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"We are not Who We Were:" Navigating Queer Time and Grieving Shifting Narratives in Destiny 2

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“WE ARE NOT WHO WE WERE:” NAVIGATING QUEER TIME AND GRIEVING
SHIFTING NARRATIVES IN *DESTINY 2*

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BY

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ABSTRACT

“WE ARE NOT WHO WE WERE:” NAVIGATING QUEER TIME AND GRIEVING

SHIFTING NARRATIVES IN *DESTINY 2*

BY BRENNA CONNELL

Within this work, I engage with queer time in the video game *Destiny 2* via an autoethnographic method that emphasizes the temporal interactions of players, characters, and narratives. I draw from my experiences playing this game with my brother, as well as years of watching him play, to build a contextual foundation for what it means to play *Destiny 2*. Then, I construct a theory of queer game time by combining formulations of game temporality, queer temporality, and queer gaming. This sense of queer game time conceives of time as a body that can be wounded, a force that can mold and be molded by characters, and a living thing that can haunt and be mourned. I interrogate how the individuality of player experiences, particularly in relation to a certain point in time, queers the world of *Destiny 2* and its narrative. From there, I unravel the complex transitions of two characters across vast spans of space and time, tracing their shifting forms and fates as they wound and are wounded by time in turn. The temporal rifts that characters undergo then widen to include the broader narrative arc of *Destiny 2*; I present a queer hauntological method to disentangle the loss and grief that came about as a result of content vaulting. While some temporal wounds like content vaulting cannot be stitched or healed, in the end, players and characters alike can find solace in the multiplicity of moments that bind them together with the universe of *Destiny 2*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is dedicated to three people in particular, although my love and thanks goes out to all who ~~tolerated~~ supported and hyped me up through the process of writing and dreaming.

First: to Lance Reddick, voice actor for Destiny 2's Commander Zavala, who passed away almost precisely a year ago. His memory is no less potent now than it was then, and his voice will forever remain with me. Rest easy, Commander.

Second: to Professor Snelson, who has met me with nothing but encouragement, excitement, and an endless supply of patience from the first class I had him as a professor. I'm incredibly thankful that I was able to participate in GEMS: Winter 2022 Edition—it set me on the academic path to where I am now. And I'm incredibly eager to finally get some Destiny 2 sessions in soon.

Finally: to Jason. I think you'll want to kill me if I say anything too sappy, but . . . you're the reason this exists (AND the reason why it's finished). You've put up with my frantic, convoluted voice messages and my belated realizations and my 3am Discord spam. You've put up with me trying for a full fifteen minutes to jump up that one puzzle in that one Sever mission, and my perpetual, unceasing, running-into-open-fire deaths. So many hours we've spent together, in this game; it binds us to each other even when we're thousands of miles apart. Savathûn said, "We are not who we were. Who we were no longer exists." She's right about that first part, but not so much about the second. We've changed a lot from when we were little kids playing Skylanders together, and we continue to change, but no matter where we go or what we become, you're my brother. That's a link to who we are that will always exist.

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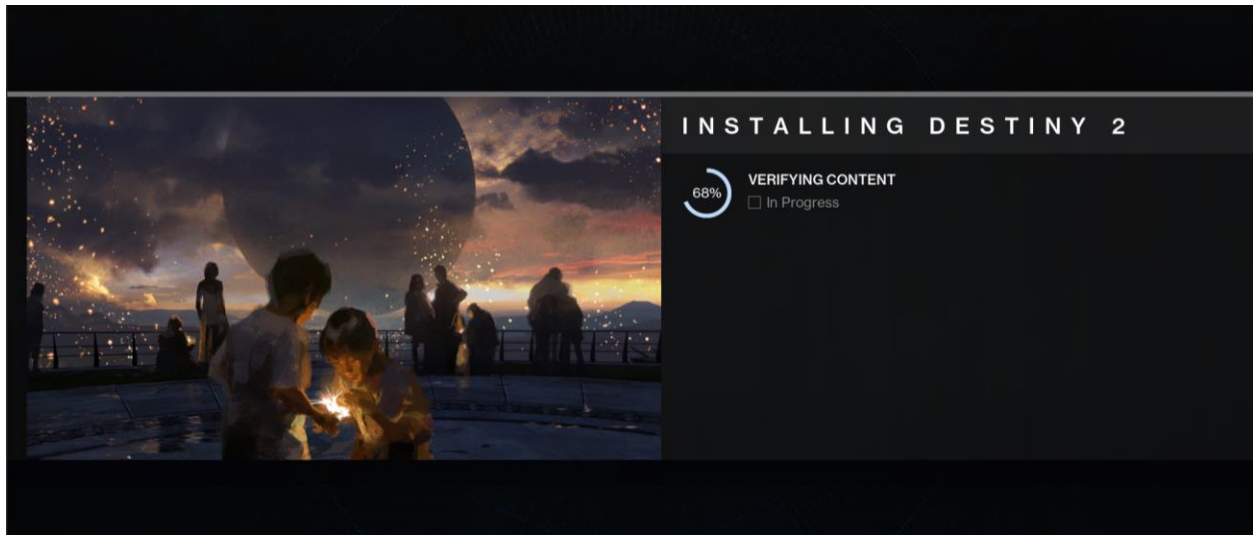


Figure 1: Destiny 2 installation screen.



Figure 2: Vault of Glass raid, Oracle encounter – screenshot from a solo guide video uploaded on YouTube by Esoterickk.

Prelude

Electricity crackling from the Arcstrider, shadows eating up the darting form of the Nightstalker, fire singing at the tips of the Dawnblade's fingers—they have been dying for centuries, over and over, to the musical tones of small, bright Oracles. The Dawnblade scrawls out charts and numbers in the shimmering Vex milk on the ground, but even their perfect pitch can only help so much.

Just like they have countless times before, the fireteam takes out the first wave of red-eyed robots that marches forwards. The Arcstrider steps into the milky fluid left behind by a Vex Goblin and swears; moments later, the enemy enacts a Ritual of Negation. He dies instantly. Dodging over to the small shining Ghost hovering over his squadmate's body, the Nightstalker uses his single revive token to bring the Arcstrider back to life. Thanks are exchanged, and they both return to their sides of the battlefield.

Somehow, the fireteam makes it to the Oracle phase without any more deaths, and deceptively passive orbs of light blink into existence one at a time, each with their own corresponding musical tone. The team fans out across the room while the Dawnblade calls out the numbers they assigned to each Oracle position, and the other two snipe the synthetic beings as they light up, one with a bow and the other with a scout rifle. With their glaive, the Dawnblade slashes through the final Oracle. After the three of them finish off the stragglers, a chest appears, opening to reveal bright blue Glimmer and the armor they'd sought. And it's over—this encounter is, at least.

They have been dying for centuries, but when the fireteam leaves the Vault of Glass, only minutes have passed in the outside world. Time passes differently for those who do not age or die naturally; even more so when they brave a place that is itself outside of time.

Introduction

I have no record of the first time that my brother and I, along with a friend, made it through the Oracle encounter in *Destiny 2*'s (2017) Vault of Glass raid. I do not know when we did it or how long the process took. Nor do I have any record of the subsequent times we succeeded and pushed further forward. This is a problem of working with video games: their ephemerality, the tendency of specific moments to slip away and be lost to time. The memories of them are carried within our minds, and to some extent, in our bodies; but it is almost impossible (within games like *Destiny 2*) for any given encounter to be replicated in the same way, with the same movements. Sometimes the differences are due to increases in skill, or a switch in teammates, or an updated arsenal of weapons and skills. Sometimes, different experiences are shaped directly by the passage of time itself, inside and outside and all around the game.

In this work, I study the way in which diverse narrative and player experiences in the videogame *Destiny 2* can be understood through a framework of queer time that emphasizes alternate life paths and ways of being. As a live-service game, one that its developer Bungie regularly provides with content updates and is as such 'unfinished,' *Destiny 2* manipulates concepts of alien species, environments, and their surrounding narratives in a continuously shifting fashion as the developers build years-long arcs of story and play. Given this shifting terrain, I investigate how the timing at which an individual player starts playing *Destiny 2* can drastically impact their experience of time within the game, both in terms of the in-game narrative that *Destiny 2* constructs and the personal narrative a player creates in the game via their character's interactions with plot, mechanics, and other players. In particular, I present the

stories of a few key *Destiny* characters within the context of queer time, to understand their stories as part of a process of queer temporal narrative- and world-building.

Within this context, I demonstrate that *Destiny* developer Bungie’s method of “content vaulting” old campaigns effectively unmoors an entire segment of the playerbase from game and narrative time. That is to say, all players who started *Destiny 2* past a certain date have a completely different experience and conception of the game and its timeline. A theory of hauntology that combines queer and game time aids me as I revisit aspects of the character studies in regard to content vaulting, and explore how the characters’ narrative trajectories parallel that of new players experiencing the now-disjointed timeline of *Destiny 2*. All of these objectives have been undertaken via a multimedia, autoethnographic approach that combines the experiences of my brother and myself—as players who started *Destiny 2* at two very different points in time—with close readings of the aforementioned characters, as well as of narrative events both synchronous and asynchronous.

