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Masculinity and Melancholia at the Virtual End: Leaving the World (of Warcraft)

To play the online game *World of Warcraft* is, for many, to enjoy an intimate and complex life with—and as—an avatar. In turn, the permanent end of such play, by quitting the game, can entail a deep sense of loss. At the height of *World of Warcraft*'s popularity—when the game might best have been characterized by its most ardent players as a lifestyle and, for some, an addiction—this sense of loss inspired a very particular genre of machinima: the memorialization of the avatar through its ritualized farewell and suicide.[1] These avatar suicide videos tend to share key visual, narrative, and musical features that help consolidate individual machinimas into a genre. The most common narrative structure, supported through visual representation, involves the avatar giving away its possessions (which attest to its high status and accomplishment in the game as well as to the time the player has invested in playing it), dressing in its most modest clothing or even stripping down to its underclothes, and then waving goodbye and, in some cases, weeping (both waving and weeping are in-game animations accessed through emote commands).[2] It is a story of the virtual end, of the avatar's leaving not only the world (of Warcraft) but also the player. The

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accompanying music—generally pop or rock songs about broken relationships and lost loves—further intensifies the dominant affective registers of loss, grief, and mourning that exceed the game world.

World of Warcraft's game world—like that of many other massively multiplayer online games—is, significantly, a man's world, despite the fact that many women also play the game and inhabit its world. Organized around questing, battling, and killing, *World of Warcraft* outfits most of the male avatars with armor that accentuates their already exaggeratedly masculine bodies—excessively broad shoulders, narrow waists, massive thighs—while, consistent with the game's gendered fantasy, most female avatars are given skin-tight armor that reveals their full breasts, slender waists, and ample hips.[3] On the vernacular level, in-game communications and verbal play frequently extend the game world's heteromasculine environment through feminized insults and homophobic slurs, regular allusions to icons of normative masculinity like Chuck Norris, and the tendency of male players to aid, flirt with, and harass female avatars (regardless of the sex of the player). Whether evidenced in the game's highly gendered representations and its emphasis on battle or in the players' everyday acts and discursive practices, *World of Warcraft* invokes and perpetuates norms of masculinity; thus, while I have argued elsewhere that *World of Warcraft* plays with—and even "camps"—masculinity (Lau, "Camping"), it is safe to say that the dominant culture of the game world and the manifest tone of the game are saturated with hegemonic heteromasculinity.

If *World of Warcraft*'s heteromasculine landscape is typical of massively multiplayer online games, so too is its tendency to destabilize the boundary between real and virtual. Game worlds and material worlds are thoroughly imbricated phenomena that bear on all dimensions of a player's experience, confusing typical demarcations between play and work, visual representation and corporeal experience, self and other.[4] Tom Boellstorff, in his ethnography of *Second Life*, describes these blurred distinctions as "bleed-through," a metaphor that captures well the fluidity and instability inspired by the ludic underpinnings of these game worlds (61). The most intimate bleed-through occurs when perceptions of self and avatar—self and other—collapse, leaving in their place a sense of subjectivity always in flux. Such moments of assimilation between self and avatar, if only ever fleeting, resonate in the ritual acts of memorializing the end of an avatar's life.

The popularity of producing and viewing avatar suicide videos suggests that an avatar's permanent departure from the world (of Warcraft) is a profoundly meaningful act—not only for the player but also for a cultural

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politics of gender and desire. That an avatar's suicide is meaningful for a player is probably quite easy to imagine, for a cultural politics of gender and desire perhaps less so, but I want to suggest that to understand one is to understand the other. The loss associated with leaving *World of Warcraft* sits at the nexus of the game's destabilizing impulses, particularly its ability to foster a hybrid subjectivity between player and avatar and its culture of heteromasculinity; as such, the public act—in ritualized fashion—of leaving the world offers a particularly compelling case for thinking about masculinity and melancholia in relation to contemporary gender politics.[5] I thus offer a reading of *World of Warcraft* avatar suicide machinima through Judith Butler's theory of melancholy gender to suggest that such a theory helps explain the cultural resonance and import of these videos even as the videos themselves help us continue to think through the nuances of melancholy gender, especially for heteronormative masculinity.

Ludic Immortality and the Virtual End

As an open-ended and subscription-based massively multiplayer online game, *World of Warcraft* relies on a ludic immortality.[6] Avatars may die with regularity, but they are almost immediately resurrected with very little "cost": a temporary decrease in health points, repairable damage to one's armor, lost time. Any diminishment the avatar might experience as a result of death is generally recuperated quite quickly and inexpensively. In this sense, death is an everyday part of game play, so quotidian that a player might characterize it simply as an "unnecessary impediment to her gaming experience" (Klastrup 147). Nonetheless, even such "soft" deaths give meaning to the game world, as Lisbeth Klastrup makes clear in her analysis of death and death stories in *World of Warcraft* as features that "help form the experience of the world as a social site by enforcing certain social practices" (163). *World of Warcraft*'s developers further articulate this understanding of death's importance in their justification of death penalties—the consequences of dying—for the emergence of a viable social world: "[W]e also want players to respect the world, which is why things like falling damage, death penalties, and other elements exist" (qtd. in Klastrup 147). Or, as Karin Wenz makes clear, "The presence of death adds to the experience of a game as a world" (315). At the same time, the pervasive and unremarkable nature of in-game death highlights the fact that permanent avatar deaths—essentially acts of leaving the world (of Warcraft)—require a certain agency and intentionality.

