation and distribution, was therefore conceptualised as being entirely within the hands of large media conglomerates and the politicians who could command them.

In the 1940s, Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) conducted an empirical study of the effects of media on people's voting choices in the presidential election, and found that interpersonal communication influenced voters far more than direct media exposure. The hypodermic model was superseded by a theory of *limited* media effects, where media messages were understood to be mediated by human agency (e.g. Katz 1957). This 'two-step' model of media effects suggested that most people received messages from the media indirectly, curated and interpreted by 'opinion leaders' in the general populace. These opinion leaders were found to be fairly evenly distributed throughout

different income levels and occupations in society, suggesting that people listened to those like themselves, and were, unsurprisingly, found to have greater exposure to the mass media than their followers (Katz 1957).

This new model had implications for theories about the nature of community in the 1950s, which had previously been thought to have become atomised through individualised media consumption, as well as the workings of democracy in a mass media society. The limited effects approach to media was a crucial revision of the 'hypodermic' model of mass media effects, shifting some of the agency from media institutions to influential audience subjects, but it did not disrupt the core proposition that media messages can reliably affect the opinion of the masses. Both the hypodermic and limited effects models have limited utility in understanding the sentiments expressed in the annotation to Figure 9.

The finding that media institutions had limited power to change opinions led to a change in the object of study. Although Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) had been around since the early 1940s, it came into its own as an approach in the late 1950s when, building off the findings of limited media effects, Katz turned the initial question of 'what do the media do to people?' around to ask, 'what do people do with the media?' (Katz 1959: 2). The annotation's initial suggestion that "when people turn to fictional characters, it's often because they want an escape," reproduces the answer to this question that had previously been most popular among commentators (c.f. Katz and Foulkes 1962, McQuail et al. 1972). Katz, and those who followed him, offered a more sophisticated approach, arguing that people seek out specific media products to satisfy particular needs, such as emotional regulation and social connection.

UGT thus heralded early academic recognition of an 'active audience' that makes motivated choice about the type and timing of media they consume. However, it

is a theory that remains beholden to the idea that the media have relatively objective 'effects' on the audience – audience agency is involved only in the selection of which effects they want to apply, and when.[35] From this perspective, we can read the opening sentence as confirming that people 'turn' to fictional characters when they have specific needs that they want met, such as the need for emotional release, companionship, or identity exploration (see Katz et al. 1973). In such a functionalist reading, agency is split between media institutions who produce media objects with certain objective effects and the audience, active in its selection of these materials, which uses these products to fulfil specific needs.[36]

The idea that media products could have determined 'effects' on their audience was challenged by Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies in the 1970s[37], who argued for the possibility of active resistance to media messages. Using a semiotic model to investigate televisual communication, Hall (1999 [1973]) identified both 'encoding' by the media institutions and 'decoding' by the receiver as determinate moments in the communicative process. Hall argued that, before media messages could

> have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', [they] must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded. It is this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect', influence, entertain, instruct, or persuade… (Hall 1999 [1973]: 509)

Whereas 'media effects' models and UGT implicitly assume a 1:1 reproduction of meaning in the encoding and decoding process, Hall (1999 [1973]: 510) took the

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[35] In McQuail et al. (1972: 144), the authors introduce, in passing, the notion of a two-way model of media use when they suggest that media use is "interactive. That is, it does not conform to the typical lineaments of a subject-object relationship," but unfortunately do not delve into it further.

[36] The UGT approach aligns with broader functionalist approaches to society that emerged around the same time, such as Malinowski's psychological-functionalist theory of culture (1939, 1944), and falls prey to the same critiques, such as its failure to account for social change and its political conservatism.

[37] Around the same time, structural-functionalist approaches to society were being challenged by symbolic anthropologists such as Turner (1977 [1969]) and Clifford Geertz (1973).

perspective that "the codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical," with one of the key factors being "the structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences". In this light, differing interpretations of media messages, understood in the tradition of media effects as 'distortions' or 'misunderstandings', were the result of the lack of equivalence between media institutions and audience members, and the audience's hermeneutic agency over media images.

Coming from a neo-Marxist perspective, Hall argued that media institutions encode media messages according to a pattern of preferred reading, one usually embedded in the dominant institutional, political, and ideological order to which the media industry belongs. However, the receiver can 'read' this message in a variety of ways, as its connotative content is available for active interpretation and transformation by the audience. This is not to say that absolutely anything can be read into any particular media message – the codes employed in the message limit the range of possible interpretations, at the risk of otherwise being unintelligible – but while they indicate a preferred reading they cannot impose this reading as the only interpretation available. Hall (1999 [1973]: 515) identifies three subject positions that viewers can take in response to an encoded message: they can take the dominant-hegemonic position, reading the content in the frame in which it was intended; they can take up a negotiated position, in which they might accept the applicability of the dominant reading in some but not all situations (usually not their local situation[38]); or they may

[38] Hall (1999 [1973]: 516) offers the example of a worker who might agree with the broad concept that 'we must all pay ourselves less in order to combat inflation' at the national level, as articulated by media messages, but nonetheless maintain that they need to go on strike for better pay and conditions in their particular circumstances.

take up an oppositional position, in which they transpose the message into an alternative framework of reference that leads to a transformative reading at odds with the dominant position.[39]

Hall's hermeneutic approach to audience agency was a turning point for media scholarship. It was followed by a range of studies in the 1980s, such as those conducted by Morley (1980), Fiske (2001 [1987]), and Ang (1989), that presented an optimistic view of active and diverse, politically and culturally situated audiences who participate in what Fiske called a "semiotic democracy" (2001 [1987]: 94) by making their own meanings from media images. Proponents of the 'active audience theory' positioned themselves explicitly in opposition to the media effects scholarship, while acknowledging the powerful distribution role still played by media institutions, such as is articulated by Fiske:

> Television and its programs do not have an 'effect' on people… Television does not 'cause' identifiable effects in individuals; it does, however, work ideologically to promote and prefer certain meanings of the world, to circulate some meanings rather than others, and to serve some social interests better than others. (Fiske 2001 [1987]: 18)

Media fandom has been studied along these lines for approximately three-and-a-half decades. Early fan scholarship, combining Stuart Hall's (1999 [1973]) encoding/decoding approach with Michel de Certeau's (1984) work on everyday resistance to mass culture, focused on the hermeneutic work that fans accomplished with media images, "raid[ing] mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, [and] reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interaction" (Jenkins 1992: 18; see also Bacon-Smith 1992, Fiske 1992 for similar approaches).

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[39] For this last case, Hall (1999 [1973]: 517) offers the example of "the viewers who listens to a debate on the need to limit wages but 'reads' every mention of the 'national interest' as 'class interest'".

In this early work, media images were largely conceptualised as inert objects; materials or semiotic resources that could be 'poached' from media producers to create new objects or discourses and generate their own distinctive subcultural capital.[40] Such scholarship grants a large degree of agency to the receivers of media imagery, constructing them not as an undifferentiated mass audience directly affected by media messages, but as politically conscious subjects who interpret received media imagery according to their individual social context and concerns.[41]

While a note of caution has been sounded in regards to the danger of over-emphasising the degree of agency that can be exercised by audiences (see Hills 2002, Morley 1992), the hermeneutic power of viewers over media messages has been a consistent theme for the last 40 years of post-structuralist media and fan scholarship. If we apply this approach to the sentence I have been focusing on so far – "When people turn to fictional characters, it's often because they want an escape" – we can read audience agency in the interpretation of these fictional characters. Whatever semiotic materials the media institutions may provide, it is up to the audience to determine how they will decode them. When these interpretations run counter to the dominant-hegemonic position of the media institutions, fans are not merely 'turning' to fictional characters, but actively 'poaching' them, reappropriating them from the media institutions for their own ends. The fictional characters they turn to for escape in this reading are therefore, in large part, their own hermeneutic creation.

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[40] This work parallels anthropological approaches in the 1980s and '90s (c.f. Abu-Lughod 1990, Comaroff 1985, Ong 1987, Scott 1985, 1990), which similarly emphasised "everyday forms of resistance" (Scott 1985).

[41] Liebes and Katz (1990) demonstrated the applicability of this theory in a cross-cultural context, building off Ang's (1989) work to compare the meanings audiences made of the quintessential North American soap opera, *Dallas*, in Los Angeles and Jerusalem.

The ‘age of the Internet’ (Turkle 1995), which has seen the rapid transformation of media institutions and practices, has only increased the salience of the notion of an active, engaged audience, as new media brings “hitherto marginal (and marginalised) tendencies into the very mainstream of media use” (Livingstone 2004: 79). Fandom has subsequently been reconceptualised to incorporate a spectrum of engagement, from the niche groups that were the original subjects of fan scholarship to the much more common and casual fan activities facilitated by affordable computer and Internet technology (c.f. Gray et al. 2007, 2017, Jenkins 2006a, 2007b).

Computers and the Internet make much more visible the hermeneutic agency of audiences as many of the traditional boundaries between media producers and receivers are broken down. Producers now often actively seek feedback on media products or facilitate the creation of user-generated content for use in marketing. Andrejevic (2008: 26) notes that “fan culture is at long last being deliberately and openly embraced by producers,” while Henry Jenkins (2006a: 138), among others (De Kosnik 2013, Keltie 2017), has observed that fan labour is increasingly being embedded within the day-to-day operations of media organisations. The increased ability for media institutions to produce and distribute niche products for the ‘long tail’ of the market (Anderson 2007) means that “fandoms are [becoming] increasingly important as audiences fragment and diversify” (Livingstone 2004: 81).

In the new relationship emerging between producers and receivers, fans do not merely ‘turn’ to fictional characters or interpret them from existing media images, but may actively *demand* certain types of characters to appropriate (including those that

remain under-represented[42], such as women, people of colour, queer people, people who are neurodivergent[43] and/or disabled), or simply create their own.[44] The louder voices of fans, and the ability for a greater amount of hitherto 'niche' material to be produced by media institutions and enterprising individuals, mean that these demands have a much greater chance of being fulfilled than they would have had previously.

As Jenkins (2006a: 3) notes in his exploration of the evolving producer-receiver relationship, "corporations… still exert greater power than any individual consumer or even the aggregate of consumers," but the agency of the consumer has greatly increased along with the communication, production, and distribution capabilities of personal computers. Agency here is not simply hermeneutic agency exercised on pre-existing products, but the ability for consumers to organise in order to collectively demand change from media producers, and to create and distribute their own media products (resulting in the rather awful portmanteaus, 'prosumers' (Toffler 1980) and 'produsers' (Bruns 2008)). If these capabilities live up to their promise, then the fictional characters to which people turn may one day not be the provenance of media institutions at all, but the product of individuals and small collectives who independently produce and distribute their artistic expressions.

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[42] For example, I Need Diverse Games (2017) is a non-profit organisation founded by fans that aims to encourage diversity in gaming and promote the work of marginalised developers, artists, and journalists.
[43] Neurodiversity is a relatively recent paradigm that encapsulates the idea that neurological differences should be "recognised and respected as any other human variation. These differences can include those labelled with Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Dyscalculia, Autistic Spectrum, Tourette Syndrome, and others" (National Symposium on Neurodiversity at Syracuse University 2011: n.p.)
[44] For example, *The Newtown Girls* (Horne et al. 2012), is a 10-part Australian web series about queer women living in Sydney's inner Western suburbs. As Keltie (2017: 10), one of the creators, argues, *The Newtown Girls* is "an example of how minority groups can participate in cultural production, shifting the balance of content available for consumption." However, she also notes that such independent content is often distributed through online content giants (e.g. Google), the profits of which rely on such voluntary labour.

Such a world would offer greater diversity in the stories and lives represented, allowing a flourishing of different identities. However, the utopian possibilities of what has been called 'participatory culture' (Jenkins 2006a) are balanced by critical perspectives from scholars such as media scholar and creator Emma Keltie, who returns to a political economy approach to warn that:

> [P]articipatory practices can create moments of resistance to the dominance of the culture industry, but these moments are not sustained: rather, they are folded back into industry practices. Increasingly, audience-produced content is becoming the linchpin of economic gain for privately owned media companies that, in effect, rely on the labour power of consumer-producers for the very existence of their business models. (Keltie 2017: 6)

The ability for media institutions to absorb representational resistance, evident through the syntactical reduction of such projects into the colourless appellation 'user generated content', places into doubt the extent to which audience agency can truly challenge the media industry. This takes us full circle, returning to Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002 [1944]) critique, with which I began this section, to suggest that escape from the machine of the capitalist culture industry may not, after all, be possible.

Each of the approaches outlined above offers a different and valuable perspective on the way in which people "turn to fictional characters" for escape, but none adequately contend with the idea of vulnerability that threads throughout my fieldwork experience. Despite the shifting paradigms of media scholarship in the 20th and early 21st century, the modernistic notion of being able to control media messages has been implicit throughout. Regardless of how agency has been understood or where it has been located, the actions of the identified agents are conceptualised as conscious and rational: media institutions craft messages to effect certain opinions in their audience, or the audience reworks the images they receive to better reflect the messages that they want to see.

De-emphasising fans' relationships with images in favour of fans' creative and hermeneutic capabilities notably fits within Western culture's privileging of the rational, logical and productive over the irrational, emotional and unproductive (Lutz 1988, Papacharissi 2015), and the self-determining individual over external forms of agency (Keane 2003). An alternative, and much older, thread of media scholarship engages with the irrational, entrancing nature of images, but tends to over-determine their effect. It is to this scholarship that I turn in the next section.

THE MORAL THREAT OF IMAGES

> The ancient superstitions about images – that they… make people do irrational things, that they are potentially destructive forces that seduce and lead us astray – are not quantitatively less powerful in our time, though they are surely different in a qualitative sense. They have taken on radically new forms in the context of new scientific and technical possibilities, new social formations, and new religious movements, but their deep structure remains the same. (Mitchell 2005: 19)

There is a long history of anxieties about images. Regardless of the type of technology involved in their production, people have expressed continual disquiet about their potential to stir humans to irrational and unwholesome action. In this section, I give a brief overview of this history, starting with the dangers of epic poetry before proceeding through novels, films, comic books, television, and, finally, video games. In so doing, I argue that we have always sought to blame images – especially the newest form of image in any particular age – for the apparent degradation of society. Seen in this light, contemporary concerns around video games are only the latest manifestation of an uneasy acknowledgement of the primordial power of figured imagery.

People have been concerned about the influence of images since at least Plato's time (5th century BCE). Plato is well known for the allegory of the cave (*Republic* 514a–520a), which is interpreted by many commentators as a warning against mistaking appearance for reality. However, in Book X, Plato makes an explicit and sustained

critique of the arts, condemning (among other things) epic poetry for the power it has to harm "even decent people" by "fashioning images which are far removed from the truth, and indulging the senseless element in the soul" (*Republic* 605c).[45] The danger for the audience lies in empathising with fictional characters. In a passage that echoes the vulnerability described in the image annotation with which I began this chapter (on page 69), Plato writes (my emphasis):

> Listen to this and think about it: you see the best of us, I imagine, listen to Homer and any of the other tragic poets representing the grief of one of the heroes as they pour forth a long speech in their lamentation, even singing and beating their breasts, and, you know, *we enjoy it, we surrender ourselves to it and suffer along with the characters* as we follow and eagerly applaud whoever thus affects us in this way the most as a good poet. (*Republic* 605c-d)

According to Plato, by encouraging us to empathise with its characters, epic poetry "feeds and waters [irrational emotions] when they should be made to wither, and makes them control us when they should be controlled in order for us to become better, happier people…" (*Republic* 606d). The annotation for Figure 9 would confirm Plato's worst expectations: although we rarely encounter them through oral poetry these days, fictional characters still have the same ability to arouse our emotions and sympathies, and people still feel the same desire to figuratively surrender to them, that Plato identified in the 5th century. Indeed, the media technologies that have been developed since Plato's time have only expanded this potential.

Much later, in the early modern era of the 18th and 19th centuries, novels were a source of anxiety for many cultural commentators. Professor of English literature, Jacqueline Pearson wryly observes that, between 1750 to 1835 in Britain:

> It seems there was hardly any crime, sin, or personal catastrophe that injudicious reading was not held to cause directly or indirectly – from murder, suicide, rape, and

[45] All translations of *The Republic* are from Plato (2013), translated by Christopher Emlyn-Jones and William Preddy.

> violent revolution, through prostitution, adultery and divorce, to pride, vanity, and slapdash housewifery. (Pearson 1999: 8)

Identification with the characters in the novel was the source of these dangers. Pearson (1999: 83) notes that "women were deemed vulnerable to excessively identificatory reading practices… which might endanger their fragile sense of rational selfhood" and lead them to imitate the actions of the novel's characters. It was not only women who were thought to be susceptible to the influence of fiction in this era: for the male audience, particularly those who were young and belonged to the working class, concern centred on the infamous 'penny dreadfuls', sensational fiction serials that sold for a penny. These booklets were thought to be a pernicious influence, leading young men of the working class to crime and immorality through the adventures of the characters depicted within (Pearson 1984, Springhall 1998).

Shortly after film emerged as a new form of media, a number of cultural commentators expressed concern about its potential to induce undesirable behaviour in youths through the depiction of crime and romance. Writing in 1923, the philosopher Joseph Roy Geiger highlighted the visuality of film as key to its appeal – and psychological danger:

> Visual impressions are, for the majority of people, the most vivid and the most lasting…. [And] the visual impressions made on the mind of the [film] spectator are always in terms of concrete imagery of the most detailed character. There is a vast psychological difference between hearing or reading an account of a murder, or an assault, or a passionate mutual attraction between members of the opposite sexes, and seeing these things actually portrayed on the screen. (Geiger 1923: 69–70)

Geiger argued that the vivid visual detail of film did not require the spectator to have previous knowledge of the acts depicted, and thus made them accessible to children in a way that textual representations were not.

These concerns led to an empirical study of the effects of cinema on children, known as the Payne Fund Studies, which found that many of these concerns had a basis

in reality (Blumer 1933). Once again, the ability of film to incite emotion through its depiction of sympathetic characters was seen as central to its subversive effect:

> It seems clear that the forte of motion pictures is in their emotional effect… To fascinate the observer and draw him into the drama so that he loses himself is the goal of a successful production. As we have sought to show, while in this condition the observer becomes malleable to the touch of what is shown. Ordinary self-control is lost. Impulses and feelings are aroused, and the individual develops a readiness to certain forms of action which are foreign in some degree to his ordinary conduct. (Blumer 1933: 198)

Concerns about film continued throughout the 20th century, with film being blamed for otherwise inexplicable travesties such as the 1993 abduction and murder of 2-year-old James Bulger by two 10-year old boys in the United Kingdom (Springhall 1998).

In the 1940s and '50s, the popularity of comic books among children provoked a backlash from public commentators who were concerned about their graphic depictions of violence, demonstrating that it was not only moving pictures that attracted hostile scrutiny. Psychiatrist Dr Frederic Wertham MD was particularly active in advocating against comic books. In his book, *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), he argues, based on seven years of clinical experience with juvenile offenders, that comic books contribute to violence carried out by youths, including sexual violence and murder. Identification with the characters was once again thought to be responsible, even though the characters they identified with were often the heroes of the piece:

> The child gets pleasure from poring over what a comic-book figure does, is emotionally stirred and identifies himself with the figure that is active, successful, dominates a situation and satisfies an instinct, even though the child may only half understand what that instinct means… Since the heroes of crime comics invariably commit violent acts of one kind or another just as the criminals do, the child must identify himself with violent characters. (Wertham 1954: 116–117)

Wertham (1954: 118) concluded that "crime comics are an agent with harmful potentialities," and described them as being like a "virus" that infects innocent readers.

From the 1950s, the rapid expansion of television into people's homes aroused many of the same concerns with which people had responded to the introduction of novels, films, and comic books. Congressional hearings aimed at determining if

television violence caused actual violence began as early as 1954 in the United States, and continued over several decades (Signorielli 2005). In the 1960s, a spate of violence in the United States – including the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King, JR – brought television violence into the spotlight.

The U.S. National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (1969: 188), established in response to these killings, dedicated a chapter of its final report to televised violence, noting that it had "received from the general public more suggestions, strong recommendations and often bitter complaints about violence on television than about any other single issue". While acknowledging that there was not as much evidence as may be desired, the report concluded that "violence on television encourages violent forms of behaviour, and fosters moral and social values about violence in daily life which are unacceptable in a civilised society" (1969: 199). Identification with the characters in television programs, and the perceived reality of these portrayals, were described as key factors in television's power to influence behaviour (1969: 196–197).

Since the 1960s, a wealth of studies, congressional hearings, and task force inquiries have sought to prove the effects of media violence on children and society (see Paik and Comstock 1994 for an overview). Many of these have found a link: in an overview of experimental research on televised violence, Bushman and Huesmann (2001) likened the link between televised and actual violence to that of smoking and lung cancer:

> Like a first cigarette, the first violent movie seen can make a person nauseous. Later, however, one relishes more and more. The effects of smoking and viewing violence are cumulative. Smoking one cigarette will probably not cause lung cancer. Likewise, seeing one violent movie probably will not turn a child into a psychopathic killer. But repeated exposure to both cigarettes and violent media can have harmful long-term consequences. (Bushman and Huesmann 2001: 234)

Concern about televised violence has continued well into the 21st century, and has been joined by concerns around newer forms of media, such as computer games.

Debates about the effect of depicted violence in computer games is only the latest manifestation of concern about the moral threat of images. Even in the early days of computer games, questions were raised about the effects of playing them. In 1976, only four years after the release of *Pong*, the arcade game *Death Race* (Exidy 1976) became the subject of "video gaming's first significant moral panic" (Kocurek 2012: n.p.). The game involved steering a car and running over humanoid figures (known as 'gremlins') to earn points. Despite the pixelated graphics of the game (see Figure 10 below), it caused much consternation among commentators and was denounced by safety authorities.

A key argument among its critics was that video game violence is more dangerous than television violence because of the active role that players take in promoting it. For example, Dr Gerald Driessen, a behavioural psychologist who worked for the U.S. National Safety Council, was quoted in a *New York Times* article as saying that:

> On TV, violence is passive. In this game, a player takes the first step to creating violence. The player is no longer just a spectator. He's an actor in the process… I'm sure most people playing this game do not jump in their car and drive at pedestrians. But one in a thousand? One in a million? And I shudder to think what will come next if this is encouraged. It'll be pretty gory. (Driessen, cited in Blumenthal 1976)

Although it dissipated relatively quickly, the *Death Race* controversy marked the start of a pattern of concern about the effects of simulated violence in video games.

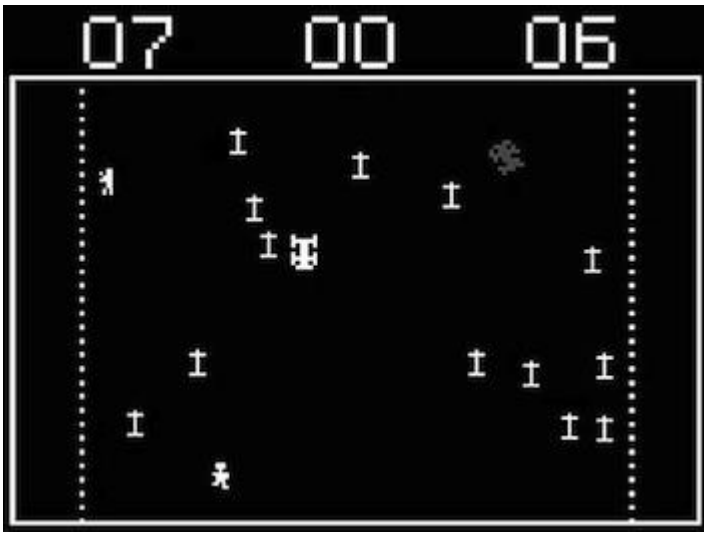

Figure 10: A screen capture of *Death Race* (Exidy 1976). Sourced from Kocurek (2012)

Increasing realism in games, as graphical technology has improved, has been cited as a reason for increased concern about violent video games (Gentile and Anderson 2003). One of the most controversial video game genres in this respect is First Person Shooter (FPS) games[46], which have been implicated in a series of high-profile school shootings in the United States. In a FPS, the player takes on the role and point-of-view of an armed agent (see Figure 11 below). The game screen shows

> a weapon controlled by the player and aimed at the vanishing point in the centre of the screen. This merging of the field of vision with point and shoot controls… marks the FPS game and encourages the interpolation of the player. What you see on the screen is what you would see if you were aiming a weapon at something. (Krapp 2014: 346)

[46] An exception to this generality is the *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar Games 1997–2013), which is one of the most controversial series of video games to have ever been made despite using a third-person perspective. The series has attracted repeated criticism for depicting and rewarding the player for engaging in extreme violence, prostitution, drug use, drink driving, and torture, among other antisocial acts. See McLaughlin and Thomas (2013) for a history of the series.

Figure 11: A screen capture of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward 2009). Sourced from Sinclair (2010)

The combination of realistic graphics, the adoption of the point-of-view of a violent protagonist, and the rewarding of aggressive actions are key reasons why prominent anti-video games campaigner (and disbarred attorney) Jack Thompson (2005) infamously described video games as "murder simulators". Following the 1997 high school shooting in Paducah, Kentucky, Jack Thompson assisted the families of the victims to take a number of video game companies (particularly those who produced FPS games) to court with the allegation that they were partially responsible for the deaths (Press 1999). A similar lawsuit filed by the families of victims of the 1999 Columbine school massacre in Colorado claimed that, "[a]bsent the combination of extremely violent video games and these boys' incredibly deep involvement, use of and addiction to these games… these murders and this massacre would not have occurred" (The Guardian 2001: n.p.). Although video games were not found to be legally

responsible in these cases (Liptak 2002, Sink 2002), news commentators continue to link playing violent video games with mass shootings.[47]

In academic scholarship, a robust debate about the relationship between video game violence and violent behaviour carried out by people in the actual world is ongoing amongst psychologists (c.f. Anderson 2004, Anderson et al. 2010, Bushman et al. 2010, Ferguson 2007, Ferguson and Kilburn 2010). While both positions are predicated on divergent analyses of the validity of experimental psychological research, proponents of the causal link emphasise existing concerns around older forms of media, such as television and film, and argue that video game violence increases these effects by allowing the audience to participate in the violence they are witnessing (Gentile and Anderson 2003). Detractors point out that rates of violent crime have fallen in most industrialised nations at the same time that video games have dramatically increased in popularity; the exact opposite relationship to that theorised by causal link proponents (Ferguson and Kilburn 2010). Neither side, however, questions the *meaning* of the images consumed, only the strength of their 'effects'.[48]

Throughout history, the same anxieties about images emerge over and over again, regardless of the medium involved: that people will imitate the transgressive or antisocial behaviour they have virtually experienced, whether that be through oral poetry, printed literature (novels), printed images (comic books), or audio-visual

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[47] For example, see news stories about the Virginia Tech shootings (NBC News 2007), Sandy Hook massacre (Bates and Pow 2013), Norway mass shootings (CNN 2012), and Munich shootings (BBC 2016).

[48] In comparison, media scholar Professor Henry Jenkins has questioned the understanding of violence deployed in these analyses (Jenkins 2007a), and has argued that meaning is something constructed by the player rather than given by the game (Jenkins 2006b), locating agency once more in the image receiver.

moving images (film, television, computer games).[49] When placed in this historical context, concerns about the "newest media violence hazard" (Gentile and Anderson 2003), that is, video games, prove to be only the latest example of an ongoing uneasiness about the power of figured images.

Scholars who exhibit concern about violent films, comics, television programs, and video games are not, by and large, suggesting that producers create these images *in order to* provoke acts of violence in their viewers or players (even if they want them to take responsibility for doing so). Unlike the media effects scholars in the previous section, who were concerned about the deliberate deployment of media messages, it is the images themselves that are implicitly held to cause acts of violence. Such an approach acknowledges that images can have effects that are outside of the control of either media producers or receivers but, I would argue, over-determines their influence while isolating them from the broader sociocultural context. The meaning and effect of images in this analysis are fixed in a 1:1 correspondence – violent images beget violence, deviant images beget deviance – but in this thesis, I will argue that images are nebulous, with a surplus value that eludes simple or direct effect.

It is also important to note who has typically been considered to be at risk from the influence of images. With the exception of Plato, who believed that epic poetry can harm "even decent people" (*Republic* 605c), it is the marginalised and disempowered who are thought to be especially vulnerable: primarily women, youth, and the working class. This can be read as an attempt to disavow any effect of images on the rational,

[49] In addition to the media that I have discussed, a range of other forms of media have provoked similar concerns, such as theatre, radio plays, and popular songs. See Springhall (1998) for a comprehensive overview.

enlightened self of the upper classes. As Mitchell notes, "there are many candidates for the 'someone else'" who is deemed to be susceptible to images: "primitives, children, the masses, the illiterate, the uncritical, the illogical, the 'Other'" (Mitchell 2005: 7). In the following section, I explore the fan as the quintessential archetype of someone who has wilfully succumbed to the power of media images.

Fan Relationships with Media Images

Despite the growing prominence of fandom within the mainstream (c.f. Gray et al. 2007, Jenkins 2006a, Sandvoss 2005), fans remain marked by the stigma associated with images more broadly. This is evident in the persistence of negative stereotypes, both in external media coverage (c.f. Bennett and Booth 2016, Larsen and Zubernis 2011) and in fans' interpretations of their own (c.f. Hills 2002) or other fans' practices (c.f. Busse 2013, Stanfill 2013), which warn about the dangers of becoming too involved with media images. These stereotypes paint fans as socially isolated, excessively attached to frivolous media imagery, and ultimately unable to distinguish between representation and reality.

Media studies Professor Joli Jensen captures these normative discourses around fandom when she says:

> Were I to call myself a fan, I would imply that I am emotionally engaged with unworthy cultural figures and forms, and that I was risking obsession, with dangerous consequences. I would imply that I was a psychologically incomplete person, trying to compensate for my inadequate life through the reflected glory of these figures and forms… I must have these relationships because my lonely, marginal existence requires that I prop myself up with these fantasy attachments… and these alliances with abstract, imaginary communities. (Jensen 1992: 23)

However, not all fans fall prey to these stereotypes. A distinction between 'good' and 'bad' fans functions as a normalising discourse within fandoms, implicitly teaching that there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' way in which to consume media products. Jensen characterises this distinction as follows:

> [A]s long as the fan shows 'good common sense,' remains 'rational' and 'in control', then he or she will be spared [from a pathological diagnosis]. But if the fan ceases to distinguish the real and the imaginary, and lets emotion overwhelm reason and somehow gets 'out of control', then there are terrible consequences. These consequences are referenced in the cautionary tales of fans who go 'over the edge' into fanaticism, and thus pathology. (Jensen 1992: 18)

Implicit in these constructions of the 'rational' versus the 'pathological' fan is the power of the image. If a fan loses control, then what is in control? What is it, exactly, that is inciting this 'irrational' behaviour? The power of the image haunts these cautionary stereotypes, with media images acknowledged as a potent but dangerous source of meaning that must be carefully managed by maintaining a reasoned attitude towards them. Interpreted through these stereotypes, the annotation to Figure 9 raises questions about the level of involvement that the author has with fictional characters. Are they acting as a rational fan, able to maintain a critical distance from media images, or does 'giving in' and becoming vulnerable cause them to slip from 'normal' to 'excessive' fandom?

Intense relationships with images are not a new phenomenon, and neither are relationships with electronic media imagery. The latter arose in tandem with the commercialisation of television, the first mass electronic imagery that could be consumed in private. In 1956, sociologists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl wrote about what they called 'parasocial relationships', that is, one-sided relationships that people develop with figured media images, including talk show presenters, people playing fictional characters, and even non-human characters such as puppets.

Describing parasocial relationships with media personae such as talk show presenters as 'intimacy at a distance', Horton and Wohl argued that:

> The spectacular fact about such personae is that they can claim and achieve an intimacy with what are literally crowds of strangers, and this intimacy, even if it is an imitation and a shadow of what is ordinarily meant by that word, is extremely influential with, and satisfying for, the great numbers who willingly receive it and share in it. (Horton and Wohl 2006 [1956]: n.p.)

Horton and Wohl argued that parasocial relationships can play a number of roles in people's lives. They might represent an idealised form of an everyday relationship, such as that with a husband or wife, allowing the spectator to imaginatively play their part in this relationship, or they may be considered as a friend, counsellor, or comforter who appears with regular dependability and can be scheduled into daily routines. Either way, Horton and Wohl suggested that one of the benefits of a parasocial relationship is that it places no demands on the active participant.

While Horton and Wohl (2006 [1956]: n.p.) suggested that "for the great majority of the audience, the parasocial is complementary to normal social life," they also argued that television shows with personable presenters are "peculiarly favourable to the formation of compensatory attachments by the socially isolated, the socially inept, the aged and invalid, the timid and rejected" because "the persona himself [sic] is readily available as an object of love."[50] Echoing the normative distinction between the 'good' and 'bad' fan summarised by Jensen above, Horton and Wohl (2006 [1956]: n.p.) suggest that it is when the boundaries between reality and representation become blurred, when "the para-social relationship becomes a substitute for autonomous social participation, when it proceeds in absolute defiance of objective reality, that it can be regarded as pathological".

Yet relationships with images are a natural and normal part of most societies – including Western societies. In pioneering work in this area, anthropologist John Caughey (1984: 7) argued that, rather than being abnormal, "intense imaginary

[50] The suggestive gendering of the presenter as male in this quote gestures towards the common devaluing of fandom as feminised – as Stanfill (2013: 124) notes, fandom is commonly characterised as being "comprised of either insufficiently masculine men or hysterical women".

relationships through fantasy, media, dreams, and the stream of consciousness are characteristic of contemporary American society". Although we may be broadly familiar with the important role that beings such as spirits play in religious or spiritual contexts, we often disregard the host of virtual people who fill the lives of secular Westerners. Caughey (1984: 21) argues that "there are hundreds of significant beings different from but somewhat analogous to spirits who haunt the lives of contemporary secular Americans," including media figures such as movie stars, talk show hosts, and soap opera characters. These figures often form an important part of individual people's subjective social worlds and Caughey argues that it is important to take these relationships into account in order to develop a full understanding of the subjective social world of any particular society.

Relationships with images follow similar forms as those with other human beings. Caughey (1984: 34) argues that, when consuming media, people "mentally slip out of the real social world and enter an artificial world of vicarious social experience". This imaginary world is interpreted using the same system of social cues that operates in the actual world; the characters that inhabit it are treated as if they are acting in socially meaningful ways, and the individual connects with this world by imagining themselves into "a social role that links him structurally to the social drama he consumes" (Caughey 1984: 36). This role may simply be that of an observer or, by imaginatively becoming a participant in the unfolding drama (such as imagining oneself as the character's partner, parent, child, or friend), the individual can be "drawn into a pseudo relationship with the media being" (Caughey 1984: 37).

Caughey (1984: 40) suggests that "fans have attachments to unmet media figures that are analogous to and in many ways directly parallel to actual social relationships with real fathers, sisters, friends, and lovers". This relationship need not always be

positive; antagonistic interactions with media images are also a form of relationship that treats the image as if it were socially real. While Caughey (1984: 49-51) notes that some media psychologists make the argument that these relationships substitute for social relations missing in an individual's life, he points to ethnographic evidence that suggests that real and fantasy relationships often co-exist, and, when they do not, it may be because fantasy relationships are preferred over actual ones.

With the development of computers, people can now engage in relationships with computerised images, such as sociable robots and computer-controlled images like the characters in *Dragon Age*. These relationships have a different character than those of previous forms of media because they allow people to directly interact with and receive responses from images. The ability to talk to both real and virtual people through computers can also blur the distinction between representation and reality. This is the case made by Sherry Turkle, a psychologist who has focused on computer-mediated interaction for more than 20 years, who argues that "as human beings become increasingly intertwined with technology and with each other via technology, old distinctions between what is specifically human and specifically technological become more complex" (Turkle 1995: 21). While she acknowledges some potentially liberatory aspects of the intersection of human, computer, and image, she finds it discouraging that "people are increasingly comfortable with substituting representations of reality for the real" (Turkle 1995: 21). This is a thesis that she developed further in her 2011 book, in which she argues that:

> These days, insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time. […] Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. (Turkle 2011: xii, 1)

For Turkle, both computer-mediated relationships and those with sociable robots are attempts at substituting representation for reality. She finds computer-mediated

relationships to be unsatisfactory, suggesting that they "offer connection with uncertain claims to commitment" (2011: 153), and warning that "there is the risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed – and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing" (154). Although she does not use the term, her treatment of computer-mediated relationships makes it clear that she sees them as another form of parasocial relationship. She argues that "we allow ourselves to be comforted by unrequited love" (2011: 282) both when engaging with computer-controlled images such as robots and when developing relationships with distant others via the Internet. In so doing, Turkle expands many of the fan stereotypes described above to include anyone who engages in relationships mediated by computer images: they too are risking social isolation by blurring the distinction between representation and reality. For Turkle, the annotation to Figure 9 would be illustrative of the unrequited love of which she warns us: although fans may feel that they have real connections with fictional characters, in actuality they remain alone.

Theorising Agency in Images

Neither approach that I have outlined above is satisfactory for coming to terms with the active role that images play in the lives of their fans. Images are neither passive vehicles for meaning, nor all-powerful forces that can incite otherwise unthinkable behaviour. Instead, I shall argue that images evidence a form of agency that is virtually intersubjective in its address to what I will call the sociocorporeal perception of their beholders. In this section, I draw upon art history, visual culture studies, the anthropology of art, and Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic aesthetics to articulate an alternative theory of figured images that posits them as being *virtual people*. As noted in the Introduction, I am here drawing on the manifold understandings of the term *virtual* to suggest that figured images are *simulated* people who have person-like *effects*

through their dense knot of intersubjective *potential*. In so doing, I align my approach with what Mitchell (1994) has called the 'pictorial turn', which eschews a linguistic analysis of images in order to engage with their non-linguistic elements. I start by considering the way in which figured images *simulate* the markers of personhood.

Scholars have long been fascinated with the apparent liveliness of figurative images and the responses they can elicit in their beholders. While the characters encountered through the *Dragon Age* games are interactive moving images, one of the most recent media developments, there is a long history of lively images that suggests that it is not just this particular medium that draws such a reaction. As visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff (1995: 2) notes, "the body has been the principal subject of Western art since the Renaissance."

David Freedberg, an art historian, has investigated responses to figured imagery from the European Middle Ages onwards (1989). He argues that humans have always responded powerfully to images and that, although we may wish to locate this capacity in the supposed irrationality of past or 'primitive' societies, people are still moved to "the highest levels of empathy and fear" by images in contemporary Western society:

> People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt… They have always responded in these ways; they still do. They do so in societies we call primitive and in modern societies; in East and West, in Africa, America, Asia, and Europe. (Freedberg 1989: 1)

Mitchell (2005: 7–8) agrees with Freedberg that "magical attitudes towards images are just as powerful in the modern world as they were in so-called ages of faith," and argues that this is something that we attempt to obscure in Western society by finding many "candidates for the 'someone else' who believes that images are alive and want things,"

such as "primitives, children, the masses, the illiterate, the uncritical, the illogical, the 'Other'".[51]

Images arouse these responses because, according to Freedberg (1989: 12), we hold "the tacit belief that the bodies represented on or in [pictures] somehow have the status of living bodies". Contrary to Mirzoeff's (1995: 2) suggestion that "in representation the body appears not as itself, but as a sign," Freedberg (1989: 12) argues that the slippage between representation and reality in our reception of figured images is not simply a case of "mere reminding" because, if it were, "the paintings or sculptures would not have the effectiveness they do". Instead, Freedberg (1989: 12) argues, that there is a "body in the image" that we refuse to acknowledge or recognise, suppressing our affective response in preference for a formalised, intellectual one that allows us to feel in control.[52]

Freedberg (1989: 13-18) gives us the example of Titian's famous *Venus of Urbino* (see Figure 12 below). He notes that the many people who have commented on this painting over the years have tended to focus on the classical beauty of the nude, engage in complex iconographic interpretations, or dwell on the charming small details, like the dog curled up on the bed – that is, more or less tying themselves in knots to avoid engaging with the response elicited by the lively personhood of the woman who takes up the centre of the frame.

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[51] This may be a peculiarly Protestant response to imagery: Webb Keane (2007: 6) has observed that Protestantism consists of a particular moral narrative of modernity, which he briefly characterises as one of "human emancipation and self-mastery," in which "those who seem to persist in displacing their own agency" onto "illegitimate rulers, rigid traditions, and *unreal fetishes*" (my emphasis) are "out of step with the times, anachronistic premoderns or antimoderns". This moral narrative led to the destruction of material images during the Reformation.

[52] Although Mirzoeff (1995: 2) does not recognise a "body in the image" in the same way as Freedberg, he nevertheless acknowledges that "the corporal sign has very real effects upon the physical body".

Figure 12: Titian, *Venus of Urbino* (1538)

Mitchell agrees that the power of figured imagery lies in its apparent personhood. He argues that:

> Pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood and animation: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively; or they look at us silently across a 'gulf unabridged by language'. They present not just a surface, but a *face* that faces the beholder. (Mitchell 2005: 30)

It is this *face* of the figured image that has not been adequately factored into the analyses of how media images are taken up by fans.[53] We do not respond to figured images as though they were an abstract design that requires cognitive decryption – we respond to them as if they were real people with whom we can engage. Part of this is that we respond to them on a bodily level. The philosopher Nelson Goodman (1968: 259) argued that "what we know through art is felt in our bones and nerves and muscles

[53] It is perhaps relevant to critics' awkward responses to Titian's *Venus of Urbino* that the titular subject is looking frankly at the beholder, as though daring them to look upon her.

as well as grasped by our minds," and Freedberg (1989: 30) argues that it is this full-bodied human perception that "elides representation with reality" such that "it is not that the bodies are present; it is *as though* they were present". Our body, goes the argument, does not know the difference, and reacts accordingly.

Interestingly, the verisimilitude of the image does not seem to be the key point on which this bodily perception hinges. Freedberg gives a range of examples where the image in question is neither particularly realistic looking nor, in some cases, particularly aesthetically pleasing, yet these images still have a powerful effect on their viewers.[54] This does not mean that the images can be any shape, however. Freedberg (1989: 201) argues that, for images to be perceived as lively, they must resemble the human form[55]: "We see the familiar anatomy and invest it with familiar sentiments; and then alien materiality can breathe, bleed, and feel." Familiar anatomy is one example of what Freedberg calls a 'clue' to the body in the image. Other clues, such as placing real objects (for example, clothing or jewellery) on figures, using lifelike colours, or creating realistic-looking eyes also contribute to the liveliness of the body in the image. These clues help us to respond to the image as though it were what it represents, but Freedberg argues that even if these clues are not abundant in the image

> we still seek to reconstitute the reality of the signified in the sign… The smallest number of clues suffices to precipitate the search for more. Response to all images, and not only ones perceived as being more or less realistic, is predicated on the progressive reconstitution of material objects as living. (Freedberg 1989: 245)

[54] Indeed, increased realism can precipitate in a fall into the 'uncanny valley,' a term originally coined by Masahiro Mori in 1970 to describe the sudden decrease in affinity that an observer has to a robot as it approaches (but does not quite attain) human likeness (Mori et al. 2012).
[55] Moving images have proven to be an exception to this argument, an aspect that I will discuss in detail in Chapter 3.

Once this reconstitution is accomplished, we respond to the image as though it were the body it represents. In a positive feedback loop, our affective response seems to confirm the liveliness of the image: it is real because I am responding to it; I am responding to it because it is real (Freedberg 1989: 325).

The simulated personhood of figured images gives rise to the second aspect of virtuality that I reference: that they can have a social agency that is *in effect* (i.e. virtually) *person-like*. The 'reconstitution' that Freedberg describes is very similar to the 'abduction of agency' that anthropologist Alfred Gell (1998) identified in relation to art objects. Gell, similarly to Freedberg and Mitchell, identified people's responses to art as his central problematic. However, as an anthropologist, Gell (1998: 7) locates the power of images to effect these responses in "the social-relational matrix in which [the art object] is embedded".

Gell (1998: 13) conceptualises art objects as mediating social agency by permitting "a particular cognitive operation" that he calls "the abduction of agency," through which people impute social agency to the figures in art:

> Very much part of the theory I am proposing is the idea that we approach art objects… as if they had 'physiognomies' like people. When we see a picture of a smiling person, we attribute an attitude of friendliness to 'the person in the picture' and (if there is one) the sitter or 'subject' of the picture. We respond to the picture in this way because the appearance of smiling triggers a (hedged) inference that (unless they were pretending) this person is friendly, just as a real person's smile would trigger the same response. (Gell 1998: 15)

Gell is here suggesting that we react to figured images *as if* they were people within our social-relational matrix. His description of the hedged inference that the person in the picture is friendly unless they are pretending is reminiscent of Geertz's (1973) classic description of the work of the anthropologist to decipher the wink that could be a twitch, a wink, or a deception. We approach the art object in the same way as we approach the winker: as though it is communicating in a socially meaningful way. This explanation also accords with Caughey's (1984: 36) description of imaginary social

relationships taking place because "an individual connects to media experience through learned systems of knowledge for processing perceptions about human social conduct". Encounters with images are therefore virtually intersubjective, with the human participant bringing to bear upon this encounter their full array of social skills and understanding.