My primary source is the game *Destiny 2* itself, but in dealing with the narrative particulars of lore and characters, I cannot avoid the tethers that stretch back to foundations established in the first game, *Destiny* (2014). A primary challenge within this research has been attempting to address a living, changing piece of media. The “vanilla” content (the first two campaigns and two other DLCs [downloadable content]) of *Destiny 2* has been removed from the game, and is no longer available to play. My inability to engage with this content other than through the memories and collections of other players, however, has ended up being one of the most significant parts of this thesis, so my regret is tinged with a strange gratitude. In common gamer parlance, the rifted time caused by content vaulting is a feature, not a bug, when it comes to the study of queer time that escapes any attempts to normalize its flow. Overcoming this

challenge of not being able to play significant portions of the game involved delving deep into community-based repositories of knowledge and experience, especially the all-encompassing Ishtar Collective (<https://www.ishtar-collective.net/>). This site is a record of all the lore in the game, which includes all the dialogue from different quests, recordings of cutscenes and quests, item descriptions, and the lore “books” that a player can collect through their play. Between the Ishtar Collective, the many wikis, subreddits, and countless YouTube playthroughs and analyses, there is more than enough information to analyze the first few years of *Destiny 2* as necessary, albeit from a perspective detached from my direct personal experience as a player of the game. One qualification is that this information can *never* be detached from personal experience as a whole—the work of archiving *Destiny 2* material is a communal effort that involves, as one example, game clips of missions taken by random, but distinct, players. All *Destiny 2* players engage with the same game in theory, but each separate encounter is unique from player to player; my battle with the Oracles in the Vault of Glass will always be particular to me, even when other people are playing with me at the same time. Community-driven conservation speaks to the idea that the amalgamation of varying individual player experiences, across space and time, constitutes an aspect of the game just as important as any storyline or gameplay constructed by the developers.

Cultural Context

“Eyes up, Guardian.”—Lance Reddick, voice actor for Commander Zavala (Reddick)



Figure 3: My Guardian stands overlooking the Last City at night.

Unraveling the release patterns of the *Destiny* games provides an insightful starting point for engaging with the mechanics of time. Released in 2017 by game developer Bungie, *Destiny 2* is the second game in a series that began in 2014 with the release of the original *Destiny*. Since *Destiny 2*'s initial release, Bungie has released seven DLCs that have expanded the narrative and gameplay of the game; four of these DLCs are still available to play today. The time in between the release of each new DLC is referred to as a 'Year' in the world of *Destiny 2*, with the exception of Year 1, which encompasses the time from the original game's launch to the third expansion, *Forsaken*. Although initially a Year in *Destiny 2* was approximately equivalent to a year in the real world, this pattern fell apart post-2020 due in no small part to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as broader considerations about story and the foundations of the game (Blackburn). Starting in Year 2, each Year of *Destiny 2* is broken into four Seasons that provide

narrative links between DLCs. While not strictly necessary in order to understand the broader narrative of *Destiny 2*, Seasons are an integral component to the storytelling and worldbuilding process of the game.

In terms of gameplay genres, *Destiny 2* falls squarely within the conventions of the massively multiplayer online (MMO) game and the first-person shooter. MMO means that it is an online game that allows, and in fact requires, a player to interact with many other players; first-person shooter means that the gameplay focuses on combat from a first-person perspective. Despite the name “shooter,” it’s not *all* guns (. . . but it’s mostly guns).



Figure 4: A speedrun of first person shooter mechanics via the *Destiny 2* HUD (heads-up display). [1] the mini-map, shows where enemies (red) and allies (green) are in relation to the player; [2] the quest bar; [3] the health bar; [4] the ammo and abilities section, showing the regeneration time for Guardian abilities on the left, and the weapon loadout with weapon type and ammo count on the right; [5] the player’s arms, hands, and weapons are the only portion of them that are visible, as is typical of first-person shooters; [6] the bar that tracks the statistics of your mission, including time elapse, point multiplier, and the total points earned. Note: yes, the HUD is warped; it’s a feature, not a bug.

In technical terms, *Destiny 2* is also a role-playing game (RPG), but the actual extent of the role-playing is quite limited. Unlike other well-known role-playing video games such as *The Elder Scrolls* (1994-2011) or the recently released *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023), the actions that an individual takes within *Destiny 2* have no bearing on the narrative. Instead, the role-playing aspects are contained within player character customization and interaction. On a socially-driven, visual level, role-playing is facilitated by cosmetic choices (physical appearance and clothing style) and emotes (character animations that can be activated at will, often humorous or over-exaggerated actions). On the level of actual gameplay, role-playing emerges through *Destiny 2*'s class system. Classes refer to distinct types of characters with specifically defined skill sets and abilities that facilitate different playstyles and allow players to better perform roles in a group combat setting.

Before delving into the specifics of gameplay, it's integral to understand what *Destiny 2* is—not just the technical details of the game, but how it exists as a livable/playable narrative experience. In regard to broader narrative genres, *Destiny 2* is through and through a science fiction/fantasy game. I say fantasy in addition to science fiction because many aspects of the game encompass a kind of mysticism (or as *Destiny* puts it, “paracausality”) that goes beyond traditional conceptions of sci-fi. The story of the *Destiny* series is an alternate future for Earth that skewed from the timeline of the real world back in 2014, when a mysterious cosmic entity known as the Traveler appeared in the solar system and forever changed the trajectory of humankind. Within the lore of the game, there is an entire history spanning between 2014 and the “present day” of *Destiny 2* some thousand years later (give or take a few centuries) that tracks the Traveler's role in the prosperity, fall, and rebuilding of humanity, all of which absolutely has its own queer potential. However, the most important concept to know regarding

the Traveler is that a malevolent force known as the Witness tracked the Traveler to our solar system and led to the collapse of humanity's Golden Age. After this, the greatly weakened Traveler granted certain humans access to a powerful force known as the Light so that they could protect the Earth and the rest of humanity.

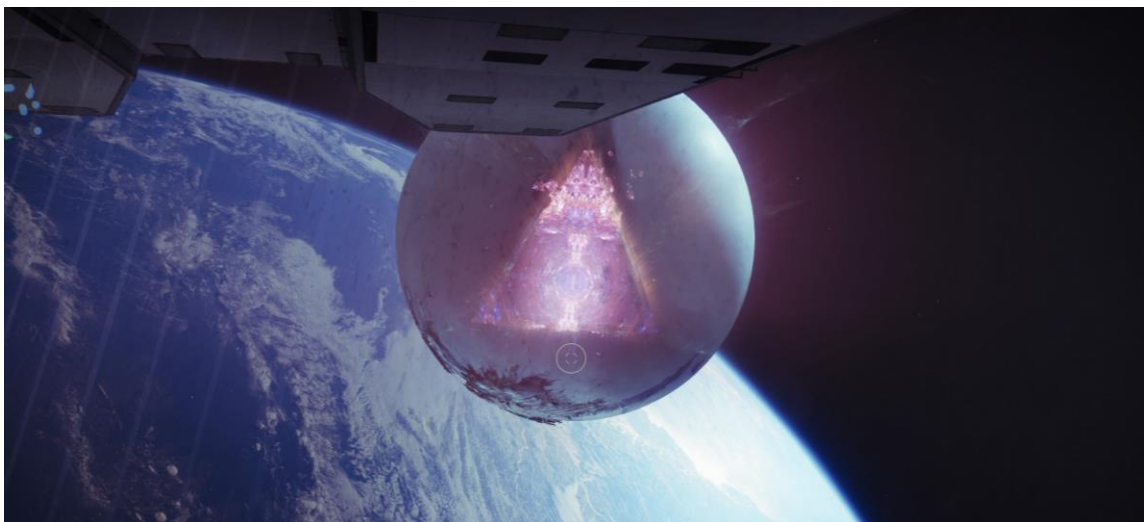


Figure 5: The Traveler, viewed from the Hub for Emergency Logistics and Maneuvers (H.E.L.M.) orbiting Earth.

Player characters are the Guardians, human and human-adjacent beings who were resurrected by the Traveler and provided with special powers and semi-immortality via the Light. I make a point of saying “human-adjacent” beings because two of the three playable races, the Exos and the Awoken, are descended from humans or *were* once human, but are no longer only human. Exos are human consciousnesses who were imported into robotic frames; Awoken are humans, and the descendants of those humans, who tried to flee the Collapse of humanity and were altered by contact with a space anomaly.

The Light is a paracausal force, just like the Traveler is a paracausal object, where paracausal is a word *Destiny* uses as a stand-in for “physics-defying” or “magic.” Within the *Books of Sorrow*, one of the key written lore books for *Destiny 2*, a character cheekily remarks that “some powers in this universe are superordinate to mere material physics” (“XVI: The

Sword Logic”). One *Destiny* theorist on Reddit describes it this way: “causality is cause and effect . . . this rule has important consequences for spacetime, and imposes limitations. . . The best meaning [for paracausal] as it applies to *Destiny*, I believe, is . . . “beyond causality,” as noted by u/cafecito820” (u/Paradigm88). A community writer known as Haruspis says that paracausality refers to “[a]bilities, events, or entities which seem to violate causality—core examples being the Light and Darkness, which are likened to ‘magic’” (Wakeford). Essentially, having the Light means that Guardians can defy the normal laws of time and space. They can enact control over electricity, sun-like flames, the void of space, the passage of time, and even the very threads of the universe; *and* they can’t be killed . . . for the most part. The Light is carried within a Guardian but also by their individual Ghost, one of many small sapient machines released by the Traveler to choose individuals to be resurrected. A Ghost prevents their Guardian from aging or dying a permanent death, unless the Ghost itself is corrupted or destroyed.

Guardians are broken into three classes—Warlock, Hunter, and Titan—and each class has five subclasses based on the five forms of elemental energy players are able to manipulate (Arc, Solar, Void, Stasis, and Strand). While both class and subclass alter the way in which an individual plays, the differences between the three classes are much more significant than between subclasses. Titans are big, bulky, powerful, and can act both as heavy-duty offense and defense. Hunters are slither, speedier, stealthier, and can maneuver the battlefield in ways both baffling and infuriating. Warlocks are a little weaker and a little slower than everyone else, but make up for it with a wider variety of skills that can aid their teammates (from healing to providing boosts in power). Choosing a class means not only choosing how you fight, but also how you interact with the world and players around you. All activities in *Destiny 2* are, or can be, undertaken by a group, and class is an integral part of figuring out one’s role in a team.