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To quit the game is not necessarily to embrace the virtual end, however. Players who choose to stop paying the monthly subscription fee, for instance, do not compromise their avatars in any way; rather, the avatars are suspended in their current state, as if awaiting the return of a player who may resume his or her subscription. Many such players choose to mark this type of exit from the game world through farewell announcements—letters posted to the player's guild, posts to official and unofficial *World of Warcraft* forums, entries on blogs—that may suggest a certain finality (Dutton), but the fact that the avatars continue to exist in cyberlimbo distinguishes these departures from an avatar's permanent death, its virtual end. Thus, when an avatar leaves the world (of Warcraft), its exit is final and absolutely intentional. That is, in order for an avatar to experience a permanent death, the player must first identify the avatar to be deleted, select the "delete" button, and then type the word *delete* in the subsequent dialogue box to confirm the action. When avatars "commit suicide," to invoke a common game vernacular, there is no question about the intended outcome.

Where quitting the game is often accompanied by a farewell announcement, avatar suicides are much more frequently staged in machinima and widely disseminated through YouTube and other user-generated media sites (Dutton 39–46; Nagenborg and Hoffstadt 91). "Drakedog's Last Video—R.I.P.," the most famous avatar suicide video with over 200,000 downloads, exemplifies the genre (Dutton 44; Nagenborg and Hoffstadt 91): it opens with Drakedog sitting on a throne while each of his items is highlighted, in turn, so the viewer can appreciate his skill and achievement; he then destroys each item, dresses in red boots and a pair of red pants, logs out, and is then deleted.[7] Even though Drakedog played the Korean version of the game, and the item names and Drakedog's final message are thus in Korean, the machinima is set to the British rock band Muse's song "Plug In Baby," the refrain of which is "to forget your love," a sentiment inspired by a series of lies and betrayals, suggesting Drakedog's suicide is motivated by a profound love gone wrong. Beyond the affective power of the avatar's suicide, "Drakedog's Last Video—R.I.P." is especially meaningful for serious *World of Warcraft* players because Drakedog had cultivated an international reputation as a highly accomplished player through his series of machinimas that not only demonstrated his PVP (player vs. player) skills but also taught others how to improve their own PVP play. He was, essentially, an early *World of Warcraft* celebrity, which further intensified the sense of loss and grief surrounding his avatar's suicide.[8]

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Self-Avatar Subjectivity and the Meaning(lessness) of Death

If virtual-end machinimas reveal a strangely simultaneous intrapersonal and intersubjective relationship between and within the avatar and the player, that may be because playing *World of Warcraft* (and many similar games) involves playing with the boundaries of subjectivity.[9] Game studies scholars consistently highlight the movement between virtual and nonvirtual identities as players oscillate “between identifying with the character as an extension of self, and relating to it as a separate, fictional entity” (Aldred 355). Whether the player-avatar relationship gives rise to a “hybrid entity” (Waggoner 173), a “projective identity” (Gee 56), or a “cyborgian extension” (Boulter 3), Jonathan Boulter argues that “the digital game [. . .] poses challenges to ideas like the fully integrated, singular, stable self, a constituted interiority without flux” (3).

With respect to *World of Warcraft* in particular, Ragnhild Tronstad suggests that there are two distinct modes of avatar identification, being and having (although he does not refer to them in this way), such that the player either “has an experience of ‘being’ the character” or has a “consciousness of the character as an entity other than [himself/herself]” (251). Tronstad’s “being” the avatar obviously expands traditional understandings of subjectivity, but I want to push his distinction even further to argue that the avatar is *always* both subject and object, self and other, that it is impossible to cleave the being from the having. Instead, the avatar and the player continually express an entangled way of living in the world.

For Tronstad, avatar being occurs when a player enters into “a state of trance-like concentration in which the body seems to perform and react automatically as well as perfectly, without the conscious mind interfering” (253), a moment he reads as exemplary of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow.” In this case, *being* depends on the avatar body and the player body existing in perfect synchrony, and that synchronized doubling of the body emphasizes the paradoxically embodied nature of a self-avatar subjectivity. Such a complete assimilation of avatar body and player body (or player body and avatar body) helps us imagine how self and avatar are simultaneously one and the other in the most idealized sense. While Tronstad’s theory of avatar being emerges from his focus on the mechanics of game play and thus privileges the practical dimensions of such a coupling, I want to underscore its broader ontological and epistemological significance—that is, the very possibility, however fleeting, of a seamless

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self-avatar subjectivity extending the boundaries of what we experience as, and know to be, the self.

Beyond these moments of perfect play and the complete assimilation of self and avatar, immersive game worlds are flush with instances of self-avatar subjectivity inspired by their mundane features rather than particular gaming experiences. To take one example, in *World of Warcraft* there is a particular sound for invisibility within the game, and that sound—heard by the player—forces the avatar to look around its nearby surroundings to identify the invisible actor, either an NPC (a nonplayer character, part of the game's stock characters) or, in some circumstances, another player. In the vast majority of cases, the sound of invisibility also signals danger because the invisible actor is likely to attack the avatar. By rendering invisibility as a sound, *World of Warcraft* encourages a conjoined player-avatar subjectivity by integrating their sensory experiences, by making hearing the mechanism for seeing. Of course, both player and avatar must actually "look" for the sound, but what they see is interdependent; thus, even though the player is viewing the avatar from a distinct vantage point, the perspective and range are still essentially limited by the avatar's embodied position (that is, the player never gains a third-person omniscient view).