Significantly for Gell, it is not the producer of an image who is accorded agency in the case of an art object (nor the media institution funding them), but the figure depicted therein. This is not to say that people believe that the person in the picture is real in the sense that canvas and paint or pixels can somehow live and breathe, but that the person-figure can be taken as an indexical object, as a trace or apparent trace of a human being who can act socially through the picture. Gell argues that agency is not the sole province of intentional actors, such as human beings, but can also be exhibited by objects, such as pictures. In so doing, he proposes an understanding of agency as the capacity to "cause events to happen":

> Agency is attributable to those persons (and things…) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events. An agent is one who 'causes events to happen' in their vicinity. As a result of this exercise of agency, certain events transpire (not necessarily the specific events which were 'intended' by the agent). (Gell 1998: 16)

This understanding of agency is grounded in the perception of the beholder rather than the subjectivity of the apparent actor.[56] It does away with the necessity of

[56] The phenomenon of attributing agency to objects appearing to act in a socially intelligible way has been studied in psychology since the early 1900s, which found that "just as the visual system works to recover the physical structure of the world by inferring properties such as 3D shape, so too does it work to recover the causal and social structure of the world by inferring properties such as causality and animacy" (Scholl and Tremoulet 2000: 299).

phenomenal intentionality to substitute the *effect* of intentionality.[57] This is a virtual (understood here as 'in effect') form of agency that must necessarily be attributed *ex post facto*:

> [W]e cannot tell that someone [or something] is an agent before they *act as an agent*, before they disturb the causal milieu in such a way as can only be attributed to their agency. Because the attribution of agency rests on the detection of the effects of agency in the causal milieu, rather than an unmediated intuition, it is not paradoxical to understand agency as a factor of the ambience as a whole, a global characteristic of the world of people and things in which we live, rather than as an attribute of the human psyche, exclusively. (Gell 1998: 20)

Gell is here advocating a social understanding of agency that grounds both persons and objects within a sociocultural milieu. In this dense web of social and symbolic meanings, both human and non-human actants can 'cause events to happen' in their vicinity through the relationships that they are embedded within.[58] As a result, Gell (1998: 96, emphasis original) argues that "works of art, images, icons, and the like have to be treated, in the context of an *anthropological theory*, as person-like; that is, sources of, and targets for, social agency". Similarly, Mitchell (2005) argues for the intersubjective nature of encounters between images and their beholders, a concept that accords an equivalent person-like status to the image in question.

Should this start to sound too much like "a form of material-cultural mysticism," Gell (1998: 21-22) hastens to reassure the reader that the agency he attributes to art objects is a *secondary* type of agency, "relational and context-dependent, not

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[57] Although a natural disaster could be understood as a "mere concatenation of physical events," it could equally be imputed to the agency of an angered deity or spirit – who is therefore seen as an agent of the events.

[58] It is important to note that Gell extends his analysis far beyond figured imagery. He famously examined the agency of Trobriand canoe prow-boards in captivating and demoralising one's overseas partners in Kula exchange (1992). Although an abstract pattern, Gell argues that the prow-boards have the effect of demoralising their exchange-partners through the combination of unfathomable technical virtuosity in their production and the use of a pattern that produces a disorienting visual effect. In combination, these attributes work to achieve the perception that the boards are evidencing magical power (1992: 44-46)

classificatory and context free". In other words, it is the social milieu that allows images to have this secondary form of agency; they could not exert it independently of their particular social context.

Following Gell, I am employing a relational understanding of agency in this thesis, wherein agency is not an inherent attribute, such that one can classify certain things or beings as agents or not, once and for all, but as an effect that can be discerned within the sociocultural milieu. However, although Gell analyses the effect of some particular art objects, he does not propose a general theory of *how*, exactly, art objects can exhibit agency. In seeking to unpack the agency that images can have within their sociocultural context, I have found it useful to draw upon Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic approach to aesthetics in conjunction with Mitchell's image theory. In so doing, I turn to the third and final understanding of *virtual* that I am employing in this thesis: the intersubjective *potential* of images.

Although not referring specifically to figured images, Gadamer argues that art 'addresses' its beholder:

> [A] work of art… *has something to say to us* either through the question it awakens, or the question it answers. A work of art 'says something to someone'. This is not merely a manner of speaking… This saying points very precisely to the reality of one's concrete experience of art. (Gadamer et al. 2001: 69–70, emphasis original)

Similarly, Mitchell (2005: 30) argues that pictures "speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively". Despite their verbal analogies, both Gadamer and Mitchell argue against a linguistic approach to images, suggesting that the meaning of a piece of art cannot be reduced to a 'message' that could be expressed in another form: Gadamer (1986: 33) argues that "the work speaks to us as a work and not as the bearer of a message," and Mitchell (2005: 47) similarly suggests that "pictures want equal rights with language, not to be turned into language."

It is the encounter that we have with the art-work *on its own terms* and in its presence that has the power to affect us:

> When a work of art truly takes hold of us, it is not an object that stands opposite us which we look at in hope of seeing through it an intended meaning. Just the reverse. The work is an… *event* that 'appropriates us' into itself. It jolts us, it knocks us over, and sets up a world of its own, into which we are drawn, as it were. (Gadamer et al. 2001: 71, emphasis original)

The language that Gadamer uses, of the art-work that takes hold of us, jolts us, knocks us over, is reminiscent of the same ineffable quality of images that Barthes (1981) calls the *punctum*. The punctum is that which "pricks", "wounds", or "bruises" – that which has an "affective texture" (Hjorth and Cumiskey 2018) that impacts upon the body. It also speaks to what Mitchell (2005: 76) has called the "surplus value of images" in the description of the image's appropriation of the beholder into itself. Mitchell (2005: 140) argues that, because images are "dense, iconic (usually) visual symbols that convey nondiscursive, nonverbal information that is often quite ambiguous with regard to any statement," the discursive content of an image "has to be brought to them by the spectator, who projects a voice into the image, reads a story into it, or deciphers a verbal message".

Gadamer similarly understands art objects to be a dense nexus of potential relationships grounded in sociohistorical horizons of meaning. Which of these relationships 'lights up' for us in the details of an art object is dependent upon the particular matrix of meanings and relationships that we bring to our encounter with the art object. This interpolates our deepest self into the very construction of the image that we perceive. In the ensuing encounter the artwork addresses us, as Nicholas Davey (2013: 22) summarises Gadamer, "on its terms, directly, irrespective of our willing and doing" and in such a way that "we cannot turn away… It implicates our self-understanding and places it at risk". Gadamer explicitly likens this experience to an

intersubjective encounter when he compares it to engaging another person in conversation:

> Through an encounter with the other we are lifted above the narrow confines of our own knowledge. A new horizon is disclosed that opens onto what was unknown to us. In every genuine conversation this happens… [A] work of art is an… encounter [that] engages us the same way a partner in conversation does. (Gadamer et al. 2001: 49)

Here Gadamer is suggesting that, although the self is deeply implicated in our encounter with art, our values and beliefs are not simply confirmed through our perception. The dense multiplicity of meanings within an artwork has the potential to open new horizons of meaning that could enhance or alter our perspective on the world by articulating an additional set of relationships on top of the ones we initially perceive. Mitchell also addresses this speculative capacity of images when he says:

> We need to ponder that we don't just evaluate images; images introduce new forms of value into the world, contesting our criteria, forcing us to change our minds… Images are not just passive entities… They change the way we think and see and dream. They refunction our memories and imaginations, bringing new criteria and new desires into the world. (Mitchell 2005: 92)

These relationships can change each time we present ourselves before an art object: the famous art historian E.H. Gombrich (1961: 17) suggested that "[g]reat works of art seem to look different each time one stands before them. They seem to be as inexhaustible and unpredictable as real human beings."

It is the inherent intersubjective *potentiality* of art that gives it the (relational, context-dependent) power to influence our understanding of self, other, and world and it is in this sense also that images belong to the category of existence that is known as the *virtual*. Pierre Lévy (1998: 24) described the virtual as "a kind of problematic complex, the knot of tendencies or forces that accompanies a situation, event, object, or entity, and which invokes a process of resolution: actualisation". In the case of images, the dense web of associations that are embedded in an image are resolved – selected, refined – upon the meeting of that image with a spectator. In the moment of perception of an image, the spectator sees one possible version of an image, out of the multitude of

associations that it could have drawn upon. This is a spontaneous, creative, and unconscious process without a predetermined outcome, similar to how Lévy (1998: 24-25) likens actualisation to the process of a seed bursting into bloom:

> The tree is virtually present in the seed… This does not signify that the seed *knows* exactly what the shape of the tree will be, which will one day burst into bloom and spread its leaves above it. Based on its internal limitations, the seed will have to invent the tree, coproduce it together with the circumstances it encounters.

Just as the seed does not know what tree it will become, even though it contains the potential within it, an image (and its creators) does not 'know' how it will be perceived by its spectators, even as it carries the seeds for all potential perceptions within it. This is an idea that I will unpack throughout this thesis.

Building upon the scholarship that I have outlined in this section, I understand agency in terms of figured images to be the ability for an intersubjective encounter with 'the person in the picture' to open new horizons in their beholder's understanding of self, other, and world. This form of agency is person-like but also secondary – it is grounded in the relationship that unfolds between human and image, which is itself embedded in sociocultural structures of meaning.[59]

The relationships thus formed between humans and images conjoin both senses of the word 'relationship'. First, and most obviously, relationships refer to the affective domain of human emotion. As I have argued above, and shall demonstrate in Chapter 3, people feel love, affection, anger, and hatred towards figured images, and can feel attachment in the sense that they do not want them to leave their lives and may mourn their passing. Secondly, relationships can also refer to links between nodes in a

[59] This emphasis upon the agency of relationships – or associations – is also common to Actor-Network Theory as articulated by Bruno Latour (2005).

network. In this capacity, I use relationship to refer to the meeting of the dense, non-discursive symbolism of figured images with the unique conglomeration of social experience and understanding that makes up the human participant, such that particular nodes in the two networks or structures of understanding 'light up' and shape the perception of both image and encounter.

I associate these 'lit' details of the image with Barthes' (1981: 43) description of the *punctum* as an affective 'partial object'. Such encounters cannot be reduced to the simple transfer of a message, instead involving complex, largely unconscious negotiations between the dense network of potential meanings within the image and the human participant's receptiveness to them. Human-image relationships, in both senses of the term, remain fundamentally grounded in the cultures, visual and otherwise, of both the image creator and beholder, but they also have the capacity to produce unexpected insights due to the surplus of meaning within the image and the unpredictability of an image's encounter with its beholders. It is this dynamic potential of the relationship that gives images their agency.

Taking the Pictorial Turn

In this chapter, I have argued that existing approaches to media images have tended to either neglect the agency of the images or, conversely, assign them an over-determining agency that sees images as causally responsible for societal ills such as violence and moral decay. In the face of this dichotomous approach to images, it is not surprising that existing fandom scholarship has largely avoided engaging with the agency of images, which continues to implicitly fuel negative stereotypes of fans as 'out of control'. Yet in my fieldwork with *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr, I heard, time and again, about how fans experience the game's character images as both real and lively.

The alternative approach I have proposed seeks to moderate both positions, emphasising the *person-like* nature of images in the contemporary social milieu.

Although engaging with one of the most seemingly irrational aspects of fandom, it is my contention in this thesis that *Dragon Age* fandom is a heightened form of a ubiquitous phenomenon – people responding to images as if they were real persons. While early fan scholarship sought to fight negative stereotypes by de-emphasising fans' emotional relationships with character images in favour of promoting their productive and hermeneutic capabilities, this strategy notably fits within Western culture's privileging of the rational over the irrational, the logical over the emotional (Papacharissi 2015), and the stereotypically masculine over the feminine (Lutz 1988), as well as upholding the myth of the self-determining individual that is independent of external forms of agency (Keane 2003). It also does not do justice to the experience of fans.

The liveliness of media images and the active role that they play in people's lives were two of the strongest themes articulated by fans during my fieldwork. In searching for an alternative theoretical framework, I have sought to engage with the agency of images whilst not pathologising fans. I agree with Freedberg (1989: 48) that "one cannot… dismiss the extent and implications of the innumerable instances where responses are based on the perception of bodies as real, and not merely as if real". In searching for a theoretical framework to tackle this vitally important irrationality I, like Mitchell (2005), intend to 'go with' the fiction of pictures as animated beings, tracing the impact and influence they have on fans' lives. I agree with Freedberg (1989: 316) that "it would do no harm," and indeed would probably do a lot of good, "to think and speak more openly about the life in the image". To do so is to take seriously the power

that fans ascribe to their media favourites and to investigate, ethnographically, the impact that these types of relationships have for individuals.

In the following chapter, I use people's relationships with Fenris, a character in *Dragon Age 2*, as a focus to consider the way in which interactive digital images elicit a sociocorporeal response from their beholders through their social intelligibility, and examine the nature of agency in the context of a computer roleplaying game.

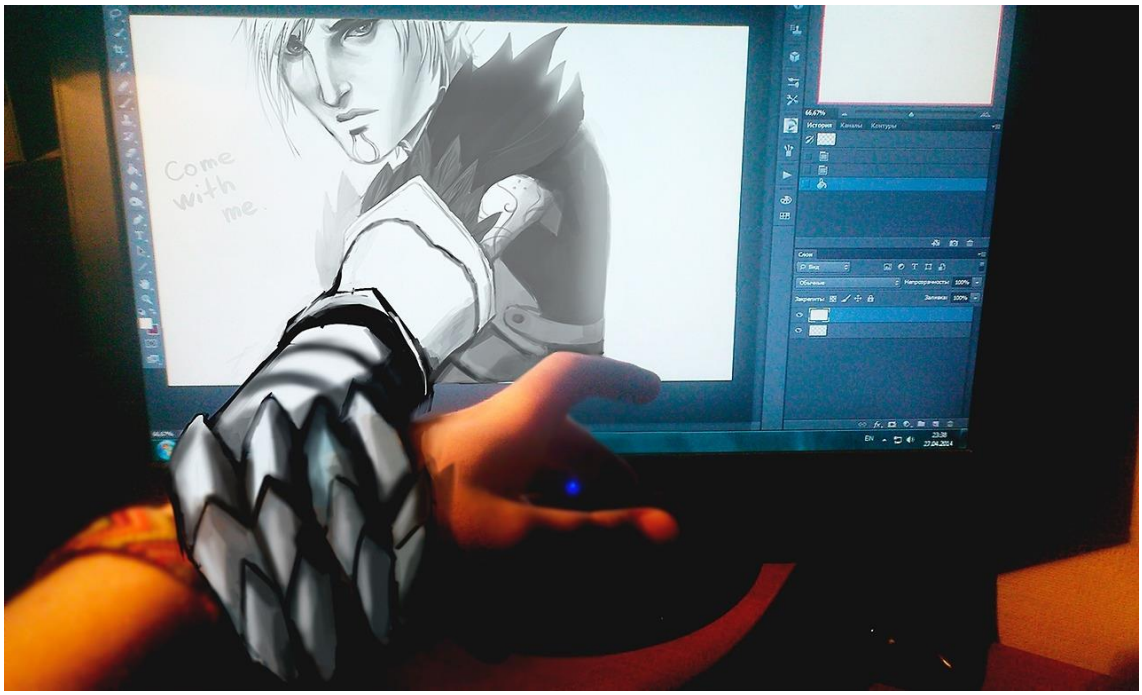

Figure 13: *Come With Me*, by miya4 (Tumblr). A composite image showing a picture of Fenris, a non-player companion character from *Dragon Age 2*, reaching out of the computer screen to capture the hand of his fan artist. (Used with permission)

3 The Person in the Digital Image

At the end of a long day running errands and solving problems for the citizens of the fictional city of Kirkwall, my character, Sara Hawke, returns to her estate in the richest part of the city. Unexpectedly, a cinematic cut scene triggers. Hawke, as she is known throughout the game, walks in to find Fenris, a non-player character with whom she has been shamelessly flirting, waiting for her.

"Fenris?" Sara says automatically, and my surprise is echoed in the tone of her voice.

"I have been thinking of you," Fenris says, approaching her. "In fact, I have been able to think of little else." He looks up into her eyes. "Command me to go, and I shall."

The camera is positioned just above my character's left shoulder, and I have a close view of Fenris's face, his eyes, as he speaks to her (see Figure 14 below).
A dialogue wheel pops up at the bottom of the screen, giving me three different ways in which my character can respond: 1) Don't go, 2) Now's not good, and 3) Leave. To remove any ambiguity, the first one is marked with a heart symbol and the bottom two with a broken heart, indicating that choosing anything other than the first option will close off the possibility of engaging in a romance with Fenris. I choose the first option ('Don't go'), and the camera cuts to a shot of my character's face.

"No need," she says.

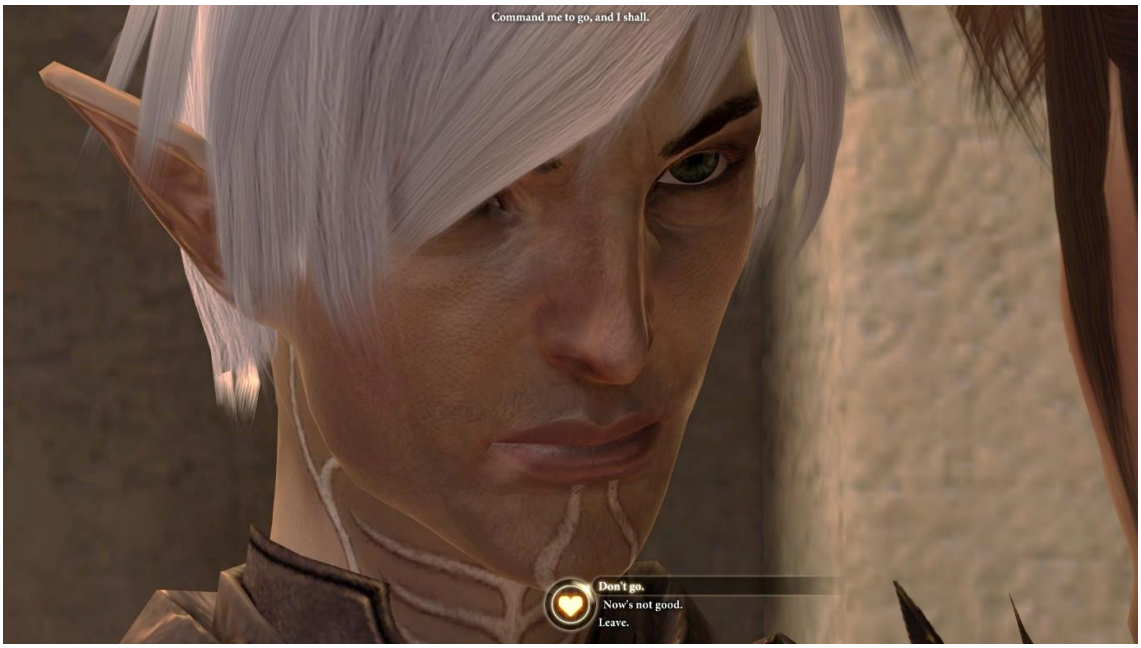

Figure 14: Screenshot of a cut scene with Fenris (left) talking to my character, Sara Hawke (mostly off-screen to the right)

The camera shifts to a mid-shot, and I watch as Fenris takes Hawke in his arms and kisses her. Hawke kisses him back and then, grasping Fenris's upper arms, swivels the two of them until she pushes him back – with a thump – against the wall. She presses up against him, trapping him in between her arms as they continue to kiss, and the camera shifts to a wide shot, strategically positioned near a torch flaming on the wall. As the two characters continue to kiss, the camera pans to take in the torch and the scene fades to black.

"When I played *Dragon Age 2* for the first time, I romanced Fenris," wrote a fan on the anonymous *Dragon Age Confessions* blog. "The second time I played, I romanced [another character], but I'm going back to Fenris because I fell in love with him. I will always love him. He had a horrible life and I feel sorry for him, so when he feels alone I'll be there for him."

"Nothing satisfies me more than making Fenris happy," wrote another fan on the same blog. "Having him smile and enjoy the company of someone who cares for him is rewarding. He's been through so much. He deserves to be happy."

The emotions that fans feel for the characters in *Dragon Age* were a constant topic of conversation throughout my fieldwork, particularly when it came to the 'companion' characters who assist the player in their quest and offer more involved dialogue and plot relevance, including romance (see Chapter 1 for a brief overview of the companion characters). These feelings can be very intense. "I've never been attracted to men in real life, but I fell head over heels in love with Fenris," wrote one anonymous fan on the *Dragon Age Confessions* blog. "I love Fenris to the point it hurts," wrote another.

In an interview, Quark, a 29-year old optometry student from the United States, went into more detail about her long-term relationship with Fenris:

> In a veritable fleet of complicated, fully-realised, nuanced characters, my favourite is […] Fenris, who is just as polarising in the fandom as some of the villains. He's an elf and a runaway slave with a preposterously tragic backstory full of pain and amnesia and systematic brutality, and some players rightfully dismiss him for that. But in *my* world, I found myself wholly stuck on this complex, scarred, remarkably shaded character with a fascinating mix of pride and fear and shame and determination to make something better of himself. So many people found him flat and two-dimensional, but after three years and six hundred thousand words I've written about him, I'm still finding new facets to his personality and character that keep me working on one more short story, one more oneshot [single chapter story], one more sixty-thousand word novel about survival in spite of all odds. Like any Bioware game, the more I care, the more I find I still have to discover.
>
> Yeah, yeah, he's a video game character, I know. He's a bunch of pixels and a voice and a hundred hours in an animation engine. But… just because he's fictional doesn't mean he hasn't affected my life.

Quark's relationship with Fenris is not unusual in *Dragon Age* fandom, except in the quantity and quality of the fanfiction she writes about him. The majority of the fans with whom I spoke had been involved in *Dragon Age* fandom for years, and most had at least one favourite character with whom they had been engaging for that time.

Fans of the *Dragon Age* games tend to exhibit a 'double consciousness' (Mitchell 2005) regarding the characters they encounter in the games, both responding to them as though they are living beings and yet remaining keenly (and often self-deprecatingly) aware that they are fictional. This awareness is often expressed through

disclaimers – exemplified by Quark's comment that, despite her feelings for him, Fenris is "a bunch of pixels" – that emphasise that the fan has not been taken in by the game images, and therefore remains within the bounds of social acceptability (c.f. the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' fans discussed in Chapter 2). But why do fans care so deeply about characters that they clearly recognise are images?

In this chapter, I take my theorisation of agency in images into the new media environment of *Dragon Age 2*. I begin by arguing that computer games like *Dragon Age* represent a radical new form of image characterised by interactivity, and that digital technology magnifies the potential agency of images through its capacity to present a virtual person who *responds* to the actions of the spectator. I analyse the player-character as the interface through which the player can enter into the fictional world of the game and interact with the game characters, and suggest that the player-character represents an unstable dialectic of self-and-other, as enacted in the opening vignette to this chapter.

In the second half of the chapter, I argue that the limited agency ascribed to the player when responding to the characters paradoxically works to confirm their social realism through the experience of "contrived contingency" (Malaby 2007). Enacting familiar social forms, such as 'the break up', with computer-controlled characters suggests the intentional agency of both parties involved – especially when the situation comes as an unwelcome surprise to the player. The social agency thus exhibited by the characters, combined with the player's limited ability to react, encourages fans to respond as though there were a living person in the image even as they remain aware that there is not.

INTERACTIVE IMAGES

If painting and photography are characterised as still images, and film and television as moving images, then computer games like *Dragon Age* can be characterised as interactive images. For new media artist and theorist Peter Weibel, this genealogy represents progress in the representation of reality:

> The possibility of imitating movement through pictures was a decisive step towards improving the representation of reality, and was the basis of the transformation of painting and photography into cinema, as a *trompe l'oeil* [trick of the eye] technology simulating motion. Image technology and its late twentieth-century tendency to imitate life moved on from the simulation of movement (the motion picture) to the simulation of interaction: a responding and reacting image, the image as living system, the viable picture. (Weibel 2003: 594)

While Weibel's prediction of a true 'living image' has not yet come to pass[60], computer games go beyond the possibilities offered by film and analogue television[61] by enabling the spectator to intervene in the performance of an image using the same technology with which it is presented.[62] Weibel (2003: 595) calls this sort of interactive image "a new synthesis of image and observer," a development he calls "the most radical transformation ever of the image". Indeed, the combination of digital

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[60] At least in terms of computer technology; Mitchell (2003, 2005, 2011) has persuasively argued that clones are a type of biological living image.

[61] Movement was a significant step forward in the representation of liveliness. Indeed, psychological experiments have demonstrated that motion is enough on its own for observers to impute social agency to the object in question. Experiments in which only the joints of a walking person were cinematically depicted was enough to "convey a vivid, compelling impression of human animation" (Neri et al. 1998: 894), including judgements about the person's gender (Mather and Murdoch 1994) and emotional state (Dittrich et al. 1996). Even when the motion in question is not biologically human in origin – such as in a famous experiment run by Scholl and Tremoulet (2000), in which geometric shapes were programmed to move in particular patterns – social motivations are abducted to the objects on the basis of their movements.

[62] Television has long had the capacity for interactivity through methods such as allowing people to call in or, in more recent times, to have their say through forums, Twitter or via SMS messages, but doing so – up until recently – has required the employment of an entirely different medium. With computer games, the same medium that presents the imagined world also enables the participant's involvement, allowing a relatively seamless incorporation of the participant into the image world.

technology with figured imagery arguably supercharges their appeal to people's sociocorporeal perception.

Just as images provoke a double consciousness with regards to their liveliness (as discussed in the previous chapter), computers have long been observed as provoking social responses despite their users' knowing better (Nass et al. 1993, 1994). In an article reviewing a series of experimental studies, Nass and Moon (2000: 82, original emphasis) observe that "all computer users know a fundamental truth: *The computer is not a person and does not warrant human treatment or attribution*" yet they found that "this rejection of anthropomorphism stands in stark contrast to people's actual *behaviour*… [T]here is clear evidence that individuals mindlessly apply social rules and expectations to computers". Although such responses may at first seem bizarre, Nass et al. (1994: 72) found that, as Freedberg (1989) and Mitchell (2005) argue in regard to images, they were "commonplace and easy to generate".

Similar to the way in which clues are sought within the image, people respond to computers as long as they have "*enough* cues to lead the person to categorise it as worthy of social responses" (Nass and Moon 2000: 83). These cues include using language to communicate, responding to the user, and occupying a role traditionally filled by humans. In other words, when computers gives us the social cues of a person, we respond to them in that manner. Using Gell's terminology, we *abduct agency* into the computer. Our relation to the images on the computer screen may also be enhanced by the affinity that we have with screens themselves. Digital media scholar Ingrid Richardson (2010) has argued that we respond to screens as though they had a similar physiology to ourselves, with 'fronts', 'backs' and 'faces', such that our interaction with screens can be described as an 'interfacial' encounter.

When figured images, computers, and screens are combined in the digital image, the power of the figured image is magnified exponentially. When a figured image not only has all of the familiar anatomy with which to trigger an autonomic response, but also has the capacity to respond to the viewer, the interactivity amplifies the apparent liveliness of the image. The interactive nature of computer games emerges out of the capabilities of new media, which is predicated upon mathematically alterable digital code, as has been described by new media theorist Lev Manovich in his five principles of new media (2001). Of these, the key principle for roleplaying games like *Dragon Age* is *variability*, which refers to the ability to adjust the sequence and selection of media in the process of displaying that media. Whereas previous forms of distributed media were fixed in a static composition for the duration of a performance (for example, film scenes magnetically fixed in VHS tape), computers can dynamically assemble different versions of the same new media object.[63]

Variability in computer is key to what anthropologist Thomas Malaby (2007) calls "contrived contingency", a defining feature of games both digital and analogue. Contingency, in this context, is "*that which could have been otherwise*" (2007: 107, original emphasis) and refers to the way in which games – of all types – allow for multiple outcomes throughout the process of playing the game. In *Dragon Age*, one of the most important ways in which contrived contingency is experienced is through the different paths of branching storylines that are displayed in response to the decisions the

[63] It is important to note that, while variability is one of computer games' most significant features, and is often incorporated into definitions of computer games, such as Alexander Galloway's (2006: 5) description of computer games as an "algorithmic machine", it is not exclusive to computer games. As Espen Aarseth's (1997: 75) argued in his seminal definition of cybertexts as "texts that involve calculation in their production of scriptons", there are a range of electronic and paper-based texts that meet this definition, including, for example, the ancient Chinese I-Ching.

player makes over the course of the game's narrative. This form of contrived contingency most closely follows the form that Malaby (2007: 108) calls "social contingency," defined as "the unpredictability of never being certain about another's point of view," subsequently leading to "performative contingency", or the uncertainty of whether an action in respect of another will succeed or fail.

However, the ways in which these forms of contingency play out in *Dragon Age* differs significantly from the exemplar games that Malaby highlights in terms of social contingency: the interpersonal strategy games of poker and chess. In these games, social contingency involves the uncertainty of a human opponent's resources (in poker) and/or future actions (in both), despite which action must nevertheless be taken (performative contingency). In *Dragon Age*, social and performative contingency does not concern the player's human interlocuters, for there are none, but the computer-generated characters. During the course of the narrative, players are placed into social situations in which they are forced to act despite being uncertain how their virtual interlocuters will respond.[64] This uncertainty replicates our experience of social situations within the broader world, and can give the impression that the computer-controlled characters within the game are responding to the player's decisions in a dynamic and socially aware way.

Although the rules that govern such outcomes are few, "computer games can germinate relationships of surprising complexity, often building patterns and perpetual

[64] There are numerous ways in which players can reduce or eliminate this uncertainty. For example, by playing a specific scene through multiple times in order to explore each potential path before choosing which one they will continue with, or by consulting external references (such as the fan-made Dragon Age Wiki) for information about companions' responses. Both are undertaken to strategise their gameplay to obtain their desired outcome.

novelty far beyond the maker's intentions" (Cypher and Richardson 2006: n.p.). Indeed, even when the uncertainty of these situations is absent due to the player's knowledge of all potential outcomes, these situations of contrived social contingency remain intensely meaningful, and are manipulated by the player who wishes to achieve a certain affect. For example, the short scene with which I began this chapter can take place at different times and unfold with different emotional textures[65], depending upon the nature of Hawke's relationship with Fenris, as built up over the course of the game. During the scene itself, the player can choose to have Hawke either encourage or reject Fenris's advances, fundamentally altering the way this particular scene is resolved as well as Fenris's later interactions with the player. This grants Fenris a social intelligence and apparent agency in responding to the player, which is not possible within older forms of media like film.

Unlike Weibel, however, Lev Manovich finds 'interactive' to be a concept that is "too broad to be truly useful" (Manovich 2001: 55). He argues that "all classical, and even more so modern, art is 'interactive' in a number of ways" (2001: 56), citing techniques such as ellipses and missing details that require the user to cognitively fill in missing information. However, this understanding of 'interactivity' makes it almost indistinguishable from imagination and interpretation, and blurring these concepts elides a genuine distinction between representational forms.[66] At its most basic level,

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[65] The scene as described reflects a friendly relationship with Fenris. If their relationship is instead characterised by rivalry, their romantic encounter is more aggressive in nature.

[66] Espen Aarseth (1997: 4) posits a similar understanding of the qualitative difference between computer games and traditional narrative when he writes, "The effort and energy demanded by the cybertext of its reader raise the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention." Aarseth (1997: 1, 48) describes texts that require the reader's active and nontrivial participation as 'ergodic' rather than 'interactive' as he finds the latter to be too ideologically contaminated by tech industry rhetoric to be analytically useful. Since the time Aarseth wrote, however, 'interactive' has waned in popular tech industry rhetoric, making it feasible for it to be critically adopted by academics.

interactivity is "submitting input and receiving output" (Ryan 2001: 14). In this sense, traditional novels are *not* interactive – we do not submit our own input into the works – but gamebook novels (such as the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series of novels published by Bantam Books (1979-1998)) *are* interactive. Interactivity involves the reader/viewer/player's incorporation into the artwork, such that the artwork responds to their presence. While this is evidently possible in forms of media apart from 'new' media, the capabilities of new media allow it to be accomplished in an easier and seamless fashion, which creates a qualitatively different experience for the participant. In the following section, I consider how the player is incorporated into the fictional world of *Dragon Age* through the medium of the player-character, and the particular subjectivity it encourages.

PLAYER-CHARACTER AS INTERFACE

The interactive image requires the spectator to be incorporated into the image system through some sort of interface. In the case of a computer game such as *Dragon Age*, this interface includes the physical components of the screen, speakers, and input peripherals such as the mouse and keyboard or gamepad. When a player plays a game, they use these components to complete a cybernetic circuit necessary for the performance of the game, which is Alexander Galloway's (2006: 2) point when he argues that games are fundamentally a medium of *action*. The linkage between the player and the computer, combining the material action carried out by both, is essential to the performance of the computer game, making it a hybridised, cyborg media form. However, physical interfaces such as these allow for the player to be incorporated in the image *system* of the computer but not necessarily into the fictional *world* of the game. That requires something further: a body into which the player can be projected (Taylor 2002).

The interface devices through which the player is incorporated into a game do not just include physical computer peripherals but also signs as on-screen graphical elements. These sign interfaces, like all forms of interface, are "a junction point between input and output, hardware and software, and the player and the material game itself… the portal through which player activity occurs" (Wolf and Perron 2003: 15). They can include non-diegetic elements, such as an overlay (commonly known as a Heads-Up Display or HUD) that provides vital in-game information to the player, as well as diegetic elements, such as the player-character. In roleplaying games such as *Dragon Age*, almost all forms of physical interaction with the computer are oriented towards the inhabitation and control of the player-character. The player-character functions as the primary boundary sign through which the player can pass into the diegetic world, and it therefore behoves us to spend some time on this special form of image interface.

The player-character is a sign-body (Hillis 2009) that allows the player to enter into as well as interact with the fictional world of a computer game.[67] Without such a body, the player remains external to this world, even if they can affect it.[68] With one, the player can enter the fictional world on approximately the same terms as the other images that already inhabit it. The player-character is a hybrid image, as indicated in the hyphenated nature of its name, and is in this respect very similar to the avatar that represents the user in multiplayer 3D worlds, such as *Second Life* (see Boellstorff 2008,

[67] Taylor (2002: 40) similarly describes avatars as "access points" through which users in multiplayer online environments can embody themselves and create identity and social life.
[68] For example, games like *Tetris* do not equip the player with a body within the world it depicts. Although the player can affect the game-world (by manipulating the falling blocks), they have no entry into the fictional world as a sign-relation of their own.

Hillis 2009, Nardi 2010, Taylor 2002). The player is umbilically linked to the player-character through the computer's physical interface peripherals, and in roleplaying games it is through the player-character's actions that the player can exhibit their (limited) agency within the game world. The detail ascribed to this sign-body varies according to the specific game and its genre, but in roleplaying games like *Dragon Age*, the player's sign-body is given a relatively high level of detail, as I shall describe below.

In *Dragon Age*, the player-character is simultaneously an extension of the player and a diegetic character whose story the player is both witnessing and directing. As a reflection of self, the player-character functions as the body double of the player within the fictional world. Players can choose the player-character's first name, gender, physical appearance and attributes (strength, dexterity, etc.), and occupational class (magic-user, warrior, or rogue) using the character creator. Customisation options for physical appearance are relatively extensive, and include the character's hair style and colour, skin colour and texture, eye shape and colour, mouth size and position, cheekbone size and position, jaw width, chin prominence, ear height and size, and neck width (see Figure 15 below).[69] In *Dragon Age 2*, altering the player-character's appearance also changes the appearance of the character's family members (mother, brother, and sister).

[69] Despite the range of customisation options, it is notable that certain ethnic backgrounds are less well-served within the character creator for *Dragon Age 2*, something for which fans have criticised BioWare as being indicative of racial bias. For example, darker skin colours are handled poorly (taking on a purple hue), there are no options for curly hair, and only one set of eyes reflect a (rather stereotypical) East Asian appearance. These limitations indicate resourcing priorities are not focused on making characters of different racial appearance equally feasible within the game's engine.

Figure 15: A screenshot of the character customisation menu in *Dragon Age 2* , showing my player-character, Sara Hawke, and the options for altering the character's nose

Despite some game scholars' assertions that "when playing videogames, appearances do not matter," (Newman 2002: n.p) character creation is a very significant part of playing *Dragon Age* and similar roleplaying games.[70] Fans often spend a great deal of time working on their characters, and develop different philosophies regarding character creation, sometimes depending on how many times they had previously played the games. Some fans choose to make their character look as much like an idealised version of themselves as possible, while others deliberately choose to give their characters a different gender and/or racial appearance in order to distance themselves from their 'real life' identities. A common, although by no means ubiquitous, comment from fans was that they instinctively based their first character on

[70] Including massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs). In her ethnography of *World of Warcraft,* anthropologist Bonnie Nardi (2010: 16) noted that the aesthetic appearance of an avatar was extremely important to players, given that "players will be looking at their characters a lot." Similarly, Taylor (2002) noted that users spent a lot of time and money customising their avatars in the online multi-user environment *The Dreamscape* in order to signal their social identity, including group affiliation.

themselves and then deliberately made subsequent characters look and act differently in order to explore different paths in the story. Still others said that they just 'played around' in the character creator until they had made a character who was visually appealing and whose appearance suggested a type of personality. My character, Sara Hawke is, in hindsight, similar to an idealised form of my own appearance, although I did not have this in mind when I created her. Regardless of the philosophy adopted, the character creation process was important for fans as a means of establishing themselves within the fictional world of the game and giving them a stake in the proceedings.

Despite the extensive customisation process, and unlike an avatar in a massively multiplayer world, the player-character is not a blank slate or 'vehicle' (Newman 2002) that the player can unproblematically inscribe their own histories or desires upon. In each of the *Dragon Age* games, the player-character has a pre-existing background that positions the player, as the character, inside certain social relations within the diegetic world. The opening sequences of each game introduces this background to the player so that they have an understanding of their character's position within the world and their motivations for engaging in the game's narrative. For example, as I described in Chapter 1, the opening sequence of *Dragon Age 2* involves the player-character, Hawke, fleeing his or her hometown with their mother, sister, and brother, due to an oncoming horde of invading monsters.[71] It is from this starting position and from within this set of existing social relationships that the player meets and interacts with

[71] In *Dragon Age: Origins*, the player can choose which of six social backgrounds the player-character has during the character creation phase: a human magic-user in a closed religious institution, a human noble, an elf living in an urban ghetto, an elf among one of the nomadic tribes, a dwarf belonging to a noble family, or a dwarf living in the slums. In *Dragon Age 2*, all players have the same social background, as described.

the other characters in the game. The world one encounters in *Dragon Age* is thus, like the everyday lifeworld, "intersubjective from the very beginning" (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 15).

The sign-body of the player-character allows the player to engage with the fictional world by reducing the player to an image within its confines. Without the limitations this imposes, the fictional world of the game would lose its coherency and the player would be unable to experience social contingency or exercise social agency. The player's agency is therefore reduced to that available to the character they are playing: the sign-body can only perform actions and make statements that are consistent with the physical and sociohistorical environment of the fictional world. This places the player on a similar level to the non-player characters with whom they interact in the game's image-world, which are similarly restricted in actions and response.[72] In *Dragon Age*, the modes of interaction available to the player are limited to three types of engagement – exploration, combat, and cinematic cut-scenes. I will briefly describe each below.

[72] Of course, the player always has non-diegetic options available to them – such as saving, loading and quitting – that are beyond the possibilities open to other characters; these are not carried out as the player-character but as the player.

Figure 16: A screenshot of the exploration mode of engagement in *Dragon Age 2* , showing the author's player-character (centre) in the fictional city of Kirkwall.

During exploration, the player has control over the character's position in the apparently three-dimensional environment of the game, subject to certain limitations that have been programmed into the game (such as being unable to pass through walls, swim, or fly). This grounds the player in the appearance of a world with similar physical laws to our own. The point-of-view 'camera' is positioned in what is commonly described as third-person perspective, usually trailing along behind the character (see Figure 16 above). This perspective allows the player to witness their player-character and their position within the world.

In this mode, the screen is by default overlaid with a non-diegetic 'Heads-Up Display' (HUD), which provides information about the health and ability status of the player-character and their companion characters (shown beside the character portraits on the left hand side of the screen), as well as the abilities that are available for the player-character to use (shown on the bar at the bottom of the screen). Combat abilities cannot be used in this mode, and are greyed out. Although non-diegetic in its presentation, the information displayed on the HUD would be available to the player

within the game world were they physically present. Due to the limitations of the medium, this information needs to be represented symbolically to the player controlling the character.

Characters that are not controlled by the player are controlled by the computer and follow passively along behind, unless ordered to halt by the player-character. Players can choose to steer their companion characters instead of the player-character, but it has no objective impact in this mode. The sole purpose of the exploration mode is to navigate the three-dimensional space of the image-world and encounter other characters. Engaging in either combat or dialogue with other characters will trigger one of the subsequent modes.

Combat mode is very similar to that of exploration. It maintains the third-person isometric view of the game world along with the non-diegetic HUD overlay with which the player can control their chosen character (see Figure 17 below). During this mode, the player can navigate their character (or companion characters) in space and use their combat abilities but cannot initiate dialogue with other characters. The player can also perform the non-diegetic actions of pausing the game and issuing combat or movement orders to their companion characters. If this is not done, the other characters are controlled by the computer according to a set of pre-programmed tactics that can be altered by the player through the menu screens.

Combat represents a temporally-limited domain of what Malaby (2007: 107) calls *stochastic contingency*; that is, "the randomness produced by, for example, a well-shuffled deck of cards or a tossed die". In combat, computer-simulated dice rolls invisibly determine, alongside variables such as the attacker's relevant attribute modifier and the defender's armour class, whether an attack will hit and how much damage it will do. During this mode, there are only two possible outcomes: success or

defeat. Progress in the game is almost always dependent upon the player's ability to successfully defeat the computer-controlled enemies. Failure to do so normally requires the player to reload a saved game and replay the combat until they are successful.[73]

Figure 17: A screenshot of the combat mode of engagement in *Dragon Age 2* , showing the author's player character (centre) engaging in combat with animated corpses.

The third mode of engagement in the *Dragon Age* games is the cinematic cut-scene, such as the example with which I began this chapter. Cut-scenes differ substantially from both combat and exploration modes, and are typically used to represent dialogue encounters between characters. In cut-scenes, the camera abandons the isometric point-of-view used in the previous modes, adopting in its place a position that is on the same level as the character's line of sight (see Figure 18 below). Scenes between characters are carefully framed using a series of close- and mid-shots to

[73] There are occasionally scripted combat encounters in which success is unlikely or entirely impossible, and defeat does not end the game but becomes a part of the narrative. This is the case for one particular combat encounter in *Dragon Age: Origins*, however no similar instances occur in *Dragon Age 2*.

capture the facial expressions and movements of the characters, and the shot-reverse-shot technique[74] is commonly used to establish the continuity of the conversation.

Unlike the previous two modes, the player has no agency over the position of the camera, the choice of which character they control, or the player-character position in space. Each of these is circumscribed for cinematic effect, and the player is locked into the dialogue as the player-character. Other characters may interject in the dialogue, but the player cannot control their part of the conversation. However, although some forms of agency are lost in this mode, it opens a qualitatively greater form of agency to the player by giving them the ability to both shape the identity of their player-character and influence the direction of the game narrative.

Figure 18: A screenshot of a dialogue cut-scene in *Dragon Age 2*. In this scene, the author's player-character (facing the viewer) has four different possible responses to Fenris (facing away).

[74] The shot-reverse-shot is "A conventional pattern of editing and camera placement in sequences showing a conversation between two (or more) people. The camera alternates between shots of person A and shots of person B, taken from opposite ends of the axis of action" (MIT Shakespeare Project 2002).

The player crafts the identity of their character and exhibits agency in the world through their choice of dialogue in cut-scenes. There are usually three to six dialogue options available at each junction point. In the first game, *Dragon Age: Origins*, each of the possible responses was written out in full and had no emotional tone as the player-character (unlike the non-player characters) was unvoiced.[75] In *Dragon Age 2*, however, the player-character is voiced and the responses from which selections are made are heavily paraphrased, the tone of which (such as diplomatic, joking, aggressive, or romantic) are indicated with symbols. In Figure 18 above, for example, the player has four different options with which to respond to Fenris (facing away). The symbol in the dialogue circle indicates the tone, while the text gives a highly paraphrased version of the response. In this screenshot, the 'romantic' response, indicated by the heart, is highlighted.