There are a few reasons why *Destiny 2* in particular is such an important game to consider through a framework composed of ethnography, theories of queer time, and video game studies. On the one hand, there are a number of actively queer characters, and even more characters surrounded by queer subtext. The entire Season of Dawn is driven by the previous attempts of a non-player Guardian named Osiris to rescue his closest ally, Saint-14, from where Saint-14 has perished in a place outside of time. Some fans suspected there was more to Saint-14 and Osiris' relationship than comradery. This was confirmed by a series of tweets from a now senior narrative designer at Bungie, who cited his experiences in the narrative department, saying, "So yes, Saint and Osiris are gay. Always have been" (Brookes). However, it took until the end of the Season of Plunder in December 2022 for Saint-14 and Osiris' romantic relationship, and queerness in general, to be explicitly dealt with in-game. It's much more difficult to deny a kiss and whispered, "Saint, my love," in a cutscene than it is to deny the queer subtext present in much of the lore about Saint-14 and Osiris and, well . . . pretty much the entire narrative of their closeness in-game ("Destiny 2: Season of Plunder - Awake Cinematic").



Figure 6: The kiss between Saint-14 and Osiris (left and right, respectively) – from the “Awake” cutscene at the end of the Season of Plunder in December 2022.

While the queer subtext of relationships and precise identities are well known and thoroughly discussed within the *Destiny 2* community, more critical to this study is an investigation of the queerness of *temporalities* that characters, players, and player characters experience in-game. Guardians are a site of a proliferation of queer temporalities; the classes (Titan, Hunter, Warlock) and subclasses (Solar, Void, Arc, Stasis, Strand) of Guardians simultaneously require and construct different styles of play that impact how a player perceives time within the game—all of which lend themselves to the player's capacity to queer their own game experience. Moreover, the revival ability of the Ghost serves both a narrative function and a gameplay function, and the fractured time of lives separated by revivals provides a player with a unique temporal experience outside of the narrative time within the game and the world time of the players outside of the game.

In thinking of lives and revivals, I am drawn to Elizabeth Freeman's formulation in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, where she maintains that within the "production of a generational peoplehood, groups make legible not only themselves but also history thought of, in its simplest terms, as the passage of time beyond the span of a single life" (21). Although the histories within video games necessarily function differently from the real world histories of queerness that Freeman engages with, this does not change the fact that histories of and within games are often similarly made "legible" by the organization of player or character lifespans. As is evident from the inclusion of both player and character lives, dealing with lifespan in games takes on additional complications as a result of the medium itself. This is particularly true in a game like *Destiny 2* where not only are character lives in constant flux, but the narrative and gameplay are interrupted by processes such as content vaulting. What does "beyond the span of a single life" even mean in a video game, especially a video game like *Destiny 2*?

We can think of this question in three different ways: mechanical lifespan, player/character lifespan, and narrative lifespan. In mechanical terms, a single life can be anything from mere seconds to many hours, if we think of lives in the traditional game sense, meaning the time between character deaths. When it comes to player/character lifespan, I mean not the IRL (in real life) lifespan of the player, but the time that they have played any given character; this can vary between the different characters of any given player based on which character is the “main” and which characters are the “alts” (alternates). It also depends on when the character was “started” or “resurrected” relative to the real life release and vaulting of *Destiny 2* expansions.

Finally, there’s narrative lifespan, of which there are different facets based on if you think about the narrative lifespans of player characters versus non-playable characters and individuals known only from lore. Player characters theoretically have interminable lives—barring cataclysm or the destruction of their means of resurrection (their Ghost)—but this is not directly shown or proven in-game. The time that has passed between the release of *Destiny* and the current version of *Destiny 2* only counts for about a decade, same as the out-of-game time. It speaks to the *potential* of highly elongated lifespans that the player Guardians have managed to survive so much and come back again and again, but nothing more than that. On the other hand, non-playable characters who are Guardians have existed within the game world for far, far longer than any player has, or could, unless *Destiny 2* undergoes a canonical time skip decades or centuries forward. Elder Guardians like Saint-14 and Osiris, former Iron Lords such as Lord Shaxx and Lord Saladin—these characters have been alive for centuries. They are living proof of how adjustments to kinship and generationality can be made within, and not beyond, the span of a single life, if that single lifespan is queered in itself.

Of course, extending a lifespan isn't the only way to queer it. As I've already mentioned, the cycle of death and revival that shapes a Guardian's existence, and the consequential fragmentation of a life—or perhaps the living of many lives within one body—provides yet another site to investigate queer temporalities and potential. Just as there are three different aspects of lifespan within *Destiny 2*, I argue that Guardian death and revival works to fragment, rift, and wound time: in a mechanical sense, in a narrative sense, and in the experience of the player/player character.

The rending of time can make us hurt, and ache, and bleed. But it always forces us onwards.

Methodology

“Well, the game has its own evolving lore, while you’re creating your own lore, as a guardian yourself housed in, you know, clips and memories that can’t be physically held, or shown. But it is still your own lore in-game even though it’s not, you know, technically a complete RPG [role-playing game], it’s still, you’re creating lore over time with your memories” (J. Connell).

In research for this project, Kishonna Gray’s *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming* has presented a singularly valuable guide toward structuring an autoethnographic methodology for engaging with games and gaming communities. Gray lists out her informal mechanisms of data collection and interviewing early on in the introduction: “direct messaging, text messaging, sharing tweets and memes, and meeting in physical spaces to check in” (7). My equivalents to Gray’s informal methods are, similarly, direct and text messaging as well as memes, but my computer and gaming consoles serve as my true personal archive. I have hundreds of screenshots and game recordings spanning the past few years of my *Destiny 2* gameplay, some of which also include audio recording of myself and whoever I played with at the time (almost always my younger brother). The only semi-formal mechanism of data collection that I use for this text is a set of short interviews with my brother, where I directly ask about his experiences of and thoughts regarding time within and around *Destiny 2*.

There is a bit of difficulty in properly recognizing the sum of knowledge and experience of *Destiny* that my brother and I have accumulated over the years. Gray addresses this in her introduction as well, noting that one of the main things she has to think about in organizing her argument is how “to condense more than a decade of experiences, stories, and narratives into a cohesive whole to ensure a unifying theme” (8). The condensation process is difficult for Gray

and I in different ways. I do not have over a decade of experiences with *Destiny 2* to mull through, but I have been around it, in one way or another, almost since it was released in 2017. I was almost sixteen years old then, and I am twenty-two now; my brother was eleven, now seventeen. Neither of us were thinking about potential ethnographies when we were in high school and middle school, respectively. So to some extent, the two of us are at an advantage because we are *in* it, deeply immersed in the fandom and the cultural and technical knowledge of *Destiny 2* as it has developed and changed. Yet we are also at a disadvantage—how is one supposed to remember all of those years of adolescent gameplay, break it apart, tie it together, when it’s just always been a part of your life? As a result, unfortunately, there are many memories and experiences that have only left behind faint impressions.

To be completely transparent: most of this experience with *Destiny 2* isn’t mine. I have only really had a part in *Destiny*’s world since 2022, even though it has had a part in my world for much longer. The real beginning of my adventure in *Destiny 2* came about when *The Witch Queen* expansion was released in February 2022. It was at this point that I made my own game account in *Destiny 2* and created my own player character. As I explain later on, it was fitting that I officially joined the *Destiny* universe at this exact point in time; only a few months later, a seasonal storyline brought back old narratives that truly highlighted the distinctions between my brother’s long-term player experiences and my own.

Gray’s *Intersectional Tech* highlights, for me, the degree to which gaming has fundamentally shaped my relationship with my brother, not just emotionally but temporally. In her introduction, Gray expresses a belief that “there is something unique about these gaming communities that let them be more real with folks online than IRL” (12). For *Destiny 2*, my brother was the only fandom I ever needed, until I moved away from home. He’s the one who

played the game first, all the way back when it came out in 2017; he's the one who has and continues to explain everything to me, from mechanics to lore to the best builds to use (even though he mainly plays a Hunter and I'm always playing my Warlock—he just knows that much).



Figure 7: A Hunter in the Dreaming City -- a screenshot from running missions with my brother on July 29, 2023, where I caught his character midleap.

Fandom can be positively massive, spanning and bringing together decades, generations, entire countries and cultures. But what about a fandom of two—insular, insulated? Certainly the *Destiny 2* fandom is not limited to two people; but what about access to a fandom that is filtered through another person? I do not mean filtered only in terms of the actual fan works consumed, but also in terms of the actual media content and the experience of that content. As I've already said, my brother was the entirety of the fandom, for me; he's also always been my gaming community.

When I dwell on my history with video games, I'm always brought back to when my brother and I were five and ten years old, maybe even younger. There's something about games—that uniqueness that Gray describes—that has always allowed my brother and I to connect differently, more deeply. We don't always *talk* about things—but sometimes, *Destiny 2*

paves the way. We're focused on something else, and the conversation doesn't have to be so serious. Time functions differently and sometimes we are different people. This has allowed us to connect in varying ways over time, adapting to situations as they change. Existing in multiple modes of time at once can cause the temporal normalization effect of kinship to skew wildly, widely. Inspecting the relationship between my brother and myself in regard to our statuses inside and outside of *Destiny 2* reveals some interesting patterns that defy linearity. In *Destiny 2*, he's always felt like the older sibling. In game time, he is—five years older, actually. Funny how our age gap is reversed pretty precisely. This is queer time: the breaking of the bounds of what we view as normal chronological progressions, the inversion of things.

A quick diversion as an initial example of my and my brother's queerly timed adventures in *Destiny 2*—in their book *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, Bo Ruberg argues that people who speedrun games (play them as fast as possible, often breaking the bounds or rules of the game to do so) are playing those games in a way that queers time via repetition and embodiment. They argue that,

“[by] playing a game or a level again and again, a speedrunner commits these elements to memory. Yet this memorization . . . must also penetrate into the body, taking on the form of an intuitive sense of the optimal way to play. This way of knowing can be described as queer because it requires an internalization of the game into the embodied experience of play. It represents a form of non-heteronormative intimacy that develops through the player's extensive knowledge of the game” (Ruberg, *Video Games* 198).