Although such shifting sensory experiences created through the game's environment are critical to fostering a self-avatar subjectivity, there are many other ways in which the avatar's embodied knowledge crosses the boundaries of the game and affects the player's corporeal body, again challenging the assumption of the player-self as a contained and bounded entity. In my own experience playing *World of Warcraft*, such moments frequently emerge when sound, again, disrupts the power of the avatar's sight and gaze. For example, there have been times when I have been intently focused on nonbattle activities, such as gathering herbs, only to be attacked by a wild beast that enters from offscreen without my avatar-self seeing it. In these situations, my first awareness of the attack, as a player, is through sound—a growl, the avatar's grunt—and this unexpected attack almost always makes me jump in my seat, makes my heart race, my adrenaline surge, and my skin break out in goose bumps. That an attack on my avatar can provoke an intense physical response in my human body underscores the profound integration of corporeal and virtual bodies, of self and avatar. At the same time, despite my trembling, sweaty hands and my erratic pulse, I "know" that the near-death experience is a fiction, a game, and this knowledge ensures that the avatar is also always other. Thus, even as playing *World of Warcraft* plays with subjectivity, even as it challenges the boundaries of the self, its

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fictions also maintain those boundaries, and it is this enduring paradox of simultaneously being both self and other that structures a self-avatar subjectivity in ways that are important for making sense of virtual-end machinima.

Of course, the paradoxical nature of self-avatar subjectivity is not limited to the ways avatar and player cross each other's physical and corporeal boundaries. Emotional, psychological, and ontological considerations also surface in discussions among players that exist outside of the game world. A recent forum conversation on worldofwarcraft.com under the heading "Is Death Meaningless?" illustrates these aspects of self-avatar subjectivity beautifully, perhaps because the specter of mortality cuts to the heart of existence itself. As with all forum threads, the responses range from playful to philosophical, from serious to dismissive, but in this particular case—regardless of tone—they all speak to the fact that players themselves have pondered the nature of the self-avatar relationship. In the context of *World of Warcraft*, the question of whether death is meaningless sets up an expectation that the ensuing discussion will explore the degree to which death affects the gaming experience; however, Thedkmeleé, a level 75 human death knight, undermines those expectations by inviting players to address the question's existential dimensions:[10] "Our toons constantly die and resurrected, what is the psycological impact on them."[11] In the following excerpts from the full forum discussion, several players take up Thedkmeleé's invitation to ponder the emotional and ontological considerations implicit in the self-avatar relationship:

Nebukenezzar
<Grievance>
100 Tauren Death Knight

They ponder the meaning of life while the user is logged off.

"WHAT AM I?" yells Neb, "Am I nothing more than a plaything only to entertain the user?!"

"I die, come back . . . die again and again only to come back. This isn't life . . . this isn't anything"

Imagine when the servers are about to shut down forever. Will your characters talk with you? Will they ask if they will dream?

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Florence
<Human Female>
90 Human Priest

I am coming to understand how death impacts toons and the player/toon relationship myself. It is an interesting topic. [. . .] I do not believe the impact of death (one that you could be resurrected from) has nearly the same heavy impact on a toon as a player or on a toon faced with perma death (i.e. deletion). No doubt toons don't like it, and I am sure constantly dying impacts DPS [damage per second] number output, tank survivability and Healer efficiency, this being true even in later runs.

Perhaps consider resurrectable deaths as "soft deaths" meaning your toon can come back and so while they are not necessarily happy gung-ho about the whole thing it's not real death—deletion and having data wiped. [. . .]

A toon who dies a lot, however, could begin to mistrust their player and this could impact the player/toon relationship which itself could result in a toon being "Shelved" and even possibly deleted, so toons do worry about that.

Khorlat
<Sixth AD>
100 Night Elf Druid

Well, our avatars don't really have a mind of their own; we are their minds. So the question is really "how does your avatar's death affect You psychologically?" because without a mind there is no psychological impact.

The psychological impact of an avatar's death on us will depend on the context. Wiping right when H Archimonds is at 627k health on the last pull of the night at 11:59 pm on

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> *Monday will probably impact us different than death at N Archimonde kill #6 in phase I to shadowfel. It's all about you. We're inured to their "deaths." As I was quoted saying, I don't think their death animation is really on par with our* RL *[real-life] death. It's more akin to a forced temporary paralysis that require simple steps to restore.*
>
> *Maybe one day our characters will have a mind of their own and they can really tell us how it impacts them, but it's clear that's not right now. In the end, I think right now we're just projecting what we see with motivations, though in our reality, it's just a series of very clever illusions. Sometimes I'm just weirded out that developers can create this illusion of movement in a* 3D *space on this flat monitor.*