When a particular option is clicked, the scene plays out the full content of the response, with the point-of-view camera focused on the player-character's facial expression. Although the choice of response may not always direct the game down a divergent storyline, they help to craft the identity of the player-character, and may change the non-player character's response. The affective texture of the interactions between the player-character and the companion characters is an important focus of player attention, with fans often reporting that they will replay the same scenes multiple

[75] My participants reported divergent responses to the unvoiced nature of the protagonist in *Dragon Age: Origins*. For some, the lack of a voice was positive because it meant that they were able to interpret the lines in the emotional tone that they thought was most appropriate. For others, it was negative because they felt the character lacked an independent personality in contrast to the vibrant personalities of the (voiced) non-player characters.

times until they find the right tone and content of response for their player-character's mood and personality.

To give some sense of the prominence that cut-scenes and dialogue have for these games, I submit the following statistics, presented by BioWare at the Game Developers Conference 2011 and published in a post on the official BioWare forums in the same year (Table 3 below).

Table 3: Content statistics for *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Dragon Age 2* as reported by BioWareduring a localisation presentation at the Games Developers Conference 2011 and published on The BioWare Forum in the same year.

Dragon Age: Origins	**Dragon Age 2**
1,000,000 words	400,000 words
1,000 cutscenes	2,500 cutscenes
1,000 characters	500 characters
56,000 spoken lines	38,000 spoken lines
60 hours of gameplay	40 hours of gameplay

These statistics suggest that *Dragon Age 2* has up to ten times the word content of a science fiction and fantasy novel[76], at least four times the word content of a PhD thesis, and more than 20 times the number of scenes in a typical film.[77] Although, due to the variable nature of the medium, not all of these elements would be experienced in a single play-through, it gives some indication of the importance that cut-scenes and dialogue hold in *Dragon Age* relative to other forms of narrative media.[78]

[76] The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America organisation defines a novel, for the purposes of its Nebula Award, as having 40,000 words or more.
[77] An analysis of the Top 20 'Return on Investment' films found they had, on average, 119 scenes (Velikovsky 2012).
[78] These statistics also demonstrate a shift in story-telling priorities between *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Dragon Age 2*, indicated by the drastic reduction in both words and characters between the two games while the number of cinematic cut-scenes doubled. However, in this thesis I am focusing on the continuities rather than the discontinuities between games in the *Dragon Age* series.

Cut-scenes are crucial to the human-image relationships that are developed in the course of playing roleplaying games like the *Dragon Age* series. Although sometimes considered to be cinematic impurities in the otherwise ludic medium of the computer game (Klevjer 2014), cut-scenes play an important role in encouraging emotional connection to the characters (both the player-character and companion characters) within the game. This is in part because it is within the context of cut-scenes that players experience the social and performative contingency (Malaby 2007: 108) of *Dragon Age*, a point to which I will return in the second half of this chapter.

The use of the point-of-view camera within each of the modes I described above – combat, exploration, and cut-scenes – reinforces the hybridity of self and other in the sign-body of the player-character. In each mode, the player witnesses the player-character act in response to their commands from a third-person perspective, an indexical sign-body that is at once attached to and separate from themselves. Ken Hillis has described this out-of-(sign-)body experience in relation to avatars of webcam users and in massively multiplayer worlds as transmitting back to oneself the potential that is inherent in what I am calling *virtual people*:

> Each individual witnesses a self-produced self-representation as transmitting back to himself or herself the potential of his or her multiplicity within a sign system – including all the things he or she is not yet, or might desire to become. A crucial use value of the avatar… therefore, lies in the degree to which viewers… experience these iconographic images as psychically equivalent to their embodied referents and, therefore, as a means to signal their collective desire to bridge the gap between consciousness and movement, inside and outside, body and sign. (Hillis 2009: 18)

This witnessing of the self-as-other has implications for the relationship that the player has with the player-character. The relationship is complex, incorporating both identification and empathy, as the player experiences the player-character as an unstable dialectic of self and other. The control link between the player-character and player means that the image of the player-character is indexical in a similar way to that of avatars in multiplayer 3D worlds, in that "it points back to the operator's body on this

side of the screen or display" (Hillis 2009: 13), but it is not a mere 'vehicle' (Juul 2005) for the player. The player-character also has an existence of its own.

In their handbook on game design, Salen and Zimmerman argue, using the same language as that of Mitchell, that the player exhibits a 'double consciousness' in regards to the player-character:

> The immersive fallacy would assert that a player has an 'immersive' relationship with the [player-]character, that to play the character is to *become* the character. In the immersive fallacy's ideal game, the player would identify with the character, the game's frame would drop away, and the player would lose him or herself totally within the game character.
>
> These ideas have some validity, but… [a] player's relationship to a game character he or she directly controls is not a simple matter of direct identification. Instead, a player relates to a game character through the *double-consciousness* of play. A protagonist character is a persona through which a player exerts him or herself into an imaginary world; this relationship can be intense and emotionally 'immersive'. However, at the very same time, the character is a tool, a puppet, an object for the player to manipulate according to the rules of the game. In this sense, the player is fully aware of the character as an artificial construct. (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 453, my emphasis)

This double-consciousness of the player-character as both self and other is part of what gives roleplaying games their appeal – and power, as I shall go into in Chapter 4.

As a hybrid construct of self and other, some fans choose to emphasise the 'self' aspect, and some choose to emphasise the 'otherness' of the character they play. For example, Wendy, a 45-year-old graduate student from the United States, described her relationship with the player-character as one of identification and immersion:

> I usually play a character who is mostly like I am (or an idealised version of myself). There's an element where I really AM my character when I'm totally immersed. I prefer to play in a darkened room, with no external distractions, and it helps me put myself completely into the game. That's why it's especially good when I have a self-insert character, one I really relate to. (And why it's more enjoyable for me to be able to play a female player-character rather than all the male player-characters of my childhood.)

Similarly, Lilou, a 25-year-old self-employed woman from the United States, initially crafted a 'self-insert' character, that is, a player-character in her own image. This link between her actual world identity and game identity enabled her to feel closer to the non-player companion characters:

> My first playthroughs of each [*Dragon Age*] game were both gratuitous self-inserts really, where I basically plastered my personality and the choices I myself would have made onto my [player-characters]. The dialogue selections I made were the closest things available to what I myself would have said if I were the one having the conversations, so when my characters started to become friendly and close with the different companions, it sort of felt like I was too, if that makes sense.

In contrast, Rhiannon, a woman in her 30s from the United States, found that the player-character's restricted range of possible interactions with the other characters meant that she could not identify with the player-character. She therefore focused on creating a character who would fit in the social relations of the fictional world:

> I never really get too emotionally connected to these characters because what I would actually choose to do is never an option. Who I would actually choose to romance is never an option. Or, if they are an option, *how* I would choose to pursue that relationship is never an option. So I make my player-characters by reverse-engineering, asking myself a) what would be the most narratively interesting endgame, and b) what sort of person would end up in that situation?

Other fans I spoke to started out with the intention of creating a character who had a separate persona than themselves, but found that they fell into responding to the companion characters as though they were the player-character. For example, Jeni, a 40-year-old photo editor from the United States, described her typical experience as follows:

> In large part, my player-characters are me. I try to create separate personas for each of them, but they usually fall by the wayside as soon as I get emotionally invested in the non-player characters and story. It's why I have a really hard time playing 'mean' player-characters. I will start out with that as the plan, but there are dialogue choices that I just can't make. Or quests that I HAVE to finish the 'good' way. I just can't bear being mean to these people, even if they are just pixels.

In each case, it is the social immersion that a player feels when playing *Dragon Age* that is key to fans' strong emotional reactions to the game. The social realism of the non-player characters, and the range of responses they can have as the player-character, affects how they feel about, and subsequently play, the game. In the negative case, people who reported feeling disconnected from the player-character often related this back to the web of relationships they had *not* developed with the non-player

characters. Wendy, for example, explained her lack of feelings about Hawke, the player-character in *Dragon Age 2*, as follows:

> Since I didn't develop any particular attachments to the characters in *Dragon Age 2*, I had less incentive to develop an attachment to my Hawke. Or maybe I'm thinking about this backwards, and if I'd developed what felt like real relationships with the non-player characters (as happened in *Dragon Age: Origins*), that would have helped me to have more developed feelings about my Hawke, as she/I reacted to the other people in the story.

Each of these examples suggests that people's experiences of their player-characters are fundamentally tied into their encounters with the non-player characters in the games, so it is time to turn to them in some detail.

Social Contingency and the Limits of Player Agency

Although the characters in *Dragon Age* do not exhibit photo-realism, they present the viewer with a face that, through animation and voice acting, suggests social realism. When the characters appear to respond in a socially intelligible – but unpredictable – way to the actions of the player-character in the context of the game, this realism is apparently confirmed. Lacking an obvious primary agent beyond the 'person in the picture', it is an easy and natural reaction to abduct agency into the character images as though they were themselves intentional beings. In this section, I unpack this process by returning to the theoretical framework for understanding agency in images, which I began building in the previous chapter, and drawing it into the 'contrived contingency' of digital games.

Alfred Gell (1998: 7) argued that, anthropologically, "art objects are the equivalent of persons, or more precisely, social agents". By applying the term 'art object' I am not intending to enter the debate about whether computer games can legitimately be considered as an art form, but to draw on Gell's (1998: 13, original emphasis) description of 'art-like situations' as "those in which the material 'index'…

permits a particular cognitive operation which I identify as *the abduction of agency*". I want to draw on the importance of the *index* in the abduction of agency, and its relation to avatars and player-characters.

The term 'index' comes from Peircean semiology, referring to a particular type of sign in Peirce's tripartite classification: one that is materially connected to the signified (Chandler 2007). The classic example is that of smoke taken as a sign of fire, but can include many other types of 'natural' signs, such as a knock (indicating that someone is at the door) or a sundial (indicating the position of the sun), as well as recordings such as a photograph or film. The indexical sign is often, as these examples suggest, indicative of *presence* – a sign of someone or something being or having been in a particular place. The avatar in multiplayer 3D worlds and the player-character in role-playing games can be considered to be indexical in the Peircean sense. Connected to the player, the moving avatar or player-character is representative of their presence and position within the game world (Taylor 2002, 2009).[79]

As I argued in the previous section, the player's relation to the player-character is as a witnessable index that indicates – to themselves – their own presence within the world of the game. When the player encounters similar sign-bodies in these worlds, it

[79] I say the *moving* avatar or player-character because the image on its own is not enough to indicate presence: players in massively multiplayer online worlds can be 'AFK' (away from keyboard) or even be disconnected from the game, leaving their avatar mute and motionless within the world. Similarly, the player-character in single-player games, absent player input, does not move in space. However, unlike the avatar, and in continuation with its hybrid nature, the player-character may still reposition themselves on the spot, making 'idle' motions, such as yawning, stretching, and sometimes complaining about the lack of activity. Such actions are intended to maintain the illusion of a living virtual world, even when the player is not engaging with it, however, in both cases, the *moving* avatar or player-character usually indicates the player's active presence within the image world. (There are exceptions to this, such as avatars in massively multiplayer games that are automatically controlled by computer scripts, a practice known as 'botting' (from robot) that is usually considered to be a form of cheating.)

suggests that a similar relation may exist between these sign-bodies and a real body existing elsewhere. As Ken Hillis has argued:

> While the indexical sign/body is clearly a representation… it is not perceived, autonomically or psychically, as such by those who consume it… The autonomic reception of the moving image operating as if it were a trace of an actual human being located elsewhere parallels the psychic desire made into the need to receive this image in the same way… (Hillis 2009: 14)

In the context of massively multiplayer worlds, such as *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft*, many of the sign-bodies encountered do in fact belong to other, actual human beings who are operating them remotely.[80] Ken Hillis is suggesting that we both automatically and preferentially treat these sign-bodies as though they were a trace of the human being in question.[81] However, in the context of a single-player game such as *Dragon Age 2*, the other sign-bodies that are encountered do not belong as the trace of an actual human being, but are controlled by the computer. This does not, however, change the way in which they are autonomically received by players, nor does it diminish the desire to receive them as such. In other words, just as the moving image of the player-character is indicative of an actual human being elsewhere (the player), the moving images of the non-player characters may be taken as indicative of an actual entity existing elsewhere, of which the image is merely the trace.

The social intelligibility of the characters is one 'clue' (using Freedberg's (1989) term, see Chapter 2) that motivates the reception of their images as a trace of an actual human being. The importance of animated facial expressions in cut-scenes as an

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[80] There are also non-player characters in these worlds, such as quest-givers, monsters, and pets. However, these are distinguishable from other human-controlled characters through their limited dialogue, different mode of engagement, and predictable behaviour.

[81] This can be true even to the extent of avatars' positions within (depicted) space. For example, Taylor (2002: 42f.) made the observation that within *The Dreamscape* multiuser online environment, users would often move their avatars if they felt their personal space had been invaded by another user. However, the close positioning of avatars may be desirable where two or more users had an affectionate relationship.

indicator of presence and social intelligence is evident in the way in which sets of moving GIFs capturing different facial expressions are created, circulated, and commented on throughout *Dragon Age* fandom. The set of originally moving images in Figure 19 below, for example, was circulated on Tumblr and responded to more than 780 times, depicting Fenris's range of different facial expressions in various cut-scenes throughout the game.

Figure 19: A 'GIF set' of Fenris's facial expressions in *Dragon Age 2* , as captured in cinematic cut-scenes. (Originally a series of moving images.)

Although an elf and therefore alien to us as a species, Fenris nevertheless has all the familiar anatomy of the human to trigger our autonomic response. Fans read great meaning into these facial expressions, searching for clues to the emotional and psychological state of the characters using their broader social experience and

knowledge. For example, Fallenleaf made the following observations about an expression similar to that in the bottom right of the GIF set in Figure 19 above:

> This expression gets to me every time, the way the right corner of his mouth curves ever-so-slightly upward. Coming from Fenris, at this point in the story, that tiny smile holds such significance. It's more meaningful than a hundred wide, toothy grins from the sort of person who smiles often and easily.

This reading of Fenris's face imputes an ultimately social meaning to the expressions he appears to make, drawing of course from Fallenleaf's own experience of social life more broadly. This is the abduction of agency in Gell's sense, as the visual images are seen as indicative of the character's mental and emotional state, in much the same way that we scan a person's expression in a face-to-face encounter to read their disposition and intentions. Such a reading implicitly imputes agency to Fenris, that he can display certain facial expressions as an index of inner emotional states.

Of course, fans do not truly believe that Fenris has an independent mind and heart, and can feel emotions like happiness, sadness, or anger. They recognise that he is a fictional character who has been created by BioWare, the developers of *Dragon Age 2*, and is therefore what Gell (1998) would call a 'secondary agent'. Gell (1998: 20) defines primary agents as intentional beings while secondary agents are artefacts "through which primary agents distribute their agency in the causal milieu, and thus render their agency effective". In the case of *Dragon Age*, the characters in the game are secondary agents that mediate between players and the game's developers. However, unlike an artwork that has a single creator, the distributed nature of agency within BioWare means that it is difficult for players to abduct agency into a primary agent beyond the character images.

For example, David Gaider, the lead writer of *Dragon Age*, was responsible for Fenris's character concept, dialogue, and story line. His appearance was a collaboration between David Gaider and Matt Rhodes, the lead concept artist for *Dragon Age*. These

designs were subsequently brought to life within the game by a team of animators, who were responsible for his bodily movements and facial expressions. He was voiced by actor Gideon Emery, who brought his own nuances to the character through vocal tones and subtle pauses. And the entire project is overseen by a team of executives with creative and financial control. Who, out of these, can be said to be the 'primary' agent in respect of Fenris is unclear – perhaps it can only be attributed to BioWare as a corporate entity. But this is an uncompelling response to a lively and social character.[82] It is far easier and, dare I suggest, far more human, to abduct agency into the figured image right in front of us *as if he was a primary agent* rather than the confusing structure of a distant game company. It also has the benefit that, even though fans do not truly believe that he is a primary agent, acting as though he were allows them to engage in the pleasures of social immersion within the computer roleplaying game.

Agency is another important part of non-player characters' social realism, and this is most obviously demonstrated when they act in socially meaningful ways that are outside of the control and wishes of the player (and player-character). For example, the cut-scene that I related at the beginning of this chapter continues after the fade-out ellipsis with my character, Sara Hawke, waking up in bed. The camera shifts to a shot of the other side of the bed in time with Hawke's head movement, and we see that she is alone. She sits up and we look over her naked shoulder to see Fenris, fully clothed, standing by the fire, his head bowed, back to us.

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[82] One exception to this is when fans feel that a specific action or comment is 'out of character' for a particular character. This is usually an action that is not socially intelligible in the context of the character's actions and/or reported history, a situation that halts the abduction of agency to the character as a socially intelligent individual within the image world and draws us to the heavy-hand of the game developers behind the curtain.

"Was it that bad?" Hawke asks of her own volition. Fenris turns to look at us.

"I'm sorry," Fenris says. "It's not… it was fine." Fenris looks away, and the camera switches to a close-up of Hawke, catching the moment when her expression drops with disappointment.

"No," Fenris says, and the camera switches back to his face. "That is insufficient. It was better than anything I could have dreamed."

The dialogue wheel pops back up at the bottom of the screen with another three options from which I can choose. However, regardless of whether I choose to make Sara Hawke's response sympathetic, humorous, or blunt, Fenris will explain that the encounter brought back memories for him and declares that:

"It's too much. This is too fast. I cannot… do this."

Although I direct Sara to attempt to convince him that this is something that we can work through together, Fenris disagrees and shakes his head.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I feel like such a fool. All I wanted was to be happy… just for a little while. Forgive me."

The last shot is of Fenris's downcast face as he walks out and, in the background, an underwear-clad Hawke sitting on the bed, watching him go (see Figure 20 below). The scene fades to black.

Figure 20: A screenshot of Fenris leaving Hawke after their night of passion

This scene provoked strong reactions among *Dragon Age 2* players on Tumblr. The unexpected nature of the entire scene – from Fenris turning up at Hawke's house without invitation, to the highly suggestive kissing scene, to him leaving immediately afterwards – took people by surprise. In Figure 21 below, an anonymous confessor relates how they had a 'breakdown' after playing through the romance scene. Talking about all of the work they had put into "trying to mend his emotional wounds, and building a trusting relationship," they explain that his subsequent abandonment of Hawke "so closely mirrored what had happened in some of [their] past relationships that it was like reliving it all over again". For this confessor, however, the pain was made up for when – later in the story – they were able to resume their relationship.

Figure 21: An anonymous confession about Fenris's break-up with Hawke, the player-character, from the *Dragon Age Confessions* blog

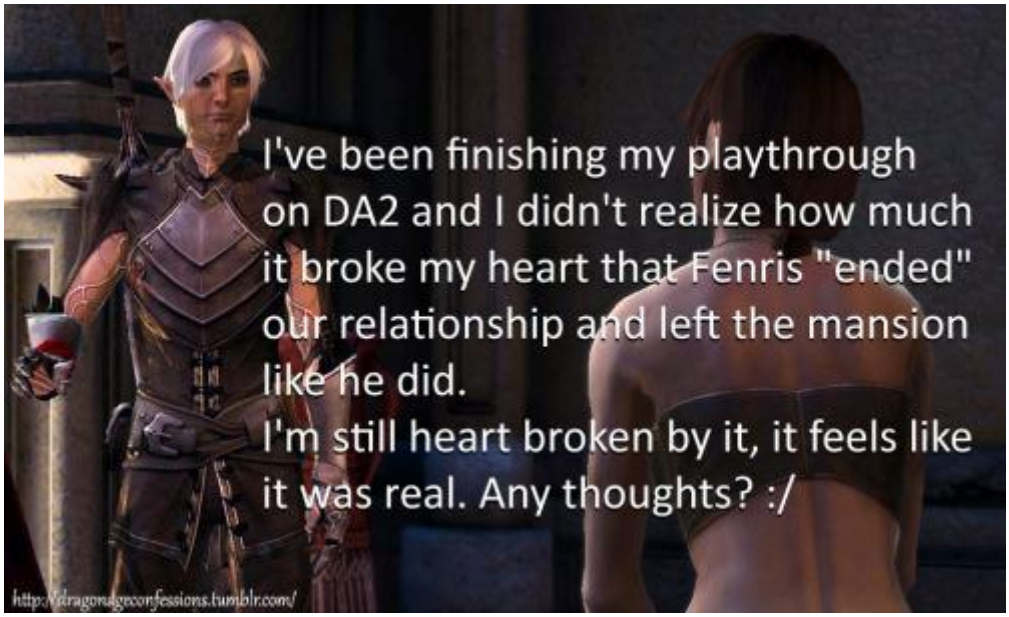

Figure 22: A second anonymous confession about Fenris's break-up with Hawke, the player-character, from the *Dragon Age Confessions* blog

Another fan, who was not so far advanced in the game, confessed that they were still heartbroken over Fenris ending 'their' relationship because "it feels like it was real," and asked for guidance from other *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr (see Figure 22 above). Many fans responded by encouraging the confessor to "give him time" because "he's worth it," advice similar to that which one might read in a dating column – while one respondent went so far as to suggest revenge strategies, such as having your character sleep with everyone they could within the game. Both are highly social responses to the situation. Only one fan responded to the confession's request for thoughts by suggesting that this was not an appropriate response to such images: "It's called getting too wrapped up in a fantasy and forgetting to distinguish it from reality."

The emotional charge of this scene, and others like it, is counterintuitively contained in the player's *limited* agency, which replicates our intersubjective experience of life more broadly. As suggested in the confessions I have highlighted above, the scene is recognisable as a social pattern – the unexpected break-up or one-night stand – that immediately draws upon fans' broader knowledge of this scenario. By thrusting the player into such an unexpected yet familiar social situation, in which they can respond to but ultimately not affect the actions of their sexual partner, the game is simulating the limited agency that would accompany this experience in other contexts. The fact that these events are experienced through images has little bearing on their affective impact on the player, because they nevertheless appear to be the actions of a social agent, with will and intention, who is unexpectedly rejecting 'us' (via the player-character).

Malaby (2007: 107) has argued that it is the simulation of "the texture of engaged human experience," particularly "the right mix of the expected and the unexpected," that makes games so compelling. Although Fenris is not an autonomous social agent, his unexpected actions put the player(-character) into a position of social

contingency through the demonstration that one can never be certain another's point of view.[83] As Fenris begins to explain that what happened between Hawke and him was a mistake, the stakes in this situation may be high for the player (as the confessions in Figures 21 and 22 demonstrate), as well as for Hawke. This leads straight to a situation of performative contingency, in which the player(-character) can attempt to change Fenris's mind (for example, by suggesting that they can work it out together) or retaliate (such as by pointing out that Fenris was the one who initiated the liaison). Somewhat paradoxically, the apparent *inability* of the player to change Fenris's mind works to confirm his liveliness by demonstrating that social *failure* is possible within the game world, simulating our intersubjective experience within the world more broadly.

As Schutz and Luckmann (1973) describe it, our natural attitude towards the world is that we share it with other, intentional beings who experience it similarly to ourselves:

> It is self-evident to me in the natural attitude not only that I can act upon my fellow-men but also that they can act upon me. I know that I can enter into manifold social relations with them. This knowledge also contains the implicit assumption that they, my fellow-men, experience their relations which reciprocally include me in a way that is similar, for all practical purposes, to the way in which I experience them. (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 5)

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[83] Obviously, a scene such as this is only potentially unexpected the first time in which the player experiences it. Subsequent (or previously informed) play-throughs would lack the element of surprise. The hybrid nature of the player-character is relevant here. Even if the player is aware of the forthcoming events, Hawke, the player-character, is not, and the game forces the player to respond as though they were unexpected. In this situation, rather than feeling personally affected (as the confessors in Figures 21 and 22 did), players were more likely to report feeling sympathy for Hawke, suggesting that the social contingency remains in place but is experienced vicariously rather than directly.

Regardless of the player's foreknowledge or lack of it, the scene is socially contingent in the sense that the player's choice affects the outcome of the game ('that which could be otherwise'). By choosing how Hawke responds to Fenris's decision, the player affects not only the texture of the scene itself but also the possibility of a reconciliation in the future. For example, if the player directs Hawke to say that he or she did not expect anything more, Fenris will not seek to reconcile later in the game. This adds a temporal dimension to social contingency, once again simulating broader social life, in which the effects of our actions may not be immediately felt but may have long-term consequences.

This reciprocal quality of intersubjective experience – that "I can act upon my fellow men but also that they can act upon me" – is simulated through the shifting of agency between the player- and non-player characters in scenes of social and performative contingency like the ones described throughout this chapter. As described in the previous chapter, I am following Gell (1998) in employing a relational understanding of agency, in which agency is not an inherent attribute but a capacity, attributed *ex post facto,* to cause events to happen. Gell distinguishes between the agent, that is, the person or object that exercises agency, and the patient, that which is causally affected by the agent's actions. These roles can shift between parties to an interaction in the midst of their exchange, depending on whom is acting as an agent at the time.

In the two scenes between Fenris and the player-character that I have related above, the roles of agent and patient shift in an important way, as I have outlined in Table 4 below. Fenris is in the position of the agent when he initiates the romantic encounter and subsequently breaks up with Hawke, while the player-character is only in the position of agent when they accept or reject his advance. Although the player-character can respond to Fenris's decision to break up, they cannot change his mind. The give-and-take of these scenes simulates the shifting agency of real-world romantic encounters, while the inability for the player to avert the break-up confirms Fenris's social agency by his refusal to occupy the role of the patient. This subverts the expectation that non-player characters in computer games are there to serve the player(-character) and their enjoyment of the game, and demonstrates that Fenris is an agent in his own right.

Table 4: Key shifts in agency during the Fenris/Hawke romance scene in Act 2 of *Dragon Age 2*

Scene	Scene Description	Agent	Patient
1	Fenris arrives unexpectedly and offers himself to Hawke.	Fenris	Player-character
1	Hawke can either accept or reject Fenris.	Player-character	Fenris
2	Fenris breaks up with Hawke, saying that their encounter was a mistake.	Fenris	Player-character
2	Hawke can choose how to respond, but cannot change Fenris's mind.	None[84]	None

Although the break-up was a negative experience for many players, the shifting dynamics of such interactions is nevertheless one of the great pleasures (and pains) of roleplaying games like *Dragon Age*. When I asked fans what their most emotional moments from the games were, a surprising common factor was the relative helplessness of the player in the scenes named, as I shall discuss in more detail in the following chapter. The experience of being a patient to the social agency of the characters facilitates social immersion within the game and brings the characters to life in a way that can only be experienced through the capabilities of digital imagery.

The Social Realism of Digital Images

In this chapter, I have argued that, through the interactive capacity of digital images, the companion characters in the fictional image-world of *Dragon Age* act as social agents in respect of the player, in much the same way that other humans can be social agents for us in the 'real' world. The audio-visual nature of the games, and the use of filmic techniques in their presentation, means that we have similar clues with which to make

[84] As related in footnote 83 on page 149, the way in which the player-character chooses to respond *does* affect whether Fenris will attempt a reconciliation in the future or not. However, this is not apparent at the time.

sense of the interactions with our computer-generated interlocutors as we do in face-to-face encounters, such as facial expression, body language, and vocal tone. Players draw upon their experience within the broader social milieu to make sense of these signs within the context of the game, and the social realism of the characters is the key to their appeal to fans of the *Dragon Age* games. The player-character is essential in this dynamic, as it gives players a body within the game world with which to interact with (and be acted upon by) the non-player characters. The hybrid identity of the player-character encourages players to have a personal stake in the events of the fictional world and the actions of the characters in respect to them. The world of *Dragon Age* is thus very much a *social* world.

While some people may assume that the game world – as a simulated world with heavy restrictions on the dialogue and decision options available to the player-character – represents a radical break from our experience of the broader social world, I argue, in line with Malaby (2007: 107), that it is a matter of degrees of difference rather than a profound distinction. Although our agency within the 'real' world is theoretically limited only by the confines of immutable physical laws, in practice the social world in which we were brought up and continue to live restricts our social agency in a multitude of ways – not least by shaping the actions that we think of as possible (Bourdieu 1977).

Both 'reality' and the game world of *Dragon Age* are socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1975), but it is in a computer-generated world such as *Dragon Age* that this construction is laid bare, the limitations of our agency laid out explicitly in a set of three to six possible responses that a player can make in reaction to a given scenario. Obviously games such as *Dragon Age* are much more heavily restricted than social reality, where our responses can be strategically and dynamically generated based on our understanding of societal norms, but the experience of limited agency does not in

itself represent a break from our experience of social reality; it is rather a continuation of it. This is evidenced in scenarios where the player-character is apparently helpless to change the outcome, such as Fenris leaving Hawke after their night together, which bring to mind and rely upon our knowledge of similar social situations outside of the game. Indeed, it is these moments of denied agency that may be the most socially immersive for players.

The social intelligibility of the characters in *Dragon Age* provides more evidence that we should take seriously the notion, put forward by both Gell (1998) and Mitchell (2005), that an anthropological theory of images should treat them as persons or, more precisely, social agents. But if images are social agents, what effects do they have in the 'real' world? This is the question that I will be answering, from various angles, throughout the remainder of this thesis. In the following chapter, I explore how the virtual people of *Dragon Age 2* act as catalysts for the temporal refiguration of fans' lives, transforming their experience of the past, understanding of the present, and hope for the future.

4 #VIDEOGAMESMATTER

> To say it's just a game is dismissive – a way to negate the impact and weight of it, the significance of [it in] all its varying degrees. And perhaps it's the medium that makes it so prone to judgement – relatively new, not as vested in society and culture as the printed word, the floodlit performance, the silver-now-technicolour screen. Yet it carries pieces of all of these – overlapping swatches of dialogue and form, expression and scenery. Broken down to its base element, perhaps it is a set of numbers, yet to lean back and see the enormity of it, all the layers combined and compressed – it is a world in and of itself.``
>
> We're creatures constantly seeking, are we not? A good story, a hearty laugh, a sense of familiarity, a kernel of courage – we look for these things in our world, but often we find them in others. But intangibility does not invalidate, for just as we find hope and inspiration, excitement and poignancy, in literature or theatre, so do these exist on-screen – downloaded and pixelated, the condensed microcosm.
>
> It's not reality, no. But it doesn't have to be. […] It is a game, and for some it is idle distraction, for others the subject of intense study, recreation and sometimes, unexpectedly, salvation.

Laura, who wrote the above commentary on her Tumblr blog, often muses about the personal impact of computer games like *Dragon Age*. A 43-year-old female program analyst from the United States, she is keenly aware of the trivial regard that computer games are often afforded by critics and casual observers. Although *Dragon Age* was, in her words, "a fun romp" at first, it became far more to her than that. In her eloquent way, she argues that the stories and characters in computer games are important sources

of inspiration and courage for acting in the 'real' world, the equal and successor of older forms of media such as film and literature.[85]

Indeed, the place of computer games within the contemporary media milieu has been under debate since they first appeared and has only become more contested as games have grown in detail and complexity. Much ink has been spilled about whether computer games could ever be profound enough to be considered a truly artistic medium. In 1984, Sherry Turkle (2005 [1984]: 76) noted that games did "not offer the imaginative identification with a character and situation that literature does," although she was confident that developments in computer graphics and power would lead to improvements.

Almost 20 years later, the *Newsweek* drama and film critic, Jack Kroll (2000: n.p.), argued in an article entitled ''Emotion Engine?' I don't think so' that computer games "can be fun and rewarding in many ways, but they can't transmit the emotional complexity that is the root of art". Films, he argued, can convey the nuance and complexity required for deep emotional engagement because they, unlike games, "don't have to simulate human beings: they are right there, to be recorded and orchestrated". For Kroll, it seems that only the biological human body can convey the emotional nuance necessary for media to be 'art', a perspective that not only put some video

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[85] Indeed, Janet Murray (2006: 187) has suggested that:

> [D]igital games are becoming the assimilator of all earlier forms of media culture. They allow players to take on the characters of print fantasy literature or popular films. They incorporate cinematic characterisation, lighting, camera angles, and even allow players to make their own movies within the game environment… They include music, graphic design, and dialog, and they make wide use of narrative genres such as adventure, romance, gangsters, and superheroes and are rapidly assimilating other new media formats such as bulletin boards, chat rooms, and in-game newspapers and radio stations.

games but also other forms of art that use simulacra into doubt.[86] The algorithmic nature of computer games also comes under fire from Kroll, when he concludes that "computer games create a world of manipulative mechanics, without the catharsis and revelation of real art".

Without venturing into a debate about the definition of art, Kroll's claim that simulated human beings lack the ability to elicit emotional engagement, revelation, or catharsis has not been borne out in my fieldwork among fans of the *Dragon Age* series of computer games. My attention was first drawn to studying *Dragon Age* because of how important the games were to their fans. The significance that the games, and the characters that populate them, have in the lives of *Dragon Age* fans was a regular subject of Tumblr posts addressed to the fandom community, and could often be the length of short essays. In these posts, as well as in the one-on-one interviews I conducted, fans recounted how the characters were catalysts for transforming their sense of self, often playing important roles in helping them to cope with issues such as grief, mental illness, and gender or sexual identity struggles.

In this chapter, I explore the active role that the characters from *Dragon Age 2* play in the lives of their fans by examining the deeply personal intersections that the game images have with the lives of individual fans. I argue that, rather than creating a world of 'manipulative mechanics', video games such as *Dragon Age* create richly intersubjective worlds filled with virtual people whose narratives address our own experiences. In doing so, I argue that the juxtaposition of player agency and

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[86] Since Kroll wrote, there has been an increasing use of motion capture in video games as well as films, in which the bodily movements and facial expressions of an actor are recorded to animate 3-dimensional computer character models. Motion capture can help with creating more realistic or nuanced animation, which may overcome some of Kroll's reservations regarding the artistic value of video games.

helplessness is a core component of the emotional power that the games hold because it re-enacts the tensions of intersubjective lived experience, offering the possibility of reflection and catharsis through the medium of the player-character.

I start by asking what it means to say that computer games 'matter' to their fans, arguing that computer games – like all other forms of media – communicate human narratives that allow us to reflect on our lived experiences and can therefore become an important building block in the reflexive project of identity (Giddens 1991). However, I also argue that the interactive dimensions of video games provide a unique experience of identification and distanciation that makes this medium qualitatively different to traditional film, television, or novels.

I then turn to my ethnographic data to analyse the active role that the computer game characters had in refiguring individual fans' perspectives on their past, present, and future. I delve into narratives of grief within *Dragon Age 2* to explore how playing through familial death within the game helped people to reframe their past experiences of loss, and argue that the 'double consciousness' players adopt towards the virtual people within the game allows them to relive and refigure past traumatic events safely, through the mediation of images. In the context of the present, I explore one woman's existential conflict between faith and identity as it was reflected in the narrative of Bethany, the player-character's magic-using sister in *Dragon Age 2*. I argue that, by supporting and enabling Bethany in her quest for identity, the woman in question was encouraged to cultivate an attitude of care towards themselves while gaining a language with which to express her internal conflict. Finally, I argue that characters can alter fans' orientations towards the future, exploring how one man's experience of a romantic relationship with a *Dragon Age* character opened new horizons of possibility, transforming his expectations for 'real' relationships in the future. In each case, players

not only gained new insight but also an increased sense of agency as they gained some measure of control over the *meaning* of events in their lives, even if they could not change their actual substance.

INVESTMENT AND IDENTITY

The tag '#videogamesmatter' circulated among *Dragon Age* fans in the early days of my fieldwork on Tumblr, and became one of my first emic categories for coding fan narratives posted on the social networking platform.[87] The tag typically accompanied personal text posts that highlighted the influence that the games had in people's 'real' lives. These influences ranged from assistance coping with mental illness, to the validation of sexual, racial, or gender identity, to the provision of companionship in the face of loneliness, courage in times of pain or illness, and comfort in grief. As implied by the tag, fans often expressed their explicit motivation to defend computer games from the perceived criticism that they do not 'matter,' arguing that they are more than 'just a game'[88], and that, while they are undoubtedly played for fun, they can also play an important role in people's 'real' lives. But what does it mean to say that video games 'matter'?

One academic who has explicitly tackled this question is cultural studies professor Lawrence Grossberg (1992: 59, my emphasis), who has suggested that "the

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[87] The tag 'video games matter' has no relation to the 'black lives matter' movement. The tag was circulating on Tumblr in 2012 and 2013, and the black lives matter movement came to prominence on Tumblr in 2014.

[88] The phrase 'just a game' is not just used to criticise games; it has also been used to deflect criticism from problematic elements in video games, such as unjustified violence and stereotypical representations of gender and race/ethnicity. By arguing against games being 'just a game,' fans are also arguing that representations in games matter, and have real effects in the world.

most obvious and frightening thing about contemporary popular culture is that it *matters* so much to its fans". He argues that what distinguishes fans from other consumers of popular culture is that fans incorporate media texts into what he calls their 'mattering maps'. Mattering maps, in his words, "direct our investments in and into the world; [they] tell us where and how we can become absorbed… as potential locations for our self-identifications, and with what intensities" (Grossberg 1992: 57). In other words, mattering maps are our individualised collections of cultural representations that we have incorporated, to some extent, into our sense of identity.[89] For the fan, these identity-forming mattering maps explicitly include fictional popular media representations.[90]

Grossberg describes mattering maps as "likely investment portfolios" for affective energy with which they can organise and empower their preferred identities:

> [F]or the fan, popular culture becomes a crucial ground on which he or she can construct mattering maps. Within these mattering maps, investments are enabled which empower individuals in a variety of ways… The fan gives authority to that which he or she invests in, letting the object of such investments speak for and as him or her self. Fans let them organise their emotional and narrative lives and identities. In this way, they use the sites of their investments as so many languages which construct their identities. (Grossberg 1992: 60)

In other words, fans invest time, energy, and emotion into the slices of popular culture that support their individual projects of self-formation. Grossberg (1992: 60) locates these popular culture investments in the context of a dearth of given meaning in contemporary society, with fans experiencing a "struggle to care about something, and

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[89] In anthropology, a similar concept was espoused when Clifford Geertz (1973: 5) famously described humans as "an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself [sic] has spun," but where Geertz understood these webs to be collective culture as a whole, the mattering maps of contemporary societies are much more individualised – cobbled together from a fractured social imaginary.

[90] Of course, media representations affect every individual's understanding of the world. However, fans explicitly incorporate representations that are coded as fictional into their mattering maps, such as television shows or video games. See Chapter 1 for a further discussion of the differing claims to reality of different forms of media.

to find the energy to survive, to find the passion necessary to imagine and enact their own projects and possibilities". Investing in popular culture, Grossberg argues,

> provides [fans] with strategies which enable them to gain a certain amount of control over their affective life, which further enables them to invest in new forms of meaning, pleasure and identity in order to cope with new forms of pain, pessimism, frustration, alienation, terror and boredom. (Grossberg 1992: 65)

Grossberg's approach to this process makes it sound highly conscious and self-directed, but, as I shall argue in this chapter, it can also be spontaneous, unconscious, and even involuntary.

While the subject matter may make these investments something of a novelty to the outsider, the incorporation of objects and others into one's sense of self is common to human beings the world over. As Michael Jackson notes in his existential anthropology:

> [O]ne's sense of being undergoes perennial redistribution in the course of one's strategic struggle to sustain and synthesise oneself as a subject in a world that simultaneously subjugates one to other ends. In psychoanalytic terms, one's being is cathected and recathected onto many others and many objects in the course of one's struggle to achieve a sense of security and viability. Thus, totemic species, inanimate objects – including prized personal possessions, dwellings, landscapes, and automobiles – as well as abstract ideas and ideals may become, by extension, aspects of oneself that one could not conceive of being without… (Jackson 2002: 13)

Building on Jackson's observation, media representations are simply another class of investment – alongside the more traditional anthropological terrain of totemic species and inanimate objects – into which we can distribute our sense of identity. The potentially fictional nature of these images is irrelevant, as identity formation is itself a fictional process, as argued by Stuart Hall:

> [Identities] arise from the narrativisation of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness […] through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary […] and therefore […] partly constructed in fantasy. (Hall 1996: 4)

Narrative plays a crucial role in why video games like *Dragon Age*, as well as other forms of visual media, 'matter' to their fans. The images encountered in visual

media are always imbued with narrative, even if the images themselves are static[91] – as is colloquially acknowledged in the well-worn English idiom about a picture being 'worth a thousand words'. The social stories that these images have the capacity to tell provide cultural resources for reflecting on our own histories, and our incorporation of these pictures helps to construct a narrative identity that unites past, present, and future and provides us with a greater sense of agency over our destiny. However, *which* narratives within an artwork 'address us', in Gadamer's (1975) sense, is indeterminable in advance. The accounts that I heard from fans usually describe a spontaneous process by which parts of their personal biographies are immediately, irreversibly, and poignantly interpolated into their perception of the game. Experienced in this fashion, 'mattering maps' appear less a design blueprint for reflexive identity construction than a reification of an unconscious and spontaneous identity process that naturally incorporates media objects.

For philosopher Richard Kearney, "every life is in search of a narrative," and never more so than in contemporary society:

> [T]he storytelling impulse is, and always has been, a desire for a certain 'unity of life'. In our own postmodern era of fragmentation and fracture… narrative provides us with one of our most viable forms of *identity* – individual and communal. (Kearney 2002: 4)

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1991) argues that fiction is one source for the narrative models with which we can render the otherwise heterogeneous incidents of our lives into a more intelligible whole. These models are necessary because our lives are never entirely knowable on their own: the framework of an existing tale helps to orient and

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[91] In the introduction to his essay on narrative, Barthes (1975 [1966]: 237) noted that "there are countless forms of narrative in the world… Among the vehicles of narrative are articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all those substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, *drame* [suspense drama], comedy, pantomime, painting… stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation".

order events in a teleological fashion that is otherwise impossible without knowing the future. By orienting our lives towards an end state, stories give us what anthropologist Michael Jackson calls "a sense that though we do not exactly determine the course of our lives we at least have a hand in defining their meaning" (Jackson 2002: 16). The narrative identity that is thus constructed through stories is not fixed but is constantly subject to revision. As we move through our lives, the narratives that orient us need readjustment in the face of changing or unexpected circumstances and shifting priorities. New sources of media can help us to make these adjustments by providing new narrative models that have space for the alternations in our lives, and our mattering maps will shift as a result.

Narratives not only serve to unite our lives, otherwise scattered across incidents in time, but also help to address the suffering encountered in the process of living. In the stories that I recount in this chapter, trauma figures prominently. 'Narrative catharsis' is a term that I am borrowing from philosopher Richard Kearney (2002), who has written extensively about the healing potential of stories, to refer to the process by which narratives can help people to relive and gain a new perspective upon experiences that are "absent, unbearable and otherwise forgotten":

> Narrative catharsis… is a way of making absent things present in a unique balancing of compassion and dispassion, of identification and contemplation, of particular emotion and universal understanding. It is a task which, if finely and delicately achieved, may proffer some measure of healing. (Kearney 2007: 63)

The use of narrative, whether expressed in words, images, or a combination of the two, as a means of regaining agency in the face of trauma is common to all human societies, and anthropology has many examples of healing narratives within its corpus. One of the most famous was recounted by Lévi-Strauss in *Structural Anthropology* (1968: 186–205), where he describes an incantation performed by a Cuna shaman to facilitate difficult childbirth. The incantation relates the struggle between helpful and

malevolent spirits for the woman's soul, which, once recovered, would allow the delivery to take place. Similar to Kearney's description of how media can help otherwise unbearable events to be given meaning, Lévi-Strauss notes that the effectiveness of the cure results in narratively positioning the painful and terrifying experience within a universe of meaning:

> The cure would consist… in making explicit a situation originally existing on the emotional level and in rendering acceptable to the mind pains which the body refuses to tolerate. That the mythology of the shaman does not correspond to an objective reality does not matter. The sick woman believes in the myth… What she does not accept are the incoherent and arbitrary pains, which are an alien element in her system but which the shaman, calling upon myth, will re-integrate within a whole where everything is meaningful… The shaman provides the sick woman with a *language*, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be immediately expressed. (Lévi-Strauss 1968: 197–198)

In other words, narrative allows us to make sense of events that may otherwise seem arbitrarily inflicted upon us by incorporating them into a meaningful universe. In Lévi-Strauss's example, the 'cure' is accomplished through verbal metaphor, but games, both digital and analogue, are just as available as a medium through which to integrate – and express – otherwise unfathomable and unsayable life experiences.[92] The act of playing through simulations of intersubjective experience, as explored in Chapter 3, not only allows one to relive – in a controlled environment – past traumatic experiences, but also provides a powerful *common* language for expressing both hope and pain. Contra Kroll's argument, the verisimilitude of the images in respect of 'real' human beings is of no relevant for the efficacy of the medium. It is the apparent *social* reality of the characters, not photorealism, that makes them effective in this way.