My brother and I are hardly speedrunners—sometimes it seems more like the game speedruns right through *us*. But running dungeons, running raids, especially when you're two-manning them (playing challenging events with only two people when these activities generally require

three people and six people, respectively), means that sometimes you die, a *lot*, before you can figure out how to synchronize actions and engage with mechanics in the proper time. It requires the creation of a different sort of sequential or temporal process than what was perhaps intended or expected. For instance, my brother and I struggled through the Grasp of Avarice dungeon for three hours the first time we played it. Since we had two players rather than three, we had to be particularly careful because death could set us back much more easily. So for some encounters (by which I mean different stages of the dungeon), we were far slower to fight through the enemies than a full fireteam of three would have been.

In the first boss encounter, in which we faced a larger, significantly more challenging enemy, my brother and I had to fill up a crystal with a certain amount of materials from defeated foes. Once the crystal was full, it made the boss vulnerable to our attacks for a brief period. Collecting the materials wasn't the issue; the problems came when the boss was vulnerable. The two of us simply could not do as much damage to the boss as a full fireteam of three players. As a result, we had to repeat the phases of weakening the enemy, then attacking, then weakening again, more often than we would have with a third person to do damage.

Not all encounters are conducive to this steady pace, though. One section involves a speedrun through a field of enemies while on your Sparrow, the small vehicle you use to travel at a planet level. There are four huge landmines, and if you don't keep track of your time, you will most definitely explode—you have to speed through the area and stop in a little circle to defuse each mine, at the same time that hordes of enemies are trying to destroy you.

After playing through the Grasp of Avarice dungeon a few times, we decreased our time by half, to merely an hour and thirty minutes. Eventually, my brother learned the Sparrow race part so well that he could do it in one try. He was able to do the dungeon solo flawless—by

himself, and without dying even *once*. For both of us, but particularly for my brother, the specific mechanics and requirements of the Grasp of Avarice became second nature. Responding to the distinct movements of certain enemies was automatic.

While thinking about games from an ethnographic perspective, I have followed in the steps of other scholars like Andrew Reinhard who have borrowed from aspects of anthropological methodology to understand the relationships between scholars and the games we play. In particular, Reinhard draws from archaeological methodology to develop a theory of “archaeogaming,” in which “digital games are archaeological sites, landscapes, and artifacts, and the game-spaces . . . can also be understood archaeologically as digital built environments containing their own material culture” (Reinhard 2). The term “digital built environments” contains a multiplicity of meanings, particularly as the scale of the “archaeological sites” in question can vary widely—this could be an environment on the level of a building, or a town, or even a planet. In my work, Reinhard’s conception of archaeogaming is particularly helpful as I try to differentiate between the two games that serve as both foundation and manifestation of the multimedia *Destiny* universe. As previously stated, I deal primarily with *Destiny 2* in this work. However, given the long-form storytelling of this game series and the specific issues of temporality I wish to deal with, it is necessary to engage with the origins of these narratives in the first game, *Destiny*. Although these games are made by the same developer and contain many of the same characters, pieces of lore, and mechanics, *Destiny* and *Destiny 2* are fundamentally different artifacts. The forms of research and interactions I dive into with *Destiny 2* are not the same that I would engage in if researching the original game. How I conceptualize this difference is that working with the original *Destiny* is like digging into and engaging with a long-buried, relatively undisturbed archaeological site. On the other hand, *Destiny 2* is an archaeological site

that has had more structures built on top of it, over and over again. In the process of building these new structures—and according to the developers, *in order* to build these new structures—the original site is mostly demolished, leaving only the faintest traces of what was there originally.

This process of breaking down or getting rid of previously existing structures in order to make space for new structures is essentially what happened when the developer of *Destiny 2*, Bungie, decided to put a significant section of the beginning of the game into the “content vault.” Reinhard builds a theory of fractured temporalities around a similar issue in the MMO *World of Warcraft*, where one apocalyptic expansion “in effect broke the world, [leaving] familiar landscapes changed” and making it “[im]possible for players . . . to revisit previous iterations of the world” (107). In *World of Warcraft*, certain players have taken on archival roles to preserve the “previous iterations” of the game via dedicated servers. Reinhard posits that these preservation efforts provide “the closest thing we have to time travel, [allowing] us to bridge the temporal gap between past and present as we study this game” (107). Crucially, as an archaeological intervention, the bridge between times is also distinctly situated in *space*. To properly go back in time and revisit a former state of things, there must be a place as an anchor, and in *World of Warcraft* this works because the changes over time were enacted upon the entire game, yes, but also certain places. In *Destiny 2*, this is not at all the case.

Although *Destiny 2* is marketed as an MMO, same as *World of Warcraft*, the games are entirely different in mechanics and composition. The fundamental configuration of *Destiny 2* servers are not the same as *World of Warcraft* servers, and so players cannot preserve previous iterations of the game world in the same fashion. Moreover, with *Destiny 2*, it’s not that content vaulting has left the landscape looking different; a “previous iteration” of *Destiny 2*’s world

refers to a state of the game universe with entire planets and other locations that no longer physically (digitally) exist within the game. As a result, “bridg[ing] the temporal gap” in *Destiny 2* requires a somewhat . . . queerer approach.

Queering the Temporal Framework of Games

“Video games . . . come to life not when their developers declare them complete but in the moment that players make contact with their control interfaces and step into their worlds. Between the player and the game stands a fluid space of possibility, an opening . . . for queer desires to take root and grow. To the extent that queerness can be understood as a way of being, doing, and knowing . . . queerness can also be a way of playing” (Ruberg, *Video Games* 136).

My approach to understanding queer time in *Destiny 2*, and the game more broadly as a work of queer worldbuilding, is guided by queer studies, game studies, and their intersections. In order to properly make connections between *Destiny 2* and queer theories of temporality, it is necessary to develop at least a brief understanding of game time. Huaxin Wei et al.’s paper “Time and Space in Digital Game Storytelling” provides an overview of narrative and games related theories of space and time. The writers build upon previous works to set forth their own framework for understanding narrative space and time within games, which at the time of publication was vastly under-addressed in comparison to general ideas of narrative space and narrative time within media. Perhaps the most useful information from the framework Wei and her cowriters create—as well as from the work of their predecessors—is the idea of a game having multiple layers/frames/systems of temporality functioning simultaneously; for instance, the narrative time of how the story itself is occurring, versus the ‘real’ time that elapses during the player’s session.

Reinhard’s *Archaeogaming* explores similar layers that occur within games, in that “all games can be explored on two levels: in-game (synthetic world) and extra-game (natural world), existing at the same time, using hardware as a nexus connecting the two” (2). While Reinhard

refers here to spatial aspects of the game world, the concept of “hardware as a nexus connecting” the synthetic and natural worlds is just as useful in a temporal sense. Even as the temporal layers of *Destiny 2* may conflict with and diverge from one another at times, they are always intimately entangled via the hardware and the player.

I found many complications of these temporal frames through my research, especially considering the logistical implications of *Destiny 2* as an online multiplayer game that continually updates with new narratives, as well as the fact that it has lore and gameplay that go back almost seven years but only accessible gameplay from the past three years. This complicates all forms of temporality that directly involve players, or specific player experiences, because the “beginning” of the game starts/started at different times and places for different cohorts of players. Already, I have previously introduced three different perspectives or aspects into which I can divide the experience of *Destiny 2*: the mechanical, the narrative, and the player/character. I want to elaborate now on the last perspective; until this point, I have largely lumped the player and the player character (that is, the character who the player controls within the game) together, but now I wish to expand upon this intersection. The separation of player and character by a forward slash means to encompass the various states of existence both inside of and outside of the game—the player, outside of the game; the individual player character, inside the game, but tied to the outside world by virtue of a player; and the character, inside the game, generalized to include all player characters and non-player characters (NPCs) alike. All three combinations of player and character experience time in slightly different ways, influenced by narrative time and mechanical time, yes, but also by the broader sway of out-of-game time and the more intimate strains of in-game time.

The nature of *Destiny* as a transmedia franchise forces one to confront time from different perspectives in order to figure out how events align. So much of the narrative that makes *Destiny* what it is takes place outside of the playable game entirely, in written lore that stretches back through (fictional) centuries before the actual start of the game. One such example are the Iron Lords, Light-wielders who were the early equivalent to Guardians, prior to the rise of Guardians as a legitimate sociopolitical force. Just as the Iron Lords are the precursors to Guardians (and thus original and/or veteran players of the *Destiny* games), the veteran players of the original *Destiny* and the early players of *Destiny 2* are the predecessors of new *Destiny 2* players. Just as the Iron Lords have lore that can only be read and not experienced by any players, entire stories have played out within *Destiny 2* and are now unable to be played or lived or experienced by those who are new to the game. The D1 vets and D2 old-schoolers are the legends, the remnants of things that we've never been able to experience or even see ourselves.

On the most fundamental level, the framework of queer time that I use is built upon Jack Halberstam's discussions of queerness and queer temporality in his book *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*. It is fitting that I turn back to this text, given that it was the first piece of queer theory that I ever encountered; *Trans** is as important to my interest in queer temporalities as *Destiny 2* is to my interest in games studies. Halberstam defines a "model of queerness [...] about different life narratives, alternative ways of being in relation to others, and new practices of occupying space [...] an altered relation to seeing and being seen [and transness as] radically new knowledge about the experience of being in a body [that] can be the basis for very different ways of seeing the world" (87). There are several key phrases within this chunk of text that I believe are crucial to developing an understanding of queer time that most effectively pairs with video games, and in particular, *Destiny 2*.

Similar to how Reinhard's emphasis on spatiality in games works with a theory of archaeogaming temporalities, Halberstam's focus on space provides an integral foundation to the construction of queer temporalities within video games. If queerness involves "alternative ways of being," "new practices of occupying space," and "radically new knowledge about the experience of being in a body," then what can be more queer than the displaced embodiment of playing video games? To occupy a digital body, even if not so directly as virtual or augmented reality allows one to do, requires a reshaping of what it means to occupy a body. To traverse a digital space and learn its landscape intimately requires a reconsideration of what space is, and what it means to interact with space in a visceral yet markedly *not* physical sense. Time is inextricably entwined with these questions of body and space—"being" and "occupying" happen *over* time; and a body, living in a biological sense or not, exists along the intersecting axes of time and space.