The seeming divergence in these responses—the agency and independence that Nebukenezzar and Florence grant their avatars versus Khorlat's claim that "our avatars don't really have a mind of their own; we are their minds"—captures the paradoxical nature of self-avatar subjectivity, which encompasses all three of their positions simultaneously. Nebukenezzar's tongue-in-cheek post immediately hones in on the ontological question: "'WHAT AM I?' yells Neb." Clearly, Neb is not the "user" since he "ponder[s] the meaning of life [when] the user is logged off" and wonders whether he is "a plaything only to entertain the user."[12] Here, then, Nebukenezzar imagines the avatar as other with a distinct consciousness, although Nebukenezzar—the player posting the response—is also Neb (Nebukenezzar) the avatar concerned with his ontological status. Florence, in a more serious-seeming reflection, similarly posits an agency and consciousness for the avatar, but in this case such consciousness is tightly bound to the avatar-player relationship: "I am coming to understand how death impacts toons and the player/toon relationship," and "A toon who dies a lot [. . .] could begin to mistrust their player and this could impact the player/toon relationship."

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Like Florence, Khorlat seems to take a more serious line in considering Thedkmeleé's question of the psychological effect of ludic immortality on avatars, and with his rationalist perspective that "avatars don't really have a mind of their own; we are their minds," he seeks to reorient the question to ask, "'[H]ow does your avatar's death affect You psychologically?'" Implicit in such a reframing, however, is a sense of the avatar as also distinct from the player; that is, the player is the avatar's mind *and* is thus affected, psychologically, by the other's death. This paradox of both being and having the avatar surfaces again when he writes, "It's all about you. We're inured to their 'deaths.'" Thus, even for Khorlat, who privileges the most rationalist or conventional understanding of subjectivity, it is impossible to overcome the constant slippage from players to avatars, made especially clear in the ways that the effects of ongoing death, of a ludic immortality, move across the boundaries of self and avatar through illusion, affect, and psychology.[13] Thus, even as different expressions of self-avatar subjectivity emerge in and through *World of Warcraft*'s multiple registers—gamic, technological, sensory, corporeal, discursive—they all model an alternative ontology of the self that encourages a reconsideration of subjectivization.

Masculinity and Melancholy Gender

Butler's theory of melancholy gender provides a compelling way to untangle and perhaps understand the paradoxical nature of a self-avatar subjectivity. In "Melancholy Gender / Refused Identification," Butler begins by clarifying Freud's conflicting ideas about grief in relation to decathexis and the role it plays in ego formation. Freud initially imagined grief to be resolvable in "Mourning and Melancholia," and thus only melancholia—the inability to resolve one's grief—led to the narcissistic incorporation of the lost object into the ego. Later, however, in *The Ego and the Id*, he suggested that melancholic identification may be critical to the very process of resolving grief because it enables one to let go of the object, although this letting go is actually an internalization and incorporation of the object into the ego, a compensatory act that ensures the loss is not experienced as complete or total. As Butler describes it, "There is, rather, the incorporation of the attachment *as* identification, where identification becomes a magical, a psychic form of preserving the object. [. . .] The lost object is, in that sense, made coextensive with the ego itself" (134).

Drawing on Freud's contention that the ego is bodily and gendered and extending the psychoanalytic understanding of loss as fundamental to

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the process of subject formation, Butler argues that the ongoing production and reproduction of gender are shaped by a melancholia that emerges out of the matrix of cultural prohibitions necessary to establish heterosexuality. While heterosexuality is constituted through multiple negations—basically, the ongoing disciplining and negation of polymorphously perverse sexuality—the prohibition on homosexuality is particularly forceful in the u.s. cultural context, denying the opportunity to grieve the lost possibility of same-sex love, whether as love object or as erotic love. In essence, the foreclosure of such possibilities for homosexual attachment represents a loss that must remain unrecognized and thus never able to be mourned in a heterosexist culture. At the same time, because "the compulsory production of heterosexuality" (144) is achieved largely through cultural prohibitions against homosexuality, heteronormative gender identity depends upon both repudiation and desire, what James Hansell characterizes as "an unstable dialectic between 'being' and 'loving'" (339). For Hansell, one "solution" to the heterosexist prohibitions dictating what one cannot be and whom one cannot love is "to 'be' (through identification) the 'other' whom one is forbidden to love, and to love, in the other, what one is forbidden to 'be'" (340).

As Butler makes clear, however, the cultural imperative to be the other that one cannot love and to love in the other what one cannot be involves a "sacrifice of desire under the force of prohibition" that results in a masculinity forever "haunted by the love it cannot grieve" (138). This unresolved grief, in turn, often results in a melancholic identification with the same-sex love object. Especially significant for Butler's theory are the cultural aspects of this loss and unresolved grief for the elaboration of gender: "[T]he 'loss' of homosexual love is precipitated through a prohibition which is repeated and ritualized throughout the culture. What ensues is a culture of gender melancholy in which masculinity and femininity emerge as the traces of an ungrieved and ungrievable love" (140). According to Butler, this culture of gender melancholy is evident in the "hyperbolic identifications" (147) that confirm heterosexual masculinity and femininity.