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[92] Lévi-Strauss (1966: 30-33) himself argues that rituals and games are closely related, with both involving a process of transformation – from asymmetry to symmetry in the former, and the reverse in the latter. Both are ways of making sense of the world by proceeding through a series of contingent events.

Just as images can make the absent present, the mediation of past experiences through representation is an important part of narrative catharsis, as it allows the audience to inhabit the ontological gap between image and reality. In the previous chapter I argued that fans of the *Dragon Age* games – like other beholders of images (Mitchell 2005) – exhibit a 'double consciousness' in respect of the character-images they interact with in the games, simultaneously responding to them as real and acknowledging their essential nature as images. This same double consciousness, or double vision as Kearney (2002: 13) calls it, provides the conditions under which we can experience narrative catharsis:

> For while narrative imagination enables us to empathise with those characters in the story who act and suffer, it also provides us with a certain aesthetic distance from which to view the events unfolding… It is this curious conflation of empathy and detachment which produces in us… the double vision necessary for a journey beyond the closed ego towards other possibilities of being. (Kearney 2002: 12–13)

The relationship that players of the game have to the player-character as representing both self and other (see Chapter 3 for further discussion), allows the player to occupy a position of both nearness and distance to the events of the game world. This provides players with the aesthetic distance required to be able to play out traumatic events without reliving them so vividly as to become overwhelming.

Dragon Age 2, which was the most recent game during my period of fieldwork, seems to offer a peculiar number of opportunities for catharsis, perhaps due to the complex themes with which the story engages (see Chapter 1 for an explication of these themes). Of course, which potential narratives, if any, are compelling for an individual fan is dependent upon their particular life history. Yet, when I asked people to recount the narrative moments that had the most emotional impact for them in the *Dragon Age* series, there was a surprisingly common theme to the answers I received: despite the enormous diversity in the scenes reported, almost all of them contained a strong element of player-character helplessness. This is, on the face of it, surprising in a series of

games that promises the experience of player agency within a branching narrative structure. Yet the player-character's inability to fundamentally alter the course of events within the game seems to play an important role in the experience of narrative catharsis, perhaps because it re-enacts the mundane, everyday experience of helplessness in the face of forces larger than ourselves. As space-monkey put it:

> *Dragon Age 2* has been one of the most relatable pieces of media I've ever interacted with, especially with regard to losing a parent, having to rebuild your life after losing everything, being discriminated against for how you were born, political power versus 'privilege' etc. It's painful to play in some ways, but building a character and having some control over events, while still having the end be inevitable was very powerful for me. Everything blows up, but the ending is not without hope. There's genuine healing in that.

In the following sections, I explore some of the key moments from *Dragon Age 2* that resonated for fans. In doing so, I argue that the operation of simultaneous identification and distanciation with the player-character allows players to revisit, with the potential of narratively transforming, traumatic experiences within their own lives, allowing them to imaginatively regain agency in the face of helplessness.

PLAYING WITH PAIN

Figure 23: A screenshot of my character, Sara Hawke, grieving her mother's death

On an otherwise unremarkable evening, my character, Sara Hawke, returns home to find her mother absent and a bunch of white lilies in a vase on the mantelpiece. My blood immediately runs cold. Over the previous one-and-a-half acts of the game, Sara has been investigating the disappearance and murder of several women. The common clue: white lilies delivered by an admirer.

"Don't worry," Hawke tells her worried uncle, who comes looking for his sister after she misses their usual appointment. "Everything will be okay." I believe this is true: Sara is, after all, the heroine of this story.

Sara takes to the streets to investigate, and I direct her and her companions to follow a trail of clues to a steel foundry in the working class district of Lowtown.

"I hope we're not too late," Sara says, of her own volition, as she and her companions enter the building. Somehow that makes me feel better. It is the sort of thing writers include in a television show to ratchet up the tension before everything is happily resolved.

I direct Sara to search the building, finding evidence of dark magic as well as a locket belonging to her mother. She is here, somewhere. When Sara finally locates the man responsible for her mother's disappearance, he is waiting for her.

"I was wondering when you'd show up," he says with a smirk. "Leandra [Sara's mother] was so sure you'd come for her." I do not like his use of past tense.

"Where is she?" Sara demands without my input.

"She's here, waiting for you," the man says, and there is a strange sneer in his voice that makes me uneasy. He turns to a chair, upon which the cloaked form of Leandra is sitting.

Leandra jerkily stands up and turns to face Sara. Her head has been attached to a body made from disembodied parts of all the women who have been found murdered; a macabre attempt by the murderer to recreate his former love. Animated by dark magic, her eyes are cloudy and glazed over, her skin deathly white. Sara's face reflects my own sense of horror.

Sara attacks the necromancer and, despite the dark shades and creatures he calls to his aid, she and her companions are victorious. It is justice, of a sort, but the victory is hollow.

Once he is dead, Sara turns to her mother.

"Mother!" she cries, as the piecemeal corpse shambles towards her. Sara catches her as she falls, and they descend to the ground together.

"I knew you would come," Leandra says. The magic is ebbing out of her now that the necromancer is dead. She lies in Sara's arms, looking up at her daughter.

"Don't move, mother. We'll find a way to–"

"Shhhh. Don't fret, darling. That man would have kept me trapped in here. But now… I'm free. I get to see [your brother] and your father again. But you'll be here alone."

"I'll be fine, mother," Sara says, looking away.

Leandra smiles. "My little girl has become so strong. I love you. You've always made me so proud." Her last words are a whisper.

As Sara's companions cluster around her, her mother dies in her arms.

* * *

Despite the fantastical nature of Leandra's death, the scene described above and its subsequent denouement, when Hawke tells her uncle the news and privately grieves,

was a poignant moment for many fans of *Dragon Age 2*. Leandra's death was the final loss in Hawke's immediate family: her father died before the beginning of the game, and her sister and brother are either dead or distant depending upon the player's decisions.

Although the loss of one or more family members is commonly used as a motivating plot device within the genre of fantasy roleplaying games[93], few games create situations where the protagonist repeatedly loses family members and is shown dealing with grief and guilt. These scenarios induct the player into a feeling of helplessness, usually considered the antithesis of the goal of computer games, which have, since their earliest days, tended to focus upon feelings of control and mastery (c.f. Gee 2005, Mehrabian and Wixen 1986, Ryan et al. 2006). As Matty, a 54-year-old *Dragon Age* fan said to me regarding the series of deaths in *Dragon Age 2*, "I know characters in games and stories often lose someone close to them, and it's a fairly standard plot device, but [while playing *Dragon Age 2*] I actually thought 'How can they put this in a game, this isn't fun!'" Playing through the experience of helplessness may not be 'fun'[94], but my research among fans of *Dragon Age* on Tumblr suggests that it offers something more valuable: narrative catharsis.

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[93] The website TVTropes.org contains a catalogue of the most common roleplaying game tropes, originally compiled in 1998 as part of a roleplaying clichés drinking game. "Missing Family Member Rule: Most main characters must have a dead or lost family member" is one of the listed clichés (TVTropes.org 2017).

[94] Thomas Malaby (2007: 96) has argued that, while the notion of play – as used in both games scholarship and society more broadly – connotes pleasure or 'fun' that is both safe and separate from everyday life, this is not "an intrinsic, universal feature of games when they are examined empirically". Malaby (2007: 99) posits that game playing is more accurately described as *compelling* (also see Chapter 3).

Dragon Age 2 and its themes of loss and survival came at a time of personal significance for a number of fans with whom I spoke about the game. For these fans, witnessing and partaking in the events of the game through the player-character addressed their actual-world experiences via a dual process of both identifying and sympathising with Hawke. Matty, for example, started playing *Dragon Age 2* at the end of a long period of depression, and was immediately struck by the parallels between Hawke's experiences of loss and their[95] own, as they related to me:

> Basically, by the time I was 30 I had lost both of my parents to cancer, two of my three siblings to suicide, and had also lost my first child at birth. My father, my older half-sister, and my younger brother all died within a four-year period while I was in my teens, and my brother's death was particularly traumatic, as it was very sudden and shockingly violent, and I was there when it happened.
>
> I had dealt with losing my mum and my son – I'd been forced to face what had happened, and I had grieved for them – but I'd never really done the same with the earlier bereavements. In some ways, I'd never allowed myself to feel them properly.
>
> So I was playing this game [*Dragon Age 2*], and Hawke kept losing family members left, right, and centre, and I was shocked by how brutal it was. When Leandra [Hawke's mother and last remaining family member] died I couldn't stop crying. I felt heartbroken – my poor Hawke, he'd lost everyone, and it was unimaginably awful.
>
> I think that was the first time I realised that what had happened to me was awful too, and that it was completely understandable that it had affected my life so much, and that being depressed and angry and grieving didn't make me weak – they were normal reactions to unbelievably horrible and traumatic events. It was almost like being given permission to feel a lot of things I'd never let myself feel before.

Matty's sympathetic response to Hawke as a person who had endured the repeated loss of his family members reflected Matty's own devastating experiences of familial death. The game's spontaneous address to their past trauma interpolated their self into the game's narrative and, through the 'double vision' (Kearney 2002) or 'double consciousness' (Mitchell 2005) of both sympathising with and yet remaining

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[95] Their/them are Matty's preferred pronouns.

detached from Hawke, Matty found themselves able to gain a perspective on their trauma that had previously been unavailable to them.

The identification between self and characters, which is vital to all forms of narrative catharsis, is arguably heightened in the context of a video game, where you can enter the game world through the indexical sign-body of the player-character (see Chapter 3 for further discussion). In his psychoanalytic take on film, Christian Metz (1982: 45, 48) argues that film is like a mirror in providing a reflection of the world, "but it differs from the primordial mirror in one essential point… there is one thing and one thing only that is never reflected in it: the spectator's own body". Absent from the screen, the spectator "cannot identify with himself as an object, but only with objects which are there without him". The spectator of a film instead identifies with the all-perceiving camera. In contrast, many computer games give the player a body on the screen (the player-character, commonly known as an avatar in massively multiplayer games) that offers a reflection that is simultaneously self and other:

> Appearing on the screen in place of the player, the avatar does double duty as self and other, symbol and index. As *self*, its behaviour is tied to the player's through an interface: its literal motion, as well as its figurative triumphs and defeats, result from the player's actions. At the same time, avatars are unequivocally *other*. (Rehak 2003: 106)

The unstable dialectic of self and other is inherent to the transformative potential of the player-character. The 'double vision' (Kearney 2002) or 'double consciousness' (Mitchell 2005) with which fans engage with the game allows them to haunt the ontological gap between self and other, giving the player-character a particular power. This dialectical relation is generative in its instability, with the player circling between self and other, applying the perspective of one position to the other and gaining new insight into their personal (present, past, or future) circumstances. In the process, the player gains a sense of agency previously absent as they reflexively incorporate these insights into their narrativised identity. As a hybrid sign that folds together both self

and other into one, Hawke acted as a pathway out of the self and back to it through Matty's sympathy for their own image reflected in the indexical sign-body that is the player-character. With the benefit of this distanciation, Matty was able to reflect on the traumatic nature of repeated loss with enough objectivity to see its true impact upon their own life.

Narrative catharsis requires enough distance to ensure that reliving the experience is not overwhelming. In *Dragon Age*, the third-person perspective the game enforces means that the player is always witnessing their character as a visible other. The graphical and physical peripherals that link us to the character may melt away from consciousness when we feel immersed, but can suddenly resurge into awareness in moments of cognitive disjunction or emotional distress. The extra-diegetic abilities of the player also provide a measure of distance. Saving and loading allows players to replay segments of the game and choose different dialogue paths if they did not like how the situation was resolved, exploring different options and outcomes. Players can take a break from the events by quitting the game, psychically pulling themselves out from the player-character for as long as they desire – and returning to it at their leisure.

The player can also deliberately craft Hawke as a separate persona, with attributes distinct from their own, in order to reinforce the psychological distance between them. This was an important element of the cathartic experience for LN, who told me about how *Dragon Age 2* intersected with her own traumatic past. Just like Matty, the game came at a particularly opportune time for exploring these past experiences:

> I grew up in Zimbabwe. When the country destabilised, my father was killed and we lost our land, so being a refugee [like Hawke is in *Dragon Age 2*] is an experience I am intimately acquainted with. For a very long time, everything revolved around survival and immigration processes […] It was never quiet and there was no time to stand still and grieve. By the time I went to college, I got on by basically pretending that the first 16 years of my life had been a very vivid dream and just focussing on achieving whatever goal I had set for myself.

> When I sat down with DA2, it was over a decade later. I'd studied and worked abroad. I had a job and my own place to live. I'd had counselling, read books on trauma recovery and was on medication to help manage my mental health. In short, I was in as good a place as I'd ever been as an adult. I doubt I would have been able to handle the game's content as a kid, but it came at exactly the right time. To be clear, I didn't set out to play [*Dragon Age 2*] for therapeutic purposes. I just wanted to beat it, because my brother and cousins had.

After having emotionally buried her devastating adolescent experience of familial loss and homelessness, LN found herself reliving them through *Dragon Age 2*. However, at first, the events of the game were too close to her own experiences for comfort. It was only when she switched to a male protagonist, who embodied a number of resources that were unavailable to her as a teenaged girl, that she was able to positively engage with the game:

> I chickened out the first time I tried playing. I'd [started the game] with a female Hawke, and by the time [Hawke's brother] was dead [while fleeing from their childhood home], it was just way too real for comfort. The second time I [played] as a male [character] and it just clicked… as a male player-character, I didn't feel as 'threatened', I guess. [It] was still tough to play… but it didn't cut quite as deep with a male protagonist.
>
> The thing about the Hawke I ended up playing, is that I picture him as a really big guy. When I look at the story though his eyes, I don't feel like everything and everyone is taller than me, like when I was a kid. If the world pushes him, he has the ability and the demeanour to push back. He could stand up to corrupt officials in a way that I, as a teenage girl, could never have managed.

Switching to a male character, especially one that she pictured as physically powerful, provided an alternative viewpoint through which she could play *Dragon Age 2* and metaphorically revisit the events of her childhood. This was a character who, unlike her past teenage self, could stand up to authorities and express his anger and frustration. The experience of playing as someone with the physical and psychological resources to cope with extreme situations allowed LN to revisit and rework the traumatic events of her adolescence:

> Right from the start [of the game, when Hawke defends his family], I felt a weight lift off my soul. I'm not a violent person at all, but there was no acceptable outlet to express what I felt growing up, and most of the time there was nothing for it but to take a deep breath and press on. Seeing Hawke react exactly as I'd fantasised about doing toward people doing almost exactly what had been done to me and my family, was not only cathartic, but validating.

Michael Jackson (2002: 18) notes that "storytelling is usually prompted by some crisis, stalemate, or loss of ground in a person's relationship with others and with the world, such that autonomy is undermined, recognition withheld, and action made impossible". In the face of such helplessness and passivity, storytelling "is a coping strategy that involves making words stand for the world, and then, by manipulating them, changing one's *experience* of the world". Although playing *Dragon Age 2* does not, and cannot, change the events of LN's past, they allow her to symbolically restructure them and, in the process, regain a sense of agency that was absent at the time.

Seeing a narrative that mirrored her own experiences in a big budget 'AAA' video game was another important part of *Dragon Age 2*'s appeal for LN. She spoke to me about how she had felt distanced from the people around her growing up because of the traumatic events she had experienced:

> When you experience things that are pretty far outside the norm, it becomes isolating. Your friends don't understand why you feel strongly about certain things and explaining only makes things awkward, so you learn to keep it to yourself.
>
> Watching Hawke's storyline unfold and seeing a lot of my own gut-reactions reflected in Hawke […] was like having someone not only understand, but actually sympathise. Suddenly things that made me feel like an outsider were 'relatable' enough to include in a mainstream video game. Honestly, I never expected to see a story like this, and it's something I wouldn't have thought to look for until I was watching it unfold on my screen.

There are two aspects of this account that I would like to bring out. First, Hawke here is not only a medium through which LN played the game, nor a proxy for the self, but a virtual person whose similar but independent experience of trauma makes him a figure that LN can imagine as sympathetic toward her own experience. Secondly, seeing her experiences reflected on the screen of a game that shipped two million copies also helped LN to feel that her past was not beyond the understanding of mainstream experience. Hawke's narrative provided her with a language through which she could discuss her adolescent experiences with other players of *Dragon Age 2*.

Although LN liked to play as a male character who, she felt, had superior resources to her childhood self, Hawke's ultimate inability to prevent tragedy from occurring was also an important element of the narrative for her:

> The fact that the end-game events and most of Hawke's personal tragedies were inevitable was immensely vindicating. I've seen people complain about being made to feel 'helpless' by the game's narrative, but to me, the standard [roleplaying game] plot, where a happy end is always possible as long as you 'make the right choices' isn't nearly as poignant. It feels like a platitude at best; at worst an indictment. The underlying message is that if you get 'the bad ending' […] it's because you didn't try hard enough; you didn't take it seriously; you did it *wrong*.

The inevitability of loss and failure in the game was important because it reflected LN's experience of the world, where forces can be bigger than you and ultimately outside of your control. By presenting loss as inevitable, and the player's agency as only able to be exercised in how they choose to deal with the consequences, the game avoids the implication that bad things only happen to those who make the 'wrong' choices in life.

Like Matty, seeing and playing through Hawke's grieving process allowed LN to access her own grief in a safe way:

> [T]aking Hawke though his own grieving process […] gave me a vicarious outlet for emotions that were all but debilitating when applied to my own memories. DA2 provided a vehicle that was realistic enough to be effective, but supportive enough to soften the blow a little. This allowed me to sort of 'ease' into the whole process, rather than jumping in and drowning.

The combination of identification and distanciation that *Dragon Age 2* encourages provided LN with a gentler return to memories and emotions that were otherwise unbearable. Through the medium of the player-character, specifically a player-character that had capabilities that LN did not during the time in question, she was able to imaginatively re-experience and come to terms with the traumatic events of her adolescence.

Despite their magical nature, many fans responded to the events of *Dragon Age 2* as realistic reflections of grief and loss. As todisturbtheuniverse suggested:

> Hawke […] loses what remains of her family eventually. […] But it happens slowly, over time, over years – which is just how it happens in a world without dragons, too.

> […] That's how the majority of us lose people: one at a time, slowly, not all at once, and in a variety of ways.

Indeed, although Matty and LN's experiences of familial death are particularly traumatic, many *Dragon Age* fans could relate to the events in the game, as evidenced by the number of anonymous confessions posted to the *Dragon Age Confessions* blog about Leandra's death. I have reproduced only a few representative posts below:

> Until I got to Leandra's death scene, I was incapable of crying for my own mother's death. It's my least favourite but the most cathartic cut-scene for me. I still bawl every time I play through it.
>
> …
>
> After one of my brothers died I was told that I was heartless because I didn't cry even though I was thinking that I wanted to die with him. When Hawke's mother died Hawke didn't cry but still obviously grieved and that helped me to get through it by showing me it was okay not to cry.
>
> …
>
> I've always liked DA2 characters, but I felt a bigger attachment to my female Hawke after seeing Leandra die because my mum died too around the time I was playing, and I could totally identify with her. It somehow gave me strength.
>
> …
>
> As someone who's lost her mum to cancer, Leandra's death [is] an unnerving representation of just how much that disease can take away from a person, through surgery, and chemo – just a piece, here and there, until (as I have discovered with my own battle with cancer) you feel there's nothing whole left. It breaks my heart, to think of my mother going through that. This quest flattens me with grief every time I play the game.

Of course, not all fans reacted in the same way to Leandra's death. In one anonymous confession, a fan talked about the guilt felt about *not* feeling moved by the scene, attributing it to the fan's difficult relationship with their mother:

> Hawke feels bad after failing to save Leandra, and to some extent I do too. Maybe guilty since it feels like I failed to help a friend save their mum, but with the abusive relationship I have with mine, Hawke mourns while I sit there awkwardly holding the controller. I feel nothing. I feel a little guilty that other players are so moved by this part in the game and all I can do is stare blankly at the screen with absolutely nothing stirring inside.

In this case, the distancing effects of the game overcame identification, evidenced in the confessor's reference to Hawke as 'a friend' and sudden awareness of the controller in their hands – in immersive moments, game peripherals dissolve out of awareness,

seeming to become part of one's own body. The fan does not identify with Hawke in these moments because the relationship they have with their mother is profoundly different. This does not meant that the fan has been entirely thrown out of the fictional world of the game – they still respond to Hawke as though he or she is another person, which is why the confessor describes feeling awkward in witnessing Hawke's (a friend's) exhibition of grief – but they cannot access the same emotions that Hawke is apparently experiencing. The affective link between player and character has been temporarily disrupted. Similarly, other fans reported feeling either relief or no emotions when Leandra died, either because she reminded them of their own volatile relationship with their mother, or because they felt that the relationship portrayed in-game between Hawke and Leandra was unhealthy.

Another key aspect to the narrative catharsis that the game makes possible is the support of the non-player characters: you do not go through it alone. After Leandra's death, a number of the companion characters approach Hawke to offer their condolences and advice. The particular characters that arrive to comfort Hawke depend on the relationship you have established over the course of the game, but usually involve the player's romantic interest or best friend, as well as Aveline Vallen, one of Hawke's oldest friends and the Captain of the Kirkwall City Guard. When I asked fans about the most important scenes in the game for them, Aveline's condolences and advice were brought up time and again. Like many scenes within the game, the player's relationship with Aveline and their choice of response affects how it plays out, but the following is one permutation of the scene in question:

Figure 24: Aveline, Hawke's friend and Guard Captain, offers her condolences

On one of the first outings since her mother died, I direct Sara Hawke to visit the office of Aveline Vallen: fellow refugee, friend, and now the captain of the City Guard. When she arrives, Aveline is, as always, wearing her official armour: full plate, with imposing pauldrons that make her seem larger than life (see Figure 24 above). She is a tough but fair Guard Captain, and is Hawke's oldest friend in Kirkwall, since they fled their home country of Ferelden together six years ago.

"Hawke," Aveline says, and nods her greeting with typical reserve, her arms crossed over her chest. Then she seems to realise the significance of the visit. She drops her arms as well as her formality, and her face takes on a sympathetic expression. "I don't care what else is going on, we haven't spoken about Leandra. How are you?"

"I have a smile on my face," Sara says. "That should be enough for most people."

"That doesn't work on me," says Aveline, tilting her head to look at Hawke. "I knew her too. I want to think my mother was like her. I just have flashes of… impossibly long hair. But my father…" she looks down, then back up at Hawke. "Would you like to hear one thing?"

"You've never talked about him," Sara says.

Aveline tells Sara about how her father trained her in the martial skills that enabled her to have the position she has today, selling everything he had to buy her a commission in the King's army. Then she looks down.

"Do you know what I remember?" Aveline asks rhetorically, then looks back up at Hawke. Her eyes crease with the recollection of fond memories. "When he read to me – stupid things, dragons and heroes – he wouldn't turn a page until I reached over and took his hand." She smiles. "That big man made every step of the story my choice. I loved that." She pauses a moment, her brow furrowing with pain, and continues: "He died of the wasting… and in those last weeks, I read to him. I had to take his hand to turn the pages. And I couldn't tell if he was too weak, or if it was the old game."

Then she laughs self-deprecatingly. "I don't know why I'm telling you this," she says, and changes the subject. She looks down at her desk. "Drink?" she offers.

"A glass for those we've lost," Sara agrees.

Aveline laughs. "All right then." She pours the drinks and hands one to Sara, before raising her own glass. "For Benoit Du Lac and Leandra Hawke," she says, then her expression turns serious and I realise we're coming to the point of her story. "Don't let anyone tell you when to move on," she says. "Take their hand, and say 'my choice'." Then she shrugs. "That's all I have. I'll miss her too."

This 'my choice' advice resonated for many of the fans with whom I spoke about the games. Although Aveline's attempt at condolences may, on first reading, appear insensitive to Hawke's own pain, the player's ongoing relationship with Aveline led most fans to interpret the story of her father's death as an attempt to connect with Hawke's own loss. This understanding of Aveline allowed players to read between the

bare lines of the scene to fill out the greater part of the story. For example, Thess offered the following explanation of the scene in response to criticism of Aveline's reaction to Leandra's death:

> I can imagine there's a lot that Aveline didn't say in there. […] She didn't say that her friends, maybe even her husband, kept trying to help her through her grief by telling her to move on. Aveline didn't want to put Hawke through that, but neither could she come right out and say, "Everyone told me to move on when I wasn't ready and it pissed me right the hell off so I am offering this advice because it's the only thing I can say that doesn't sound like a mealy-mouthed platitude." So she tells the story of how her father died instead.

This interpretation lay behind the emotional impact that the scene had for many of the fans to whom I spoke. For example, Brilliantcat said:

> When Aveline tells Hawke about her dad, it was one of the most emotional moments in the game for me. […] It validated that grief does not have an end date – that it is a process that continues. […] I've dealt with grief myself in losing people so it was so important to hear a video game character say that it is your choice in deciding when to mourn.

Crested-gull had a similar reaction to the scene:

> Aveline's reaction to the death of Hawke's mother is so important. The "my choice" speech, you know the one. I hold that speech close to my heart because I have a tendency to feel guilty about my feelings and it helps me not feel that. A friend of mine passed away suddenly at the beginning of 2014 and it was something I kept in mind especially then.

Although a manifestly virtual person, Aveline's response to Hawke's loss provided fans with a way to reconsider their own experiences of grief, providing support and validation for its ongoing nature. A similar theme was evident in a number of anonymous confessions about this scene, of which I reproduce a select few below:

> I really loved Aveline's story about her father. *Dragon Age 2* came out a year before my own father passed away and when I played through it again after that happened the story touched me so much more, it brought me to tears and helped me cope with my loss. My grieving was my choice. Thanks Aveline.
>
> …
>
> I still get chills when the companions give their condolences after [Leandra dies]. I lost my father 23 years ago and my step father almost two years ago and it's still hard. But, "No one tells you how to mourn. And when someone says 'move on', you take their hand and tell them 'my choice.'"
>
> …

> I'm not much of a gamer, I first started playing DA2 when my mom died to keep me distracted for my own sake at night. I ended up loving it, but what hooked me to the game was Aveline's story about her dad after Hawke's mom died. She then became one of my favourite characters. I guess it's silly but I needed it and I didn't move on until I was ready…
>
> …
>
> My father died almost two years ago. I hadn't played *Dragon Age 2* since it happened. None of the advice I'd heard about grief really resonated with me until I heard Aveline say, "No one should tell you how to mourn. And when someone says 'move on,' you take their hand and say, 'my choice.'" I'm thankful for this poignant, beautiful moment.

Each of these confessions shows that Aveline's message is not only delivered to Hawke, but also the other half of the player-character: the player. Although the player cannot engage Aveline in a discussion of grief like they could with an actual friend, her acknowledgment of the impact of Leandra's death on Hawke simultaneously addresses similar experiences the player has experienced in their personal life.

It is important to recognise that it is not just the message, but also the message *giver* that is important in this exchange. If the same lines were delivered by someone else, an acquaintance of Hawke's rather than a friend, then it is unlikely that they would have had the same impact. The fact that it is Aveline who offers this advice, Hawke's oldest friend and someone who is typically reticent about discussing her personal life, gives this scene much of its emotional force. *Who* Aveline *is* is as important in the efficacy of this scene as *what* she says. Thess articulated it as follows:

> [Aveline] is offering up her own father's slow, lingering death – the sort of thing she NEVER talks about – to say, "It's okay to tell stories about Leandra, you know. You can tell me what it was like for you when she died if you want, or you can tell anecdotes of the woman who existed before the flight from Ferelden, but you can tell me anything you want, or nothing if you prefer. Here's me opening the door to you; I've let you into my life so you can feel a little less creepy to invite me into yours if you need to". This is Aveline the perennially private opening dialogue about the hardest thing in the world to talk about. And I think she does it damn well.

The social realism of the characters, and the very human appeal of their stories, means that the player does not go through the experience of narrative catharsis alone. The character's support can even become part of the cathartic process: for LN, the

companion's reactions to Leandra's death gave her a sense of solidarity that she felt had been missing after her father's death.

Support from non-player characters was not only important to fans when revisiting past experiences, but also helped people to cope with their present circumstances. In the following section, I explore one woman's story of how enabling a virtual person's quest for identity helped her to come to terms with her own.

Reflecting on Faith and Identity

Throughout my fieldwork, many fans expressed feelings of gratitude towards the *Dragon Age* characters for their role in helping them to come to terms with a self-identity that fell outside the norms of their immediate friends and family. Whether it concerned their gender, sexual orientation (or lack thereof), mental illness, or physical disability, the reflection that these fans saw in the virtual people of the game was an important source of affirmation and support in circumstances that otherwise threatened to invalidate who they were. In this section, I explore a single example: the role that Bethany Hawke, the player-character's sister, played in helping Defira, a 30-year-old woman from Australia, to reconcile her faith and sexual identity.

Like many fans, Defira started playing the *Dragon Age* series during a particularly difficult period in her life. Struggling with chronic depression, she was about to be made redundant in her job and her father had just been diagnosed with cancer. At the same time, the comfort that she would normally have drawn from her faith eluded her, as she began to realise that the Church would never accept her emerging sexual identity. During a period of leave that she took before she was made redundant, *Dragon Age* promised to be a diversion from these stressors, but when

Defira started playing she found in it much more than that. She credits the *Dragon Age* games with saving her life:

> The *Dragon Age* series quite literally saved my life. In early 2011, I was miserable – chronically depressed, and on the brink of losing my job of eight years. My dad had just been diagnosed with cancer, my career prospects were non-existent and my creativity had lapsed close to death. My self-esteem had plummeted… and I was in a terrible place mentally and emotionally. When I learned that I was going to be made redundant, I took a few weeks off of work to use up my years of accrued leave and try to come to terms with what I was losing. At home all day with nothing to do and trying desperately not to sink further into depression, I picked up my husband's copy of *Dragon Age* […] The women of *Dragon Age* saved me. Living vicariously through them, I crawled out of that dark hole I had landed in and began to live again.

Although Defira acknowledges the influence of a number of women in the *Dragon Age* games, the woman that Defira gives the greatest credit to is a non-player companion character: Bethany Hawke.

Figure 25: Bethany Hawke from *Dragon Age 2*

Bethany is the player-character's sister in *Dragon Age 2*, and a magic user who is struggling to reconcile her identity and her faith. Bethany's belief in the teachings of the Chantry is challenged by its doctrinal position that magical ability is a sign of condemnation in the eyes of the Maker (God). In an interview, Defira told me how she recognised parallels between Bethany's struggle and her own: both found that the faith that gave them comfort also rejected a fundamental aspect of their being:

> I was in a very bad place the first time I played *Dragon Age* and among the many things I was dealing with, one of them was my very badly broken faith and trying to find my way forward when I'd essentially had my safety blanket ripped from me.

> Bethany's anger and fears and depression is so understated in the game […] but she shook me up so much. She was a young woman, grieving and trying not to show her grief, trying not to show her fear, trying not to show her resentment and her anger and her frustrations, struggling to reconcile her faith and the comfort it gave her with her magical talents and her place in the world.
>
> She talks quite candidly when she wonders how to balance her faith and her magic, and that was very nearly a conversation I could have had myself, replacing magic with "self-identity" because at that point I was struggling to come to terms with my depression and anxiety and also teetering on the brink of attempting to accept that I was not straight. I was raised in a conservative household […] and Bethany's fears and her frustrations were my fears and frustrations. I didn't know whether to cling to my faith for the vague comfort it gave me, or whether to take a risk and believe in myself, just as Bethany didn't know what to do.

There are three possible fates open to Bethany in *Dragon Age 2*, hinging upon a seemingly unrelated decision the player-character makes at the end of the first act: who, among their companions, they bring along on an expedition to the dangerous underground area known as the Deep Roads. If Bethany is brought to the Deep Roads, she either dies (if the healer Anders is not present), or is inducted into a special order of soldiers known as the Grey Wardens in order to save her life. If the player instead chooses to leave Bethany behind, as their mother requests, she is taken into the Circle – the military-style Chantry institution for magic users. It is unclear in the context of the game if Bethany voluntarily turns herself in to the Circle or is forcibly incarcerated.

Fans are divided in their opinions over which of the latter two outcomes (the ones in which Bethany survives) are best, but Defira always makes sure that Bethany goes to the Circle. This choice continues the theme of faith versus identity in Bethany's narrative arc, and is important to Defira because she believes it provides Bethany with the greatest chance for personal growth and agency:

> I find it easier to let Bethany go to the Circle than to make her join the Wardens, because at least, in a way, she has a chance to make peace with something that is as defining to her personality as her magic is. Bethany is a woman of faith, and she needs the time and the space to reconcile that faith with the reality of living in a world that condemns mages. […] I feel that in going to the Circle, she made a conscious choice to attempt to balance her faith and her magic, and I could never take that choice away from her. […] I want her to have the chance to reconcile her faith and her magic. I want to give her that opportunity, because I came to better understand that same choice for myself by seeing her go through it.

In this passage, Defira treats Bethany as an independent person who has her own desires and ambitions: she talks about it being easier to 'let her go' rather than 'make her' join the Wardens, suggesting that Bethany has a clear preference that should be respected. Similarly, her reference to Bethany's entry into the Circle as a 'conscious choice' resolves the ambiguity of the game into an empowering narrative of identity that Defira refuses to subvert ("I could never take that choice away from her"). The reason that Defira treats her in this way is evident in her final statement, a temporal paradox in that she wants Bethany to have the same chance for the self-understanding that Defira gained by watching Bethany go through it.

Defira identifies closely with the version of Bethany who attempts to reconcile her magic and faith through the Circle, and has spoken in a profoundly personal way of her own experiences, as refracted through her response to Bethany:

> I relate a lot to Circle Bethany, in that I see a woman struggling with her faith and her place in the world and how to reconcile her very deep personal beliefs with a system that is very painful, damaging and frightening. […] I know what it's like to sit there and question the structures of your faith and wonder why it doesn't fit and what you can do to make it fit. Feeling at odds with your own personal faith is one of the most jarring and painful experiences you can ever go through. […] I know what it's like to want to cling to the tendrils of your faith and the safety of the system you were raised in. […] Being condemned by your own religion is painful, hurtful, scarring – it's a cycle of vicious self-loathing and despair and it's really hard to break out of it. Especially when you're clinging on to that religion and trying to do the right thing and all it does is hurt you more.

Playing the game in such a way as to allow Bethany to go to the Circle brings this conflict to a head, and by the end of the game Bethany presents to Defira an image of unity between faith and identity:

> By the end of the game, it's very obvious to see how she has grown in self-confidence and how she easily comments on what she believes her faith requires of her, and that character development is so, so important to me. […] Bethany chose to continue with her faith, confident in her abilities and confident that her magic was not a condemnation, which was a far cry from where we found her at the start of the game. In the end, I did not choose to continue with my faith, but Bethany's story gave me the opportunity to work through the same issues that were hurting me, and come away stronger for it.

Although Bethany and Defira ended up choosing different resolutions to the existential conflict between their faith and identity, it does not diminish the importance that Bethany had in Defira's life. Witnessing, and enabling, Bethany's journey towards belonging helped Defira to surface – to recognise, express, and work through – her own internal conflict. It is important to emphasise that it is in responding to Bethany as a *virtual person*, and not merely as a narrative vehicle or plot device, that Defira achieves her self-recognition. Defira's engagement with Bethany is more than cognitive, as is evident in her attitude of care towards her and, indeed, as Michael Jackson (2002: 15) has noted, "storytelling does not necessarily help us understand the world conceptually or cognitively".

Bethany does not help Defira by simply informing her that the reconciliation of faith and identity is technically possible, but in representing the lived experience of that conflict and resolution. The player's virtual kinship with Bethany – recall that she is the player-character's sister – predisposes us towards caring about her psychological journey, and wanting her to be able to resolve her existential conflict in the best way possible. In Defira's case, the sense of kinship that she has with Bethany extended beyond the confines of the game into her own life experience, and the attitude of care which she brings to bear on Bethany is in some manner extended to herself as well. By enabling Bethany's quest for self-identity, Defira could imaginatively contemplate the same possible horizons for herself, finding the strength to overcome the values imposed by her conservative upbringing to explore a self-identity that deviated from that which her faith allowed.

IMAGINING THE FUTURE

While all narratives, to some extent, change our orientation towards the future by allowing us to symbolically rework our pasts, some stories explicitly open new prospects by restructuring our horizons of possibility. In my final case study for this chapter, I introduce the story of Basil, whose relationship with Anders from *Dragon Age 2* transformed his hopes and expectations for the future.

Basil is a transgender man who had been involved in a series of abusive relationships with men before he first played *Dragon Age 2*. Over time, these relationships had undermined his self-esteem, and had led him to believe that the cold and dismissive treatment he had experienced from his boyfriends was all that he deserved and, hence, all that he could expect in the future. The romantic relationship that he engaged in, via the player-character, with Anders in *Dragon Age 2* showed him new possibilities by allowing him to simultaneously witness and participate in a relationship based on mutual love and respect. In so doing, it gave him new hope for navigating relationships with actual men in the future.

Like Laura, with whose words I began this chapter, Basil is highly aware of the trivial regard with which games are often considered by critics of more venerable forms of media, and offered his own story as a corrective to this perception. In an essay written for the *Dragon Age* fandom entitled 'Why do I care about Anders?: A Small Essay about Representation, Dragon Age, and Falling in Love', Basil explained how Anders from *Dragon Age 2* transformed his life. He begins by grounding his experience of the games in his marginalised identity and his first, traumatic relationship with a man:

> If you don't know me, then here's a few factoids about me you should know before reading further: I am 20-years-old, I am a trans man, and I am gay. I am neuroatypical. From ages 15 to 17, I dated a cisman who was seven years older than myself. The relationship was toxic, abusive, and would likely be a textbook example of statutory rape.
>
> [Our] relationship […] ended with him coming to my house and threatening to hurt me – and I truly believe he intended to kill me. I was emotionally shocked through all of the next two years. I still am. I think about that day with horror and fear. […] He stole my books, my games, and a lot of what I cared about. He did not take *Dragon Age* [*Dragon Age: Origins*]. Only because he didn't get his hands on it – but he did take so much else. More than anything else: he took my belief that anybody would ever love me or care about me again.

Basil subsequently entered into another relationship but, although this one was not abusive, it was not fulfilling his emotional needs. At the same time, Basil was struggling with his body image as a transgender man as well as post-traumatic stress from his previous relationship. It was during this vulnerable period that he started playing *Dragon Age 2*:

> I resisted buying *Dragon Age 2* for a very long time. I heard it was awful, compared to the original which I really, truly, loved and probably always will. But I eventually caved and bought it with my friend to play over the holiday break. At the time, I was seeing somebody, with a sort of casual feel to things. I was in the middle of an eating disorder. The reasons are not very complex: I was a trans guy. I hate my body about 80% of the time - in those days, it was closer to 100% of the time. And I truly believed that, at 140 lbs [64kg], with PTSD and trans shit, I would never, ever be truly loved.

Like many others, Basil started playing *Dragon Age 2* to distract himself from his personal problems. He did not have very high hopes for the game after the negative reviews he had read, and certainly did not expect it to change his life. But that was before he met Anders.

Figure 26: Anders (centre front), with my player-character, Sara Hawke

Anders is a magic user (mage) who lives in the poorest part of Kirkwall, where he spends his time using his magical abilities to heal the local populace. Having been incarcerated in the Chantry-run Circle of Magi as a young child, Anders has both witnessed and personally experienced institutional abuses of power that have made him a fervent advocate for mage rights and freedoms. Passionate and haunted, Anders is the only companion to express romantic interest in Hawke without the player explicitly encouraging it, something that was crucial to Basil's response to him.

> When Anders appeared in the game I was smitten. At the time, I didn't really know why. […] He had the sort of quiet anxiety that I understood all too well. He was hard-edges and sadness and anger. And I really, truly, thought I was done with angry men.
>
> But then I realized something about him, and I only realize this now, as I'm writing [this…] Anders didn't take me for granted. Every time he spoke to my Hawke, and by extension, me, it was like he could lose me at any moment and that I mattered to him. […] More importantly, Anders said the most beautiful thing to me, and something I will probably always treasure: "I believe that you fall in love with a whole person, not just a body."
>
> I know that the writers probably just intended this to be a reference to the fact that Anders is bisexual, but it meant more to me than just that. Here I was: 10 or 15 pounds lighter than I should have been and still thinking I was far too fat to be loved, trans and not happy about it, and still dealing with the internalized anxiety of [my past relationship experiences]. Anders made me feel that I deserved to be loved, and he gave me hope that I would be loved, truly loved, again.

Although Basil acknowledges that Anders' words were most likely intended to reference his bisexuality, rather than the possibility of a trans identity, they were propitious in addressing Basil's anxieties and gave a highly personal texture to the developing relationship. The slipperiness of the distinction that Basil makes between Hawke and his actual self throughout the essay points to the importance that the dialectic of the player-character has to the development of these relationships.

Although Anders and Hawke's relationship may appear initially idyllic, it is in practice a complicated affair. Over the course of the game, Anders struggles with the consequences of having incorporated a supernatural spirit into himself, and he is eventually in fear of losing himself – a situation that has been compared to the experience of certain mental illnesses (see Chapter 6 for a full discussion of this point). The challenges this poses to Hawke and Anders' relationship are played out in conversations, in which Hawke can choose to either support or condemn Anders. Basil's sense of gratitude to Anders for his unconditional acceptance of him in the early days of their relationship is reflected in his caring response to these conversations:

> As Anders deteriorated, my Hawke was there for him. How could I condemn somebody who had pulled me out from the same misery and the same feelings of unworthiness? And even in the middle of this, Anders still managed to be there for Hawke, and for me. We supported one another, like couples are supposed to be like. […] Hawke knew everything about Anders and loved him nonetheless. I wanted that. That was beautiful.

Witnessing the loving relationship that he himself enacted through his choice of Hawke's responses, Basil found himself able to believe in a better future even when his most recent relationship broke down:

> [My boyfriend] and I broke up a few weeks ago. Although I was upset about it, it wasn't because of him. I don't think I ever loved him and I don't think he ever loved me. I was upset because […] my other ex-boyfriend had been proven right. That hurt more than anything else. I was once again the plump, trans guy who couldn't be loved.
>
> But then I thought about Anders. And I thought about Hawke. And I thought about the fact that Hawke would be loved by him, forever, unconditionally. And Hawke would love him forever, unconditionally. […] They believed in themselves. And they had

> each other. And they still do – unlike so many gay relationships, this couple stayed together.[96]

The narrative model of Anders and Hawke's relationship gave Basil the courage to override his immediate response to the break up – which seemed to confirm the pattern set by his first, abusive relationship – and keep his horizons open to the possibility of a loving, respectful, and lasting gay relationship in the future. By imaginatively rewriting his own potential future, this virtual relationship may very well affect how he will approach actual romantic partners and relationships in the future.

Like many fans, Basil repeatedly emphasised the fictional nature of Anders throughout his account, juxtaposing Anders' fictional and constructed nature with the very real effect that he has had on his life. These two threads converge in the conclusion, where he argues for the importance of *Dragon Age*:

> Anders has problems, and I never said he doesn't. But he's a person, to me. He's code and graphics and Matt Rhodes' [the official concept artist's] concept art, and Adam Howden's voice. He probably saved my life. When one person, who wasn't a person so much as a collection of tropes and 3D modelling held together by code, told me that I was actually worth something it changed me, fundamentally. It made me a better person.
>
> So don't you *dare* tell me that *Dragon Age* isn't important. […] Don't you *dare* tell me what I should care about. *Dragon Age* will always be important to me. It is the worst period of my life. But it's also Anders, smiling as Hawke enters [the room], and saying: "You are the one bright light in Kirkwall."

The tick-tack between a fans' knowledge of the artificial nature of the character images compared to the way they are experienced as vital beings, is an intentional disjunction that is common to many fans' accounts of the importance that the characters have for them. It asserts the rationality of the fan by demonstrating their awareness of the characters' nature as images ("code and graphics") even as they testify to the

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[96] Basil is here referring to the fact that when, in the following game (*Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare 2014)), the new player-character (known as The Inquisitor) meets Hawke, he or she mentions their continuing relationship with Anders if they romanced him in *Dragon Age 2*.

person-like agency they have in their fans' lives ("but he's a person to me"), and points to the power that images have in people's lives *despite* fans' knowledge of their unreality. The character images' power is not dependent on a misapprehension of their nature, but emerges from it in ways that have profoundly transformative effects on people's lives.

Temporal Refigurations

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that the character images from *Dragon Age 2* act as catalysts for fans to refigure their temporal trajectories, by addressing the player in ways that allow them to re-imagine past experiences, present troubles, and future possibilities. In each of the case studies that I presented above, the virtual people of the games present a certain unity of identity that provides a narrative model through which players can organise their own life experiences into a coherent whole, gaining a sense of meaning over events that are otherwise out of their control. The relationships that players develop with characters is vital to this process, as it is the nature of these characters as *virtual people*, and not just as passive vehicles for messages, that empowers them to take on these roles. The player-character is critical not only for establishing these generative relationships, but also for enabling the dialectic of self-and-other that is key to the refiguration of one's own life experiences. The important role that the characters play in helping players to narratively organise their life trajectories is key to why video games *matter* to their fans. The adoption of video games for this purpose is only the latest development of a fundamental human need to locate life experiences within a coherent framework of identity; however it is still a medium that invites criticism due to its novelty.