I want to dwell on Halberstam's mention of "different life narratives" to introduce a key concept of queer time defined by Elizabeth Freeman in her book *Time Binds*, "chrononormativity," which I believe functions as a point of departure from which to consider the alien depths of queerness and queer time in *Destiny 2*. Chrononormativity is the process by which "manipulations of time convert historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power into seemingly ordinary bodily tempos and routines, which in turn organize the value and meaning of time" (Freeman 3). Halberstam's "different life narratives," either sought out or inevitably traveled by queer subjects, work in opposition to these organizing, "ordinary bodily tempos and routines." If chrononormativity is about "maximizing productivity" and making "meaning" out of time, then video games as a medium—still the pastime of children and teenagers and losers in their mothers' basements—are in opposition to chrononormativity even if not in a directly queer

fashion (Freeman 3). Similar to Halberstam's "different life narratives," Freeman imagines "[q]ueer temporalities . . . [as] points of resistance to this temporal order [chrononormativity] that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others" (xxii).

The concepts of queerness as resistance, difference, and possibility are all abstract, but Freeman does return to a somewhat more concrete realm when she writes that "time has, indeed *is*, a body; the disruption of present by past and the resulting disunity of the present seem visceral . . . the body is less a metaphor for time than it is the means for and effect of convoluting time" (14). In the case of video games, and *Destiny 2* in particular, "time [as] a body" functions on multiple levels. In one respect, time works on and is worked on by the virtual bodies of the player/characters; but *Destiny 2* as a game, a narrative, a living-shifting-changing *entity*, is also a body that exists in both spatial and temporal realms. The "disruption" and "convoluting" of this body is just as "visceral" as the manipulation and disruption of player/character bodies.

A temporal dance is required for player/character bodies to shift around and within the body of the game. Freeman says that "[t]hose who can synch up their bodily hexes and linguistic patterns, who can inhabit a culture's particular tempos with enough mastery to improvise within them, feel as if they belong to that culture" (29). This is what makes live-service games, games that continue to change and shift, sometimes drastically, even after their initial release, tricky to understand in relation to chrononormativity. With *Destiny 2*, even though I've spent hundreds of hours in this game and do feel that I "can inhabit [the game's] particular tempos with enough mastery to improvise within them"—because this is what keeps you alive in the face of wave after wave of enemies—even though I do feel that to some extent I "belong to [the] culture" of the game . . . I have to do this to the tune of music I've only ever heard snatches of. The

“patterns” and the “particular tempos” don’t stay the same, and in many ways are entirely different from how they began seven years ago with the release of *Destiny 2*; I think there’s something to be said about the queerness of having to constantly shift tempos, constantly adapt to new norms. There’s something queer about having to keep time with a beat you’ve joined in with after the song’s already halfway through.

Player/character bodies also have to chart their movement in relation to other player/characters, of course. In speaking of “accent,” Freeman mentions an “[extension] beyond the spoken rhythm of individual words and sentences to encompass kinetic tempos and . . . interactions between people” (29). Both “kinetic tempos” and “interactions between people” speak to the medium of games as played with other people—the kinetic tempos of movement and tactics, the patterns that make up not only the language of my brother and I as we play (“go left to dunk!” “put down your Well now!”), but the ways in which we move around each other in these virtual spaces.

The movement of player/character bodies through *Destiny 2* can only have so much effect on the world of the game, however. Freeman speaks of “queer pleasures”—which I extend to encompass queer play and play with queer time—as “tropes for encountering, witnessing, and transforming history” (58). Encountering and witnessing history are key aspects of how players can interact with *Destiny 2*’s world and narrative. Running into shards of the past within the present is often how *Destiny*’s underlying lore is expressed; and the importance of cutscenes to propelling the story and tracking the passage of time sets the player and player character as direct witnesses of history in the making. But it is not through the game that we transform history—not to say that the game’s history is set in stone now and always has been, but that player actions as they play the game cannot transform the game world. The world of *Destiny 2* functions by a

variety of times that I consider queer, but the actual production of the game world, within a real world governed by capitalism, does align much more closely with chrononormativity. So my argument here is not only how queer time functions within *Destiny 2*, but how ideas of queer temporality can be used to understand how I interact and play with these worlds that are alternately/simultaneously being built and collapsing around me as I go.

The ongoing acts of building and collapsing are evident in the spatial landscape of *Destiny 2*. In any given location, there is “archaic or futuristic debris as signs that things have been and could be otherwise” (Freeman xvi). The “debris” that litters a game world, whether it is literal ruins left behind or the experiences and memories built into the landscape, is both “archaic” and “futuristic.” In the game world, these ruins and landscapes are ancient; in the real world, older parts of the game may seem archaic over time because of how long they have been around, comparatively; yet in the narrative, and in comparison to our twenty-first-century world, almost all of these ruins are futuristic.



Figure 8: My Guardian brandishing a sword before ancient human ruins on Jupiter's moon Europa.

The language of ruins and debris speaks to the potential for using archaeological methodology in examining this game. Just as in conventional archaeology, working within a video game world involves collecting and analyzing the materials, physical and otherwise, of human culture and using them to make sense of cultural processes and often invisible or subconscious frameworks of power and influence. Archaeology is not constrained to the past, or the physical—the existence of Reinhard’s archaeogaming, as well as digital/interactive archaeology (see Mol, et. al), is evidence enough of this.

Bo Ruberg’s work, particularly *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, provides a unified framework of queer game studies, setting the grounds for what it looks like to examine video game theory and close read games through a queer lens, as well as close reading specific games through such a lens. In the introduction to their 2019 book on the intersection of video game studies and queer theory, Ruberg defines and expands upon the typical ludology versus narratology debate of games studies by “finding the queerness” in games in ways that go beyond simple representation. In doing this, Ruberg not only brings together theories from games and queer studies, but also incorporates the work of those who have already approached the analysis of video games from a queer standpoint. As I have analyzed my experiences within *Destiny 2*, I have kept at the forefront of my mind Bo Ruberg’s notion of “queer play,” where “[p]lay itself can constitute a form of queerness in video games that goes beyond the representation of LGBTQ characters or romances” (Ruberg, *Video Games* 135). That’s not to say I don’t also bring up (both implicitly and explicitly) queer characters, because a deep-dive into the narratives of two characters who I read as queer is exactly what the next section contains. However, I want to make it clear from the beginning that the queerness of *Destiny 2* comes from all directions: inside, outside, around, and through the game and its narratives and its community.

Guardian lifespan and resurrection has already become a recurrent theme in this work, but Ruberg's book provides another, more video-game specific lens through which to consider the politics and implications of queer time and character death. In reference to Anna Anthropy's indie game *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, Ruberg notes how the game "raises many issues, such as those around permadeath (a game mechanic in which all of a player's progress is lost each time they die), and by extension what could be called permalife, along with the biopolitics and necropolitics of gameplay" (187). The thing about permadeath games is that there is a contract between the players and the game (truly, the designers of the game), where the player understands what is at stake and what will be lost if they do perish. There is also usually an understanding that the items that are lost can be regained in another playthrough, although not necessarily the exact items. This is to say that the players of permadeath games are prepared for loss even if it is painful at the moment it comes.

Destiny 2 players never have to deal with permadeath; *constant* death, perhaps, but the continual, narratively-consistent resurrection of player Guardians sets *Destiny 2* much more on the level of Ruberg's idea of permalife: "permalife games make it impossible for players to die . . . players are forced to go on living indefinitely—even, or perhaps especially, in the face of death. . . [P]ermalife games set themselves apart by making the inability to die a central theme and/or core gameplay mechanic" (Ruberg, "Permalife" 2). As a game where death can set you back significantly, although never permanently, *Destiny 2* probably is not a permalife game in the way of Ruberg's original intent. However, I think the canonical and mechanical impossibility of the player or their character actually dying in *Destiny 2* makes it a worthy, even if not perfect, candidate of permalife status.

Being *not* a permadeath game, and *maybe* a permalife game, *Destiny 2* does not offer or contain that contract of mutually agreed-upon loss between player and game/developer.

Consequently, when Bungie took away part of the game via content vaulting, there was no precedent in the community for how to deal with this loss, or how to continue on knowing that more loss was on its way (the content vaulting happened in multiple stages, with the last campaign vaulted being Forsaken, which happened right at the release of the Witch Queen campaign in February 2022). In contrast to actual permadeath games, this loss did not set *Destiny 2* players farther back in the game—instead, it made it *impossible* to go back, and forced players forward, new and old alike. What does it mean to experience genuine loss in a permalife game? What does it mean to mourn? What happens when the loss is not of a character, but of a world?

If time is a body, then it can also be wounded; if it takes a corporeal form, then it can be ripped and rifted and cut open. The same can be said for the body of the game world, and, of course, the bodies of characters—this is fitting for a game in which the primary mechanic is to wound, to rift, to cut. According to Freeman, “queer becoming-collective-across-time and even the concept of futurity itself are predicated upon injury,” or wounding, and “[t]hese woundings signal both the body’s necessity as the grounds for transformational sufferings, and its transience, its this-worldliness. They mark the sacrifices of personhood necessary for new forms of embodiment and power” (Freeman 11, 47). To be wounded, then, is to “signal” the potential for “sacrifice,” “transience,” and transformation; the transformation between one “[form] of embodiment and power” and another is not only shaped and delineated by injury, but in fact *requires* injury.