While Butler's theory of melancholy gender clearly attends to the cultural logic in which the production of normative gender is accomplished through a heterosexuality that repudiates homosexuality (a repudiation that—ironically and paradoxically—"strengthens homosexuality precisely *as* the power of renunciation" ["Melancholy" 143]), others have considered melancholia in relation to the production of minoritarian subjectivities and, in so doing, question the degree to which melancholia applies to normative heterosexual male subjects. David Eng, for instance, identifies melancholia

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at the turn of the twenty-first century as one of the dominant modes for understanding a diverse range of subjectivities, and he emphasizes its usefulness for investigating the formation of "minoritarian group identities mobilized through identity-politics movements of the last quarter-century" (1276). Rightfully insisting on a consideration of melancholy gender "through the multiple and intersecting registers of sexuality, race, and postcoloniality" (1280), Eng argues that heteronormative subjects fall outside of melancholic gender: "[N]ot all gendered subjects, I must emphasize, are finally melancholic ones, as the normative heterosexual male on whom Freud's gendered productions focus remains largely untroubled by this condition" (1277). Here, Eng contests not only Freud's theory that the ego is constituted through loss but also later psychoanalytic theory that understands loss as central to the production of subjectivity; that is, for Eng, the normative heterosexual male offers an example of ego formation that is simply not predicated on loss as evidenced by his being largely "untroubled by this condition."

While I agree with Eng's politicized reading of melancholia as a late twentieth-century affliction for which "women, homosexuals, people of color, and postcolonials seem to be at greatest risk" (1278), his distinction between the untroubled heteronormative male subject and the minoritarian subject who is forced into an "ambivalent attachment to devalued objects" (1278) obscures the role the unconscious plays in Freud's early theory of melancholia ("melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness" [Freud, "Mourning" 245]) as well as in Butler's theory of melancholy gender. For Butler, melancholy gender does not depend on a conscious grappling with loss; in fact, it is very likely the unconscious nature of melancholy gender, the unrecognizable and thus ungrievable loss, that accounts for its naturalization and elevates it to a cultural level: "[W]here there is no public recognition or discourse through which such a loss might be named and mourned, then melancholia takes on cultural dimensions of contemporary consequence" ("Melancholy" 139).

In contrast to heterosexual melancholy—which is predicated solely on loss—Butler also posits a gay melancholia, a form of melancholia that she suggests "contains anger that can be translated into political expression" ("Melancholy" 147). Such an anger, however, has the potential to cut both ways. Because rage over the loss of same-sex love is just as prohibited by a heterosexist culture as is grief, anger might simply compound the loss if it remains unavowed. For Butler, then, public modes of grieving over the loss of gay loves—the AIDS quilt and Queer Nation's "die-ins" are two examples she offers—are critical means of both survival and political

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intervention: "Insofar as they ['collective institutions for grieving'] involve the publicization and dramatization of death [. . .] they call for being read as life-affirming rejoinders to the dire psychic consequences of a grieving process culturally thwarted and proscribed" (148).

In many ways, Butler's theory of melancholy gender was fundamentally shaped by the specific cultural and political milieu surrounding homosexuality in the early 1990s, from the enormity of AIDS and AIDS-related deaths to policy debates about service in the military and gay marriage. Although homosexuality—especially in its less "homonormative" instantiations (Duggan)—is still a long way from being completely socially accepted, cultural attitudes have certainly shifted in the intervening two decades, with the advent of life-saving AIDS therapies, the legalization of gay marriage, and the possibility for gays and lesbians to serve in the military. While such legal and cultural changes may raise questions as to the relevance of the concept of melancholy gender for understanding contemporary cultural productions, the fact that they have also inspired significant hostilities and backlash—exemplified in the rampant homophobia that characterizes dominant gamer culture[14]—foregrounds the value of such an approach to reading self-avatar subjectivity and avatar suicide videos. In other words, it is precisely the constant, vehemently toxic turn to homophobia in dominant gamer culture that encourages and supports such an analysis through an understanding of the avatar as "a magical, a psychic form of preserving the object" (Butler, "Melancholy" 134). In this case, the "incorporation of the attachment as identification" (134)—the process of internalization through which the lost object becomes "coextensive with the ego" (134)—also involves an externalization of the psychically preserved object in the form of the avatar's visual representation. The avatar is simultaneously internalized and externalized object, simultaneously ego and other.

In drawing a parallel between public acts of grieving, like Queer Nation's die-ins, and avatar suicide machinima, which might provide similar public stagings, I want to be clear that I am not equating the virtual suicides ritualized and commemorated in these machinimas with the deaths of real men and women to AIDS. Rather, just as Queer Nation's performances resist melancholy gender by insisting on a recognition of same-sex love and desire, avatar suicide videos might be understood as an *unconscious* mode of grieving the foreclosed possibility of such love and desire in a heterosexist culture, particularly if we understand the self-avatar relationship as a physical or visual manifestation of the lost object's incorporation into the ego, where the avatar is not so much an alternative for the self but rather

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an "embodied" representation of the lost object. In *Precarious Life*, Butler's later work on violence and mourning in relation to 9/11, she speculates that what is lost in the other as love object is a "relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related" (22). This sense of *the tie* that holds together self and other without quite fully encompassing either similarly suggests a way of thinking self-avatar subjectivity and virtual-end machinima as motivated by an ungrievable loss, which I discuss in greater detail below.