The stories that people share online about the importance that *Dragon Age*, and the characters that populate it, have in their lives are not just personal testimony in defence of video games, but entreaties to other fans to share a phenomenal world with them. Common experiences of narrative allow the creation of what Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, called a *shareable world* (cited in Kearney 2002: 3), and what Papacharissi (2015) calls 'affective publics'. Through the common experience of the games, fans otherwise separated by country, gender, age, and/or life experience are able to discuss deeply personal issues using a common language of affective images. Having media in common does not necessarily mean shared ideological orientations, however (Papacharissi 2015: 22), and the interpolation of the self into the games raises the stakes in encounters between fans, producing a highly volatile environment in which fans' identities are at risk. In the following chapter, I explore these issues through an analysis of an incident in which Fenris came to metaphorically embody his fans in a debate about the nature of transgender identity.

Figure 27: ***Trans Fenris must be protected at all costs*****, by Mads (Tumblr)**

5 Embodied Images

Fenris's voice is the first thing we know of him.

"Your men are dead," a voice says, deep and gravelly, from around a corner. "And your trap has failed. I suggest running back to your master while you still can."

The voice is not addressing my character, Sara Hawke, but the human soldier who is menacing her at the foot of a staircase leading into the slums of Kirkwall. As the lone elf appears from around the corner, the camera coyly avoids showing who is speaking. I see only close-ups of his gauntlets, then his breastplate, as he descends the stairs towards Sara. It is not until after Fenris uses his magical tattoos to rip the heart out of the soldier that the camera draws back and reveals him as a whole. When it does, the deep, gravelly voice that I had heard is utterly at odds with the lithe elf with floppy hair that is standing before my character (see Figure 28 below). The dissonance is startling.

I was not the only one to find it so.

"Why is Fenris's voice so deep? It feels so utterly unfitting," wrote Algernon. "Like baby, you are so small you shouldn't sound like you've gone through puberty three times over."

"Omg, I know, right," replied jammug. "When I first got to him I had to take a second because I imagined [his voice] to be so much different."

Figure 28: Meeting Fenris for the first time in *Dragon Age 2*

The juxtaposition between Fenris's deep, almost hyper-masculine voice and his lithe, almost feminine build became significant when a small but vociferous section of *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr began circulating images, both visual and verbal, of Fenris as a transgender man. Fans who supported and opposed the notion of transgender Fenris clashed in public discussions on Tumblr and, in the subsequent debate about Fenris's bodily identity, his voice and build were taken as clues pointing to two different sexes that he could have been assigned at birth. These debates were acrimonious, with each side accusing the other of being transphobic and falsely representing their own identity, and filtered into broader *Dragon Age* fandom. In this chapter, I take this debate as my focus for analysis and ask: Why do fans care so much about Fenris's bodily identity and, why, more broadly, do fans make and defend identity claims on behalf of fictional characters?

Images are inherently political. As the creation of human beings located with a particular time, place, and culture, and interpreted by others embedded in potentially quite different localities, temporalities, and cultural sensibilities, politics is both encoded and decoded into them (Hall 1999 [1973]). In the spontaneous, unconscious

process by which they 'address' their beholder, pictures are, in the words of media studies professor John Hartley (1992: 2), "the place where collective social action, individual identity, and symbolic imagination meet". This is true regardless of the subject matter of the picture in question, which may not necessarily visibly image the sociopolitical debates in which they participate. A tattooed elf in a quasi-Medieval computer roleplaying game is, at first glance, an unlikely subject to provoke and mediate debates about transgender identity, yet this is exactly what happened amongst *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr during my fieldwork.

In the previous chapter, I explored how the characters from the *Dragon Age* games enter into the personal lives of fans, providing an avenue for imaginatively refiguring their past experiences and expectations for the future. In this chapter, I ask how these same images act within the online network of *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr, mediating between identities among diverse fans. I focus on the identity debates that occurred over 'trans Fenris' as a particularly prominent example of the way in which the character images can become proxies for the actual bodies and gender identities of their fans.

I start by considering the way in which body and medium are merged in images, and the implications this has for identity in the imaginary environment of cyberspace. I then turn to examine the way in which identity claims are made on behalf of fictional characters through a close look at the claims and counter-claims regarding the gender identity of Fenris. I argue that Fenris's image body mediates between identity positions of fans, and that the ensuing debate, which ties into broader contemporary debates about transgender identity, became so acrimonious because fans' actual bodies were conceptually merged with Fenris's virtual one. Contesting Fenris's identity therefore meant contesting that of his fans, not just in the digital spaces of the Internet but also in

the broader world, as they argued for either the discursive or embodied nature of transgender identity. This shows that the bodily reception of images is the fulcrum point of a complex interrelationship between image bodies in digital spaces and physical bodies in actual space, such that the two cannot be ontologically separated.

Image Bodies in Cyberspace

In the earliest days of the Internet, 'cyberspace', as it was then known, was celebrated in popular culture and some academic work as a realm of pure image, in which identity could become disembodied (c.f. Benedikt 1991, Featherstone and Burrows 1996, Poster 1995, Stone 1996, Turkle 1995). The term 'cyberspace', and much of the early thinking about it, took its cue from William Gibson's (2000 [1984]) novel, *Neuromancer*, which imagines it as a utopian realm into which we could escape from the limitations of our physical forms. Gibson (2000 [1984]: 5) famously described the protagonist of his novel as "jacked into a custom cyberspace deck that projected his disembodied consciousness into the consensual hallucination that was the matrix". Similarly, Michael Benedikt (1991: 3) characterised the early Internet as a "collective memory or hallucination, an agreed-upon territory of mythical figures, symbols, rules, and truths". Although largely textual at this time, the Internet was imagined as the visualisation of the social imaginary. Ron Burnett (1996: 68) described it as a "visual labyrinth of association," in which you travel, without leaving your chair, "by looking, by reading, by imaging and imagining. The eyes are, so to speak, the royal road into virtuality."

Quite explicitly mapped onto the cognitive side of a Cartesian split between body and mind[97], cyberspace was imagined as a space in which one could discursively fashion a new, virtual body – what I am calling an image body – that was entirely separate to the one we occupy in what was sometimes derogatorily known as 'meatspace'[98]. Allucquère Rosanne Stone (1996: 43) described the relation as such: "The [physical] body… sits at a computer terminal somewhere, but the locus of sociality that would in an older dispensation be associated with this body goes on in a space which is quite irrelevant to it."

This discursively created virtual body was thought to let us escape from the limitations of our embodied existence, rejecting prejudice and leaving us free to experiment with our identity. Cyberspace was heralded as a utopian world, in which "all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth," a place where "identities have no bodies" (Barlow 1996: n.p.). As Krueger (1991: 256) observed, "You might choose on one occasion to be tall and beautiful; on another you might wish to be short and plain." The disembodiment of cyberspace was thus thought to "make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion" (Turkle 1995: 12).

Since these early days, numerous scholars have critiqued the notion that the Internet is a bodiless place, and have highlighted the ways in which bodily identity is continually reinscribed through our practices online (c.f. Ginsburg 2012, Kolko et al.

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[97] In John Perry Barlow's famous *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* (1996: n.p.), he described cyberspace as "the new home of Mind" and "a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live".

[98] 'Meatspace,' as a term for the offline world (as opposed to 'cyberspace'), dates back to at least 1995 (Oxford English Dictionary 2001), and is commonly associated with cyberpunk novels of the same era.

2013, Nakamura 2002, 2008, Tufekci 2012). In these analyses, the utopian promise of disembodied subjectivity and the dissolution of prejudice is revealed to be the rather less utopian promise of being taken to be cisgender, male, white, and able-bodied unless you explicitly presented yourself otherwise. As Nakamura (2002: 4) has described it, early utopian rhetoric was in actuality "an ideology of liberation from marginalised and devalued bodies". Indeed, rather than being irrelevant to online sociality, these analyses revealed that our bodies are integral to our experience of digital spaces. As Kolko et al. (2013) argue in the case of race, but which is also applicable to gender, class, and bodily ability:

> While the mediated nature of cyberspace renders invisible many (and, in some instances, all) of the visual and aural cues that serve to mark people's identities [in the physical world]… all of us who spend time online are already shaped by the ways in which race matters offline, and we can't help but bring our own knowledge, experiences, and values with us when we log on. (Kolko et al. 2013: 4–5)

As these authors make clear, our bodily existence is not left behind when we engage in the digital spaces of the Internet. Our bodies colour every aspect of our interactions.

As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, it is with our whole bodies and not just our mind's eye that we encounter images, whether they are brought to us by the Internet or older forms of distribution. The way in which images 'address' us is shaped in large part by the bodily experiences that we bring to an encounter with an art work. As the philosopher Nelson Goodman, following E.H. Gombrich put it, "there is no innocent eye":

> The eye comes always ancient to its work, obsessed by its own past and by old and new insinuations of the ear, nose, tongue, fingers, heart, and brain…. Not only how but what it sees is regulated by need and prejudice… It does not so much mirror as take and make; and what it takes and makes it sees not bare, as items without attributes, but as things, as food, as people, as enemies, as stars, as weapons. Nothing is seen nakedly or naked. (Goodman 1968: 7–8)

In other words, the eye (and the mind, for which it often stands metonymically) is never disembodied. Our perception of an image is always grounded in our corporal existence, motivated by our needs and desires, and inflected by our particular attributes

and experiences. As the art historian Hans Belting (2011: 11) has argued, "[D]isembodiment is nothing but another form of body-experience… Even the virtual body… happens with the sensory organs of our bodies." As such, we cannot see things 'as they are' in a pure or objective sense, although we may be aware of how they were intended to be viewed, and what we may think of as being self-evident within an image only reveals our unconscious assumptions and biases. This is especially true when the picture in question is a figured image, upon which we bring to bear all of our sociocultural education and prejudices.

Our body shapes the images that we see, but the images that we see also shape our bodies – particularly when the images in question are figured. As visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff (1995: 2) has argued, "[T]he corporal sign has very real effects upon the physical body, especially in regard to determining what is held to be 'normal'." By looking at pictures of bodies we unconsciously absorb social norms that govern the way in which we regard and treat both our own body and that of others. It is through pictures of bodies, both seen and not seen, that we learn the answers to questions such as: "How can the body be shown? Whose body should be shown? What corporal practices are 'normal', hence fit to be seen, and which are 'deviant', and must be kept out of sight, off the scene, that is, *obscene*"? (Mirzoeff 1995: 6, original emphasis). Even if these images are only transitory in our consciousness, Belting (2011: 17) has argued that they can nevertheless "alter the perception of our bodies, representing us as we wish we could be". And when there is an absence of images that reflect our bodily experience, the media teaches us not self-perception but self-oblivion (Belting 2011: 11).

The intimate link between images and bodies reveals a critical flaw in early conceptions of cyberspace as a realm of disembodied subjectivity. When early descriptions of cyberspace offered a vision of the Internet as a 'collective hallucination', it implicitly located these images 'out there', in the wire and servers that make up the Internet, as if it were itself a medium. It is not. The Internet is a transmission mechanism for digital code. The images that make up cyberspace are only actualised *as* images when they are processed by a computer, displayed on a monitor, and perceived as such by a spectator. When the ultimate medium for images is understood to be the living body (Belting 2011), the Internet is more easily recognised to be not a separate monolithic space without bodies but a vast, disarticulated network of relations created through the digital traverse of images from one body to another. In other words, cyberspace is not 'out there', it is 'in here' – grounded in the bodies of everyone who sits down at their computer and completes the cybernetic loop necessary for binary code to become images.

This grounding of images in the body reveals the high stakes with which images on the Internet are invested – even, or perhaps especially, when they have no reference in the world beyond. The images shared online, and their contestation, affect people's perceptions of themselves and, through images, people can begin to create networks – affective publics (Papacharissi 2015) – with others who respond similarly to them. In the next section, I explore these aspects in practice through a detailed examination of the debate about Fenris's gender identity on Tumblr.

EMBODYING FENRIS

The trans Fenris 'headcanon' emerged during my fieldwork in April 2014.[99] At the time, it did not attract a large amount of attention but it resurged with renewed vigour a year later, not coincidentally in the same month that reality TV star and former Olympian Caitlyn (then Bruce) Jenner gave an interview on ABC News in the United States about being transgender. Shortly after, fans who saw Fenris as transgender began making and circulating images, both visual and verbal, that depicted him as trans masculine and began making categorical assertions that Fenris is transgender in the 'canon' of *Dragon Age 2*. To understand the significance of these claims, it is important to understand the meaning of the two terms I have used here: canon and headcanon.

'Canon' is a term, arising from the theological concept[100], used across fandoms to refer to official or authorised sources of information about a fictional world. In the context of *Dragon Age*, canon includes the games themselves (and most[101] of the information they contain within them), pronouncements by the game developers about the world or characters (commonly called 'Word of God'), and some tie-in media (such as novels, comics, or films) that are explicitly set within the same fictional world. In contrast to canon, 'headcanons' are fans' personal ideas, beliefs, and imaginings about a

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[99] I am using the term 'trans' as an adjective to describe "people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth" (GLAAD 2017: n.p.). This is the term used by proponents of 'trans Fenris' and I am adopting it as an umbrella term to incorporate all identities that fall under both the transgender and transsexual identity labels.

[100] The fan-created encyclopedia Fanlore (2015) cites a study that dates the use of the term 'canon' to a 1911 essay that jokingly compared the Sherlock Holmes stories to the Bible, after which it apparently caught on as an apt analogy.

[101] Sometimes the information in a game is subsequently contradicted by later games, tie-in media, or 'Word of God' clarification.

fictional world (and the characters, events, or institutions within it) that do not necessarily correspond with canon representation. Fans use headcanons to talk about the personal meanings they draw from media images without foreclosing alternative meanings that can be found within the images by other fans. The idea of 'headcanons' implicitly accepts the multivocal nature of images; by describing an interpretation as a 'headcanon' a fan provides space for the existence of other, equally valid ideas about the fictional world.

If all fans of 'trans Fenris' had been content to describe the idea as a headcanon, the debate would probably not have been as acrimonious as it was. But not all did.

"It is the 20th of April, 2015, and Fenris is trans," wrote October, the moderator of the controversial *Is Fenris trans?* blog, in what would become a four month project of daily pronouncements.

"Well, Fenris *can* be trans, if you want him to be," superbia responded. "But there's also nothing wrong with him being cisgender. Personally, I don't see him as trans, and this blog feels kind of like you're trying to tell people that any other headcanon is incorrect."

"You're right," October replied. "It *is* the 20th of April, 2015, and Fenris *is* trans."

October's project of daily pronouncements exceeded the boundaries of 'headcanon', and therefore violated fannish etiquette, by making a definitive identity claim on behalf of Fenris. October's claim is that Fenris is trans in *canon* – that is, in the version of the game that everyone experienced, *regardless* of whether they thought so or not. It was this aspect of October's project that attracted the most criticism. A flush of confessions made to the anonymous *Dragon Age Confessions* blog complained about the practice of claiming Fenris as trans in canon:

> I'm trans male, and I don't think the trans Fenris headcanon is wrong or bad or anything like that. But some of the fans in that part of the fandom make it seem like it's an absolute, and that other headcanons cannot exist at all. It's that mentality that has turned me off of this headcanon, not the idea of Fenris being transgender.
>
> ...
>
> I saw a post about Fenris being trans. I don't mind if people write fics about it or draw fan art or things like that, but when people call it actually canon??? […] Fenris? I don't see how people would come to that conclusion? […] Headcanon whatever you want, but don't call it actual canon when it isn't.

October's project was deliberately provocative. Their posts were tagged to make sure they were visible to a wide audience, the blog featured a large 3D render of Fenris making the 'loser' sign on his forehead (directed towards the viewer of the blog), and October's responses to anonymous criticism such as the two above were seemingly purposefully infuriating images that provided no rejoinder other than the obstinate insistence that Fenris is trans (see Figure 29 below). It was a move calculated to destabilise people's ideas about Fenris's identity, as well as trans identity more broadly, and prompted a sadly predictable hostile response.

Figure 29: 3D renders of Fenris's body spelling out the word 'trans' on the *Is Fenris Trans?* blog, by October (Tumblr).

One anonymous fan sent the following to October's blog shortly after the daily pronouncements started:

> Holy shit you're annoying. Are you 12? Jesus, way to enforce that everyone in the trans Fenris tag is an immature pushy piece of shit. Congratulations on giving actual trans people a terrible reputation. Stop flaunting your shit like being transgender is an accessory. Even trans people fucking hate you at this point. I hope you're proud of your place in destroying what is left of the *Dragon Age* fandom, kid.

Another fan mockingly characterised October's project as follows:

> I'm an asshole that doesn't want others to enjoy a character and identify with a character unless they are trans, because I'm so self-absorbed and such a piece of trash that I need to post every day that a fictional character is trans to help with how needy for attention that I am. I don't want anyone but trans people to enjoy Fenris because I'm young and unable to see that […] everyone deserves to have their own headcanon.

Although October's tactics attracted the criticism of immaturity, when I spoke to them[102] about their blog they articulated a thoughtful political project that was focused on normalising transgender identity and representation within *Dragon Age* fandom:

> This blog, this ritual of posting daily that Fenris is trans, is more an act of rebellion than it is a demonstration of Fenris being trans. Like, yes, this character is trans, but I could easily have felt that in a private way on my personal blog, never interacting with anyone potentially hateful. It's just that after all the years of fandom I've gone through there's always this violent response that people have to the suggestion that a character is trans, even when (or especially when) that character is already interacting with gender in a non-traditional way. […]
>
> [Declaring trans Fenris as canon is] just connotation, semantics, but honestly I think it goes a long way; it casually enforces the idea that trans people don't actually show up in media, and if they do they're throwaway tokens. I want to say instead that these characters have been trans all along because, surprise surprise, trans people are actual people who can do things other than just be trans! We don't spend our whole lives in dysphoric woe, mourning that we are "in the wrong bodies".

By declaring Fenris to be canonically transgender, October has taken an overtly political stance that problematises the dominant-hegemonic assumption that male-presenting characters are cisgender unless proven otherwise. It also subverts common media tropes by arguing that transgender identity does not need to be established for the

[102] October prefers to use the non-gendered pronouns they/their.

audience through the explicit depiction of gender or bodily dysphoria – that transgender people can exist as an invisible part of fictional worlds such as *Dragon Age*, just like they do in the actual world.

October's project provoked a response in kind from other fans who contested the idea that Fenris is transgender. A rival blog appeared two days after October started their daily posting, called *Is Fenris Cis?*, which adopted the same strategy with the opposite pronouncement: "It is Wednesday, 22 April 2015, and Fenris is cis," they wrote, and continued to make sporadic announcements throughout the following months. The same idea was taken up by other blogs with similar names – such as 'Canon Cis Fenris' and 'Actual Trans Fenris' – the owners of which each made daily (and opposite) pronouncements about the essential nature of Fenris's identity.

Part of what made October's project so infuriating to other fans was that October refused to provide evidence for their claim for Fenris's identity.

"I'm really curious," an unusually civil anonymous fan wrote to October. "Where's your proof that Fenris is trans?"

"I was gonna answer this all jokey, but I don't much feel like it," replied October, breaking with their usual intransigent responses. They continued:

> I don't need proof for Fenris to be trans. I don't need to 'prove' anyone's trans identity. Not my own, and not anyone else's. Being trans is not a concept that adheres to a rigid set of rules. It's an experience, and that experience is different for everyone. No one ever asks for proof that someone's cis […] but god forbid we have a character be trans for once in our tiny lives.

Just as figured images contain 'clues' to the person in the image (see Chapter 2 for further discussion), so too do they contain clues to the racial, cultural, gender, and sexual identity of that person. Even though players rationally know that the characters have no actual existence beyond their image on the computer screen, their image is scrutinised for clues that point to their identity. Appearance, behaviour, posture, voice,

and narrative all contribute to this apprehension of identity – which occurs spontaneously as players encounter and are addressed by the characters for the first time. However, the multivocal nature of these clues means that the person in the image can 'speak' in many different ways. Their identity is never fixed once and for all, and they can appear quite differently according to different viewers.

When players discuss their response to the game's characters in an environment like Tumblr, their understanding of the characters must be claimed and defended among fans who hold differing responses. While it is certainly possible to conceive of a character in ways that are unmotivated by any clues in the image, it is customary to reference specific canon elements to explain or justify a particular understanding. Not doing so can be a source of anxiety and frustration. Part of October's project, however, involved the argument that transgender identity should not need to be proven against a dominant cisgender norm, but should be accepted on face value as a discursive construction.

October's stance is informed by the way in which trans identity in society more broadly often becomes a topic of public discussion in deeply uncomfortable ways for the trans individuals involved. From this perspective, some fans appreciated October's discursive articulation of trans identity:

"I really appreciate that you don't try to explain Fenris's trans status," an anonymous fan said in response to October's post above. "Trying to explain it becomes a discussion of whether he is trans enough, when the point is if someone identifies as trans they are trans regardless of gender presentation."

"Agreed, agreed," replied October. "And any attempt to *prove* someone's transness just becomes a way to allow someone to *disprove* a trans identity, and I'm not for that."

But many other fans found the lack of firm ground for Fenris's identity disconcerting, and offered clues in his image and story to support their interpretation. Fans often went to some length to do so. For example, Orsinohawke extracted the in-game 3D character models for Fenris and the standard male elf (used for generic non-player characters), and compared their bodies by overlaying them. They found that Fenris's body was slimmer than the standard male elf, with thinner thighs and less of a bulge at the crotch, which they demonstrated with screen captures (for example, see Figure 30 below). Although Orsinohawke acknowledged that being slimmer (and having less of a crotch bulge) than the 'average' male elf does not prove that Fenris is trans, they nevertheless found the differences to be significant, and supportive of a trans identity:

> [S]omeone is inevitably going to try to trip me up on this post and claim that a guy being thinner doesn't mean he's trans. Yes, obviously, but in a game where nearly everyone has the same body shape, there's got to be a reason for differences. The differences here are noticeable, and trans [Fenris] is a 100% valid interpretation.

Figure 30: Fenris's body compared with the standard male elf body in DA2 (represented by wire mesh), by Orsinohawke (Tumblr).

Such a detailed examination of the in-game images is, however, uncommon. Much more commonly, trans Fenris fans referred to elements of Fenris's story to anchor his transgender status. For example, one fan wrote:

> You don't need a reason to headcanon a character as trans, but in my opinion the reason trans Fenris is so popular is because it ties into his personal narrative and enriches it so incredibly well: his previous name being 'Leto' (a female titan in Greek mythology), his violent and visceral reaction to being called it, his armour never being removed during the romance scene, to some degree even his reservations with regard to sex and intimacy are reflective of things many trans people go through.

The persistence of Fenris's armour in the romance scenes was frequently brought up as a salient clue for his transgender status. Although this can be explained in the actual world as the result of the short development time allowed for the game, which limited the amount of character models that were created, it can also be explained within the context of the game as evidence of Fenris's reticence to reveal his naked chest with its secondary sex characteristics (breasts, binder, or top surgery scars). Indeed, Fenris's unseen chest became a site of contestation for fans who supported and opposed trans Fenris.

Imaging Fenris's chest – unseen in the context of the game – emerged as an important practice that could quickly and succinctly make identity claims on his behalf. In these rival images, Fenris's chest became the signifier of his gender identity and the key area of contest – partly because his chest is never shown in the game but always hidden beneath armour, and therefore is not 'fixed'.[103] Although the chests of most of the other characters, both male and female, are also not shown unclothed within the game, Fenris in particular invites speculation on the nature of his upper half, and a disproportionate amount of fan art depicts his naked chest. The line of tattoos that leads

[103] Interestingly, his genitals, although also unseen and presumably just as telling, have not received the same attention.

from his chin down the length of his neck, disappearing into his clothing, invites the eye to follow it. Fan art depicting Fenris as cisgender either on his own or in a relationship (see Figure 31 and Figure 32 below), often images what these tattoos may look like. In these images, Fenris's naked chest functions as a symbol of both intimacy and desire.

Fans who opposed trans Fenris commonly used images from authorised sources that depict Fenris's chest as traditionally male to attempt to prove his cisgender status. For example, Figure 33 (on page 213) shows official concept art depicting the pattern of Fenris's tattoos on his chest and arms, as it was planned to be implemented in the game, whereas Figure 34 (also on page 213) is very early concept art that depicts a different pattern of tattoos on a bare-chested, and radically different looking, Fenris. Although both of these images are official concept art produced by BioWare, the fact that neither made it into the game undermines their authority as 'canon' sources for Fenris's unseen body.

When fans of trans Fenris queer these images of desire by depicting Fenris with breasts (see Figure 35 on page 214), a breast binder (see Figure 36 also on page 214), or scars from top surgery, they are introducing a new form of subversive intimacy to the cisgender viewer. Like all trans portraiture (Attitude 2010), these pictures implicitly refute notions of sex and gender as being stable and biologically determined, and force the viewer to reconsider their own gender and sexual subjectivity (Prosser 1998: 223).

Figure 31: A shirtless Fenris, by VelvetRue (Tumblr) (Used with permission)

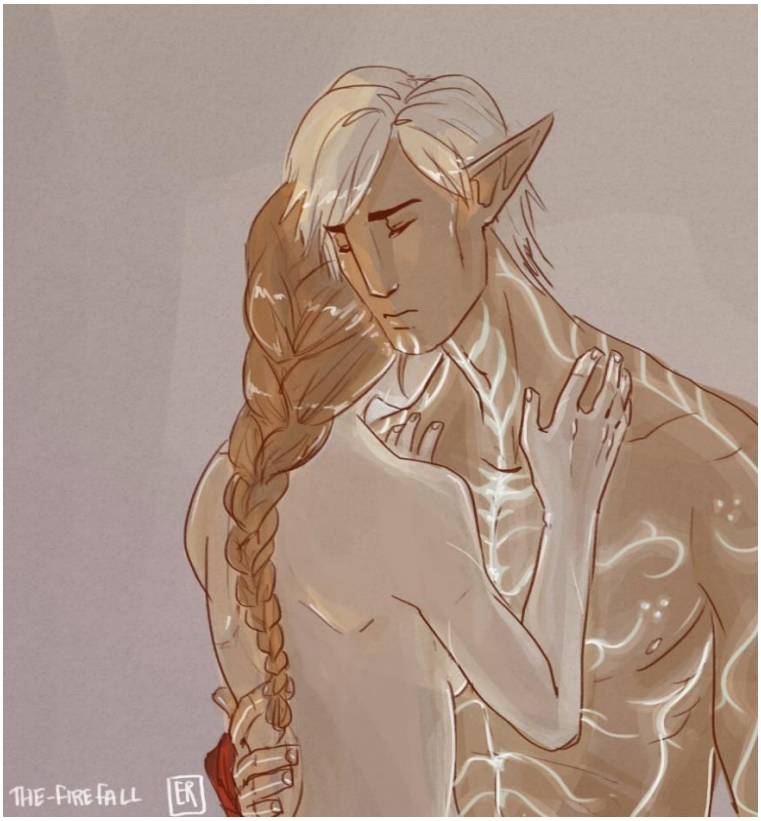

Figure 32: Hawke and Fenris embracing, by the-fire-fall (Tumblr) (Used with permission)

Figure 33: Official concept art for Fenris showing his chest tattoos, by Matt Rhodes

Figure 34: Early official concept art for Fenris that shows his chest, by Matt Rhodes

Figure 35: Fenris as a trans man with visible breasts, by Les Valiant (Tumblr). (Used with permission)

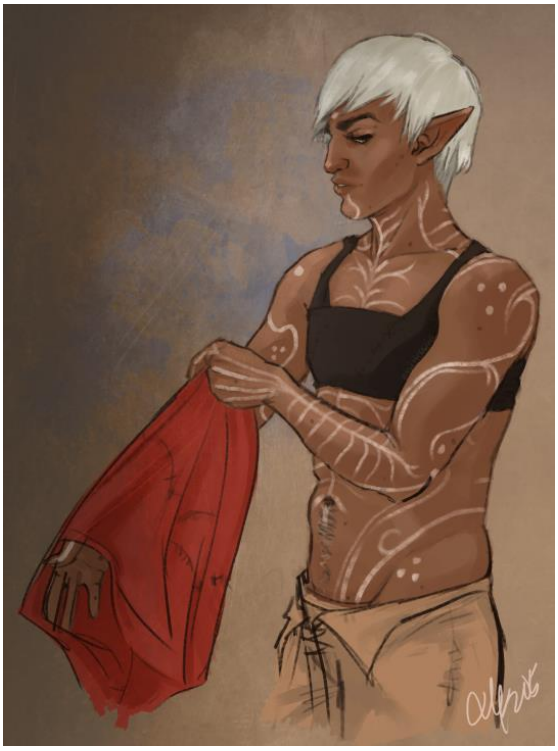

Figure 36: Fenris as a trans man wearing a breast binder, by Nathaniel (Tumblr) (Used with permission)

Although these images make no explicit claim as to the canonical nature of Fenris's identity, they perform a double act by visualising both Fenris's identity as a trans man and, implicitly, his ability to 'pass' as a cisgender man when his chest is covered. This creates what queer theorist Jack Halberstam (2005: 107) has called an "aesthetic of turbulence" that not only disrupts binary notions of gender, but serves to reorient the bodies of both the viewed and the viewer in time and space. The desire that imag(in)ing Fenris's naked chest may normally evoke in the cisgender viewer is party to this reorientation, as the image challenges the viewer to consider how they would react to a similar revelation in an actual lover. One fan explicitly addressed the challenge that desire poses when confronting the transgender body when they wrote:

> If you claim to support trans people but wouldn't date and/or fuck one of us, guess what, you don't truly consider us to be our preferred gender(s) and you're still transphobic. I'd be willing to bet this is the case for a good 80% of so called trans supporters. Like most of you say you're down to get in bed with us but when it comes down to it you'll find an excuse not to.

By depicting Fenris – someone who is already an object of desire – as a visibly trans man, this challenge is rendered to fans in a concrete and visceral form.

As Jack Halberstam (2005: 77–78) has noted in reference to transgender characters in film, "The exposure of a trans character whom the audience has already accepted as male or female causes the audience to reorient themselves in relation to the film's past in order to read the film's present and prepare themselves for the film's future." The question implicitly asked by pictures of trans Fenris is: Would you still find Fenris attractive if it was revealed that he was a trans man? And, inevitably, this is followed by the question: Would you still find an actual lover attractive if he revealed that he was a trans man? The contemplation of these questions challenges the cisgender viewer to consider whether their physical responses could match their cognitive acceptance of transgender individuals. Contemplating trans identity through the figure of Fenris, and the viewer's pre-existing relationship with him, makes these questions

more personal and practical than an abstract consideration of trans identity would be – if people ever thought of trans identity at all. Fenris thus plays a powerful role in uncovering and challenging cisgender people's latent beliefs, feelings, and biases towards trans individuals on a personal level.

For transgender fans of Fenris, images of Fenris as transgender help them to see themselves within the fictional world of *Dragon Age* and, through it, the broader world. When I spoke to fans who were particularly committed to trans Fenris, they invariably said that they liked the image because he tied into their own identity explorations. For many, images of transgender Fenris in relationships with other characters provided, in a similar way to that which Anders provided Basil in the previous chapter, a way of imagining a positive future for themselves with loved ones. Tobias, for example, found that trans Fenris helped to support xir[104] sense of identity:

> I've always found a lot of comfort in fiction, whether in reading or, after I started in high school, in writing. It served both as an escape and a way to work through things, and the trans Fenris headcanons definitely served as both. I wrote a lot of my own experiences and feelings into those headcanons. When I wrote about trans Fenris, smiling in comfortable silence with trans Isabela [another character], it was a very direct and real, if temporary, comforting feeling of warmth, that someone like me could find that happiness with other trans people, that ease, a feeling of safety, and it was just... It helped, so much, during hard times in my life.

Similarly for Jairan, trans Fenris presented a hopeful future in which he could be loved:

> I've just recently been seeing trans Fenris comics and drawings pop up on my dash, and I realised something quite beautiful. It never occurred to me that I could one day find someone like Hawke in the pictures. Someone who would love me and love the trans part of my life as well. I had thought that being trans would lead to nothing but complications, heartache, awkwardness, and loneliness in the romantic department. The thought had actually never crossed my mind that someone out there could love and even support/help me in my gender process as a significant other. I truthfully had never even thought of the possibility of a happy outcome. The artists on the trans Fenris tag gave me some hope.

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[104] Xie/xir/xirs are the gender-neutral pronouns preferred by Tobias.

For both Tobias and Jairan, trans Fenris is important because his relationships hold out the hope of finding companionship with others who accept their trans identity. As Halberstam (2005: 52) has noted, "gender discomfort can be alleviated by narratives that locate the oddly gendered subject in the world and in relation to others". By portraying Fenris in a loving relationship with like others, fans are crafting a positive image of transgender identity and belonging that can be incorporated into their self-identity and alter their orientation towards the future.

Furthermore, images of trans Fenris can not only imaginatively reorient people towards a future of companionship, they can help to bring it about. Circulating these images on Tumblr can help to 'surface' (Ahmed 2014) individuals who have similar life experiences; actual people, with whom one can identify and who can in turn help to sustain one's identity. The affective public (Papacharissi 2015) of fans who are surfaced in this way can function as a support network, as Tobias explains:

> Trans Fenris, and headcanons like it, helps give people like me something to identify with, a safe space. So often, fandom is unwelcoming of trans headcanons, as I have discovered on a number of occasions, and when you find someone else who shares it – it is such a lovely feeling. It's a gift you pass back and forth, and it grows each time. Which is true of all fandom, that is true, but having found my little corner of fandom that accepts and supports the sharing of these ideas, this support system, I wouldn't trade it for anything.

However, not all transgender fans of *Dragon Age* appreciate the image of trans Fenris. Indeed, most of the fans who have spoken up against the trans Fenris headcanon have identified themselves as trans themselves (the veracity of this claim is a question to which I will return later in this chapter). Their opposition centres around three key objections: that the images that people create of trans Fenris are fetishizing and trigger bodily dysphoria for other transgender fans; that depicting Fenris as trans makes light of transgender identity struggles or (alternatively) depicts them in a stereotypical fashion; and that insisting Fenris is trans in canon erases the other possible identities to which his image speaks.

The imaging of Fenris's body as visibly transmasculine became a frequent target of critique by transgender fans who opposed the trans Fenris headcanon. These fans felt that the attention paid by fan artists to the parts of Fenris's body that explicitly mark his trans identity were fetishising the transgender body in a problematic way. For example, salmonsock said:

> Honestly, I wouldn't feel as grossed out with the trans Fenris tag if I didn't get the feeling that most of it was just to show off trans men's exposed chest, or to enable people to have passable male pregnancy fantasies. […] That isn't to say that I have problems with it entirely, so long as it's not just focused on tits, hips, binder, and uterus, given that these are the areas that, from personal experience, trans men *don't* want people to focus on.

Benji similarly argued that the bodily markers of transgender identity were over-emphasised and over-sexualised in much of the trans Fenris fan art:

> Being transgender myself, I am embarrassed by [the] actions [of some trans Fenris fans]. A lot of people base their headcanon on stereotypes (such as [breast] binders being overly visible), to the point where they are oversexualised, and the focus is really unsettling, as it glorifies the parts of a body that generally set off dysphoria for a lot of people.

The motivations of fans who image trans Fenris in these ways are often questioned by fans who oppose it. For example, Broodylove spoke angrily against the practice and labelled those who engage in it "transtrenders" because of their disregard for other transgender fans' responses to the art:

> I cannot even touch on how much the art frustrates me… the abundance of untagged pictures of Fenris in a [breast] binder and panties, but they don't even care that they set off dysphoria because apparently that's IMPORTANT REPRESENTATION. But being transtrenders, they […] have no problem glorifying the parts of a trans person's body that make people uncomfortable. And they claim that there is no fetishizing of trans people in the fandom. LOL. […] Frankly, it's depressing.

The issue of tagging is important in this critique. By refusing to tag images of trans Fenris *as* such, pro-trans Fenris fans are ensuring that the images cannot be blocked or avoided using common blacklisting software, which hides posts that include specific words. This is in itself a political act, intended to make a point to cisgender fans, as actual-dragon argues in response to an anonymous request to tag these kinds of images:

> I will not be making any effort to tag trans Fenris, or trans headcanons for any other character, unless it's explicitly sexual. I will not (on the word of an anonymous person claiming a trans identity) enable cis people to block a specific tag because the thought of their male favourite without a dick is just too alarming for them. That's not behaviour I want to encourage. If you're genuine and insistent about this you can message me off anon.

The identity of fans comes under debate in these issues. Just as actual-dragon argues that fans who want to avoid pictures of trans Fenris are likely to be cisgender, dragondysphoria has argued that it is most likely cisgender people who are posting visibly transgender character images, in order to showcase their liberal attitude in fandom, without regard for the dysphoria it may trigger in transgender fans:

> What makes me really uncomfortable about Tumblr's treatment of trans characters is how they feel the need to shove the transness in people's faces. Like go into the […] trans Fenris tag and you'll see TONS AND TONS AND TONS of pictures of [him] shirtless and in a [breast] binder for no actual reason other than "Look at all of this trans."
>
> It feels so tokenising and "Look at me aren't I so ACCEPTING???" when that takes up such a large amount of the fan art of a trans character. Especially since a lot of trans people who wear [breast] binders feel uncomfortable when it's showing.

The visual imaging of Fenris's trans body, as well as the responses to it, play into a broader debate about the nature of transsexual versus transgender identity that has been ongoing since the latter term emerged near the end of the 20th century. Briefly, transsexual is a term that arose from psychomedical discourse and encodes the binary construction of sex in its implication of a desire for complete bodily transition to the opposite sex. While medical diagnoses of transsexualism may seem unnecessarily restrictive in what has commonly been referred to as an "age of flexibility" (including by Jack Halberstam (2005: 18)), as well as a potential avenue for pathologising individuals, it is important to remember that medical recognition of a transgender condition was an historical achievement that allowed transgender individuals access to medical re-embodiment technology, such as surgery and hormone replacement therapy (Elliot 2010: 43–44, Halberstam 2005: 19).

In the 1990s, queer and feminist theorists sought to queer the binary assumptions of gender inherent in transsexualism. Where the transsexual narratives of the 1970s to 1990s were based on the idea that the subject was inhabiting the 'wrong body' in a binary system of gender, the transgender theory that emerged in the 1990s called for recognition of "the complexities and ambiguities of lived experience" (Stone 1991: 299), and explicitly included gender-queer and gender-ambiguous identities that did not comply with psychomedical models of transsexuality. This discourse celebrated the partialities and incompleteness of transgender experience and called for the embodiment of ambiguity and instability, rendered visible in the non-passing transgender body (c.f. Stone 1991, Wilchins 2002). Halberstam (2005: 54) has argued that as a term, transgender "refuses the stability that the term transsexual may offer to some folks, and it embraces more hybrid possibilities for embodiment and identification".

By making visible Fenris's transgender identity, by refusing to allow him to 'pass' unnoticed, these images implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) celebrate the incompleteness of the transgender body. And in reacting to the visibility of these cross-gender identity markers, anti-trans Fenris fans are recalling the older, medical definition of trans identity, which includes gender dysphoria as a critical component – that is, distress felt at the conflict between one's body (particularly secondary sexual characteristics) and the gender with which they identify. By emphasising their dysphoric reaction to images of Fenris's transgender body, these fans are implicitly staking a claim to a medical definition of transgender identity that they are, in turn, implicitly denying to the artists and supporters of the pictures. Images of trans Fenris are thus implicated in the transgender identities of fans on both sides of the debate, a point to which I will return later in this chapter.

Another of the key complaints that fans make about the idea of trans Fenris is that it ignores the identity struggles of transgender individuals. Moongoo, for example, has argued that re-imaging characters such as Fenris as transgender does not meet the needs of trans people because it is a purely linguistic construction unsupported by any representation of trans experiences within the game itself:

> The thing with trans headcanons is that[…] I'm looking for them to be trans so I can relate to them, so I can see myself represented in them. […] Being transgender is a lot more than just adding it to a list of fun little [identity] labels. There are joys, pains, struggles, and more that come with being transgender, and that's what I want to see represented. I want to see my experience acknowledged. But for someone to say "This character is trans because I said so" – that doesn't give me representation. That gives me a label slapped onto something and my experiences [are] completely disregarded.

Building upon this critique of the linguistic construction of Fenris's trans identity, other fans have argued that 'trans Fenris' erroneously implies that being transgender is a choice as simple as defining oneself that way, rather than a lifelong process of becoming. Broodylove, for instance, said:

> I understand representation and wanting it. I'm trans male, and trans representation is definitely not major in *Dragon Age* […] But for me personally, I don't think [Fenris] is trans. I don't see it at all, and I personally don't enjoy the headcanon, as to me it comes off as insinuating that being transgender is a choice.

Benji felt similarly, and also raised doubts about the motivations of people who image Fenris as transgender:

> For me, personally, insisting a character is trans is actually transphobic in itself – being transgender isn't a choice to make, for anyone. A lot of people I've run across act like Fenris being trans is some kind of accessory that makes him 'better because cisgender is boring', apparently.

For each of these fans, the trans identity claims made on behalf of Fenris lack the depth that they are looking for in media representation, reducing a complex embodied experience to a linguistic label that can be applied (and presumably discarded) at will. These critiques once again re-enact the debate about the nature of trans identity that occurred in the 1990s. In an attempt to free transgender identity from the necessity of medical diagnosis, queer and feminist theorists posited transgender identity as an individual's choice rather than something that needed to be diagnosed

(and fixed) by the medical establishment. For example, Sandy Stone (1991: 296), in her 'posttranssexual manifesto', *The Empire Strikes Back*, famously argued for transsexual people to be constituted "as a genre – a set of embodied texts" while author, playwright, and performance artist Kate Bornstein (1994: 118) declared herself to be "a transsexual by choice, not pathology" in her book, *Gender Outlaw*.

This is not a development that has been wholly embraced by all academic theorists, however. Bernice Hausman (1995: 195ff), for example, argued that 'transgenderism' as a body of theory falsely posits that gender is a voluntary and willed choice, undermining the achievement of transsexual recognition in the medical establishment, while Jake Halberstam (2005: 18) has cautiously critiqued contemporary constructions of the fluid transgender body as "a heroic fulfilment" of neo-liberal discourses that celebrate flexibility:

> Because bodily flexibility has become both a commodity… and a form of commodification, it is not enough in this 'age of flexibility' to celebrate gender flexibility as simply another sign of progress and liberation. Promoting flexibility at the level of identity and personal choices may sound like a postmodern or even a queer program for social change. But it as easily describes the advertising strategies of huge corporations like the Gap, who sell their products by casting their consumers as simultaneously all the same and all different. (Halberstam 2005: 18)

Fans implicitly re-enact these debates through their critique of trans Fenris headcanons. Broodylove and Benji's critiques imply that, while the rhetoric of 'choice' in terms of transgender identity can facilitate the proliferation of gender-transgressive identities, it can also become dangerously associated with conservative values and attitudes that suggest it is not only a choice, but a bad one, similar to conservative rhetoric around homosexuality. Benji also implicitly picks up on Halberstam's point about trans identity becoming a neo-liberal celebration of flexibility by suggesting that cisgender identities are seen as 'boring' in contemporary society, which may prompt a broader identification with trans identity, threatening its coherence or legibility as an identity. Similar critiques have labelled this phenomenon 'transtrending', implying a

shallow and impermanent identification as transgender because of its (current) positive connotations.

At the same time, other transgender fans have argued that the narrative clues most commonly referenced in support of Fenris's trans identity are stereotypical and negative, and therefore not in service to the trans community as a whole. While these fans acknowledge that the narrative points in question may reflect some unfortunately common aspects of transgender life experiences, they argued that by confirming rather than subverting dominant tragedy narratives they do not provide the kind of positive representation that they are seeking. For example, Sidhe argued:

> Does anyone else feel uncomfortable with how fans usually assign trans headcanons to characters who are survivors of abuse, or otherwise suffering a lot of mental trauma? Like, I get the trans Fenris headcanon, it's cool and all… but at the same time it's not? I don't want more trans representation to be centred around mental illness and PTSD and emotional pain. This ain't a fantasy for some people, buddy, this is a reality. And I don't need angsty fan art/fanfiction to remind me about my unhappiness.

Similarly, Alex wrote that "I shudder to think [that] Fenris's history of abuse is one of the reasons this 'headcanon' is so popular with him".