For Guardians, player characters or not, the concept of a wound as both a site and a rule for transformation holds unnervingly true. One must be dead in order to be resurrected and

turned into a Guardian. Moreover, this wound is not strictly physical, but holds a temporal aspect as well. In one way, the temporality of Guardian transformation-by-wound is quite literal, because there is a span of time between death and resurrection; the length of this time depends, but it always exists, because a Ghost must seek out and find a Guardian to be able to resurrect them. Yet in another sense, the temporal injury is markedly abstract, because it is a tear in chrononormativity itself. Recall that chrononormativity “dictate[s] how individual lives and larger historical narratives should progress” (Ruberg, *Video Games* 185). Within “larger historical narratives” and certainly within “individual lives,” death is the end; the natural progression is from life to death, not from life, to death, to life, followed by countless short lives punctuated by deaths. So for Guardians to persist beyond that initial death directly challenges chrononormativity in the sense of a life narrative.

With the death and revival of Guardians as such a central mechanic in *Destiny 2*’s narrative, it wouldn’t be a stretch to claim that the narrative itself is “predicated upon [temporal] injury” (Freeman 11). Yet the transformative wounds are not limited to deaths, or to Guardians. Wounds in time prevent and undo deaths, but they also facilitate changes to singular characters that are more violent and acute than death; they make Guardians, but they also make Gods.

Transing the Villains, the Aliens, the Unearthly Beings

“Trans* bodies represent the art of becoming, the necessity of imagining, and the fleshly insistence of transitivity” (Halberstam 136).

I. Uldren Sov and The Crow

It’s September 10, 2018. I’m sixteen, and I’m staring at the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen. He’s on his knees, his face huge on the TV screen, his eyes haunted, desperate, his hair dark and soft—and I hear my brother’s voice, saying “Brenna . . . Brenna, you think he’s hot don’t you.” I go upstairs and grab a journal and start writing furiously.

I’m a little embarrassed that I’ve been so thoroughly entranced by a video game character, and a murderous villain at that. His name is—was—Uldren Sov, Prince of the Awoken. He’s dead now; eaten by an eldritch creature. But that was a not-quite-end for him, just as it was a not-quite-start for me.



Figure 9: THE cutscene of Uldren Sov – Nothing Left to Say, from the Forsaken expansion. The face that launched a thesis.

As I’ve said before, the true start to my personal *Destiny 2*-playing journey was in 2022; but I began to view *Destiny 2* from my own perspective, rather than just through the lens of my

brother's experiences, on the day I first saw Uldren Sov on screen. His story, conveniently enough, serves as an excellent example of queer time at work in *Destiny's* lore; while he was first known as Uldren Sov, Prince of the Awoken, he has now been reborn as a Guardian and taken on the moniker of The Crow.

The impact of my introduction to Uldren Sov is evident in the fact that I spent a good half hour writing about it afterwards. I was watching my brother play the last mission of the Forsaken expansion for *Destiny 2*, and the villain he was trying to go after was Uldren, who had killed an NPC Guardian named Cayde-6 for the final time after first destroying his Ghost; this was the driving event of the entire campaign. When my brother had talked about Uldren previously, I thought he'd be hulking and brutish like the Cabal antagonist from the first campaign of the game. But then there was a cutscene, *the* cutscene. It opened on a remarkably rendered, gorgeously realistic face, and I was—as I wrote in my journal—”smitten immediately.” I didn't know it was Uldren until my brother made a comment, and at that point I was surprised. This guy wasn't an ugly alien monster (although the thing that ate him most definitely was). He looked more human than anything else. He was *pretty*.

Before watching that cutscene, I knew the bare bones narrative of this campaign of *Destiny 2* (Uldren killed Cayde-6), but it was inevitably colored by my brother's own experiences and beliefs. Cayde-6 was the Hunter Vanguard, the leader and mentor of all Guardians who take on the Hunter subclass. As my brother plays as a Hunter, he felt a special connection to Cayde-6 from the start; he was understandably driven by vengeance and a dislike for the antagonist who had killed his favorite character. I missed out on most of the Forsaken campaign so I had no idea what Uldren had even done other than kill Cayde-6. Only later, once I started playing *Destiny 2* myself, did I discover the true extent of the crimes Uldren committed.

Consequently, I made all of my judgments based on what I knew either directly from my brother, or from watching him play previously. I hated Uldren because he hated Uldren; I thought Uldren was a distinctly alien or monstrous character because that was what the other antagonists in the game had been (the Cabal, the Fallen, and the Taken are all non-humanoid alien races).

But that moment when I stood behind where my brother sat on the couch, gazing in awe at the hyper-realistic face of Uldren Sov . . . that was the moment I experienced a connection with *Destiny 2* that was uniquely my own. This game had characters, even antagonists, who were fully fleshed out, with motivations and hauntings; there was enough care put into the work that every expression on Uldren's face conveyed very real emotion. This game had lore and storytelling that came through in the writing, in the visuals, in the music and audio. Every movement was visceral: Uldren's eyes opening, his knees hitting the ground, his hair falling into his face as if truly affected by gravity. Do I find it mildly embarrassing that my first individual, personal connection with *Destiny 2* was because sixteen-year-old me thought the bad guy was hot? Oh, most certainly. Yet it is fitting that it was a queer longing that inspired this connection, and has strengthened along with the connection over the years; and it is fitting that it is Uldren, of all characters, who bridges the queer temporalities I have lived in and around *Destiny 2*.

Uldren, however, was killed at the end of the Forsaken campaign by either the player Guardian or an NPC named Petra Venj. And so Uldren Sov, Prince of the Awoken—brother of Mara Sov, the Queen of the Awoken—no longer exists; not as he once did. Remarkably soon after his death, he was resurrected by a little Ghost named Glint with no memories of his former

life. Now he's known as The Crow (or just Crow), and he works with the very Guardians whose close friend and mentor he'd killed in his past life.

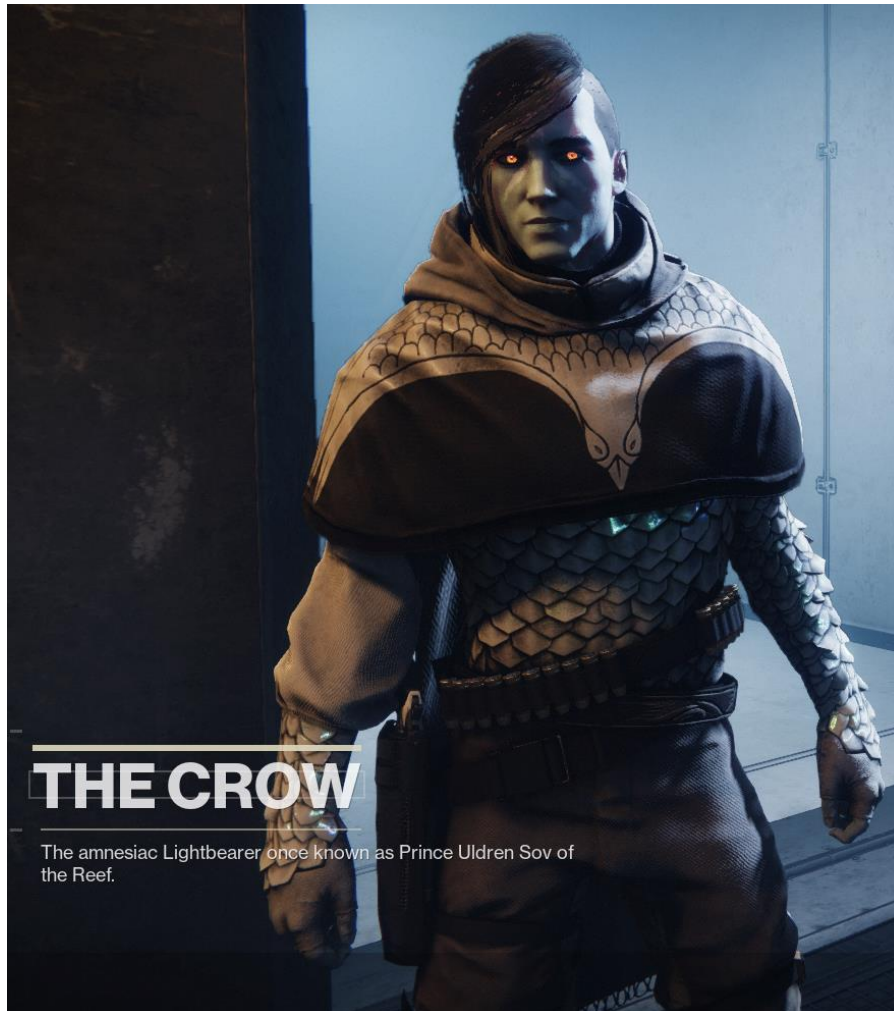


Figure 10: The Crow at his usual position in the H.E.L.M. – although his outfit as Uldren Sov isn't visible in the previous figure, even just looking at neckline of his clothing in both images provides insight into the differences between Uldren and Crow. Where Uldren's clothes are dark colors, Crow's cowl is a far lighter color.

Being a Guardian, *becoming* a Guardian, involves a transition—there is a break in identity and personhood between an individual's life as a Guardian and their life before they were resurrected. That break is quite literally a death, and there is no assurance that a Guardian will be the same person they were in their first life. Rarely, however, is there anyone to know a person between their first and resurrected lives, and in that Crow is exceptional. The span between his life and death— was not only short enough for Guardians, with their multi-

centennial lifespans, to remember him, but for even the average human to remember him—and to remember the harm and chaos he wrought on all who stood in his path.

There is a significant amount of discourse within the *Destiny 2* community regarding whether or not Crow and Uldren are in fact the same person (u/Cruggles30). After all, in many ways their personalities, for *Destiny 2* players who have interacted with both characters, are distinctly different. Uldren Sov was haunted by madness and the specter of his dead sister; he killed Guardian allies, and his own people, the Awoken. Meanwhile, Crow is a lighter character—certainly still haunted, particularly after his memories as Uldren are returned by an antagonist a few years after his resurrection, but empathetic, protective of those for whom he cares. Although the characters both existed within the same body, the death that separates Uldren and Crow in time seems to be a drastic rift, temporally and psychologically.