Machinima and Mourning: Reading the Virtual End

Permeated with a profound sense of loss and mourning, virtual-end machinimas draw much of their affective power from the complex self-avatar subjectivity that characterizes the conjoined lives of player and avatar. As a result, an avatar's suicide video is both an intensely intimate act and a grand public staging. It is an invitation to participate in a moment of loss—to bear witness, to empathize, to grieve—and the fact that many such machinimas have been viewed tens and sometimes hundreds of thousands of times testifies to their cultural resonance.

In his work on participatory quitting and *World of Warcraft*, Nathan Dutton interprets the "virtual suicide" video as an extension of Henry Lowood's "community player," a player who "is not only creative and theatrical but also takes care to exhibit mastery of technology and cyberathletic skill" (qtd. in Dutton 45); for Dutton, community players use virtual suicide videos to "make their exit just as much of a production or event as was their time in the game" (45). Michael Nagenborg and Christian Hoffstadt similarly suggest that "elaborate or exceptional [virtual] suicides" are filmed and distributed for "the entertainment of third parties, without which a game world's external motivational factor would be missing" (91). While such interpretations capture the lingering traces of the ludic implicit in virtual-end machinima, their privileging of the "theatrical" (Dutton 45) and the entertaining ignores the predominant tone of loss that generally saturates these videos.

Focusing on loss as the heart of virtual-end machinima challenges the critical tendency to read them solely as extensions of the gaming experience and instead reveals their significance for a broader cultural politics of gender and desire. Within this context, I read the avatar suicide video "Me Quitting wow," created by Hockey1912, as motivated by an almost

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overwhelming grief inspired, implicitly, by melancholy gender. “Me Quitting wow” is a somewhat long (7:51 minutes) but nonetheless typical virtual-end machinima in which the avatar Scipher identifies, removes, and then deletes all of his gear and clothing; gives away his gold; waves goodbye; and, finally, weeps before making a final exit.[15] The machinima is set to two pop songs—Sum 41’s “Best of Me” and James Blunt’s “Goodbye My Lover.”

While the “Me Quitting wow” video illustrates nicely some of the complexities of a self-avatar subjectivity, it also clearly articulates the ways in which the avatar is frequently figured as lover, including—most often—same-sex lover (since *male* avatar and player are often of the same sex). That is, although gender-crossing is not uncommon in *World of Warcraft*, according to Nick Yee’s extensive research among players, boys and men tend to play female avatars much more frequently than girls and women play male avatars; in fact, Yee found that “about 1 out of every 2 female characters is played by a man” while “about 1 out of every 100 male characters is played by a woman” (“wow”). So, while player and avatar are not always the same sex, male avatars tend overwhelmingly to be played by boys and men. At the same time, the vast majority of virtual-end machinimas feature male avatars, thus further underscoring the particular relevance of melancholic masculinity to their cultural resonance and meaning.

In “Me Quitting wow,” the figuration of the avatar as both self and same-sex lover is articulated most explicitly through the specific choice of music. Sum 41’s “Best of Me” and James Blunt’s “Goodbye My Lover” not only set the emotional tone of the video but also narrativize this figuration, suggesting in the first half of the video that the player’s avatar is the best of himself and in the second half, his lover. Though Sum 41’s song is most likely directed to another and not to the self, I want to argue that this particular love song explicitly seeks to break down the barriers between self and lover, particularly through the refrain, “You would have the best of me.” In this sense, the player seems to characterize the avatar as having—or being—the best of him. However, if we grant the avatar agency—it is, after all, the avatar’s death ritual—we might understand the song and video in a different way, specifically as a message directed not *to* the avatar-self *from* the player but rather *from* the avatar *to* the player-self.

Interpreting the farewell video in this way, it is the avatar who apologizes and promises to make everything right for all the things he’s done; from this perspective, the refrain is especially touching as the avatar “throws it all away” or commits virtual suicide for the sake of the player-self:

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I'm sorry
It's all that I can say
You mean so much, and I'd fix all that I've done
If I could start again
I'd throw it all away
To the shadows of regrets
And you would have the best of me

Regardless of the directionality of the message in these readings—from player to avatar or from avatar to player—the "best of me" resides in and with the other, and in this way the distinction between self and avatar collapses. Hockey1912's choice to set his video to this song makes explicit the co-constitutive and integrated nature of self-avatar subjectivity, and the ability of Sum 41's song to capture that unique subjectivity clearly resonates with quite a number of other *World of Warcraft* players who viewed and commented on the video. In at least a dozen instances, viewers explicitly mentioned the Sum 41 song as being particularly well suited for the video and/or relevant to their own experiences playing and/or trying to quit the game.

"Me Quitting wow" further calls attention to the avatar as same-sex lover through Hockey1912's use of the James Blunt song "Goodbye My Lover." Blunt's lyrics are clearly enunciated and as such allow little room for misinterpretation. Regardless of whether the message is directed from player to avatar or from avatar to player, the meaning is clear in lyrics like "You touched my heart you touched my soul / You changed my life and all my goals" and "I love you, I swear that's true / I cannot live without you" or "Goodbye my lover / Goodbye my friend / You have been the one / You have been the one for me." As with the earlier example of Hockey1912's use of Sum 41's "The Best of Me," his use of Blunt's "Goodbye My Lover" is unabashedly romantic and typifies the way music operates in the genre. Many virtual-end machinimas are set to contemporary pop and rock love songs such as Céline Dion's "My Heart Will Go On," Evanescence's "My Immortal," Hoobastank's "The Reason," and Sum 41's "Pieces." The avatar as same-sex lover is a common—albeit implicit—trope in virtual-end machinima, wherein the loss of the avatar is made culturally comprehensible through the use of love songs that thematize breakups and other loves lost.