That experience of abuse or mental trauma provide 'clues' to a transgender identity for the person in the image is, for many of these fans, a troubling association that plays into rather than subverts the dominant hegemonic assumption that the lives of transgender people are marked by tragedy, trauma, and abuse. However, these same narrative points were portrayed in a very different light by October, who argued that:

> It's validating and relatable for a lot of people – Fenris is a fairly realistic character, someone who's got a lot of baggage from trauma and it shows […] A lot of people who have experienced abuse like that are trans, and having both of those things show up in a great major character is so nice because you can relate to them, you can feel real. When this sort of stuff shows up in media like major video games it's a validation, sort of. And that's an important feeling.

For October and other pro-trans Fenris fans, these narrative points provide the substance behind the linguistic label. Rather than seeing them as negative and stereotypical, these fans find the resolution of Fenris's story to be uplifting and hopeful. For example, Quinn said:

> I love the idea of trans Fenris because there are so few transgender characters in the media, especially ones that can have a happy ending, like Fenris can if the player takes those steps. He comes from a terrible place where he was treated terribly, but he ends up in Kirkwall and joins this family of ragtag misfits. There's a pervading sense of hopefulness to his story. […]
>
> As a trans person, I'm constantly bombarded with sad stories about members of the community – about murders and violence and rampant discrimination. I'm lucky that I have family and friends who support and love me, but sometimes it's hard to want to face the world when so many people don't want me to exist or don't believe I exist in the first place. By escaping slavery and fighting for his freedom and building a life of his own, Fenris proves his existence. When I headcanon Fenris as trans, I'm giving myself hope that, no matter what crap I've been through or will go through, I will always exist. Not only that, but I'll be okay. Things get better and worse in different ways, but I have to hold onto the idea that I'll come out on top.

Both Quinn and October found Fenris's story useful as a model with which to organise their own life narrative, something that Jay Prosser (1998: 6) has argued "may be the very route to identity and bodily integrity" for transgender people.

The divergent responses fans had to Fenris's story appears to depend on the fan's focus: on Fenris's past (of slavery, enforced body modification, and name change) or on the future, which is played out through the course of *Dragon Age 2*. As Fenris's story can have widely varying outcomes (disappearance, re-enslavement, death, or escape with the player-character), his future is not fixed like his past but is socially contingent: dependent on the actions of the player-character. Fans that emphasise Fenris's story as uplifting are most likely referring to the ending in which he escapes from Kirkwall, while the potential for negative endings to Fenris's story (particularly death or re-enslavement) may make other transgender fans uncomfortable about the agency the player has to ensure a tragic ending for a character sometimes conceived as transgender.

The same elements of Fenris's story that make some transgender fans uncomfortable are often posited as being important representation for another minority group: male survivors of sexual abuse. These fans argue that the abuse that Fenris has canonically experienced, heavily implied to be sexual, provides an important narrative for cisgender males that is rendered mute if Fenris is conceived as transgender. For example, Flutterby explains:

> Yeah, I mean it's subtext, but Fenris IS an abuse survivor. It's canon (as in confirmed by David Gaider [Fenris's writer and lead writer for *Dragon Age*]) that he was sexually abused, which is implied at several points in his story. […] And he has quite realistic PTSD and anger problems about it. This is important because how often do you see such a narrative when it comes to cis males?

Similarly, Broodylove questioned the effects that silencing this narrative (through appeals to Fenris's trans status) might have on cisgender male survivors of sexual abuse, asking: "What about the sexual abuse survivors that happen to be cis that connect to him? Do they just not matter because they aren't trans?" Benji was also concerned about the erasure of representation for this group:

> In media, there are very very few instances where cisgender males are represented, especially in Fenris's case, where he was sexually abused and suffers from PTSD. If we're talking representation, then that's a huge deal, as most of the media makes fun of this very important issue.

Unlike the transgender fans who participated in this debate, no fans made this argument while identifying themselves as a cis-male survivor of sexual abuse, perhaps supporting the point that such narratives are still under-represented in mainstream media.

Images and Bodily Identity

In this chapter, I have argued that there is no 'innocent eye' with which Fenris can be viewed. All of the interlocutors in the trans Fenris debate responded to the multivocality of his image in ways that intersected with their sexual, bodily, and gender identities, regardless of whether they identified as cisgender or transgender. In the process of claiming and depicting Fenris as either trans or cisgender, fans are asserting

their own subject positions within fandom, implicitly speaking with and through his image. It is this investment of personal identity that gives the gender of a fictional character, which might otherwise be regarded as trivial, the significance with which it was regarded by Fenris's fans.

But the Internet troubles identity claims, and it is difficult to take anyone's identity in this debate at face value. After all, as the famous New Yorker cartoon put it, "on the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog". Virtual bodies can be faked and, as October noted in relation to trans Fenris, 'proof' of identity, whatever form it may take, can be turned around to disprove one's identity as well. Both sides claimed their own identity status to be transgender, while arguing that their opponents were (obviously) cisgender. In doing so, the fans claim what Sonia Kruks has called an 'epistemology of provenance' to legitimise their own claims while delegitimising those of their opponents. The epistemology of provenance refers to:

> The claim that knowledge arises from an experiential basis that is fundamentally group-specific and that others, who are outside the group and who lack its immediate experiences, cannot share that knowledge. As a corollary, it is generally claimed that outsiders have no basis from which they can legitimately evaluate the group's claims about its knowledge, or those political or moral positions it takes on the basis of that knowledge. In short, only those who live a particular reality can know about it; and only they have the right to speak about it. (Kruks 1995: 4)

In the affective publics of Tumblr, notions about the epistemology of provenance are routinely called upon to legitimise intervention in a debate, particularly in regards to the issues of race, gender, sexuality, or (dis)ability. At the same time, people are highly suspicious of the possibility of others making false identity claims in an attempt to authorise their voice. It is possible that everyone in the trans Fenris debate is exactly as they represent themselves, but the ability to change username and presented identity at will makes it likely that at least some of the interlocutors that I have referenced have forged their identity claims in order to justify their assertions. I did not seek to verify the identity of any of the individuals involved in the debate; part

of the experience of interaction in digital spaces like Tumblr is that much of the time we do not know the bodily identity of our interlocutors, and we have to rely on the discursive or visual representations they give us.

The fundamentally discursive nature of identity on Tumblr means that the identities of fans and the character images they support become comingled. Both Fenris and the fans on both sides of the debate are images in the environment of Tumblr. Although Fenris is more constrained in what he can say, limited to the clues that are provided by animation, dialogue, and appearance in the fictional world of *Dragon Age*, fans can provide no more evidence to their identity than the discursive performances by which they present themselves.

The characters from *Dragon Age* provide a shared ground upon which fans can base, and contest, their various subject positions – one that is defined by high levels of affect. Through the action of publicly championing for Fenris's identity, on either side of the debate, fans' bodily identities are performed in the digital space of Tumblr. Questions about the authenticity of Fenris's claim to transgender identity merge with questions about the authenticity of fans' own claims to this identity. Through this process, the nature of both 'real' self and character image converge as images that can both speak and be contested online.

In the following chapter, I maintain my focus on contestation in the reception of *Dragon Age* images but zoom out from the personal to a broader set of issues, looking at the way in which justice and morality was debated in respect of terrorism and minority rights in competing responses to Anders, from *Dragon Age 2*.

Figure 37: A screenshot of Anders, a companion character from *Dragon Age 2*

6 Image Morality

The Templars and mages are fighting. My character, Sara Hawke, and her companions rush to the centre of Lowtown – the working class quarter in the fictional city of Kirkwall – to attempt to defuse the situation. The mages (magic users) and Templars, the politically powerful military arm of the Chantry, have been at loggerheads ever since we arrived in the city. Under Chantry law, mages are segregated from society to protect the public from their potentially dangerous magical powers, confined to a special institution known as the Circle and watched over by Templars. Throughout the nine years that we have spent in Kirkwall, the tension between the two factions has escalated as the Templars have employed increasingly brutal methods to control the mages, and the mages have grown increasingly rebellious in response.

We arrive to find ourselves interrupting an argument between the leaders of the two factions. Meredith, the Knight Commander of the Templars, insists that First Enchanter Orsino is harbouring dangerous mages and declares her intention to root them out at any cost. Despite the First Enchanter's relief at seeing Sara, a relatively neutral party in their conflict, it soon becomes apparent that the situation will not be easily resolved. No matter what we say to try to smooth over the fracas, Meredith insists that the draconian measures she proposes are necessary to protect the city from the danger that mages pose.

Over the last two acts, Anders, one of Sara's closest companions and a former romantic interest, has been working to raise awareness of the unjust nature of the institutionalisation of mages, as well as the abuse that some Templars have perpetrated on the mages in their charge. He has written letters and treatises and, at Anders' urging, Sara had tried to take the issue up with the head of the Kirkwall Chantry, but the Grand Cleric had only expressed a position of cautious neutrality. In this final confrontation, Anders suddenly interrupts my desperate attempt to defuse the situation.

"I will not stand by and watch you treat all mages like criminals," Anders says, walking forward to address the gathered crowd. "The time has come to act. There can be no half measures." His words and tone are ominous, and his brow creases with pain as he looks away from the crowd.

Sara turns to him. "Anders, what have you done?" she asks, her voice reflecting her fear.

"There can be no turning back," is all the answer that Anders gives. Then the Chantry explodes.

Ash and burning debris rain down upon Sara and her companions, who stare in horror at the place where the church spire used to occupy the skyline.

"There can be no peace," Anders says, confirming what I have guessed. He was responsible for the explosion, destroying the Chantry and killing the Grand Cleric as well as any innocent citizens inside the building.

"Why? Why would you do such a thing?" demands the First Enchanter. It is a question I want answered as well.

"I removed the chance for compromise because there is no compromise," he says. For Anders, it can only be all or nothing. Mages are either free of the Chantry's institutional control, or they are not. There is no acceptable halfway position.

Knight Commander Meredith reacts in the predictable way. Despite Orsino's protests that they were not responsible for the destruction, she orders her troops to execute every single mage in Kirkwall, the traditional Templar response to widespread corruption among mages and a last resort to protect the public from the catastrophic damage that would accompany unchecked magic.

Sara is prevailed upon by both Meredith and Orsino to either protect or kill the mages. My attempt to take a neutral path is rejected, forcing me to choose between them. I direct Sara to turn to her companions for input, and each has their own opinion about which side Sara should support. Because of the decisions I have made throughout the game, Sara has a personal stake in the fate of the mages: her sister Bethany is a mage, and will most likely be executed if the Knight Commander has her way. For me, this means that there is very little option: I will protect the mages.

Regardless of whether the player chooses to support the mages or the Templars, Anders' fate is left up to Hawke. Anders waits calmly for Hawke's judgement, expecting to be made a martyr for his cause.

"There's nothing you can say that I haven't already said to myself," Anders says, forestalling whatever Sara was about to say. "This is the justice that all mages have awaited."

A number of dialogue options appear at the bottom of the screen: 1) Come with me; 2) Get out of here, and 3) Then you die. I also have the option to ask my companions

their thoughts on Anders' fate, but when I do their opinions are divided between mercy and execution.

"Whatever you do, just do it," Anders says.

I hesitate. There is no option to bring him to lawful justice – to imprison him and ensure he receives a fair trial. My options are blunt instruments, arguably the only kinds of choices available in the middle of a violent revolution, and whichever option I choose, I know that I will regret it. Anders was a friend, a lover, and his actions have betrayed Sara's trust, as well as everything that they were working towards.

"You have to pay for what you've done," Sara says reluctantly, when I eventually choose to execute him.

"I know," Anders says, his shoulders sagging. "For what it's worth, I'm glad it's you. It was nice to be happy… for awhile."

Sara draws her blade. The camera switches to a close-up of Anders' face as the knife plunges into him. His expression registers shock before he slowly slumps to the ground. As Sara walks away, the camera closes in on his face. His eyes slowly flutter closed as the screen fades to black.

Figure 38: Screenshot showing Hawke (holding the knife) about to kill Anders (facing away) for the crime of destroying the Chantry, the main church in the fictional city of Kirkwall

In the same way that the images from the *Dragon Age* games acted as catalysts for the imaginative transformation of people's life narratives (see Chapter 4), and became the embodiment of rival discourses of transgender identity (see Chapter 5), they became potent metaphors for the actual-world issues of terrorism and minority rights. Despite fans' acknowledgment of the game images and its scenarios as fictional, the idea that actions towards and affiliations with characters from the *Dragon Age* games can reveal something about an individual's real-world morality and political opinions is embedded in much of the conversation and activity that takes place in *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr. "You can learn so much about someone when you watch them play a BioWare roleplaying game," said Orlesian-gay-wardens. "Their morals, their values, their weaknesses…"

The implicit connection between the player and player-character (as discussed in Chapter 3) implicates the player in the actions they choose to take within the socially and performatively contingent game world. The stakes in these scenarios are heightened by the meaning that fans attribute to the games' images and events, seeing

them as reaching out beyond the fictional confines of *Dragon Age* to link into actual political conundrums. Anders is a particularly divisive character within the fandom due to the multiplicity of ways in which he is received by fans: Is he a terrorist, a freedom fighter, someone who is mentally ill, or a champion for the rights of the LGBTIQ community? The scene that I have described above, and my/Sara's actions within it, take on a different affective texture depending upon which of these divergent images of Anders is encountered by the player.

In this chapter, I use fan activity surrounding Anders as a lens through which to consider the ways in which human-image relationships travel from the fictional world of the game into the broader world. I argue that the images from the games draw are taken by fans as a virtual thought experiment that reflects actual-world scenarios and ethical values and beliefs, and that disparate responses to Anders are judged as indicative of a person's 'real' world moral and political stance.

MORAL RESPONSES TO IMAGES

> I always wonder whether the people who defend Anders realise that if they accept his terrorism as justified they must also condone the actions of suicide bombers and the 9/11 hijackers. All used injustice and oppression as an excuse to murder large numbers of civilians as a political statement. Anders isn't an exception […]
>
> …
>
> If you are a Templar supporter you are okay with rape, abuse, abduction, torture, and genocide. Fictional concepts reflect real life, thus making your choice to be supportive of such an oppressive system very telling about you as a person.
>
> Anonymous confessions by *Dragon Age* fans

Art, in all its forms, has always inspired moral responses, whether expressed in anxieties about its corrupting influence or high hopes for its ability to foster appropriate ethical attitudes. As I noted in Chapter 2, moral questions about art have existed at least since Plato, who warned of the power of poetry to corrupt through its appeal to

irrational emotions. Professor of philosophy, Berys Gaut (2007), identifies three strands to the historical debate about art and ethics: humanism, which emphasises the ethical potential of art; aestheticism, which disputes any connection between art and ethics; and art as transgression, which argues that art can play a positive role by shaking up the status quo, even if what it depicts is regarded as unethical. Each of these strands is fundamentally concerned with a causal question in relation to art: What effect does art have on us? This question, similar to that which drove media effects research from the 1950s, still resonates today in concerns about violence or sex in video games and television (see Chapter 2 for a full discussion), and is implicit in the morality debates among *Dragon Age* fandom, such as the quotes with which I began this section.

In this chapter, I am not concerned with the question of art's causal influence but with how fans consider the game to function as a barometer for reading the ethics of fellow fans. This means that I will not consider what Gaut (2007: 9) calls the "intrinsic ethical value" of *Dragon Age 2*. I will not analyse whether BioWare has presented the characters and situations of the game in such a way as to imply moral judgements, nor will I explore the ethical effect that some fans allege the game can have on its players. Instead, I will focus on the moral meanings that people ascribe to other people's responses to the game. Gaut notes that people always ascribe ethical import to people's artistic tastes, understanding them as expressions of a person's identity and values:

> Consider the ways we would differently interpret someone's values and character were we told that her favourite modern artist were Mark Rothko, or if we were told that it were Roy Lichtenstein; if we were told that her favourite author were Jane Austen, or that it were Dostoevsky; if we were told that her favourite opera were Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* or that it were Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*. The arts, high and low, can express and develop our understanding of who we are and of what matters to us… (Gaut 2007: 6)

It is this link between art, ethics, values, and identity that underlies and drives much of the moralising that takes place on Tumblr in regards to the *Dragon Age* games.

Computer games[105] are at present distinguished within the range of art objects available for popular consumption by having the native capacity to allow the user to intervene in the game world and shape the narrative portrayed in the game (see Chapter 3 for detailed discussion). *Dragon Age 2* explicitly constructs this intervention along moral lines through the juxtaposition of the mage and Templar factions, and demands the player take a position on the issue by forcing the player to take a side in order to continue the game. In *Dragon Age 2*, unlike many other roleplaying games that clearly signal a 'good' and 'bad' outcome when such a choice is required, neither response is consequently shown to be superior, in either moral or other terms (such as personal gain). This leaves the choice open-ended and contested, a barometer for the moral judgement of individual players rather than their skill at playing or interpreting the game.

The player's insertion into the game world through the medium of the player-character, and the relationships they develop with the inhabitants of that world, heighten the impact of this moral decision-making process, both in regard to their own decision and that of other fans who choose differently. The fact that the characters who are impacted by the moral judgements of the player-character are virtual people, with whom the player has developed relationships over the course of the game, means that fans often have strong opinions about the decisions other players have made, and many seek to establish their particular choices as the morally correct response to the situations the game poses.

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[105] I am including visual novels and interactive fiction in my definition of the term 'computer games'.

People's responses to art are often the subject of moral criticism by others. To accept that people's responses to art are a legitimate target of critique is predicated on the idea that moral responses to situations presented in art are just as real and meaningful as moral responses to situations encountered in 'real life'. As Gaut (2007: 205) argues, "[s]omeone can be criticised for enjoying the suffering of others; and likewise someone who… enjoys the imagined suffering of others can properly be condemned for this response". This position rejects the aesthetic valuation of art, that it is 'art for art's sake' or, in the context of computer games, 'just a game'.

This is a position supported by the moral philosopher Colin McGinn (1997) in his exploration of the ethical import of narrative fiction. McGinn (1997: 174) suggests that stories are particularly amenable to moral reasoning through their dramatic enactment of ethically-charged situations and characters, and argues that novels are "for most educated people one of the prime vehicles of ethical exploration":

> In reading a novel we have ethical experiences, sometimes quite profound ones, and we reach ethical conclusions, condemning some characters and admiring others. We *live* a particular set of moral challenges (sitting there in our armchair) by entering into the lives of the characters introduced… Stories can sharpen and clarify moral questions, encouraging a dialectic between the reader's own experience and the trials of the characters he or she is reading about. A tremendous amount of moral thinking and feeling is done when reading novels (or watching plays and films, or reading poetry and short stories). In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that for most people this is the primary way in which they acquire ethical attitudes, especially in contemporary culture. (McGinn 1997: 174–175)

Characters are essential to ethical explorations in fiction. However, in the traditional narrative forms that McGinn focuses on, the reader is *outside* of the moral situation in question, looking in upon the characters. In narrative video games like *Dragon Age*, the player can develop relationships with these characters and respond to their actions, adding another dimension to the ethical reasoning that can take place. Although the scholarship acknowledges a certain level of affective participation in media witnessing (Kyriakidou 2015, Papailias 2016), this takes the player beyond the role of a witness by giving them a stake and a role within the game world.

Marcus Schulzke (2014) argues that video games can be analysed as virtual thought experiments similar to narrative thought experiments used in philosophy. Thought experiments are hypothetical 'Imagine if…' scenarios, intended to simulate or model some aspect of actual world decision-making. For example, John Rawl's (1971) 'veil of ignorance' thought experiment asks the reader to imagine the type of society that a group of people would create if they were ignorant of both their position and their natural assets and abilities within this future society. Schulzke argues that video games can not only perform a role similar to the narrative thought experiment by presenting a hypothetical scenario but may improve upon them by giving the player a stake in the proceedings:

> [V]ideo games allow players to encounter and resolve thought experiments as engaged actors rather than as disinterested spectators. It is relatively easy to answer traditional narrative thought experiments idealistically, without considering the demands that a given course of action would impose on the decision maker… By contrast, players encounter thought experiments in video games as moments in an ongoing gameplay experience in which the avatars they control will have to live with the consequences of players' actions. These consequences are much lighter than they would be in real life, yet this still simulates cost and benefit calculations that are largely absent from narrative thought experiments… This allows video game thought experiments to add depth to the decision-making experience by imposing costs on players. (Schulzke 2014: 260)

In *Dragon Age 2*, the conflict between the mages and Templars represents a thought experiment that positions the player as having to choose between freedom (mages) and security (Templars), individual (mages) versus collective (Templars) interests. However, unlike narrative thought experiments, which attempt to isolate the particular issues under consideration from the complexity of the broader world, the game world of *Dragon Age 2* is not hermetically sealed. Indeed, much of the affective intensity of the images within the games comes through their relation to other, often mediated, events. As a result, the thought experiments that take place through video games such as *Dragon Age* have a significant amount of bleed-in from actual world events.

The complexity is compounded because the exact events and situations that are recalled by the game vary between individuals, depending upon their particular sociocultural positioning and life experiences. This makes it unclear what, exactly, fans are seeing when they look at the images and hence what they are responding to within the games. In the following sections, I trace some of the key connections that players made between the games and actual world situations and events, focusing on Anders and his destruction of the Chantry.

THE EXCESS IN ANDERS

As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, images have very porous, ill-defined boundaries. Unlike pictures, their physical manifestation within a medium, images bleed – and have other images bleed into them, creeping out beyond their borders to comingle. This excess or 'surplus' potential of images gives them a certain indeterminacy that distinguishes them from language. As Roland Barthes (2002: 70) noted, "general opinion… has a vague conception of the image as an area of resistance to meaning". It is difficult to pin images down, once and for all, like a butterfly labelled neatly in a specimen case. They have a tendency to ooze out, contaminating and being contaminated by other such specimens. Images certainly do not conform to the conscious intentions of their creators (as I have argued in detail in Chapter 2), and the way in which they acquire new forms of value position them in the middle of social conflict, as noted by Mitchell:

> For better and for worse, human beings establish their collective, historical identity by creating around them a second nature composed of images which do not merely reflect the values consciously intended by their makers, but radiate new forms of value formed in the collective, political unconscious of their beholders. As objects of surplus value, of simultaneous over- and underestimation, these stand at the interface of the most fundamental social conflicts. (Mitchell 2005: 105)

In this section, I consider how the images of Anders take up political significations that extend far beyond the fictional conflicts in which he is involved, becoming an unwitting actor in the web of connections between fans. Anders has two key contexts with which we must reckon in this analysis: the fictional world of *Dragon Age*, and the broader image world. The interplay of these contexts inform the moral reactions that take place within the affective public of *Dragon Age* fans.

In Thedas, the fictional world of *Dragon Age*, a small percentage of the population are born as magic users (mages). Mages have the ability to shape reality using their mind via a connection to the spirit world known as the Fade. This connection, however, makes them vulnerable to corruption – both moral and physical. This corruption can take the form of blood magic, an illicit form of magic that allows the mage to control people's minds and bodies, and/or demonic possession, which grants the mage powers far beyond his or her natural ability. Both lead to the potential for widespread chaos and destruction. In response to this threat, people who are identified as mages are separated from their family and confined to religious institutions known as 'Circles of Magi' where they are taught to control their powers and are watched by religious warriors known as Templars for signs of corruption. If the Templars believe that a mage has fallen to corruption, they have the power to imprison or execute them. In addition to these sanctioned punishments, there are persistent rumours of extrajudicial abuse perpetrated by the Templars on their mage charges in Kirkwall.

Once a mage comes of age, they are additionally required to undergo a trial in which a demon tempts them to accept and wield great power. Mages who fail this test, or who the Templars deem insufficiently skilled or mature to undertake it, are made 'Tranquil'; that is, they are subjected to a lobotomy-like operation in which their

magical ability is excised along with their will and emotions. Although mages who have successfully completed this trial have supposedly proven their ability to control themselves, they are rarely allowed to leave the Circle of Magi and remain under constant Templar surveillance for the rest of their lives.

Anders is a mage who has escaped the Circle and lives in Kirkwall as an 'apostate', an illegal magic user who would either be executed or made Tranquil if captured by the Templars.[106] He has personally experienced abuses at the hands of the Templars, and has also witnessed it among his closest friends. In the first quest that the player undertakes with him, Anders attempts to rescue his friend and – it is strongly implied – former lover from the Circle. Unfortunately, Anders is too late: his friend has been made Tranquil for allegedly plotting a rebellion.

Anders believes strongly in the fundamentally unjust nature of the Circle, and makes passionate appeals to Hawke and their fellow companions about the importance of rectifying the situation. Through *Dragon Age 2*, he is shown to be acting on these convictions by facilitating the escape of mages from the Circle and writing his 'manifesto', a political treatise that uses the Chantry's own religious texts to argue against the institutionalisation of mages. In the final act of the game Anders creates, plants, and explodes a bomb in the Chantry, in a move designed to spark a continent-wide mage rebellion.

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[106] Anders' position is complicated further by also being an 'abomination', a mage who is possessed by a spirit. In Anders' case, he is possessed by a spirit of Justice. While this raises questions about the extent of Anders' personal culpability, for the purposes of this chapter I will treat Anders and the spirit of Justice as one entity that is mutually responsible for his actions in *Dragon Age 2*.

Anders' in-game context bleeds into the actual world in ways that appear natural, immediate, and obvious to his fans. The image of Anders that addresses them within the game is necessarily blended with the actual world issues they have interpolated into him. This can mean that quite different images of Anders, picked out from the dense network of potential relationships that his character draws upon, co-exist within the online Tumblr network of fans. These differing receptions of Anders are driven by strong underlying values that can, and often does, lead to vitriolic conflict.

ANDERS AS ACTIVIST

One of the dominant responses to Anders within *Dragon Age 2* fandom on Tumblr is that he is an activist fighting on behalf of various minority groups who have been subjected to forced institutionalisation in the actual world. This includes people with disabilities, people with mental illness or who are neurodivergent (i.e. have a style of cognitive functioning that falls outside of societal norms, such as people on the autism spectrum), and people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or queer.[107] Often, the fans who found themselves addressed by Anders in this way have a personal connection to one or more of these minority groups, meaning that fans are personally invested in the way in which Anders, and his cause, are received by the fandom at large. For the purposes of this section, I will focus upon the reception of Anders as a champion for the mentally ill, neurodivergent and/or disabled.

[107] See Bayer (1981) and Drescher and Merlino (2007) for overviews of how homosexuality was historically viewed and treated within American psychiatry.

Figure 39: Anders as a modern 'Occupy' protester, by cuddlingthecthulhu (Tumblr) (Used with permission)

There are many aspects of the Circle of Magi that can be received as an allegory for psychiatric institutions and their historical practices. For some fans, this immediately drew them to Anders and the cause for which he was working. Catplague articulated these connections as follows:

> I don't know how intentional it was on the writers' part, but there are strong parallels between mage oppression and how neurodivergent and mentally ill people are treated in the real world. The Circle [of Mages] is essentially forced institutionalisation; Tranquility has similarities to lobotomy and it, solitary confinement, and the other abuses we see occurring in the Circle are reminiscent of psychiatric and medical abuse […] I'm neurodivergent and all of this is actually what makes me personalize the mage situation in [*Dragon Age*] so much.

The justification that is given for the treatment of mages within the context of the game – that they are dangerous and incapable of controlling themselves – has likewise been linked to social prejudice against people with disability and/or mental illness in the actual world, as outlined by faerymal:

> Mages are oppressed not because of their powers, but because of ableism. Mages are coded as disabled. […] It's not just a question of personal agency; it's systematic abuse based on the idea that these people are incapable of controlling their bodies or their minds, and that they need to be treated like children 'for the good of everyone'. […] [M]ages are canonically stated to be inherently violent, uncontrollable, dangerous to others and themselves, and prone to very obvious parallels of 'scary' mental illnesses like psychosis and schizophrenia.

The Circle's close association with the Chantry, the dominant religious institution of Thedas, also plays an important role in people's association of the treatment of mages in *Dragon Age* with the treatment of mentally ill and disabled individuals. In an essay published on Tumblr, Yorduck argued that the construction of disability in the actual world and magic in the world of *Dragon Age* operates along the same religious lines:

> Religion has great influence in the construction of disability. The Chantry controls mages and the perception of mages in [*Dragon Age*], while in the real world the Christian church has in many cases guided perceptions of disability, and also provided the first outside-of-family care. Despite the positive treatment of people with disabilities sometimes proposed by the church, Christians have in many cases interpreted disabilities as evidence of sign, as signs of pacts with the Devil, or as evidence of heresy. In [*Dragon Age*], the Chantry's view of mages is much the same.

From this perspective, Anders is an activist who is working against an oppressive religious institution that is denying the human (and elven[108]) rights of people who happen to be born in a particular way (with magical ability and/or mental illness, disability, and neurodivergence).

Fans who receive Anders as a symbol of resistance against unjust societal institutions tend to perceive criticism of him as a sign of a moral failing in his

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[108] Although it is tangential to the issues under discussion, it is worth noting that some fans critiqued Anders' championing of mage rights in terms of intersectionality because he does not acknowledge the multiple dimensions of prejudice and oppression to which elven mages are subject. Analogues are often drawn with white, self-described 'progressive' men. In fact, Figure 39 on page 232, which depicts Anders as a modern 'Occupy' protester, is intended to reference this blindness, as the artist's annotation makes clear:

> I think [Anders would] be that white guy claiming to be a social activist, who's progressive about some things but really, really fucking clueless about others and that he'd also be a massive hipster and that I'd probably hate him more than a little.

detractors. They often characterise such critics as people who are not subject to, and therefore do not care about, prejudice or oppression against minority groups, as was articulated by janders:

> Anders is a mage and even more so, the face of the oppression of mages. […] Watching him and listening to him, he reminds me of the people I know who fight against oppression every day. I have the faintest nagging feeling that those who call him whiny, pushy, etc, likely are already in places of privilege or "simply don't care" about equality for whatever reason […]

Responding to Anders as someone with mental illness who is working to defend the rights of other people with mental illness places fans (such as myself) who took the option to execute Anders at the end of the game in a certain unflattering light. Catplague, for example, argues that people who choose this option are unconsciously enacting their actual-world stance towards people with mental illness (emphasis original):

> [S]eeing the way fans respond to [Anders in *Dragon Age 2*] is terrifying. I can't tell you how many times I've seen fans say that players SHOULD kill him, that it's the only morally correct response, that he's better off dead. Multiple times now I've seen people frame it as a mercy killing, which is its own special brand of horrific. And I can't tell you how many people I've seen say they wish they could make him Tranquil—which is not only considered a fate worse than death by many mages […] but is also basically talked about as though it's like a spiritual lobotomy. *And Anders is a mentally ill character. Who people want to subject to a procedure possibly analogous to lobotomy, a very real-life form of ableist abuse and violence under the guise of 'treatment'.* And I cannot even articulate how terrifying that is to me – what that says about what people in this fandom think about mentally ill people, and what messages they're internalising, often without even realizing it.

A similar view is often put forward in respect of fans who defend the existence of Circles. These fans are often interpreted as being callous about human rights in the broader world, and therefore someone to be wary of, as argued by rebel-mage:

> I will legitimately never understand anyone who can defend the Circles. They literally strip away almost all the bodily autonomy of mages, and control of your own body and life is one of the absolutely most important things to human existence. Mages don't get to have this. Every time I see a defence of the Circle all I can hear is 'oh yes, well fuck those mages for wanting to be treated like people, and wishing to enjoy basic human (and elven) rights'. Because that's what the Circles take away. They take people, people who have done nothing wrong save being born in a particular way, strip away their basic personhood, and treat them as basically dangerous cattle. […]
>
> Seriously, do the people spouting this nonsense even hear themselves? Are they aware of what they're saying? No one should have to earn the right to be treated as a fucking

> *human being* (or elven being, etc.). […] And anyone who believes that someone should be treated as lesser, to the point of not even treating them as a *person* anymore, simply for an accident of birth […] honestly, seriously terrifies me. Because people are people, and if you think some are lesser just for being the way they are, it's time to fucking re-evaluate some things.

Fans who are critical of people's responses to Anders, and the treatment of mages in Thedas more broadly, may also blame the writers' treatment of these issues – often in terms of their analogues. They argue that situations are set up in such a way that players are intended to respond negatively to Anders, and indeed to kill him at the end of the game, and express concern about the effect this may have for players' attitudes towards mentally ill, neurodivergent or disabled people in the actual world, as catplague argues:

> [I]t was just so socially irresponsible for the writers to deliberately code a character as mentally ill who they all KNEW was going to commit such a controversial act of violence, who they KNEW they were going to scapegoat for the mage-templar war, who they KNEW was going to get framed as a villain. […] It's very clear that we're *supposed* to hate him. We're heavily encouraged to kill him (which, personally, makes me incredibly uncomfortable because it basically reads like extrajudicial killing of a neurodivergent person, which – surprise! – is an actual problem in the real world).

In a similar vein, fans argue that the Chantry explosion is framed within the game's narrative as a devastating tragedy instead of a just blow struck against an oppressive system. Again articulated by catplague:

> There's also more I could talk about, like… how violence is framed in the games – how the radicalism and extremism of mages is framed as evil, even though it's a direct response to centuries of violence and oppression perpetrated by the Chantry. How the violence of the marginalized in response to their oppression is viewed as "bad" violence, but the violence of the oppressors – which occurs on a much greater scale over a much greater period of time – isn't seen as "real" violence. How the Chantry is a powerful sociopolitical institution with a standing army, and how it uses its influence to perpetuate incredible cruelty.

The player's inability to openly support Anders' actions or assist him in his goals is cited as evidence for the bias the writers held against him, such as is articulated in the following anonymous confession:

> I'm still disappointed there was no option to support Anders' actions or at least not to judge him. It feels like I was forced to blame him despite [the fact that] I believe he was right and I approve [of] everything he did for my personal reasons.

Of course, not all fans agree with the analogy between mages and people with mental illness, neurodivergence, or disability. Indeed, many fans who identify as such find the comparison offensive and capable of perpetuating the status quo in regards to the treatment of mentally ill people, as fanherald argues:

> Can we stop using magic as a metaphor for mental illness please? When you do this, you are (hopefully inadvertently) perpetuating a harmful stereotype about the mentally ill. Usually I see it used to say: putting mages in the Circle to keep the population safe is just like putting mentally ill people in an institution to keep the population safe, which is unfair because everyone should be free. It's the same thing! But no. It's not. Mages can light you on fire with their minds, summon demons, and create immense amounts of death and destruction at will. In the real world, mentally ill and neuroatypical people have no special abilities to hurt people. In fact, they are much more likely to be victims of violent crime than perpetrators. That they are somehow dangerous to have in the general population is a false premise. This kind of parallel reinforces the idea that people with mental illness are dangerous to the people around them, which only supports their discrimination and mistreatment. So knock it off, okay?

Such fans have also argued that, rather than acting as metaphors for the mentally ill, mages are, by virtue of their magical ability, an analogy for the rich and powerful of society. In this context, seeking freedom for the mages appears to be an unpalatably libertarian goal that implies that the powerful (mages) should not be subject to restriction for the good of the whole. This is an implicitly Marxist argument that has obvious connotations within the actual world, as fanherald once again argues:

> I am naturally suspicious of any narrative that is trying to tell me it's the "special" people who are discriminated against, which is why I just can't get into this whole mage/Templar storyline. […] I feel like I'm being manipulated into arguing that trying to limit powerful people from being able to cause harm to the less powerful is the same thing as oppression. And that's just not true. […] I feel that twisting things around so that wanting to stop powerful people from hurting the people around them gets called oppressive is pretty much manipulating you into signing off on power differentials that in real life cause a lot of suffering.

The very popularity of the mage narrative compared to the elves, who are also oppressed within the game (see Chapter 7 for a full discussion), makes fanherald suspicious about the transgressive potential of this narrative and the motivations of those who support it:

> People love and are comfortable with this kind of narrative, and this very comfort makes me think it can't possibly be radical. It is not challenging to the status quo in the least. […] It shows once again that the powerless are less attractive to people than the

> powerful. People would rather see themselves in the special gifted group with the awesome powers and talk about how people like them are persecuted than champion the people [elves] who actually correspond to real-life oppression. That's just so depressing to me.

Rather than being an activist for an oppressed people, by this reading Anders is a white libertarian male who is seeking freedom from the laws of the land for himself and his own kind. This places the destruction of the Chantry in quite a different light.

ANDERS AS TERRORIST

An alternative response to Anders than that which I have articulated above places him in the role of the terrorist, rather than the activist or freedom fighter. With *Dragon Age 2* released nine years after the events of September 11, 2001, Anders' destruction of the Chantry is haunted by the after-images of the World Trade Centre. As the visual culture theorist Ron Burnett has argued:

> The images of the destruction of the World Trade Centre by terrorists were not static; they immediately became part of a dynamic, ongoing historical process. It is precisely because images are the product of a particular moment that more must be added to them than is ever present in the images themselves. This excess, which is often seen as somehow interfering with the meaning of the image, is a necessary staging ground for interpretation and analysis. (Burnett 2004: 15)

Although the destruction of a fictional church in a fictional world, the tall edifice, and the tower-like beams of light that accompanied the explosion (see Figure 40 below), bring to mind the attack on the World Trade Centre towers (Figure 41 on page 249) as well as the beams of light that replaced them in memoriam (Figure 42 on page 250).

Figure 40: Screenshot of the Chantry explosion in *Dragon Age 2*

Figure 41: The World Trade Center attack, by Scott Ludlum. Detail of the 2002 Pulitzer Prize winning photo originally published in the New York Times (12/09/2001). (Source: Green 2011)

Figure 42: The Tribute in Light memorial, as seen in 2014. (Source: Keivom 2014)

For most fans, both the fatal events of September 11 and the resulting memorial would not have been witnessed first-hand, but through images that were conveyed to them through screens. The visual similarities between the destruction of the Chantry and the destruction of the World Trade Centre's twin towers (and their subsequent reconstruction as columns of light) means that the images of the game reach inexorably outward to this broader image world of which they are an indelible part.

In addition to the visual resonance with the events of September 11, 2001, the name 'Anders' was, unbeknownst to the developers at the time of the game's release, to become directly linked to a right-wing terrorist: Anders Behring Breivik, a Norwegian man who murdered 77 people on 22 July, 2011. The links with *Dragon Age 2* were even closer: in his approximately 1,500 page manifesto (written under the pseudonym 'Andrew Berwick'), Breivik notes that he had played and enjoyed *Dragon Age 2* approximately three months before he conducted his attack. Perhaps because of these

associations, some fans draw visual associations between the two men as well, such as in the following anonymous confession (also see Figure 43 below):

> I know it's fucked up, but I can't help thinking of Anders Breivik whenever I see or hear Anders in [*Dragon Age 2*]. Same name, both are terrorists with radical manifestos, and DA2 Anders even looks like a thinner, scruffier Breivik. […] I just can't help but draw the comparison.

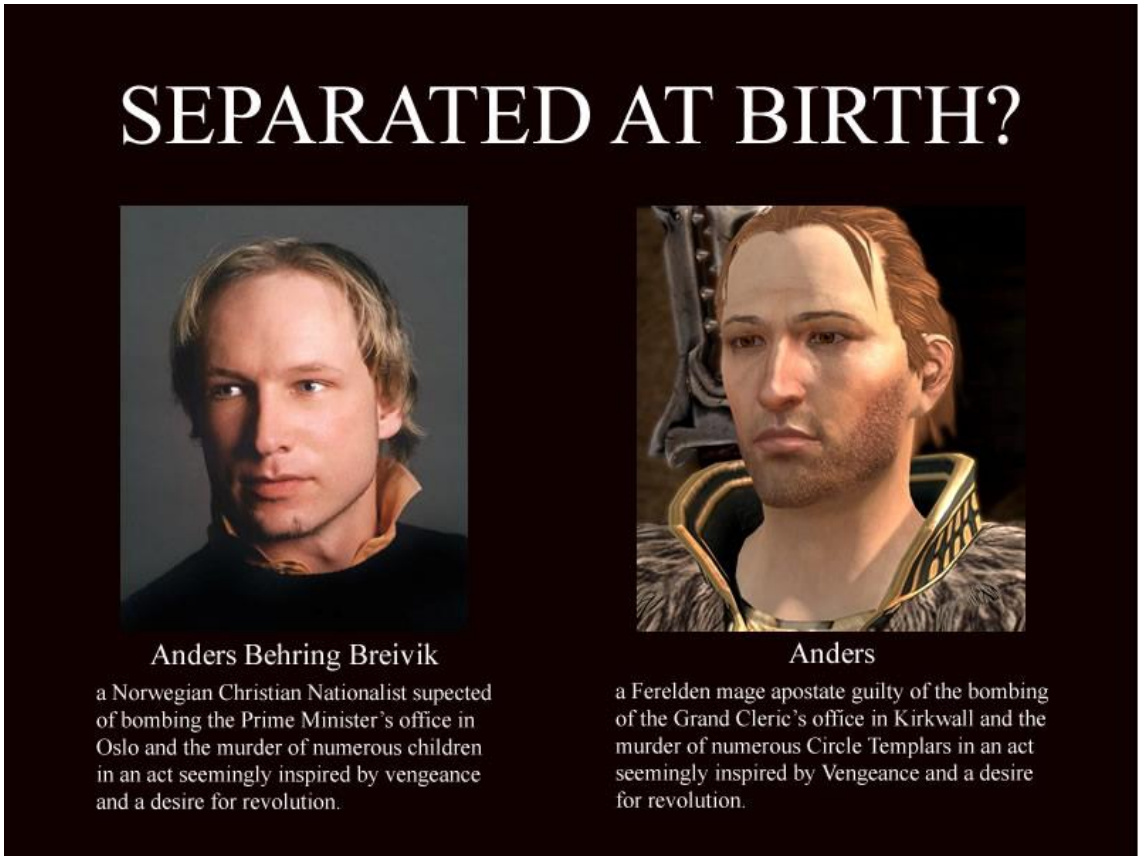

Figure 43: Image comparing Anders Breivik with Anders from DA2

These resonances echo through fans' responses to the narrative events of *Dragon Age 2*. Fans who have received Anders as a terrorist figure often find it disturbing that other fans justify Anders' actions on the basis of his political cause, arguing that the parallels between Anders' actions and actual world terrorist events mean that they must sympathise with the terrorists in those situations. For example, an anonymous confession posted to *All Dragon Confessions* read:

> It bothers me how many people support Anders blowing up the Chantry. What he did mirrors actual terrorist acts in too many ways for it to sit well with me. Sure, it's just a game, but the fact that they condone the act makes me think they'd have sympathy for real terrorists. The Boston Bombing and 9/11 both had a purpose in the terrorists' minds; they believed what they were doing was for some form of justice […] [but that] doesn't make it right.

This confession explicitly addresses – but dismisses – the aesthetic defence that it is 'just a game' in order to make the same kinds of moral arguments that supporters of Anders made in the previous section, albeit in the opposite direction. A similar point was made by luposan – again referencing, but dismissing the aesthetic argument (original emphasis):

> I know this is a video game but this gets me so heated, y'all are willing to stare blatant terrorism in the face and act like it's an act of righteousness oh my God fuck OFF. And that's why I can never forgive Anders for blowing up the Chantry and why I will never forgive anyone who defends this act, who condones this act, who analyses his motive, and yet *refuses* to call it an act of terrorism, *refuses* to see the real repercussions it has on the people he's "defending," and refuses to acknowledge that what he did is a shitty thing and there is no two ways about it.

Received in this way, Anders can become a sympathetic figure in a narrative that warns the public not to become complacent about the threat of radicalisation, as rugaru explains:

> Anders is a cautionary tale, not an innocent victim of circumstances. Anders is what happens when someone allows the injustices of the world to corrupt them to the point they themselves become a dangerous and corruptive force, which is what Anders is. It genuinely unnerves me how obsessed with preserving Anders' innocence the *Dragon Age* fandom is, even at the cost of making him a generally more bland and all-around flatter character. As a cautionary tale, as someone who has allowed the world to corrupt them, Anders could actually be pretty interesting, he could actually be someone you could pity as well as revile for his very mortal weaknesses.

Rugaru's concern about the way in which fans seek to "preserve Anders' innocence" ties into broader debates about the treatment of white male characters compared to women and/or characters of colours in fandom. Rugaru draws attention to the fact that Anders is a white man considered attractive by many people, and suggests that it is a combination of his race and charisma that results in him having as many supporters as he does, compared to fictional villains that are not white men:

> [Y]ou never see this kind [of] logic used for villains who are not handsome white guys. Like, I can't remember the last time I saw fandom bending over backwards for lady villains or villains of colour and in fact [fandom] usually actively likes to villainise or dismiss those two groups when it gets in the way of the white men.

The racialised nature of our response to villains ties into a broader debate about the racialised way in which the term 'terrorist' is deployed in mainstream media coverage of similar incidents of mass murder, as was argued by fanherald:

> [W]hat really bothers me about [the defence of Anders] is that IN REAL LIFE, we ALSO apply the label of terrorist really really really selectively, as in if people with the wrong skin colour or the wrong religion do something, it's terrorism, but if a white guy does it, it's just random violence. And that lets us just ignore systemic patterns of behaviour because we have some prejudiced ideal about What Terrorists Look Like.
>
> It bothers me in the game because if it had been […] someone visually Othered and racially oppressed in the game world, we would not hesitate to call [them] a terrorist for a single minute. But blonde human Anders is a freedom fighter, and NOT a terrorist, not even a little bit, nope, never.