Yet there is much to be said about how Uldren's persona when the Guardian first meets him may not at all be what Uldren was like, once. By the time the Guardian first meets the Prince of the Awoken, all the way back in the original *Destiny*, he had undergone significant, largely negative, changes to his personality. Some years before, Uldren had illicitly journeyed to a strange place known as the Black Garden, where he was tainted by the Darkness—the abstract, antagonistic force of *Destiny 2* that opposes the Light of the Traveler. In the intervening years between his journey to the Black Garden and *Destiny 2*, Uldren was slowly corrupted by the Darkness, until the death of his sister drove him entirely over the edge and provided the mental foothold that the Darkness took advantage of in order to manipulate him.

Although it has not been shown within the game, written lore indicates an entirely different side of Uldren that the Guardian was not privy to: desperate to please his sister as always, yes, but with the potential for charm, the potential for comradery, and more than that, a

potential for deep intimacy and trust. This personality shines through in the first half of the lore book *The Forsaken Prince*, which chronicles Uldren's decision to venture to the Black Garden, his experiences within, and his gradual descent into a pawn of the Darkness. It ends immediately before the events of the Forsaken expansion. Notably, Uldren does not undertake this mission alone; he enlists his best friend and closest companion, Jolyon Till the Rachis, to come with him. Uldren's relationship with Jolyon is incredibly important, not only because of the queer potential that it contains, but because it is through Uldren's interactions with Jolyon that we can see glimpses of an Uldren Sov that is far more similar to Crow than the Uldren of Forsaken. Further, the interactions between the two men also serve as the way by which changes in Uldren's personality can best be tracked.

At the beginning of *The Forsaken Prince* lore book, Uldren opens by proclaiming, "Jolyon, my man . . . you and I are going to take the Black Garden," and when he receives a sarcastic response, Uldren retorts with an, "I'm serious, Jol" ("The Length of a Chain | Part I"). He's cocky, he's overconfident, but capable of making deep interpersonal connections, as is evident from the casual intimacy of the possessive "my man" and the endearment "Jol". And even though Jolyon is exasperated by Uldren's willingness to disobey his sister (she's forbidden anyone from venturing into the unknown dangers of the Black Garden) and clear disregard for his own safety—perhaps *because* of those reasons—Jolyon goes with Uldren anyway. Their extensive efforts to reach the Black Garden prove the depths of Jolyon's dedication to Uldren; the man spends *eight hours* "picking off Cabal infantry with his rifle" ("Through the Gate"). Yet it also reveals an easy physical intimacy and familiarity to match their emotional intimacy. This intimacy is interspersed with combat and high stakes situations: they use a code tapped out on skin to communicate; as they run toward the entrance of the Garden, Uldren "grabs Jol by the

hand and pulls;” as Uldren activates a shield to protect them both from certain annihilation-by-big-gun, he “holds Jolyon close, and together they calm their breath” (“Through the Gate”). This Uldren is completely unrecognizable to anyone who saw him gun down Cayde-6 in cold blood. He is capable of curiosity, and deep affection, and shows of devotion that don’t involve the death and devastation of all other living things. This Uldren is actually quite a bit like Crow.

Of course, by the halfway point of *The Forsaken Prince*, after the adventure into the Black Garden, Uldren as *Destiny 2* players knew him was quickly coming into being. An entry titled only “Jolyon” charts one of the last interactions when Uldren was still himself, before the corruption of the Darkness took full effect. There are glimpses of Uldren—he misinterprets Jolyon’s refusal to talk about the Black Garden as a desire to keep the experiences as “shared secrets” between them, which “kindles a little bonfire of warmth in his gut” (“Jolyon”). But as a whole Uldren is drifting away; he’s mostly forgotten about Jolyon, forgotten about anything that isn’t the mystery of the Black Garden, or his desperation to impress his sister. By the end of *The Forsaken Prince*, Uldren’s sister is gone and he has become a murderer of his own people. For me, the extent of Uldren’s brokenness is best demonstrated when he is captured and jailed: “one of the snipers [from the strike team] looks him in the eyes, like he’s asking a question. A tall man with a long rifle. Narrow intelligent eyes. Handsome. Is he . . . did Uldren want something from him once? Something important? . . he can’t figure it out” (“Free | Part II). This is from the last entry of the book—a book that starts with an excited “Jolyon, my man,” ends with Uldren entirely unable to recognize his former companion. He’s able to recognize a faded importance, but nothing more.

All of this is to say that, first, Uldren’s original personality is entirely different from his portrayal within *Destiny 2*’s Forsaken expansion, and aligns much more closely with the

empathetic, well-intentioned Crow. Yet perhaps more importantly, *The Forsaken Prince* as a narrative is an ideal entry point into the queer temporal framework through which I examine both Uldren/Crow and another character, Oryx the Taken King. This framework relies upon Halberstam’s “notion of “becoming trans” which highlights “the impossibility of linearity, permanence, and end points”” and can reveal itself within “a narrative framework of continual transition” (63, 96). I conceptualize Uldren/Crow’s (and Oryx’s) narrative trajectory as being one of “becoming trans” via “continual transition,” and *The Forsaken Prince* acts as such a “narrative framework of continual transition” in how it depicts the constant shifting of Uldren’s persona. That singular lore book, however, is only a fragment of the “becoming trans” or the “trans becoming” that characterizes Uldren’s arc—the transitions have no clear beginning and certainly no clear end (yet). They are in effect long before Uldren learns of the Black Garden, and continue on even after Uldren is claimed by the Darkness.



Figure 11: Comparison screenshot of two scenes by u/SirGibbleFrits on Reddit. Top: Commander Zavala (right) offers a hand to Crow (left) in a cutscene from *Season of the Chosen*. Bottom: Uldren Sov (left) immediately before murdering the Lightless Cayde-6 (right) at the beginning of *Forsaken*.

Within this notion of “becoming trans,” I do want to establish a foundation of internal consistency. That is to say, the “becoming” and the transitions are not so much *limited* as they are acting upon a singular being that maintains a recognizable character even as they may change drastically both externally and internally. Reddit user u/cptenn94 explains this idea elegantly in relation to Crow and Uldren: “Crow is just one branch of the tree originally named Uldren, with each fork a choice or experience a different “Uldren/Crow” that was or could’ve been. All equally part of the same person, but free to develop different personality traits” (u/cptenn94). However, I find it necessary to alter u/cptenn94’s formulation slightly. Uldren’s death before becoming Crow was not his first; before he was an Awoken man named Uldren, he was a human man named Uldwyn.

Far, far back in *Destiny* lore, Uldwyn was a passenger on the colony ship *Yang Liwei* that left the Earth to escape the Collapse. *Yang Liwei* was the ship that collided with a space anomaly which destroyed the ship and its inhabitants, resulting in the creation of the Awoken race—the transformation of all the crew and passengers from humans into something else, something more. This is to say that Uldren had a life before he was Uldren, and if anyone is to be the tree that eventually branches into Crow, it is not Uldren, but Uldwyn.

There is very little information about the original Awoken from their lives before, particularly because very few of them ever were able to remember their prior human lives. What information does exist comes from the writings of Uldren/Uldwyn’s sister Mara, creator and eventual Queen of the Awoken. Uldwyn’s introduction is one of action and motion. His sister Mara finds him picking a prizefight, something he’s evidently done many times before: ““Mara!” the fighter shouts, delighted . . . Uldwyn grins messily . . . He took the fight for the same reason he wanted to join the Amrita expedition—he measures himself by the bravery of his losses. By

what he can survive losing” (“Brephos II”). There is danger, of course, in all memory of Uldwyn existing through the lens of his sister. What’s written may not be what *was* (and isn’t that the danger for all of us, for queer folks and trans folks in particular—not being seen for what we are?). But if Mara Sov is to be trusted, then Uldwyn was as wild, careless, and exploratory as the self that came after. Some of the descriptions of Uldwyn even parallels those of Uldren from *The Forsaken Prince*. Where “Uldwyn grins messily,” Uldren the “Master of Crows grins his winningest” (“The Length of a Chain | Part I”).

Mara glimpsed Uldren’s fundamental nature very clearly when she sought a glimpse of the future in a machine known as the Oracle Engine: “her brother, who explored the ruins of the fallen worlds and sought out challenges to test himself . . . a brother who hunted and explored” (“Tyrannocide II”). If this is to be seen as Uldren’s true nature, what’s left when all the Darkness and grief is peeled back from his bones—well, then, it’s quite the same as he was before as Uldwyn, and is as Crow.

Uldwyn/Uldren/Crow has undergone transitions that change drastically the ways in which he interacts and engages with the world around him, and how the world responds to him, even as there remain parts of him that are much the same even after death twice over, and corruption to boot. I do not necessarily subscribe to the idea of gender transition as the *death* of an entire former self, but I do see it as a potential for rebirth. I do see it, as Halberstam says, as a process of “becoming.” With that in mind, the resurrection that comes with being a Guardian, and the way such a rebirth allows a remaking of the self, mirrors how a transition in gender can spark or allow for a very similar remaking of self, as happened in the transition from the corrupted Uldren to the Light-chosen Crow.

II. Oryx, the Taken King

Although not with Uldren, *Destiny 2*'s lore does contain a literal gender and sex transition as a method of remaking the self: the Hive God, Oryx, the Taken King. The similarities between the two characters, however, are both notable and intentional. Uldren wasn't the only "brother who hunted and explored;" that reference in Mara Sov's vision of her brother's nature was part of a series of direct parallels between the Hive Gods and Mara's family ("Tyrannocide II").