The avatar as simultaneously both self and lover is of fundamental importance to the argument I want to make here. Within the context of Butler's theory of melancholy gender, the avatar as self and lover might also be understood as two different expressions of the foreclosed—and thus

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lost—love object in the context of compulsory heterosexuality. That is, the avatar enables both a recognition of what heterosexist culture renders unrecognizable and an enactment of its loss. By explicitly casting the avatar as both self and lover, virtual-end machinima creates an important space of public grieving in which the cultural prohibitions against such recognition and mourning might be suspended. As a significant part of *World of Warcraft*'s broader cultural context, these videos, with their powerful mourning of a same-sex love object, disrupt norms of heteromasculinity, perhaps opening up possibilities for grieving the ungrievable love that haunts melancholic masculinity.

At the same time, I want to suggest that it is only in a virtual world—because of its ability to simultaneously complicate and naturalize the distinction between self and other, between self and avatar and self and love object—that such a mourning can occur. As well-recognized cultural productions within the broader *World of Warcraft* community, virtual-end machinimas are more than individual tributes to the lost avatar-lover-self; they are also public acts and engagements, community death rituals shared among thousands. Like the Queer Nation die-ins that Butler invokes, these vernacular performances of death and public expressions of grief provide an (unconscious) opportunity to mourn differently. Given heteronormative injunctions against masculine emotionality, particularly against demonstrating one's sadness over loss by weeping, I have been surprised to see grown men cry upon viewing this and similar virtual-end machinimas. I was likewise surprised to see how many men articulated their empathy and sadness, and even confessed to crying, in response to the "Me Quitting wow" video. One friend in his late thirties forwarded me a link to an avatar suicide video with the subject line "This actually brought tears to my eyes" (Burningtears). Of course, it's impossible to know whether these men *actually* cried when viewing the video, but that seems irrelevant. If crying calls one's masculinity into question—as it tends to do in a heterosexist culture—then *confessing* to crying and *crying* are essentially the same thing.

In reading virtual-end machinimas as important public rituals of recognition and mourning, I am not suggesting that their creators are consciously aware of grieving the foreclosed possibilities of same-sex love (indeed, I feel fairly confident that they would absolutely deny that their avatar suicide videos are doing that). Rather, I am suggesting simply that regardless of intent, virtual-end machinima nonetheless offers a recognizable form of mourning through the simultaneous grieving for the avatar-self and the avatar-lover. Moreover, I am not so much concerned with intent

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as I am with what this public performance of mourning might do for the ongoing performance of masculinity. If, as Butler argues, heteromasculinity is structured by melancholia, then virtual-end machinimas—with their powerful mourning of a lost same-sex love object as well as their mourning of the ego's construction through such a loss—can potentially intervene in norms of masculinity defined through compulsory heterosexuality and help us imagine alternative ways of living with, and perhaps beyond, melancholy gender.

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Notes

1 Machinimas are cinematic productions based on real-time computer-game graphics.

2 There are, of course, virtual suicide machinimas that do not adhere to this narrative structure, although they may still incorporate some of the more common tropes such as the destruction or dispersal of the avatar's possessions. See Dutton for a discussion of some specific examples.

3 While these descriptions hold true for the vast majority of avatars, there are some that fall outside of these heteronormative and hypersexualized norms, including both male and female Dwarves and Gnomes. For male avatars, Blood Elves are somewhat slighter than other "races," and many players perceive them to be "gay" (see, e.g., Sundén 1). For female avatars, Tauren and Trolls do not adhere to idealized heteronormative standards of beauty, and it is worth noting that in both of these cases the "races" are also highly racialized according to the dominant U.S. imaginary (see, e.g., Higgin; and Langer). The Pandaren—a "race" of humanesque pandas—are similarly racialized, degendered, and desexualized.

4 See, e.g., Boulter; Castronova; Dibbell; Lau, "Political"; Yee, "Labor"; and Yee et al.

5 Although some dimensions of *World of Warcraft*, such as its facilitation of bleed-through and hybrid player-avatar subjectivity, pertain to other immersive games and virtual worlds, avatar suicide machinimas seem to center primarily on *World of Warcraft*. This may be due to the fact that *World of Warcraft* radically expanded the player base for massively multiplayer online role playing games; that is, while other such games existed prior to *World of Warcraft*, none achieved the same degree of popularity among gamers (at its height, its player base was estimated at approximately 11.5 million) or the same degree of recognition in U.S. culture more generally (*World of Warcraft* and its related culture have been referenced in such culturally disparate sources as *South Park* and *Jeopardy!*). For many, then, *World of Warcraft* introduced a new level of immersion—and thus a new kind of life—in a fantastic social world; consequently, quitting the game was akin to ending that particular life. At the same time, while there

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is certainly something specific about avatar suicide machinima in relation to *World of Warcraft* as a gaming and cultural phenomenon, I want to suggest that the broader themes of masculinity and melancholia that they inspire may have relevance beyond *World of Warcraft*.