In these debates, fans draw similarities between the treatment of Anders by *Dragon Age* fandom and the treatment of white male mass shooters in the United States, who are commonly described as 'troubled young men' rather than terrorists, such as in the case of Adam Lanza who carried out the Sandy Hook Massacre in December 2012 (Swaine 2012).

These analyses are refuted by fans who support Anders, who dispute the application of actual world categories of race and violence to Anders. For example, hilobrun argued that the markers of gender and racial privilege that detractors highlight within Anders are not relevant within the fictional context of *Dragon Age*:

> I mean look man you gotta understand that *Dragon Age* =/= [does not equal] modern Western society. Anders may be white and he may be a dude, but this is [*Dragon Age*]: which means that, as a mage, he is a member of a group of people who are among the *most* terrorized and brutalized. […] [H]e's not some average white dudebro Templar, someone given every privilege in life the way white cishet [cisgender heterosexual] guys are privileged in our society. He's a mage, a group that is systematically, viciously abused and murdered by those in power. He was specifically written as mentally ill. Arguments that he doesn't deserve a defence squad because he's white… are just…????????

Similarly, fans of Anders who support the destruction of the Chantry refute the appropriateness of the term 'terrorist', arguing that this label is primarily a gut response to the visual association with the destruction of the World Trade Centre rather than a measured analysis that takes into account his liberatory agenda:

> People tend to [associate Anders with terrorism] because terrorism and bombings are so deeply ingrained in our societies, particularly those of Western countries, as evidenced by events such as 9/11. Anders was indeed fighting against a horrifically oppressive institution that was literally committing genocide, yet people reduce him to a 'terrorist' simply because of his method of choice. And all this is despite the fact that people often applaud victims striking back against their oppressors, even if there is collateral damage and people die […]
>
> I have wondered for some time now, even though I've never said it before, if people's reactions would've have been so viscerally negative had he used something other than a bomb. Because I think 'blowing up a building = terrorism' is a belief that is just so deeply ingrained in our culture that it explains why so many people hate him so vehemently, despite 'blowing up a building' being neither necessary nor sufficient to consider someone [a] terrorist.

Fans who hold these views often seek to ascribe alternative labels to Anders in order to counter that of 'terrorist', including revolutionary, social justice activist, freedom fighter, and insurrectionist. These alternative labels place Anders within a different light, as argued by newjustice:

> 'Terrorist' when pinned to Anders is more often than not used entirely as a derogatory term with a particular bias to paint him in a light that in present day means something else entirely. It dismisses what he does as an act of retaliation against an established system of oppression and instead as one without valid reason or purpose. […] Anders by definition better suits the term 'insurrectionist'. An insurrection is an act or instance of rising in revolt, rebellion, or resistance against civil authority or an established government.

As an insurrectionist, the violence that Anders committed is understood to have been a measure of last resort. Such fans argue that Anders had exhausted all peaceful and official avenues for bringing about change before resorting to violence, as an anonymous confession articulated:

> Anders will always be a hero to me. […] It really upsets and worries me when someone says he's a terrorist/monster. Do they seriously believe that someone who blows something up is automatically a terrorist? No. A terrorist uses violence and intimidation to achieve political goals. Anders tried writing, talking, and saving/helping Circle mages and apostates. It was only after NINE YEARS of trying to persuade ONE Circle that what they were doing is WRONG that he blew up a building with two or three sisters, one or two citizens, and a cleric that did nothing to stop the abuse and rape of hundreds of mages to get SOMEONE to recognize the injustice that mages face. That's no terrorist. That's a man with no options left trying to save people like him.

The intractability of this debate has divided *Dragon Age* fandom. There is no 'right' answer that can resolve it once and for all, leaving the game – and people's treatment of Anders – as an interesting thought experiment that has perhaps unwittingly

surfaced deeply held beliefs and values. However, not all fans agree that their responses to the game reflect actual world values.

A Bunch of Pixels

Participants on both sides of the debate that I have outlined above have implicitly agreed that a person's treatment of the characters from the games reflects people's actual worldviews. However, not all fans accept the idea that the actions they take in a video game can or should be judged according to actual-world ethical standards. Fans who hold to the aesthetic valuation of art argue that one's treatment of virtual people in a fictional setting is qualitatively different to that of real flesh-and-blood humans and has no necessary relation. They also point out that many of the actions that are critically judged by ethically-minded fans are isolated from a broader ethic of violence that drives one of the core mechanics of the game: combat.

An anonymous confession that read, "I don't trust anyone who killed Anders; I thought capital punishment was a barbaric practice that we wanted to abolish from the world," received a number of incredulous replies that disputed this link. The fans who replied pointed out that killing people is a compulsory part of the game, and questioned the link between killing one particular video game character and supporting capital punishment in 'real life', particularly given how superficially limited your options are within a video game such as *Dragon Age*. The below is a representative sample:

> What about those hundreds of people you killed throughout the game? Were they just gnats in your way? THIS IS A VIDEO GAME. Anders is a bunch of pixels. Is this confession fucking serious?
>
> …
>
> Because anyone who kills a fictional video game character in a make believe world must be pro-death penalty? Damn, I guess I should quit playing video games before they go and change my core beliefs!
>
> …

> Honestly […] trying to reconcile people's choices in DA2 with their real-life opinions is a bit of a futile thing to try to do in most cases, simply because there's no option (in the end) for Hawke to just throw his/her hands up and go "both sides of this are extremes can we please sit down and talk about this like adults" or refuse to further the agenda of either extreme. Also because the options for Anders are "let him run off to spread the fighting/let him run off to come and try and kill you later on" or "kill him". There's no "give him a fair trial and put him in prison if found guilty" because that option doesn't exist for him within the current legal infrastructure of Kirkwall, but I think a lot of people would have chosen that if given a chance.
>
> …
>
> Let's all say it together, people. I am not my Hawke. My Hawke is not me. Just because [Hawke executed] Anders does not necessarily mean that I support or believe in capital punishment.

These replies suggest not only that people who judge others based on the actions they take in a video game are highly selective about which actions they take to be significant, but that they have also lost sight of the distinction between fiction and reality. Many of these fans apply a form of moral relativity to the game world; Kirkwall is not contemporary Western society, and the same moral standards do not necessarily apply – a view supported by the vast amount of fatal combat that takes place throughout the course of the game. Nevertheless, these arguments have had little impact on the amount of time and effort spent articulating the morality of the actions and attitudes that people take in respect of the *Dragon Age* games, suggesting that fans broadly accept the game as a thought experiment that accurately reflects people's values and beliefs.

Moral Stakes

Mitchell (2005: 94) argues that "the value and life of images become most interesting… when they appear as the centre of a social crisis." As a virtual thought experiment, player's responses to Anders became a proxy for a much broader debate about whether violence – particularly violence against civilians – can ever be justified. This is a question that has particular salience in the present, perhaps especially so in the United States, where the majority of *Dragon Age* on Tumblr fans reside, where issues of

violence, terrorism, and social justice have received significant media attention in recent years. By contemplating the virtual person of Anders, fans can consider these ethical questions from an angle unavailable to most people in everyday life – as the friend, lover, or associate of the instigator of violence. As McGinn has noted in respect of literary fiction:

> It helps enormously to have a particular character in a specific context with whom to raise and test ethical ideas. Without this specificity the discussion is apt to become lifeless and unmoored, the moral generalities hanging limply in the air… In fiction, we can put an ethical idea through its paces, testing its ability to command our assent. We can also explore its alignments, limitations, repercussions. We can face moral reality in all its complexity. (McGinn 1997: 175–176)

The moral debate that took place on Tumblr in the wake of Anders' actions certainly cannot be described as "lifeless and unmoored". *Dragon Age 2* brought the troubling ethical question of violence into sharp relief through the character of Anders, and the player's compulsory judgement of Anders through Hawke's decision to spare or execute him forced players to take a moral position on the issue that had consequences for the virtual world and people in which they had become invested.

The way in which we respond to images as virtual people means that the moral questions provoked by media like *Dragon Age* are not encountered as abstract propositions but as immediate and concrete social problems that demand action on behalf of the player. As Schulzke (2014) has argued, video games in this respect represent an enhancement of the ethical potential of older forms of narrative media by insisting that players live with the consequences of their moral decisions, however much lighter these consequences may be than in the actual world. It seems likely that video games like *Dragon Age* may provoke a greater moralising response from fans than other forms of media, such as films or television, due to this ability to intervene in the game world.

Although fictional worlds may be "the ideal world for going on ethical expeditions" because, as McGinn (1997: 177) argues, they are "safe, convenient, inconsequential, and expressly designed for our exploration and delight," taking these explorations into the affective publics of Tumblr is a risky exercise. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, people's actions and attitudes towards the characters and events of *Dragon Age* are widely believed to be symptomatic of their social and political leanings in the world beyond the game. While the common experience of the *Dragon Age* games may facilitate a shareable world, the slippery borders of the images that make up this world mean that it appears differently to each individual fan who encounters it. The affective commonality of the images enable heated discussion and argument, such as I have documented in this chapter, but rarely facilitated genuine dialogue between individuals with opposing viewpoints. This is partly due to the nature of images, which appear to self-evidently address themselves in different ideological ways to different individuals, and online interaction, in which the circumstances that contribute to an individual's reception of an image are invisible to their interlocutors unless explicitly addressed. The result is conflict that is usually both vehement and intractable.

This has implications for the formation of collective memory in the digital age. It is in large part through the media that memory can be said to be 'collective' (Halbwachs 1992) or 'social' (Connerton 1989) and it is through the media that images of the past can be shared – to be either commemorated or contested (Neiger et al. 2011). The shared imagery of *Dragon Age 2* can be thought of as a form of what Alison Landsberg (2003, 2004) calls 'prosthetic memory' – that is, a 'public past… available to individuals across racial and ethnic lines' which becomes 'the grounds upon which social meanings are negotiated, contested, and sometimes constructed' (2003: 149). However, as we move further away from truly 'mass' forms of media in the Internet

age, the dynamics of such remembering are changing (Hoskins 2009, 2011). 'Digital network memory' (Hoskins 2009) in affective publics, like *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr, challenges traditional notions of 'collective' orientations to the past due to its fragmented, temporary nature. At the same time, it enables new possibilities for memorial configurations among individuals living in what can be radically disparate circumstances.

In the following chapter, I build on the moral responses that people have to shared imagery by turning to the activism that people engage in on behalf of images. Comparing fans' responses to fictional characters from *Dragon Age* with their response to actual distant others, I argue that the distinction between fictional and actual others breaks down in both directions through the medium of images.

Figure 44: Protesters autograph a sketch of Michael Brown during a protest on 18 August 2014 in Atlanta, Georgia. (Photo by David Goldman)

7 IMAGE ACTIVISM

On Saturday, 9th of August 2014, an unarmed African American teenager by the name of Michael Brown was shot dead by a white police officer in the small town of Ferguson, Missouri. Occurring in the middle of the day, the immediate aftermath of Michael Brown's death was captured by bystanders using mobile phone cameras and quickly shared across social media, primarily Twitter. The response was swift, as residents of Ferguson congregated to protest and demand an explanation for the extrajudicial killing. As the unrest grew, citizen-captured images of the protests and the heavily-armed police response circulated widely on social networking sites. Quickly associated with a long history of police violence against African Americans, these arresting images captured attention throughout the United States and around the rest of the world.

Although the images were originally shared on the Twitter social networking platform, they quickly jumped social media boundaries as Tumblr users screen captured the original tweets and circulated them anew on Tumblr. They entered my orbit through the choice of many *Dragon Age* fans to reblog these images, usually with no comment other than the tags #Ferguson, #police brutality, and #signal boost. Their raw texture and sense of immediacy gave these images a certain potency that suggested no need for additional text, but in the melting pot of images that is *Dragon Age* fandom on Tumblr,

these images vied for attention with that of fictional characters from the games – such as elves – which arguably made similar moral demands for action. Over the course of my time among *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr, both fictional and non-fictional representations of suffering received attention and responses through similar forms of digital activism, while hard lines of differentiation remained tightly and explicitly drawn between them.

In this chapter, I meditate on digital responses to two seemingly disparate images of suffering – that of Michael Brown and African Americans more generally in the United States, and elves in the fictional world of *Dragon Age* – to consider what the similarities and differences in fan responses may suggest about the ethical potential of encounters with images. I argue that the distinction between images of fictional and non-fictional suffering may blur in both directions for the distant receiver. Despite widespread stereotypes about fans being unable to differentiate between fiction and reality, I argue that this blurring does not result from the confusion of ontologically distinct categories of images but emerges from their shared capacity to function as icons of suffering in the broader world.

Although it is common-sense to privilege responses to actual suffering over fictional suffering, I ask whether, in at least some cases, fictional icons of suffering could prove to be a better and more useful aid to ethical conduct in the broader world (and perhaps be more ethical in and of themselves) than images of the actual suffering other. At the same time, I consider whether responses to non-fictional suffering represent a genuine engagement with the photographed other, or whether our interpolation into the image renders them almost as fictional as those from *Dragon Age*. These questions raise important points about the intersubjective and ethical potential of

image-based encounters, a salient issue in a world where much of our understanding of others and their circumstances comes through visual representations.

IMAGE-ENCOUNTERS

Scholars have studied the ethical implications of televised images of the other, especially the suffering other, for more than 20 years. The majority of such scholarship has focused on the way in which the image of the other is framed by news organisations for our viewing (e.g. Boltanski 2004, Chouliaraki 2006, Kleinman and Kleinman 1996, Silverstone 2007). Articulating the rationale for this approach, Roger Silverstone (2007: 7) has argued that "it is because the media provide… the framework (or frameworlds) for the appearance of the other that they, de facto, define the moral space within which the other appears to us…" Similarly, Chouliaraki (2006: 3) has argued that the everyday decision-making processes of "how the sufferer is portrayed on screen and how the scene of suffering is narrated… come to orientate the spectator's attitude towards the distant sufferer and, in the long run, shape the disposition of television publics vis-à-vis the misfortune of far away others".

This remains an important area of research, however the relatively recent developments of social media and affordable, mobile, Internet-connected video recording technology have disrupted the traditional role of news organisations in receiving, packing, framing, and broadcasting stories about the distant other (Papailias 2016, Schankweiler et al. 2018). The images and discourse of suffering circulated on social media are, by and large, the product of lay people, and may operate to explicitly counter the narratives and 'hierarchies of life' (Chouliaraki 2006) promoted in news reportage through the materialising of affective publics with an explicitly political agenda (Papacharissi 2015). In comparison to journalistic images, the immediacy or

'rawness' of images taken with mobile phones and circulated on social media promises an encounter with the distant other that is more authentic and potentially more demanding (Hjorth 2017). At the same time, the volume of such images to which we are exposed has increased exponentially through these same technologies, raising questions about which images we respond to and which we do not (von Engelhardt and Jansz 2015).

As more and more of our understanding of the world and distant others are shaped by images (Thompson 1995), the question of what, exactly, it is that we see (and respond to) when we look at such images is of paramount importance. Visual anthropologist Melinda Hinkson has queried the extent to which images, with all of their excesses and slippages, can truly mediate intersubjective encounters:

> If the circulation of images can be understood as a communicative act that seeks a response, what kind of communication is possible via these images…? What do observers… *see* when they encounter this material? [And] what are the intersubjective potentialities and limits of such encounters? (Hinkson 2011: 131)

Hinkson (2011: 134) argues that genuine intersubjective encounters rely on "our capacity to engage with an image of an other in the specific terms of the other's". This requires the challenging task of going beyond our own moral, cultural, and subjective frameworks to incorporate divergent contexts and histories. But how possible is this?

Despite increasing access to image production and distribution technologies, the distance implied by mediation means that a fundamental asymmetry of safety and suffering remains between the spectators of and subjects in such images (Chouliaraki 2006: 4). This asymmetry in experience can potentially lead to the images being fundamentally incomprehensible (von Engelhardt and Jansz 2015), appropriated into different contexts (Hjorth 2017: 142), or even perceived as unreal. Tester (2001: 79) has argued that the lack of material co-presence between spectator and sufferer means that "the [suffering] other is, in a profound sense, not present in the world" of the

spectator. Similarly, Cohen (2013: 17) argues that "[t]elevised images of distant misery don't seem to belong to the same world as our familiar daily round".

Nevertheless, it remains clear that some images of distant suffering have the potential to evoke powerful responses in spectators. For example, in 2015 the image of three-year-old Alayn Kurdi lying face-down and lifeless on a beach in Turkey changed the way that many people around the world, including a number of politicians, viewed the Syrian refugee crisis – with some governments agreeing to take increased numbers of Syrian refugees as a result (Papailias 2018). Similarly, the videos and photographs that many of the 250 children who died in the Sewol Ferry Disaster in 2014 made in their final hours reached out and touched hearts around the world, and spurred action against the ferry company as well as the South Korean government (Hjorth 2017). This speaks to the potential for images to cultivate an ethic of social responsibility that extends beyond our immediate, face-to-face context.

While some scholars are optimistic about the role that mediated suffering can therefore play in fostering engagement with culturally and geographically distant others (Silverstone 2007), it must be remembered that the photos that can encourage such strong responses remain highly contingent upon the viewing position and priorities of the beholder. In a TIME article about the impact of the photo of Alayn Kurdi, Peter Bouckaert, Human Rights Watch's emergencies director, who originally circulated the photo on social media, noted that "the week before, dozens of African kids washed up on the beaches of Libya and were photographed and it didn't have the same impact," suggesting that the fact that Alayn Kurdi "looks a lot like a European child" was an important factor in the reaction his image provoked among Western audiences (Laurent 2015).

Even when images of suffering succeed in provoking a moral response, the possibility of action can often feel elusive for the average viewer. Lilie Chouliaraki argues that:

> No other spectacle can raise the ethical question of what to do so compellingly as suffering. The most profound moral demand that television makes on spectators… is to make us witnesses of human pain without giving us the option to act on it. (Chouliaraki 2006: 2)

Silverstone (2007: 11) has similarly argued that the paradox of media images, which simultaneously incorporate both distance and presence, is that they both "enable the stretching of action beyond the face-to-face, and consequently undermine the expectation of responsibility and reciprocity that action and communication in face-to-face settings conventionally require".

Luc Boltanski (2004: 16) has argued that the "disjunction between the possibilities of information and possibilities of action" mean that "moral responsibility through omission becomes more uncertain" as judgements about the obligation to give assistance become tangled in questions about distance, capability, and willingness. However, Boltanski takes this point even further, arguing that the uncertainty of action in response to distant suffering alters the way in which we receive these images:

> [W]hen the spectacle of the unfortunate and his suffering is conveyed to a distant and sheltered spectator there is a greater likelihood of this spectacle being apprehended in a fictional mode the more the horizon of action recedes into the distance. The distinction between reality and fiction loses its relevance for the utterly powerless spectator for ever separated from what he views. (Boltanski 2004: 23)

In other words, Boltanski argues that images of distant suffering appear real to us in proportion with our perceived ability to act upon them. This is a point also made by von Engelhardt and Jansz (2015: 81) in their conceptual framework for the reception of mediated suffering, when they argue that "[a]ctual suffering achieves realness mainly through the behaviour it triggers in audiences".

The link between action and perceived realism can, as I shall argue, also operate in the opposite direction – with fictional images being apprehended in a more realist mode, the closer the horizon of action appears to their spectators. This is in part due to the similarities in the potential for action that distant observers can take in response to images of both fictional and non-fictional suffering. Boltanski (2004: 17) argues that there are ultimately only two forms of action that are possible in response to images of distant suffering: paying and speaking. Similarly, Papacharissi (2015: 131) notes that, among affective publics, "impact is symbolic, agency claimed is semantic, [and] power is liminal." As I shall demonstrate below, paying and speaking (a semantic and symbolic form of agency) are arguably more feasible forms of action – with more immediately visible results – for fictional others encountered through images than for real but distant others. The convergence in the possible avenues for action in response to fictional and non-fictional others reveals the genuine continuity in the nature of our encounters via images.

Is this a bad thing? Although it may at first seem that moral responses to fictional and non-fictional suffering cannot be considered as equivalent, art objects – as I argued in the previous chapter – may play an important role in reflecting people's ethical attitudes towards others. If, as Professor of Philosophy Berys Gaut (2007: 205) argues, "[s]omeone can be criticised for enjoying the suffering of others; and likewise someone who… enjoys the imagined suffering of others can properly be condemned for this response," can someone be praised for responding morally to the imagined suffering of others?

Maria Kyriakidou (2015: 216, my emphasis) argues that "watching suffering, even if only on the screen, is emotionally compelling due to the knowledge that *this suffering is real, is actually happening*". Yet she also argues that "central to the concept

of media witnessing… are the imaginative moral demands images of suffering make to their spectators." I would suggest that it is not only images of actual suffering that can make moral demands or enable imaginative connections with distant victims. Indeed, other scholars have explored how fiction may help to cultivate an ethics of care by overcoming what Elaine Scarry (1998: 40) has described as "the difficulty of imagining other persons":

> [T]he way we act toward 'others' is shaped by the way we imagine others… Both philosophic and literary descriptions of imagining show the difficulty of picturing other persons in their full weight and solidity. This is true even when the person is a friend or acquaintance; the problem is further magnified when the person is a stranger or 'foreigner'. (Scarry 1998: 40)

Reflecting upon the poverty of our imagination in respect to the cultural other, Scarry (1998: 46) argues that this poverty is partly redeemed through "great literature," which presents a picture of the other in much greater detail than our own imaginations allow.

Yet one of the limits that Scarry identifies in literature's potential to foster a generous attitude towards actual others is "the lack of any anchor in historical reality," which may leave us blind to the real suffering in the world before us. She notes,

> It has often been a criticism of literature that the very imaginative labour of picturing others that we ought to expend on real persons on our city streets, or on the other side of the border, instead comes to be lavished on King Lear or on Tess [of the D'Urbervilles]. Pushkin provided a stunning portrait of how we come out of the opera, weeping with compassion for those on stage, not seeing the cab driver and horses who are freezing from their long wait to carry us home. (Scarry 1998: 47)

In part, this blindness may arise because literature can be "a seductive vehicle for an exercise in self-reflection and self-identification, rather than reflection upon and identification with people different from oneself," (Scarry 1998: 47) a possibility that seems well-and-truly open to the consumption of images (and video games in particular) as well as literature. Scarry (1998: 49) ultimately decides that literary representation alone cannot solve the problem of otherness, but that it can make "its contribution by critiquing the origins of (rather than providing solutions to) the problem

of otherness" by bringing attention to the mechanisms by which we fail (or deign not) to imagine the other.

Susan Sontag explicitly considered the role of images in cultivating an ethic of care for the other. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag (2003) considered the impact of war photography on people's ethical stances. Noting the partiality of all images of suffering, which can only ever capture a fraction of the broader tableau, she argues that they still play a vital role in bringing the cruelty of the human participants to broader awareness as a warning:

> It seems a good in itself to acknowledge, to have enlarged, one's sense of how much suffering caused by human wickedness there is in the world we share with others… Even if [the images] are only tokens, and cannot possibly encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform a vital function. The images say: This is what human beings are capable of doing – may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget. (Sontag 2003: Chapter 8)

Could images of fictional suffering play a similar role in provoking moral consciousness even though, they too, are "only tokens"? There is reason to believe that they might. Sontag argues that images of suffering are not

> supposed to repair our ignorance about the history and causes of the suffering it picks out and frames. Such images cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalisations for mass suffering offered by established powers. (Sontag 2003: Chapter 8)

Such an invitation could feasibly be offered just as well by fictional representations of suffering as they could by actual depictions of suffering. Indeed, it is possible that they could present a more compelling face: Sontag (2003: Chapter 8) notes that, with the volume of images we are exposed to today, "it seems normal to turn away from images that simply make us feel bad". If images of suffering are incorporated into a video game, which overall brings pleasure to the player, could they not prove more enticing – and more effective – than those on news reportage or social media? I have no firm answers to the questions I have posed in this section, but over the course of this

chapter I will reflect on what the similarities in response to fictional and non-fictional images of suffering may suggest about the nature of image-encounters in the digital age.

#FERGUSON

The vast majority of people learned of the events transpiring in Ferguson through images, taken by reporters and protesters and circulated on social media (see Figure 45 below). Bonilla and Rosa (2015: 4–5) note that, during the first week of protests,

> over 3.6 million posts appeared on Twitter documenting and reflecting on the emerging details surrounding Michael Brown's death; by the end of the month, "#Ferguson" had appeared more than eight million times on the Twitter platform.

A report by the Centre for Media & Social Impact at American University's School of Communication, Washington D.C., which examined more than 40 million tweets related to the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, highlighted the role that images played in this social media activity:

> We cannot ignore the role and power of images in spreading [the Black Lives Matter movement's] messages… Images circulate prominently in the corpus of [Black Lives Matter] Twitter activity, with many of the most-retweeted tweets overall including one or more images. (Freelon et al. 2016: 30)

The immediacy of these images, many of which were produced and circulated as citizen journalism by the protesters, made an implicit moral demand that observers *do* something. Among my fieldwork participants on Tumblr, the action that was primarily taken was to recirculate these images as a means of bearing witness and encouraging others to bear witness to these geographically distant but emotionally immediate events.

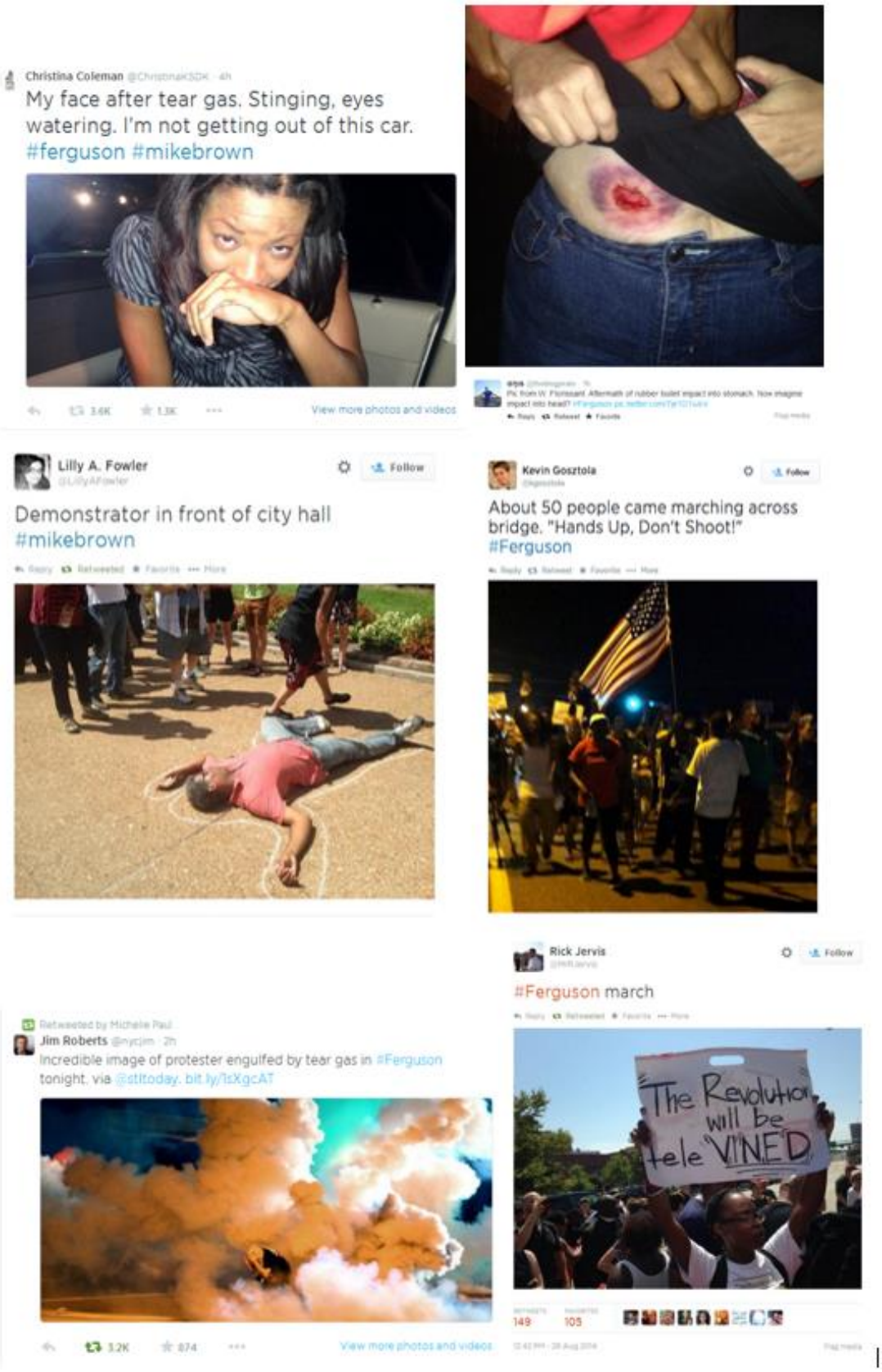

Figure 45: Images from the Ferguson protests that were originally posted on Twitter and recirculated on Tumblr

In her analysis of mourning and witnessing on YouTube, Penelope Papailias (2016: 438) notes that "[s]ome might maintain that to 'simply watch' things on television or 'follow' them on the Internet would better be termed spectatorship than witnessing, with its legal, historical, and religious connotations of temporal and spatial copresence with the event". However, she goes on to argue that the term witnessing "entails a responsivity toward the other that posits watching as a civil act… a form of visceral and affective participation in events that awakens a sense of shared vulnerability and connectedness". This sense of responsivity accompanied the posts that were circulated on Tumblr. The images recirculated on Tumblr worked towards three objectives: highlighting racial prejudice as the ultimate cause of Michael Brown's death; proposing alternative narratives to those reported in mainstream media sources, and raising awareness of police brutality among distant observers. Similar motivations were identified in interviews that Freelon et al. (2016) conducted with participants on Twitter.

Images taken and circulated by protesters and journalists emphasised the humanity of Michael Brown and the protesters by focusing on their faces and showed the brutality of the police response (such as tear gas and rubber bullets) through their effects on individuals (see the top two images in Figure 45 above). The amateur nature of many of these photographs only served to heighten their immediacy, drawing the spectator into the sense of being present in events that were happening right then and there. As the sociologist Fuyuki Kurasawa has argued in relation to survivors' written testimonies, such immediacy allows for the cultivation of empathy, such that:

> [I]t becomes possible for viewers and readers to connect to the vulnerability and pain of their fellow human beings who, beyond their historical and socio-cultural specificities, remain persons of flesh and blood, of heart and soul, of despair and hope… (Kurasawa 2009: 103)

Photographs that visibly compared the police response to the Ferguson protests with the police response to civil rights protests in the 1960s were used to make a point about the longevity of the racial dimensions of the violence taking place in Ferguson. For example, Tumblr user kim-jong-chill compiled a photo collage entitled 'What a difference 50 years can make. Or not.'; in which they juxtaposed images from the Ferguson protests with images from the 1963 Birmingham Movement – a civil rights protest in Birmingham, Alabama, that also involved highly publicised confrontations between police and African American protesters. By drawing parallels between these two events, kim-jong-chill highlighted Ferguson's significance beyond the specific events that constituted it, linking it into a broader history of civil rights protests undertaken by African Americans in order to guide the event's interpretation by its audience.

Photography was also used to counter mainstream media narratives: photographs of black men and women guarding stores offered a counter-narrative to the media report that black people were engaged in looting. Photos of Michael Brown in his high school graduation cap and gown, demonstrating his academic achievement, were used to counter mainstream news reports that portrayed him as troubled. And African American activists posted images of themselves on Twitter to highlight biases in media reporting that were subsequently recirculated on Tumblr. Under the tag #IfIWasGunnedDown, participants juxtaposed two different photographs of themselves – one that conformed to stereotypical narratives of African Americans as drug addicts or gang members, and one that showed them as caring and achieving individuals – with the question, "Which picture would they [media organisations] use?"

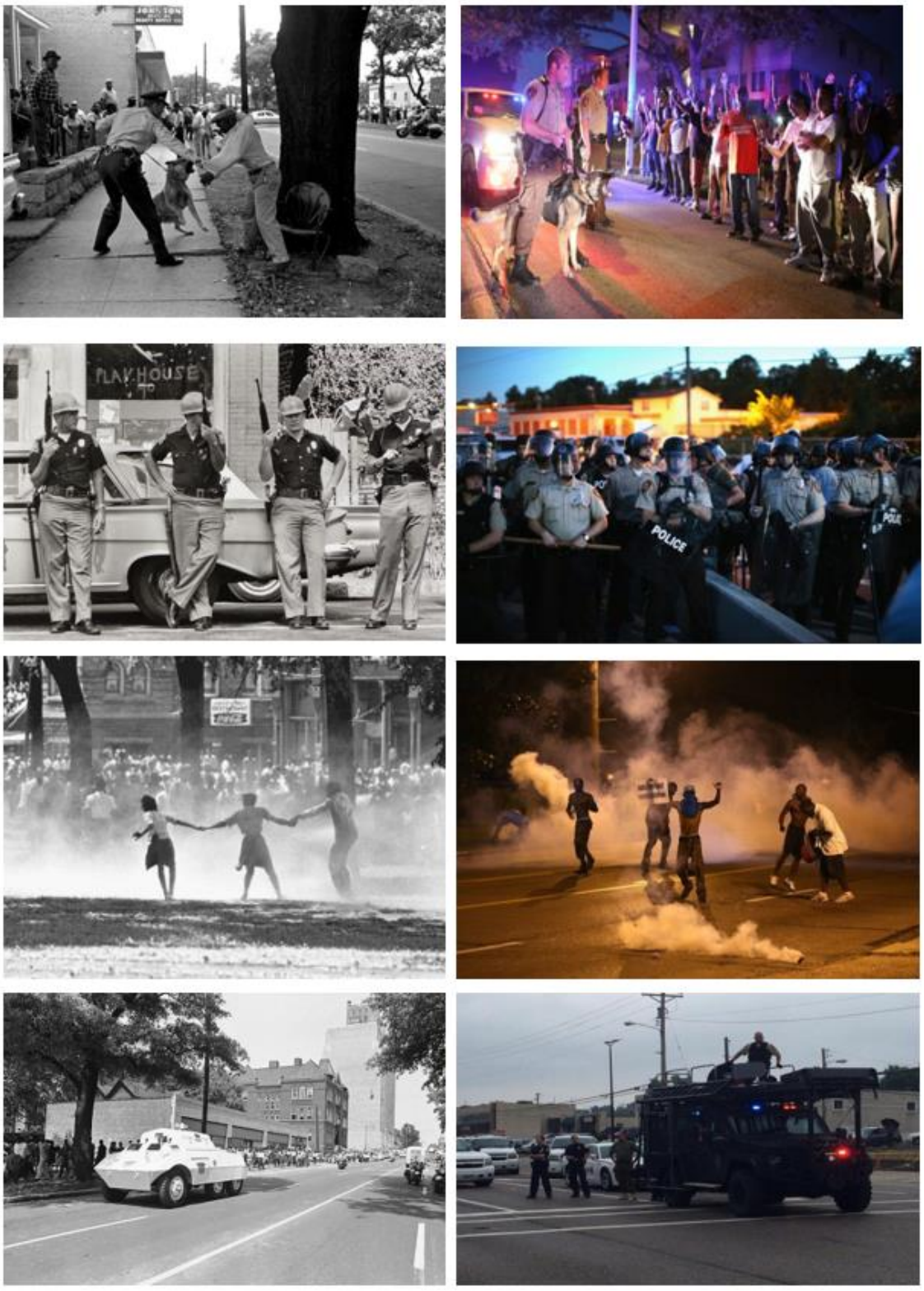

Figure 46: ***What a difference 50 years can make. Or not,*** **by kim-jong-chill (Tumblr) (One pair of photos was excised for space)**

Unlike the original images on Twitter, which "often included participants' commentary on what was represented in the images," (Freelon et al. 2016: 30) (as is seen in the images in Figure 45 on page 271) the majority of the posts circulated on Tumblr did not include additional text. Instead, most Tumblr users allowed the images (and existing captions) to speak for themselves, tagging them only with "#Ferguson," "#police brutality" and "#signal boost". This may be because of the relative 'distance' of Tumblr compared to the eyewitness reporting that was taking place on Twitter: no one that I saw was using Tumblr as the primary means of eyewitness reporting from Ferguson. Instead, Tumblr was a secondary location of circulation for reports posted to Twitter, and therefore a form of 'third-order' witness, at a remove – both in terms of its networks and temporality – from what was taking place on both Twitter and on the ground at Ferguson.

The lack of commentary on the pictures arguably placed limits on the development of an "intersubjective sphere of mourning" among fans (Papailias 2016: 444). Nevertheless, by viewing and distributing these photos, Tumblr users – including but extending far beyond fans of the *Dragon Age* games – were exhibiting an ethical and affective response to the suffering they witnessed among distant others in Ferguson. Just as Papailias (2016) insisted upon the weightiness of the term 'witnessing' as compared to the less rich term 'spectator', I must do the same. Although Tumblr users did not enact their embodied reactions to the images, their ethical commitment to testify, that is to "relate (to) what they have seen in multiple times and spaces" (Papailias 2016: 438) was played out not only in their circulation of the images on Tumblr, a form of "affective contagion" (Thrift, cited in Papailias 2016: 459), but by the request – silent at times, explicit in others: "Do not pass this post. Reblog, share, spread the word. Do not stay silent."

After the initial flurry of posts, images of Michael Brown and Ferguson re-emerged on Tumblr in November 2014, when the prosecutor announced that there would be no indictment, and again on the one year anniversary of his death. The tag #BlackLivesMatter had a longer life as it was used to connect multiple instances of police violence against African Americans.

Many scholars remain deeply skeptical about the value of so-called 'hashtag activism' as a form of action. As Bonilla and Rosa (2015: 8) note, "many have disparaged hashtag activism as a poor substitute for 'real' activism," and, indeed, the additional remove and exceedingly low opportunity cost involved in recirculating images of protest on Tumblr opens it to the charge of 'slacktivism', as argued by Charlotte Robertson in an article in the Huffington Post:

> When we 'retweet,' when we 'hashtag,' when we 'share,' we allow ourselves to feel more moral. We feel like we are good people because we have shown a level of awareness. But don't we, in fact, become guiltier of perpetuating social injustice once aware? Our inactivity upon awareness makes us implicit in a form of systematic oppression. In truth, our new form of activism, our 'slacktivism' enables us to be lazy, cowardly, and, in return, to feel good about it. (Robertson 2014: n.p.)

Critiques such as the one above are predicated upon a hierarchy of value privileging 'real' activism – that is, street protest, often harking back to 1960s civil rights activism in the United States (c.f. Gladwell 2010) – over digital activism, such as what people on Tumblr were participating in following Michael Brown's death. This is misguided in two respects. First, 'speaking' as a form of action – such as through signing an online petition – can have real results.[109] Second, the goal of digital campaigns may be misunderstood.

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[109] In 2016, for example, a video released by the comedy website 'Funny or Die' supported an online petition that saw the United States' Senate vote to unanimously support a bill improving the rights of survivors of sexual assault (Lapowsky 2016). In 2017, the #MeToo movement, which encouraged women to use the hashtag to signify that they had been sexually harassed or assaulted, led to a series of

"[S]ome of the most important hashtag campaigns emerging out of #Ferguson," Bonilla and Rosa (2015: 8) note, "were targeted at calling attention to both police practices and media representations, suggesting that social media can serve as an important tool for challenging these various forms of racial profiling". When the target is representations, then engaging in activism through the representative plane of social media is meeting this challenge head-on. The counter-narratives made possible through the images circulated on Tumblr allowed for a form of protest distinct from the protests simultaneously occurring on the streets, whilst bringing wider attention to the actions of police on the ground. Indeed, digital activists were able to support the local protesters by contextualising their actions within a much larger pattern of discrimination and oppression against African Americans in the United States. Nevertheless, as I shall argue later in this chapter, the limited range of actions available to distant observers of the Ferguson protests had an impact on the mode in which they were received.

In the next section, I turn to the elves in *Dragon Age* as an example of a fictional case of racial oppression that provoked similar responses on Tumblr.

ELVEN OPPRESSION

Sara and her companions are passing through the Chantry courtyard when a man attracts her attention with an imperious "You there!" Pressing my lips together at the man's tone, I nevertheless direct my character, Sara Hawke, to reply politely.

"Is there something I can help with?" she asks.

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allegations against high profile media figures. The movement has since extended into a myriad of other contexts – including academia (Anderson 2018).

"I am a magistrate in this city and I wish to hire you for a small, albeit important job," the man begins. "A man I have sentenced to a life in prison has escaped custody. I'd like you to retrieve the fugitive and hand him over to the Guard."

It seems like a simple mercenary job. But why ask Hawke, and not the City Guard? I direct Sara to inquire further.

"Is there anything else I need to know?" she asks.

"There is something, yes. There are… creatures in the ruins where he is hiding. The guards I sent are ill-equipped to deal with such beasts. Bring the fugitive in alive, quickly and quietly. Not only will you be paid, but you'll have the gratitude of a city magistrate. Useful for a refugee, wouldn't you agree?"

I decide that it is something Sara is well-equipped to handle.

"I'll take the job," Sara says. She needs the money, after all.

When we travel to the ruins in which the fugitive is hiding, we are greeted by a relieved looking City Guard.

"Ah, so you're the reinforcements the magistrate promised," the guard begins, only to be interrupted by an elf who walks up to the group.

"That bastard's to be brought in alive after all he's done? Just because it isn't you and your pretty little human children he's after…"

Sara raises her eyebrows. "Please," she says. "Calm down and tell me what happened."

"The man you're after, he targets elves!" the elf says. "He dragged my daughter into those ruins and killed her! I want him dead!" He suddenly seems to deflate. "My girl, Lia, she wasn't his first victim. Over the years he's taken dozens of our children and

not once has he paid for his crimes. Please, no one else cares that our children are being slaughtered like beasts."

"There must be some humans who would take offence to these disappearances," Sara says, frowning.

"We're nothing to them. Even if this murderer does finally go before the courts, the magistrate won't take our word over his."

"Why only elves?" Sara asks. "Why not human children as well?"

"We're easy prey. No one thinks twice when an elven child disappears."

Sara is still frowning. The elf is asking us to take justice into our own hands and execute the fugitive without due process. I choose to have Sara follow the law.

"I'm sorry about your daughter," she says, "but murdering this man outright is no solution."

"No!" the elf cries. "Don't you understand? If you take him in, he'll be free again by nightfall! For all my damned coin, I'm still only an elf to these humans. There'll be no justice for my girl in the courts of Kirkwall."

Leaving the distraught elf, Sara and her companions enter the ruins and fight through the monsters, eventually entering the chamber where the fugitive is hiding. He is sitting at the bottom of a stone pillar and looks up with a resigned air.

"I knew my father would eventually send someone," he says. "I was hoping the beasts down here would get to me first."

"The magistrate sent me," Sara says. "I've never even met your father."

The man's eyes widen. "He didn't tell you, did he? The magistrate *is* my father. He's tried so hard to keep me – and what I've done – hidden away."

Sara frowns. “The magistrate is supposed to protect the people of the city, and that includes the elves,” she says, anger in her voice.

“Father is a good man. He tried to help, to stop me. But he can’t… no one can. That elf girl. She had no right to be so beautiful, so perfect. The demons said she needed to be taught a lesson, like all the others.”

“It’s obvious that you’re not well,” Sara says. “You need help.”

“No! I’m not mad! It’s the demons! I can’t stop. I’ve tried so many times. Please, you have to kill me. There’s no other way.”

I pause, contemplating my options. I can either bring the man in, as the magistrate asked, or kill him, as the girl’s father asked. As the son of a magistrate, he will continue to be a threat. It seems that only decisive action will protect the elves.

“If nothing short of killing you will stop this, then so be it,” Sara says, and swiftly dispatches him with her dagger.

When Sara and her companions emerge from the ruins, the elf is waiting for them, and Sara lets him know that the deed is done.

“I didn’t believe an elf could ever get justice in Kirkwall,” he says. “I speak for all of us when I say that we are in your debt.”

The guardsman, watching on, shakes his head. “I feel just as bad for those knife-ears as the next man,” he says, using a pejorative term for elves, “but ignoring the magistrate’s direct orders? That’s madness.” He tosses his hands in the air, and leaves.

* * *

Elves are an oppressed racial minority group within the narrative world of *Dragon Age*. Historically the dominant race[110] in the fantasy world of Thedas, their civilisation fell when they were invaded and enslaved by a human empire. Although some elves escaped and attempted to rebuild in the wilderness, generations of slavery and subsistence-based living has meant that they have lost most of their cultural heritage and identity. At the time when the *Dragon Age* games are set, elves are scattered across the land of Thedas, either living in gated ghettoes known as Alienages within human cities, or living in small nomadic bands roaming the wilderness. Elves within human cities live in conditions of abject poverty, as well as being under constant threat of violence from humans. Elves living in nomadic tribes are known as the Dalish, and cling to the remnants of their ancient religion, language, and cultural beliefs. They tend to view city-based elves with derision, as having lost what little of their culture remains.

This broad narrative of the elves speaks to a number of different peoples who have experienced racial oppression and cultural identity loss in the actual world. Although the elves in *Dragon Age* are mostly depicted with light skin and lilting Irish accents, fans explicitly associate elves with African Americans, Native Americans, and Romani, as well as many other people who were colonised by white societies, as articulated by algernon:

> I don't understand [why] there are people who do not consider elves to be 'People of Colour' in the *Dragon Age* universe. They are an ethnic minority in comparison to the human population, a large swathe of their population was killed off by invaders/settlers (see Native American and Aztec history), buildings/monuments were shattered and in many cases lost and destroyed by those who took over their land (see the desecration of Egyptian temples and statues), [they were] forced into slavery in the [human] Imperium (see the enslavement of Africans) or forced into indentured servitude and socially denied access to basic education, and [they are] forced to live in slums or low income

[110] Humanoid species (such as humans, elves, and dwarves) are referred to as 'races' in *Dragon Age* and other media within the fantasy genre.

> shitholes that the rest of society feels they should be happy [in] because it could be SO MUCH WORSE FOR THEM (see every minority in America).

Within these analogies, the colonizing human empire within the games is taken to represent white Europeans, while elves represent various non-White others. These resonances were acknowledged by David Gaider, the lead writer of *Dragon Age*, in his response to a fan's question on Tumblr. Although he notes that Jewish people were the original inspiration for the elves, he acknowledges that they speak to a number of different histories of racial oppression:

> **Anonymous Fan:** I was wondering if the elves in *Dragon Age* were at all inspired by First Nations people? […] The missing history and loss of language, and Alienages being almost identical to reservations. I'm First Nations and I hardly ever see my culture represented in the things I love, so even if it wasn't intentional, it made me so happy to see this!
>
> **David Gaider:** The initial inspiration for the elves actually came from Jewish people – consider the lost homeland, the existence of Jewish ghettos in many medieval cities, etc. After years of development, however, the connections to those initial inspirations are tenuous at best, and I can definitely see comparisons to Native Americans as well as a number of other peoples who have experienced oppression in our history. These cultural elements evidently have many real-world analogues, which is interesting but also a bit sad.

Regardless of which of these groups are interpolated into the image of the elves, the scene with which I began this section addresses itself to the player as a reflection of institutional racism in the actual world. As Hawke, the player can enact the fantasy of taking justice into one's own hands by punishing the (human/White) perpetrator for their crimes, without further consequences for Hawke. However, despite being able to make a difference in this particular situation, the player/Hawke is unable to materially affect the broader system in which the elves are oppressed on the basis of their race. Although it would be theoretically possible for Hawke to take up the cause of the elves within the fictional world of *Dragon Age* (for example, by using the privileged position that he or she wins to lobby the political powers for change), the game's narrative does not permit the player to explore these options. Instead, the oppression of the elves

within *Dragon Age 2* is presented as a backdrop to the main narrative issue: the institutionalisation of mages.

This treatment of the elves by the writers – that is, their decision to focus on mages at the expense of elves – offers a meta-narrative to some fans that highlights the way in which issues of importance to people of colour are often sidelined in favour of issues that are more important to white people. This perceived bias on the part of BioWare (a North American game company) was satirised by a fan in the following post, which received more than 1,900 likes and reblogs on Tumblr:

> **BioWare:** play this game and choose a side on the issue of mage rights!
>
> **Me:** where the fuck is my elven revolution?
>
> **BioWare:** pay no attention to the race-coded violence behind the curtain

The disparity in the treatment of elves compared to mages has also been highlighted in anonymous confessions, such as the following:

> It really bugs me that the abuse of the mages is a major storyline, but the abuse of the elves, which is often just as bad, is relegated to a few subplots at most.
>
> …
>
> I'd prefer the next game [*Dragon Age: Inquisition*] to be about the elves rather than the Mage/Templar war. Especially after replaying [*Dragon Age 2*] and having to listen to all the insulting background comments about elves.
>
> …
>
> I hate how BioWare creates these amazing elf characters and then makes them all totally optional with no impact on the main storyline. So not only is fighting elf oppression never a major goal, individual elves don't matter either. So frustrating.

This meta-narrative can be, and often is, extended to the fans of *Dragon Age 2*, who tend to privilege the issue of mage institutionalisation over elf oppression in their activism and fan works (not surprisingly, given the mage narrative's dominance within the game). Although some fans explicitly push for an intersectional approach that highlights the dual oppression experienced by elven mages, the issue of mage rights and

elf rights are often opposed to one another as being, respectively, white vs person-of-colour issues among the fan base on Tumblr.

Elves in *Dragon Age* therefore operate on multiple levels as a metaphor for racial minorities. There are, however, problematic elements to the analogy that are not limited to *Dragon Age*. Communications scholar Nathaniel Poor has observed that "elves, as a textual creation, have consistently been produced by the same group over their long history: educated White males" (Poor 2012: 390) As such, elves commonly represent the cultural 'Other' within fantasy games that predominantly feature people who are 'white' in appearance:

> Like Tolkien's work, many Western fantasy settings today lack non-White humans, and so lack a human other. […] Elves… are a way we can narratively acknowledge and explore real-world racial problems in a safe manner. Yet they are also a way in which we can avoid the same problems, as racial tensions in fantasy games rarely exist between different human groups, most of whom are White. (Poor 2012: 378, 391)

Many of these same points have been explicitly argued by *Dragon Age* fans. In an open post to David Gaider, elfyourmother articulated her frustration with people of colour being present within fantasy worlds only as the non-human other:

> To see *Dragon Age* fall back on that trope of "Humans are White, Fantastic Races are POC" was really disheartening and just plain tiresome, to be honest. This has been a thing for as long as I can remember in fantasy […]. People of colour, if they exist at all in these settings, are typically either Orientalist Yellow Peril monsters from the ~Forbidden East~, or dark barbarian hordes from the wastelands outside the pristine lily white lands of the heroes, always threatening the white status quo somehow. At best, we're noble savages who can teach the white heroes ancient wisdom and life lessons about how to be better people. […]
>
> I identify very strongly with the elves in [the fictional world of] Thedas, because I relate to that experience of being marginalized. But at the same time, being relegated yet again to the role of non-human? That is painful. It's reinforcing a really damaging kind of Othering in real life. When the only humans we ever see are white, except for a token here or there, it reinforces the idea that only white people are human. And it's really very strange and off-putting in a story that has oppression and marginalization as major themes […]

Another problem with the role that *Dragon Age* elves play in representing marginalised people of colour is that they are generally depicted with light skin, highly aestheticised European features, and Irish accents (see Figure 47 below). This can lead

to troubling associations when placed into situations of racial oppression, as faerymile argues:

> Elves are not of colour. Elves are WHITE PEOPLE. In all three games, elves are white. […] Situations where elves face racism are downplayed by the way they're portrayed with 'porcelain skin, blond/white hair like moonlight, large blue/green/violet eyes". Elves fit carefully within white supremacist ideals of beauty and intelligence.

This complicates their role in representing real-world marginalisation and raises questions about their ability to help the player to imagine the real-world racial other (Scarry 1998). Indeed, a number of fans have argued that depicting elves as white allows white fans to identify with them and their experience of racial oppression while doing nothing to encourage sympathy towards actual victims of racism. As wolfqueen puts it:

> It's like saying, "Well, people aren't getting that racism is bad when we show it against PoCs [people of colour], so let's show the violence and disgusting treatment of PoCs and make sure white people know it's bad because they're seeing it applied to themselves!" And really, all that does is make people more sympathetic towards the fictionalised group of people than the people in reality whom they are meant to (tangentially) represent. It doesn't expose racism for what it is […]. The main reason people care about the elves and whatever perceived racism thrown at them in *Dragon Age* is because we as an audience are culturally encouraged (and I would say indoctrinated) to sympathise with them because we perceive them as an idealised version of what it means to be white in a Western society.

Figure 47: Merrill, a Dalish elf companion character from *Dragon Age 2* , with white skin and large green eyes

These arguments suggest that sympathy towards the elves' narrative situation may have limited impact on people's sympathy for racially oppressed groups in the broader world, a possibility raised by Elaine Scarry (1998: 47) in her analysis of the role of literature in fostering identification with the imagined other. Yet witnessing the living conditions of the elves nevertheless provoked activism on the part of fans who wished to see the issue of the elves given greater prominence in subsequent games.

In the lead-up to and just after the release of the third instalment of the *Dragon Age* series, fans who were passionate about the issue of elven oppression used their blogs to promote the issue to the game developers and other fans. This often involved long essays analysing the experiences of the elves and their similarities to other oppressed people, suggesting that allowing the player to more fully engage with the plight of the elves would usefully speak back to the actual-world issue of racial oppression. In addition to these verbal arguments, fans would draw or circulate images of elves that visually collapsed the narrative context of the elves with that of their actual world analogues (see Figure 48 and Figure 49 below). In doing so, people were implicitly claiming elves as people of colour, in spite of their depiction as white within the games, by seeking to erase the potentially confusing disjunction between their white-skinned appearance and their narrative of racialised oppression. For example, Figure 48 and Figure 49 below portrays elves with the skin tone and facial features of an African American, visually uniting the elves' history of slavery and cultural loss with that experienced by African Americans.

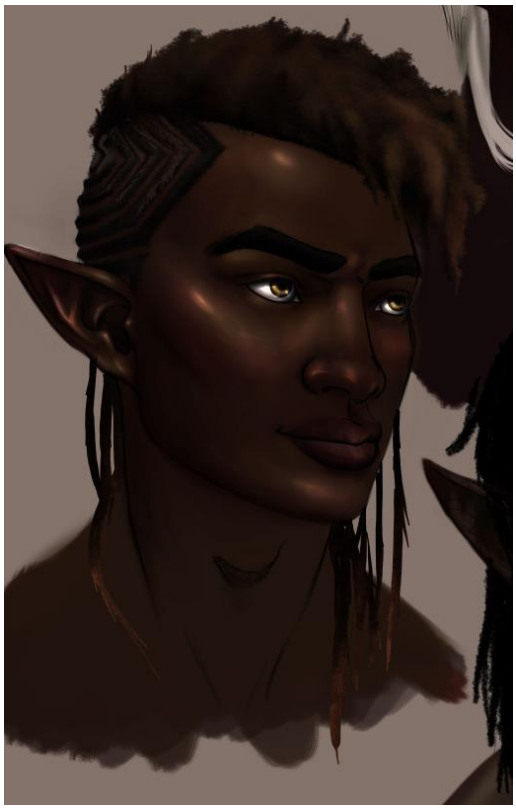

Figure 48: *Dark Skinned Elves*, by Kate Rodriguez (Tumblr) (Used with permission)

Figure 49: Character portrait study, by Oglesby Lee (sizzlyart on Tumblr) (Used with permission)

The explicit depiction of elves as people of colour was reacted to negatively by some fans who claimed that they look 'wrong' because they, as one anonymous fan put it, "lose so much of their ethereal beauty and the purity they represent". These complaints demonstrate that, as an analogy for racial oppression, elves had up until that point failed to provoke the kind of understanding that could lead to action on actual world issues. As Elfyourmother responded in exasperation:

> This is why it matters, why we keep demanding that Thedas [the fictional world of *Dragon Age*] have elves of color, when elves are portrayed within the *Dragon Age* narrative as racially oppressed and real life PoC narratives are co-opted and appropriated for them.
>
> This is the mentality we have been fighting since fucking Tolkien, and this is the mentality that BioWare is feeding into and reinforcing when they keep giving us white elves.

Elfyourmother's argument echoes Arthur and Joan Kleinman's concerns about the appropriation of suffering in popular representations in the West:

> Suffering, 'though at a distance'… is routinely appropriated in American popular culture, which is a leading edge of global popular culture. This globalisation of suffering is one of the more troubling signs of the cultural transformations of the current era: troubling because experience is being used as a commodity, and through this cultural representation of suffering, experience is being remade, thinned out, and distorted. (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996: 1–2)

By giving elves the appearance of (one of the) racially marginalised groups that their narrative position within the game references, these artists are aiming to close the cognitive gap that could otherwise allow the player to, as Scarry (1998: 47) suggested, engage in "an exercise in self-reflection and self-identification, rather than reflection upon and identification with people different from oneself".

Through images and essays, fans were active in their attempts to direct both fan and developer attention to the issue of racial subjugation, both within the narrative universe of *Dragon Age* and within the meta-treatment of elves in the broader world. Although elves are not real, fans spent considerable time and thought making these arguments because they believed that images of racial inequality and prejudice from the

narrative universe of *Dragon Age* had the capacity to influence attitudes towards racially marginalised groups in the actual world. This gave their arguments a charge that might otherwise seem inappropriately placed on images of purely fictional characters like elves, and moves them into the same terrain as the so-called hashtag activism prosecuted on behalf of actual victims of racial violence, such as Michael Brown.

In the next section, I compare the way in which fans responded to the protests surrounding the death of Michael Brown and the representation of elven oppression in *Dragon Age*, arguing that both fundamentally concern the link between racialised representations and racialised violence.

Representational Violence

There are a number of intriguing similarities in the activism conducted on behalf of Michael Brown and the elves in *Dragon Age*. At the same time, there are obvious and pertinent discontinuities between the images in their claims to realism and immediacy that led to hard lines being drawn by fans to preserve the distinction between fictional and non-fictional suffering.

Actions undertaken in response to both Michael Brown's death (and subsequent protests) and the elven oppression in *Dragon Age* were directed towards highlighting the problem of racial inequality in the broader world. In both cases, this issue was threatened to be subsumed by alternative narratives privileged by certain viewers and sanctioned media authorities. Fans recalled long histories of racialised violence and oppression that were enfolded in the images of both the elves and the Ferguson protests, highlighting these associations to contextualise these images within a broader narrative of structural racism and biased media representations. These associations were made

visible in text and images that collapsed the temporal (in the case of Ferguson) and fictional (in the case of *Dragon Age*) distance between these histories and the contemporary digital images of suffering.

Although Michael Brown and the Ferguson protests were real, and the elves in *Dragon Age* are clearly fictional, users on Tumblr were engaged in the same testimonial practices identified by Fuyuki Kurasawa (2009: 93) as belonging to what Wieviorka has called the transnational 'era of the witness' (2006) and Felman and Laub have called 'the age of testimony' (1992).[111] These can be considered to be a detailed breakdown of of Boltanski's (2004) identification of speaking and paying as the two key forms of transnational action, and are constituted by:

1. Giving voice to mass suffering against silence;
2. Interpretation against incomprehension;
3. The cultivation of empathy against indifference;
4. Remembrance against forgetting; and
5. Prevention against repetition. (Kurasawa 2009: 95)

Kurasawa understands these interrelated practices as belonging to both direct eyewitnesses of the events in question and the second-order audience who receives and responds to representations of the events. Although removed from the immediacy of the events, the distant audience plays an important role as the ultimate arbiters of which appeals are considered worthy of action, or not. When the audience does engage in action, their participation in these testimonial practices widens the potential audience for the transmitted representations.

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[111] Although the practice of bearing witness has existed as an orientation towards suffering for a long time, Kurasawa (2009: 94) argues, and I agree, that bearing witness has become increasingly globalised since the 1980s, as technology and mass communication networks such as cameras and the Internet have made the recording and distribution of witness testimony more accessible to the general public.

Each of these testimonial practices can be identified in the actions of *Dragon Age* fans on Tumblr in their response to both the Ferguson protests and the oppression of the elves. The first task, giving voice to mass suffering, involves listening to those who have directly experienced mass suffering and raising awareness among the broader public through practices such as speaking out on behalf of victims and distributing their eyewitness testimonies to a wider audience. In the case of elves from *Dragon Age*, speaking out on behalf of victims was the primary means of undertaking this testimonial task, although the sparse testimony that was given by the elves themselves within the game was also occasionally distributed as evidence. In the case of the Ferguson protests, receiving and re-circulating visual and verbal testimony from eyewitnesses was the key practice, with almost no additional comment made. This choice to amplify rather than re-interpret their message may be due to the perceived ability of the protesters to make their own case using technological aids, combined with the justified concern that a distant observer speaking out about the protests could easily turn into speaking over the protesters themselves.

The second task seeks to ensure that the voicing of mass suffering is understood by engaging in interpretative processes that simultaneously emphasise both the specificity of the event in question as well as its broader significance. *Dragon Age* fans did this in the case of the elves, by analysing the variety of parallels that could be drawn between the elves and other groups stigmatised through the construction of race, suggesting that – while the elves are clearly fictional – their treatment by the game's developers and fans reflected deeply ingrained prejudices held against racially oppressed groups in the actual world. This provided the elven situation with a significance and impact that extended beyond the fictional setting of the game. In respect of Ferguson, although fans did not tend to add textual commentary, their choice to juxtapose photos of the Ferguson protests with those from previous eras highlighted

the long temporal context in which the protests were grounded and linked it to a broader struggle for civil rights in the face of police brutality in the United States.

The third task is to overcome apathy or indifference on the part of the potential audience while encouraging a globalised ethic of care. By comparing the plight of the elves to a range of different groups that have been marginalised on the basis of race, fans sought to capitalise on the relationships that people had developed with elves within the game, including two elven companions that the player gets to know quite well, to encourage an empathetic response. This may place some audience members in the position of identifying with the elves, while others may feel that their particular cultural and historical legacy places them in a position closer to that of the colonising human empire – a potentially uncomfortable position to inhabit. Either way, the identification encouraged by this tactic has the potential to foster "the moral imagination of different audiences" (Kurasawa 2009: 102), with the hope of encouraging action.

In contrast, fans who responded to the Ferguson protests relied on the use of images produced by eyewitnesses to encourage a sense of urgency and compassion. The images circulated were often quite visceral, showing the effects of tear-gas and police violence on protesters' bodies, and emphasised the humanity of the protesters. By choosing to recirculate these particularly affective photos, fans were engaged in a testimonial practice that can, as Kurasawa (2009: 101) describes, "bring a tragedy home" and "put a human face" on the events unfolding in Ferguson, encouraging empathy among their observers through a form of "affective contagion" (Thrift, cited in Papailias 2016: 459).

The fourth task, remembrance against forgetting, involves the rekindling of collective memory as the passing of time threatens to dull the remembrance of suffering. For the elven issue, this involved maintaining a constant advocacy campaign through (at

least) my fieldwork period, which covered 14 months of the four year 'hiatus' period between the second and third games in the *Dragon Age* series. In regards to Ferguson, *Dragon Age* fans would periodically recirculate photos and images of Ferguson in response to further developments (such as the grand jury decision not to indict the police officer who killed Michael Brown, and subsequent police shootings of African Americans) as well as in regular intervals (such as one month, two months, six months, one year, etc.) after the initial events.

Finally, the fifth task – prevention against repetition – speaks to the ultimate purpose of the four other testimonial practices. The activism conducted in response to both the elves and Michael Brown's death and subsequent protests were ultimately intended to fight the racial oppression of people in the actual world, focusing specifically on the role that media representations play in contributing to racialised violence and oppression. In respect of Ferguson, after the initial flurry of images, the digital activism morphed into a critique of the role that mainstream news plays in perpetuating violence through stereotypical narratives that position African Americans as criminals. Similarly, the activism conducted in response to the elves was aimed at highlighting the insidious role that even fictional media representations may play in perpetuating racial prejudice against people of colour in predominantly white societies. Both forms of action were aimed at critiquing the visual cultures that contribute to racial inequality in Western, primarily North American, societies. Nevertheless, hard lines remained drawn between images of racial prejudice drawn from the actual world and the fictional example from *Dragon Age*.

Approximately two years after the Ferguson protests – long after the immediate and visceral images had circulated through Tumblr – a Tumblr user wrote a piece of fiction that paralleled real-world events, in the process turning the 'Black Lives Matter'

movement into ‘Elf Lives Matter’. There was a swift response by fans to condemn the author for exploiting real-world suffering for the purposes of a fanfiction plot and the author deleted their piece. Although the elves may generally be accepted as a useful analogue for considering issues of real-world racial violence and oppression through a consideration of in-game events, this incident shows that there remains a clear hierarchy between fictional and actual world representations. The connection between fiction and the actual world can only be safely made in one direction: the fictional oppression of elves can be used to contemplate the racial oppression of groups in the actual world, but actual suffering should not be transplanted into the fictional world in order to contemplate how elves may respond in a similar situation. In the following section, I consider the ways in which fictional and non-fictional images of suffering compare in their function as catalysts for action in the broader world.

IMAGINING THE OTHER

The similarities in response to fictional and real images of suffering raise interesting questions about the role that images can play in encouraging us to imagine and respond to distant others. How do fictional and non-fictional images compare in provoking a moral response? To what extent do they allow us to imagine the other? How do the actions we take in response affect our perception of them? And what does it say about the intersubjective potential of images of actual suffering, if we respond to fictional representations in more or less the same way? I address these questions in this section by considering three inter-related points: the collapse of context that occurs in social media; the continuum of fictionality that unites Michael Brown and elves as symbols of racial violence and oppression; and the inherent indeterminacy of images that means we risk ‘filling in’ images with our own personal and cultural concerns.

We encounter images of both real and fictional suffering through the same plane – the mediascape of globalised representations – and, increasingly, through the same devices (often the computer, whether that is in the form of a laptop, desktop, or mobile phone). In Chapter 1, I described this as 'context collapse', in which images are disembedded from their original contexts and brought together on a single, convergent platform. In the process, the distinction between different types of images are eroded – all that matters is that they arrest attention and provoke circulation. It is also through this same plane of representation that we can take action in response to both fictional and non-fictional suffering.

Although Boltanski (2004: 17) is right when he suggests that "[i]t is action above all that is the problem" in responding to distant suffering, his observation that "the instruments which can convey a representation and those which can convey an action are not the same" is outdated with the development of Web 2.0. Social media platforms allow spectators to take action in response to images of suffering, either through their own representations or the recirculation of existing ones. Thus, images of real and fictional suffering, and the actions that can be taken in response to them, are all flattened onto the same plane of representation. If, as Boltanski argues, the perceived reality of the images we see are affected by the possibility of taking action in response, then the distinction between real and fictional images breaks down in both directions through the convergence of representation and action.

As symbolic victims of racial violence and oppression, images of Michael Brown and elves function in a similar way, placing them on a continuum of representation that confounds a sharp distinction between fiction and reality. Although the original photos of Michael Brown's death were unstaged, the subsequent circulation of photographs and images of Michael Brown (such as Figure 44 on page 260, with

which I began this chapter), and the related protests transformed him into a symbol: his likeness became disembedded from the particularities of that fateful day in Ferguson, Missouri, to become yet another victim of a long pattern of police violence against African Americans. In the process, as Hinkson (2011: 136) observes regarding the video-captured deaths of protesters in Iran, "the dead man's image takes on significance beyond the specific time and place of his own life and death". This is both an expansion and reduction of Michael Brown's image – in taking on these extra significations, the narrative of Michael Brown the man is subsumed. Who really was Michael Brown? For many protesters and activists, particularly those based on social media, the answer does not matter beyond his status as a victim of race-based police violence. As Hjorth (2017: 145) notes, "the social life of the mobile media is changing the relationship between the memory, image ownership, and dissemination". In a similar way, the elves in *Dragon Age* are associated with racialised violence and oppression outside of their original context, coming to stand in for a multitude of groups that are otherwise absent from the game.

In an era of increasing digital activism, where vast cultural and geographic distances may separate participants on the ground and their digital counterparts, the use of images of suffering to evoke distant action raises questions about the intersubjective potential of these encounters. The similarities in fan responses to fictional and non-fictional images of suffering suggest a continuity in their potential to provoke us to imagine the other, yet images do not portray a simple, universal message to all who view them – even if they have been deliberately crafted for transmission. Although the immediacy of images may seem to make them able to stand for themselves, and to convey "the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual universes of survivors and victims" (Kurasawa 2009: 102), our reception of them is a complex and spontaneous process wherein our cultural meanings and personal biographies 'light up' certain parts

of images and obscure others. Without an in-depth understanding of the context in which particular images were produced, images – both fictional and non-fictional – run the risk of standing only for themselves, so that people encounter them as virtual people who speak to them in highly personal ways. In other words, without the appropriate interpretative context, images run the risk of becoming abstract signifiers, detached from their particular sociohistorical, nevermind individual and subjective, context, making them hyper-adaptable to the circumstances and issues privileged by the distant receiver. Perhaps the ability for certain images to 'light up' and take on sociocultural meanings within the receiver's context is partly to blame for the notorious selectiveness of audiences in responding to such testimonial appeals (Kurasawa 2009).

Yet images retain the potential to provoke contemplation and potential action in regard to issues of social justice in the world, even if they cannot enable a truly intersubjective encounter between humans. In the previous chapter, I argued, along with Marcus (2014), that video games can operate as thought experiments in which players contemplate real-world questions of ethics. Although Elaine Scarry highlights the limitations of addressing otherness through artistic (in her case, literary) representation, I am intrigued by the findings of Mendelson and Papacharissi (2007: 240) who found, in a study where they manipulated whether people thought images were fiction or reality, that "people thought more about images that they thought were fictional". They go on to suggest that:

> [W]hen individuals believe that a communication event is fictional or symbolic, they are more likely to think about the message. It is likely that the specificity of the 'real' photos led people to unconsciously limit the connections they make, while the fictional photos led people to wander to more disparate areas.

Conversely, they found that "people respond more strongly to content they believe is real," leading the researchers to suggest that

> [I]t is possible that when realistic content is more emotionally powerful, this would preclude cognitive processing of meaning. And conversely, because fictional content is

> less emotionally engaging, individuals might be able to think more deeply about it. Perhaps this is the advantage of fictional content. Fiction facilitates the confrontation of topics that are more sensitive or painful.

The contemplative – rather than emotive – demand made by images of fictional suffering could have potential value in educating the spectator about issues such as structural racism and social justice rather than provoking knee-jerk compassion and sympathy. As Stanley Cohen (2013: 178) argued in respect to positive and negative representations of suffering in humanitarian causes, "[A] commitment to long-term structural change called for actively educating donors – not just sentimentally luring them into a guilty gesture of charity." Could fictional representations of suffering offer a way of educating about structural causes of suffering without causing people to turn away, as Sontag (2003) feared images of suffering would do? And could this experience lead to a greater intersubjective encounter with images of suffering in the actual world? These are questions that I must leave hanging for future projects to explore further.

In the following and final chapter, I bring together the threads that have made up my thesis to consider the broader implications of human-image relationships, both in the present and into the future.

CONCLUSION: THE VIRTUAL MILIEU

> You say they're only characters / You say they're not real / But where were you / When I needed to grow? / Where were you / When I needed to believe? / Where were you / When I was dying? / Who saved my life? / Because it wasn't you.
>
> They're more than fiction. They were there for me even if they weren't real. They were there when you weren't. They're more than you think they are.
>
> by Behindtheplottwist (Tumblr)

The above quotation is the text of a popular visual meme on Tumblr, reblogged in one instance more than 92,000 times. The lines of the first paragraph are commonly superimposed on top of images of the fictional characters that the fan adopting the meme has in mind. The sentiment that such characters are "more than fiction" is widespread among fans of different media types, including fans of video games such as *Dragon Age*, and provided the original impetus for this research.

In the subset of video game fans, another post on Tumblr, although only a single sentence, attracted almost 32,000 responses, including from many of my *Dragon Age* friends: "I am not the same person I was before I started playing this video game." In their comments and tags, respondents named the games that had affected them in this way, as well as how they felt they had changed: gaining self-confidence; exploring their gender or sexual identity; meeting new friends; becoming more positive; gaining greater awareness of social justice issues; becoming more politically active; coming to terms with loss, and – more mundanely – simply growing older and experiencing life

transitions alongside the video games they played. The figured images that inhabit popular media are central to these experiences. As I have shown throughout this thesis, in the individualised image worlds of the digital age, figured images are our constant companions. Our relationships with them as virtual people have the potential to introduce new and unpredictable forms of value into our lives and, more broadly, the world.

This ethnographic observation challenges us to extend the sociocultural milieu of anthropological research beyond both face-to-face and telemediated contexts, incorporating a *virtual* milieu into our sociocultural analysis. We already do this in communities that have been the traditional subjects of anthropological analysis, such as when we engage with the agency of spirits, ghosts, and deities, but we tend not to acknowledge the influence of figured imagery, especially those outside of a religious or spiritual context, in contemporary Western societies. Yet this is an undertaking that is becoming increasingly vital as we enter what has variously been called the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' (Schwab 2016) or the 'Second Machine Age' (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014), characterised in part by increased automation and machine learning. As new media technologies increase the ubiquity and intelligence of figured images in our everyday lives, taking the agency of images seriously will become necessary for understanding the complexity of the contemporary sociocultural milieu.

In this concluding chapter, I firstly touch upon the key arguments that I have made throughout this thesis. I then discuss the broader implications of my research, before outlining a research agenda that expands upon the work that I have done to date and looks to the future of human-image relationships. In the final section, I consider how the conclusions of this thesis reflect upon the relationship between images and humanity more broadly.

THE POWER OF IMAGES

I began this thesis with a series of moving images (Figure 1 on page xviii). In these images, Kyle Broflovski, a cartoon character from *South Park*, argues that virtual people like Luke Skywalker, Santa Claus, and Harry Potter are 'real', perhaps 'realer' than actual people, saying:

> They've changed my life, changed the way I act on the Earth. Doesn't that make them kind of 'real'? They might be imaginary, but they're more important than most of us here. And they're all gonna be around long after we're dead. So in a way, those things are more realer [sic] than any of us.

In this thesis, I have argued that virtual people are indeed real, and have very real effects in people's lives. I have argued, along with the likes of anthropologists Alfred Gell (1998) and John Caughey (1984), and art historians such as W.J.T. Mitchell (2005), Jonathon Freedberg (1989), and Hans Belting (2011), that it is important for scholars to engage with this agency of images. More specifically, I have argued that figured images need to be considered in anthropological analysis as *virtual people* – powerful actants in a world increasingly mediated by individualised image sources.

My research focused upon three questions: Why do fans act as if the computer-generated characters of *Dragon Age* are real? What effects do relationships with these characters have in the lives and identities of fans? And how do these relationships orient fans in relation to the broader world? I began with the observation that we are increasingly living in what I have called *image worlds* – phenomenal worlds shaped by the individualised paths we take through the constellation of images that make up the globalised mediascape (Appadurai 1996). In this context, the images that we encounter arguably have a greater potential to exhibit agency than ever before, because they are increasingly encountered on their own terms, rather than being filtered through our immediate face-to-face environment. The convergence culture (Jenkins 2006a) of the digital age means that the traditional interpretive frames in which we once encountered

these images are collapsing, brought together in the melting pot of social media (Chapter 1). This challenges many of the ontological distinctions with which Western culture has traditionally organised the world, such as that between fiction and non-fiction, high and low culture. Both of these factors contribute to what has been identified as the contemporary era of 'post-truth', in which clear distinctions between truth and falsehood appear to be less important than images that appeal to an individual's beliefs and emotions. However, I have argued that the images that we encounter in our individualised image worlds do not merely reproduce and reinforce worldviews.

Images intervene in the world in surprising and unpredictable ways, introducing new forms of value that elude the hermeneutic control of producers and receivers alike (Chapter 2). In their 'address' to us (Gadamer 1986), human-image encounters are virtually intersubjective: simulated encounters with virtual people have the potential to cause events to happen in the same way that an encounter with an actual person may. This is a secondary form of agency (Gell 1998), generated from their surplus of meaning (Mitchell 2005), but one that is becoming increasingly important to acknowledge as images proliferate in the world and acquire new capabilities.

New media technologies expand the potential for images to address us by giving them the capacity to *respond* to the actions of the spectator-participant (Chapter 3). The interactive capability of the digital image amplifies their potential agency by combining some of the most powerful clues to their liveliness in a moving, socially intelligent and responsive image. Although this is demonstrated only in a limited and contingent way within the context of *Dragon Age 2*, it points to the possible futures of human-image interactions as artificial intelligence and machine learning, augmented and virtual realities, become increasingly banal aspects of our everyday lives.

Encounters with digital images have the potential to spontaneously and unpredictably influence the way that individuals experience the world. On a personal level, image encounters have the potential to dramatically reshape the narratives of people's lives by helping them towards insights that may otherwise have eluded them, refiguring their past, present, and projected future (Chapter 4). In the telemediated space of social media, images – through the different ways in which they address themselves to people – become mediating nodes in online networks as individuals debate personal identity constructions (Chapter 5), and politico-ethical positions (Chapter 6). In both of these instances, the game characters become sites of contest that revealed the disparate image worlds of their fans while also offering a shared language to engage with these same issues.

The potential of fictional images to exert agency in these ways raises interesting questions about the possibility of intersubjective encounters through images of *actual* others. In the final ethnographic chapter (Chapter 7), I argued that the context collapse associated with social media, combined with the inherent indeterminacy of images, prevents genuinely intersubjective encounters through images, even as these same images retain the potential to reshape individuals' phenomenal worlds. Images of actual people, transmitted to us through social media, are no more – or less – powerful than those of fictional others: both are *virtually intersubjective* in their address to us, and as spontaneous and unpredictable as each other. While there may be genuine ethical insights gained through transmitted images of actual others, particularly suffering others, there is nothing to suggest that this potential is limited to, nor guaranteed by, their non-fictional nature. In the mediatised world of post-industrial capitalism, images must compete for time and attention – and their appeal is predicated upon the spectator finding something within the image that addresses them, rather than their designation as fact or fiction.

How do the relationships formed with *Dragon Age* characters orient fans in relation to the broader world? In this thesis, I have shown that human-image relationships are not an escape from the world, even if we want them to be. No matter how fantastical the images in question, or how far removed from reality their context may seem, they inexorably point to the broader world of which they are fundamentally a part. Whether it involves necromantic magic (Chapter 4), a supernaturally enhanced elf (Chapter 5), a possessed magic user (Chapter 6), or the oppression of elves (Chapter 7), images address us in ways that inevitably reflect and help to shape our understanding of self, other, and world. In the process, we are interpolated into the image's very construction, giving us a personal stake in the way that the image is received and responded to by others within our social milieu. The amorphous character of shared images therefore opens a space for dialogue, negotiation, and contestation about the world through the generative potential of their multiplicity of meanings (as highlighted in chapters 5 and 6).

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Although this work is concerned with the human-image relationships established by fans of a particular video game, it speaks to a broader potential for images to exert influence within the contemporary media environment. This expands upon, as well as modifies, the observations of Thompson (1995) and Giddens (1991), among others, about the increasing mediatisation of society. It also indirectly touches upon contemporary concerns about the fragmentation of society, as well as the still nascent potential for virtual people, imbued with artificial intelligence, to become an integral part of our lives. This section touches upon the first two of these points, while acknowledging the limitations of this research in generalising to broader societal trends. The following section addresses the potential future for human-image relationships.

In Thompson (1995: 34) and Giddens' (1991: 4) respective descriptions of mediated worldliness/experience, images are, like in much media studies scholarship (see Chapter 2), inert symbolic fodder with which people reflexively construct their sense of self, other, and world. In this thesis, I have argued that people's relationships with figured media images are far more complex and unconscious than Thompson and Giddens allow. As 'virtual people', the images we encounter address us in ways that are spontaneous, indeterminate, and sometimes even unwelcome. This injects an unpredictable element into mediated worldliness, as individuals coproduce their phenomenal world in partnership with images. As our forays through the globalised mediascape become increasingly individualised, the potential for images to influence us in ways that elude the mediating effect of the face-to-face sociocultural environment is becoming more pronounced. The communities of interest that spring up around influential images (including, but not limited to fandoms) do not substitute for this broader mediation: indeed, scholars and commentators have suggested that the emergence of 'echo chambers' in social media – groups of individuals who virtually congregate around common allegiance to particular beliefs, ideas, or images – are contributing to the apparent fragmentation of society (e.g. Sunstein 2017).[112]

The meanings that emerge from human-image encounters seem neither inherently beneficial nor detrimental to broader society, despite long-standing concerns about the deleterious effect of images (see Chapter 2). At their best, human-image relationships "materialis[e] concepts and meanings beyond the limits of a narrow

[112] 'Echo chambers' are distinct from the related concept of 'filter bubbles' in that the first are voluntary associations of individuals on social media, whereas the second refers to the automated curation of content on sites like Facebook, which filters information according to an algorithmic determination of users' pre-existing political positions (Pariser 2012).

individualism," enabling us to "encounter difference, imagine change that has yet to come, and make possible the now" (Meskimmon 2011: 8). From this position, images can – as was the case for many *Dragon Age* fans – inspire greater ethical consideration and social justice activism. At their worst, human-image relationships may confirm existing prejudices, encourage extreme perspectives, and advance societal fragmentation. Their inherent ambiguity means that the same image could potentially lead to both responses in different individuals. Throughout this continuum, however, the possibility remains for images to introduce surprising twists to our existing worldviews.

The unpredictability of image encounters means that we need to take the agency of images seriously in scholarly work that deals with the media, in any culture around the world. This means going beyond an analysis of either producers or receivers, as valuable as this is, to engage with the meanings that emerge spontaneously from human-image encounters. The indeterminacy of such relationships will have an increasing impact upon the world as media become ever more integrated into our everyday lives. My research is thus suggestive of broader issues that need to be considered within the contemporary media environment. Questions that could be addressed in future research include: How might virtual people influence the lives of those who do not identify themselves as fans? How are virtual people affecting traditional face-to-face relationships? And does the virtual milieu come into play in broader societal dilemmas and conflicts, such as in debates over identity, immigration, and terrorism? As technology develops, and virtual people become even more intelligent and embedded in our everyday lives, these questions will become increasingly important to consider.

The Future of Human-Image Relationships

This thesis engages with very simplistic digital images – ones that are programmed to respond in certain ways to a limited range of inputs – but it points towards how our relationships with images may evolve as they become ever more intelligent and socially responsive. We are on the cusp of a new age of machine learning, which may bring with it the capability for images to dynamically respond to any manner of inputs. Machine learning is the capability of a computer system to "independently learn from, and continuously adapt to, data without being explicitly programmed for that data" and is an important part of artificial intelligence (Alberta Machine Intelligence Institute 2018: n.p.).

Artificial intelligence is already being utilised in video games. It is involved in procedurally generating maps (video game environments), pathfinding (determining how to move a non-player character from one location on a map to another, within the constraints established by the game), and controlling non-player characters' responses to the player's actions (by selecting from a variety of possible responses). But these are, in media studies professor Ian Bogost's (2017: n.p.) words, "deflationary examples" – they are not what we tend to have in mind when we think of artificial intelligence. Professor of interactive computing, Charles Isbell (cited in Bogost 2017: n.p.) defines artificial intelligence according to two criteria: that it must "learn over time in response to changes in its environment," and that "what it learns to do should be interesting enough that it takes humans some effort to learn". The latter criterion is what distinguishes the kind of dynamically and socially responsive digital images that appear in, for example, the experimental, artificially intelligent interactive story *Façade* (Mateas and Stern 2005; see also Jones 2008, Chapter 4) from the banality of automated recommendation systems such as those employed by Amazon or Netflix. Truly socially

intelligent images – those that utilise artificial intelligence or machine learning to respond dynamically to social cues – bring us closer to new media artist Peter Weibel's (2003: 594) prediction of "the image as [a] living system". How would this *dynamic* capability to respond affect our relationship to these images? Will artificially intelligent images exceed the apparent liveliness of the digital images discussed in this thesis? Or will a human hand prove necessary for the creation of images that can capture us on an intersubjective level?

Digital images will soon be able to accompany us outside of the confines of the fictional world of a video game. We have already seen how augmented reality technology in *Pokémon Go* (Niantic 2016) has enabled fantastical creatures to apparently co-habit the same physical environment. While these can currently only be perceived through the somewhat awkward hand-held device of a smart phone, development continues on wearables, such as smart glasses, which will enable us to perceive virtual persons and creatures using what may very well become an integral part of our daily attire.[113] This raises the possibility of perceiving our everyday world – our houses, workplaces, cities – as populated by virtual people. How would our relationships to such images change, if they could accompany us through all parts of our life? What if these images were combined with artificial intelligence, perhaps allowing them to dynamically respond to what they 'see' – such as, for example, sitting on your actual couch? How would our relationship to the actual world change in the face of this melding of fictional and actual worlds? Such images could become our life companions to an extent that is currently not possible.

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[113] There are still many challenges associated with wearable augmented reality devices that have prevented this to date – see Gardonio (2017) for an overview.

Virtual reality is a technology that has excited popular imagination since the 1980s and has seemed to be on the horizon of mainstream adoption since that time. In comparison to augmented reality, which expands the reach of images, virtual reality promises an enhancement of existing modes of engagement with images. Fans of the game already seek to limit outside stimuli while playing, to better achieve a sense of immersion in the fictional world (see Chapter 1). Virtual reality offers this possibility on a greater scale by allowing one's visual environment to be entirely occupied by the fictional world, and to respond in a natural way to one's head movements within it.

Virtual reality has already inspired concerned commentators to warn of the dangers of addiction (e.g. Ablow 2014, Davidow 2012, Hillis 1999: 29, 2009: 88, Tisdale 2016). Others are concerned about virtual reality making the violence, common in video games, too realistic and emotionally intense (Rundle 2015) – at its most extreme, commentators warn about the possibility of dying in the actual world if someone experiences death in virtual reality (e.g. Barack 2018, Dixit 2014, Richmond 2014). However, the intensity of the experience may also lead to a reconsideration of the role that violence plays in such games (McMullan 2016). Some scholars have raised the possibility for virtual reality to allow for ethical experimentation and reasoning, similar to that which I described in Chapter 6, whilst also arguing for the potential of ethical and political manipulation through the same mechanisms (see Gonzalez-Franco and Lanier 2017 for an overview).

In all of these cases, commentators are raising concerns about the loss of rational self-control in an environment in which images are dominant (similar to the concerns about addiction that Boellstorff (2008: 176–178) noted in his study of *Second Life*). These concerns beg the question: Without the visual reminder of the actual world to

ground us, could images in virtual reality have even greater agency than those experienced in other media?

Artificially intelligent robots are another area where a consideration of human-image relationships is relevant. Robots are, arguably, a form of digital image: a three-dimensional image (similar to a sculpture) imbued with the same responsive capability as their two-dimensional counterparts. Science and technology studies professor Sherry Turkle has been exploring human relationships with 'sociable' robots for the past 30 years (Turkle 1995, 2005 [1984], 2011), and this is an area that will become of increasing importance as robots move outside of university laboratories and into people's homes.[114]

A consideration of the agency of images could enhance these studies by exploring the linkages between our responses to robots and other forms of imagery. Acknowledging the continuity – and ubiquity – of human relationships with figured images can help us to distinguish what is qualitatively different in our relationship with robots, while perhaps mitigating some of the alarmism that has accompanied technological innovation since the 18th century. This is not to suggest that sociable robots will not have profound impacts upon society, but that they should be recognised in scholarship as a continued, although expanded and evolved, relationship with figured images rather than a dramatically new development that has only arisen with the technologies of robotics and artificial intelligence.

[114] Even today, robots are beginning to enter into our homes through smart home devices such as the Google Home, Apple Homepod, and particularly the more personified Amazon Alexa.

IMAGES AND HUMANITY

In his book of the same title, Bruno Latour (1993) famously declared that 'we have never been modern,' referring to the falsity of the modern Western ontological split between the human and non-human. The same is true in respect of humans and images, and the virtual more broadly (as articulated by Tom Boellstorff (2008: 237) in his complementary argument that we have "always been virtual").

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that people and images coproduce one another, both at the initial moment of their encounter and in an ongoing relationship where images unfold into new and unexpected meanings as we ourselves change and grow. This dynamic process of mutual shaping is suggestive of the ways in which personhood is distributed (Gell 1998: 104) in a virtual milieu rather than bounded by our biological bodies. However, whereas in Gell's theory of distributed personhood, it is the artist (or producer) alone who is distributed through their oeuvre (1998: 232ff), my research posits that it is also the image spectator whose personhood is distributed through the images that address them (similar to Grossberg's (1992) 'mattering maps', discussed in Chapter 4).

The complex, and increasingly individualised, constellations of images that thus partially form contemporary personhood provide potential connection (and friction) points with others, whether face-to-face or telemediated, in tangled social imaginaries that do not easily map onto any particular physical environment. Images, and our relationships with them, therefore do not represent an escape from the world, as casual observation may incline one to believe. Indeed, it is increasingly through images that we engage with the world, and with each other. Anthropology must engage with this virtual milieu in order to come to terms with contemporary forms of subjectivity and relationality.

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