6 I use *ludic* here as it is invoked in critical game studies: "The concept of a ludic system encompasses a family of media forms and experiences involving elements of simulation, game play and narrative or story construction" (Lindley).

7 For those who are not familiar with gaming, an avatar's "gear," or possessions (e.g., clothing, weapons, trinkets), reflects its status in the game. Gear is indexed first to the avatar's level and then ranked within the level by its rarity; rare items are generally available only through a combination of luck and success in the most demanding battles. As such, an avatar's gear reveals a great deal about the player's skill, status, and investment in the game. The slippage here, between Drakedog as player and Drakedog as avatar, is intentional and underscores the difficulty of representing their individual agencies alongside a player-avatar subjectivity.

8 Because it is possible to create virtual-end machinima on private servers (thus not really deleting the avatar) and because Blizzard (World of Warcraft's developer) has the ability to restore a deleted avatar in cases where accounts have been compromised, virtual-end machinimas are sometimes subject to debates about their authenticity. In Drakedog's case, his eventual return to *World of Warcraft* raised suspicions about the authenticity of his suicide video, although an "Admin" note accompanying the video seeks to vouch for its legitimacy. Judging by comments posted in response to virtual-end machinimas and by the fact that Blizzard will not restore an avatar that has been deleted by a player, it seems that a majority of the videos are "real." Moreover, it is quite possible that debates about the authenticity of an avatar's suicide emerge out of an overwhelming affective response, a welling of emotion so strong that it must be sublimated in disbelief. Thus, while questions about the authenticity of virtual-end machinimas may diminish their ability to inspire an empathetic response among some viewers, I would contend that, on the whole, the visual representation of the avatar's suicide exerts an emotional force even in the absence of absolute certainty. Regardless, I am concerned more with virtual-end machinimas as cultural productions, and the impulse to stage a ritualized death that elicits a range of affective and discursive responses, than I am with the facticity of the representation.

9 See my article "The Political Lives of Avatars: Play and Democracy in Virtual Worlds" for a more extensive discussion of the simultaneously "real" and "virtual" nature of self-avatar subjectivity in relation to *World of Warcraft*'s dismantling of the play/labor and time/space binaries.

10 Avatars have a "race" and a "class." In *World of Warcraft*, the game is structured so that only certain races can become classes (and vice versa). In this case, Thedkmeleé is a human (race) Death Knight (class); he is also level 75 out of 100 levels. In the following excerpt from the forum discussion, avatars are identified by name (first line), guild (second line), and level, race, and class (third line).

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11 "Toon" is a common way of referring to an avatar in *World of Warcraft*, as is "character" (or "char"). I have left forum posts completely unedited.

12 I am using the gendered pronouns that correspond to the avatar's sex, not to an imagined sex/gender identity of the player.

13 There is, of course, the possibility that what I am identifying as the more "serious" posts are not actually meant to be taken seriously, but the fact that such conversations exist at all nonetheless points to some of the complex ways that players imagine themselves as both self and avatar with varying degrees of overlapping agency and consciousness.

14 See, for example, Evans and Janish; Huntemann; Maisonave; Todd, "GamerGate;" and Todd, "Sex." Dominant gamer culture—and its associated "geek masculinity" (see Dunbar-Hester; Kendall; and Taylor)—is, of course, notorious for its vitriolic misogyny, articulated with particular clarity in the recent #GamerGate phenomenon. While the specific targets of misogynistic and homophobic discourse, bullying, and coordinated attacks may, at times, be different, misogyny and homophobia are deeply imbricated phenomena in dominant gamer culture. Butler's characterization of the process of "becoming a 'man'" under the Freudian logic whereby heterosexual aims—and later sexual orientation—are produced through the renounced homosexual attachment is particularly apt here:

> *If a man becomes heterosexual by repudiating the feminine, where could that repudiation live except in an identification which his heterosexual career seeks to deny? Indeed, the desire for the feminine is marked by that repudiation: he wants the woman he would never be. [. . .] One of the most anxious aims of his desire will be to elaborate the difference between him and her, and he will seek to discover and install proof of that difference. His wanting will be haunted by a dread of being what he wants, so that his wanting will also always be a kind of dread. Precisely because what is repudiated and hence lost is preserved as a repudiated identification, this desire will attempt to overcome an identification which can never be complete. ("Melancholy" 137)*

15 Between the original writing of this article and its publication, "Me Quitting wow" was deleted from YouTube; the video was available for public viewing from its original post in 2007 until sometime in 2015, during which time I downloaded it for analysis and conference presentations. The ethics of sharing that video are now more complex; however, because of Hockey1912's likely anonymity (that is, it would be extremely difficult to identify the individual who originally created "Me Quitting wow") and because the benefit of making the video accessible outweighs the potential risks to its creator, I am providing the link to the downloaded version, which does not contain viewer responses. "Me Quitting wow" actually stages two avatar suicides (Dethstorm, an "alt" or alternative avatar, and Scipher) and the deletion of all of Hockey1912's lower-level characters, but the most extensive avatar suicide staging is Scipher's. Only Scipher weeps as he says farewell. The final text emphasizes the player's time investment in each character in terms of "days," *World of Warcraft*'s built-in function that calculates in "days" the number of hours played per each avatar; in this case, Hockey1912 has played 960 hours with Scipher and 912 hours with Dethstorm.

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