As the young Oryx and his sisters had to dive into the gaseous layers of their planet—"for life . . . for vengeance . . . to understand"—so must we dive further into the deep lore of *Destiny 2* ("VII: The Dive"). The Hive are an insectoid alien race within the universe of *Destiny 2*; Oryx, as well as his two sisters, are known as Hive Gods because of their immense power and role in shaping both their race and the universe. While Oryx was at one point a major villain in *Destiny*, his sisters Savathûn and Xivu Arath have taken precedence over the last few years of *Destiny 2*. Yet even more so than his sisters, Oryx's life has traced along a fragmented path of queer temporalities and radical transformations.

Just as with Uldwyn/Uldren/Crow, I've marked three distinct phases in Oryx's trajectory of transformation: the eldest child, Aurash; the Hive God, Auryx; and the Taken King, Oryx. But the truth is that from the moment he and his sisters left home Oryx had been constantly changing. His sister Savathûn deems this as his "infinite adaptability," through which his "greatest acts of navigation were his metamorphoses" ("II—Savathûn—Imago Unfurl").



Figure 12: Oryx (as Aurash) and his sisters, pre-Morph (from left to right, Xivu Arath, Savathûn, and Oryx)



Figure 13: Oryx and his sisters post-Morph (from left to right, Xivu Arath, Savathûn, Oryx)

The first metamorphosis took place when Oryx, known as Aurash, was a young female Krill, the origin species of the Hive (I will briefly switch to using she/her pronouns when

describing Aurash, in keeping with how the *Books of Sorrow* lore referred to her). Driven away from her home with her sisters, the three of them made a bargain for power with an ancient creature, the Worm God Yul, to gain the power to retake their home. This bargain is markedly queer, and markedly temporal: an offering of eternal life and the “power to make of [their flesh as they] will,” in exchange for becoming a host species for the Worm God’s children (“IX: The Bargain”). This allowed Aurash and her sisters to not only extend their lifespans far beyond any normal living creature—to millions of years—but shape their bodies as well. Both aspects are even queerer in the context of the Krill/Hive species, because before then the Krill lifespan was generally only ten years. So to receive eternity, instead, required a radical reshaping of what it meant to exist as a species, as siblings, as part of the larger universe. In terms of the shaping of bodies, the Krill/Hive species had a number of “morphs” that could be chosen in adolescence. A morph determines an individual’s role as an adult in society via a physical and cultural transformation, and in the case of the “King morph” that Aurash chose, a literal transformation of sex. Aurash became male, and took on a new name to mark his transition from fragile and short-lived to powerful and nigh eternal: “Auryx. It means Long Thought,” matching his new potential to comprehend the universe on a far vaster scale than before, both in space and time (“X: Immortals”).

Millions of years later, after the dramatic transformation of not only the three siblings but their race as a whole—a process of becoming on the level of a species—Auryx underwent a second transformation separately from his sisters. Much as Uldren sought out the mysteries of the Black Garden, Auryx sought out mysteries of the Darkness as a paracausal force, although he knew it as “the Deep.” Through a convoluted (but consensual and ultimately not permanent) process of killing his sisters, Auryx gained the power to face another Worm God, Akka, and

“take” the knowledge of how to manipulate the Deep. With the Deep, Auryx learned how to “take” entire armies of beings—yank out living things from their place in space and time, change them, and return them as something else. Something dark, something unnatural, something *his*. He changed his name once more, now to Oryx, the Taken King. As he undertook this major transformation, he gained the ability to force others to transition from one state of being to another.



Figure 14: The beginning of the final encounter with Oryx in the King's Fall raid, from a guide video by Rick Kackis (KackisHD).

The key difference between the two character trajectories that I have tracked in this section is that while Uldren/Crow's memories and personas have often been marked by distinct cuts, with little thoroughfare between the befores and afters, the progression of Oryx (and his sisters) was one long trajectory that he held in his mind. In no place is this better shown than in a passage from the *Books of Sorrow* lore where Oryx is met with an enemy who attempts to create a simulation of him in order to defeat him. The enemy initially thinks it fails, thinks that its

simulation is wrong, because “it’s Oryx minus the symbiote organism, minus the wings and morphs, minus the weapon, minus the power.” But Oryx looks at the little simulation with amusement: “You’ve made me as I was. You’ve made a tiny Aurash” (“XLIII: End of Failed Timeline”). Oryx’s younger self was familiar to him; he potentially even held affection for the little simulation, judging by the way he spoke to it, telling the “tiny Aurash” that he had everything he had wanted as a child. The path of continual transition and “becoming” is highly visible in the stark contrast—minus, minus, minus—between “how [Oryx] was” and how he is at the time of the encounter. When Crow met a spectral Uldren in the Season of the Haunted (as I describe in the following section)—the Nightmare of him, the remnants left behind—it was a confrontation. A conflict, with each trying to inflict pain on the other. But where Oryx ultimately destroyed the little Aurash—recognized it, and then moved on—Crow not only faced but eventually accepted and assimilated the reality of his former self.

The theme of injury as a path to “futuraity” and “becoming-collective-across-time” is reflected in the various transitions of Crow and Oryx across their respective narratives (Freeman 11). Crow, as Uldwyn, had to be unmade and remade by a space anomaly to become Uldren; and then had to be corrupted, broken, and killed as Uldren to become Crow. Oryx, as Aurash, had to bargain with Worm Gods and take on a parasitic symbiote to become Auryx; and then had to kill his sisters and the Worm God Akka, and learn how to take life and reshape it with Darkness, to become Oryx, the Taken King (“IX: The Bargain”; “XXVIII: King of Shapes”). Bodies were made and destroyed to make other bodies; bodies were turned inside out by the cosmos and the dark things that lurk beyond and beneath. These transitions could not happen simultaneously, because one was needed to set the stage for the others. While much of *Destiny 2* can be understood *through* queer time, the narratives of Uldren/Crow and Oryx are genuinely

representative of queer time—both characters are “transed” by temporal wounds and movement, which allow for alternate forms of existence and shaping/shifting over time.

Content Vaulting and Queer Grieving

“In war or peace, the life of a Guardian . . . is a life of loss.”—Lord Shaxx (*Destiny 2*)

“. . . these queer affective experiences may be intentionally incorporated into a game by its designers—but they may also be brought to a game by its players, to whom video games offer the opportunity to explore alternate ways of feeling, desiring, and being” (Ruberg 159).

We are coming to the end of an era in the *Destiny* universe, one that has spanned the entirety of both games: the Final Shape is approaching.

For nearly a decade now, *Destiny* has been building up to The Final Shape, an expansion set to release in less than three months. It is the culmination of what Bungie refers to as the Light and Dark saga; how this story ends, and what comes after, is uncertain. Each time I watch the reveal trailer for The Final Shape (and that has been frequently through the course of my research) I am reminded of why I love *Destiny 2*. Everything about the trailer reminds me of the sheer depth of that love: the music, the dialogue, the new worlds opening up before us and the old worlds revisited.

The reveal trailer opens with the Guardian’s Ghost saying, “After all these years. . .” which instantly draws attention to the temporality of the scenes that the trailer ties together. Within the trailer, there are a few notable scenes that hearken back to previous expansions and important locations, as well as the reveal of a long-dead character mysteriously returned to life—Cayde-6, the Exo Hunter Vanguard who was killed by Uldren Sov back in the Forsaken expansion. None of these scenes, however, and certainly not Cayde-6, will be familiar to players who entered the world of *Destiny 2* post-2022. The trailer makes a point of aligning the Ghost’s words, “After all we’ve seen . . . all we’ve lost” with a shot of Cayde-6 looking over his

shoulder, emphasizing his loss as one of the most impactful and devastating in the entire game. Yet what is the impact of seeing Cayde-6 alive again for people who never met him in the first place?

“All these years” is intended to apply to all player/characters who have spent a significant amount of time within the game, but most of all is intended to speak to the player/characters who have been in *Destiny 2* since the very beginning of the game. The more times I watched the teaser, the more I realized that its meaningfulness is predicated upon a deep connection to the history and characters of *Destiny 2* that stretches back farther than is playable by characters who have come into the game in the past couple of years. More broadly, I have been grappling with the question of what this whole adventure, *Destiny 2* in its entirety, means for people who have only been *around* for part of it, and who can only ever directly *participate* in part of it. This is symptomatic of a wound in time, one that has left *Destiny 2* bleeding ever since—content vaulting.

In 2020, *Destiny 2* developer Bungie revealed that with the release of the Beyond Light DLC later that year, they would be “adopt[ing] a new content model that [they are] calling the Destiny Content Vault (DCV). Each year, usually at the expansion boundaries, [Bungie] will cycle some destination and activity content out of the game (and into the DCV) to make room for new experiences” (Dague). Bungie went about this due to considerations of the ever-growing size of the game, as well as how much work was required to maintain those older, less relevant portions of the game rather than work on future installments of the *Destiny 2* narrative. In August 2022, a little under two years after the first batch of content vaulting, Bungie walked back on their decision and promised that there would be “no more expansion sunseting,” meaning that they would no longer remove older narrative expansions as new DLCs came out. But by that

point, it was too late for the first four campaigns of *Destiny 2* that had been removed between the releases of the Beyond Light Expansion and the Witch Queen expansion in February 2022.

Everyone who started playing *Destiny 2* after November 2020 never had a chance to play the initial Red War campaign, or the two expansions The Curse of Osiris and Warmind. Similarly, everyone who started playing *Destiny 2* after February 2022 never had a chance to play those first three narrative campaigns, *or* the Forsaken campaign.

Externally, this might not seem particularly problematic. After all, in 2024 we're now in the seventh year since *Destiny 2* was released. The first four campaigns only made up two years of that, and we still have all of the narrative expansions of the last five years. But one of the most significant issues lies with the fact that content vaulting affected the *first* expansions, and the very *first* part of the story. The Red War was the opening to *Destiny 2*—there was no gradual introduction. The player was dropped directly into the story, and directly into battle, at that. But that battle set the stakes for both new players and players coming from the original *Destiny*; it introduced or reintroduced key characters and concepts, setting players old and new on equal ground.

I have the faintest memories of that introductory mission from the first time, long ago, that I tried to start out in *Destiny 2*—the briefest glimpses in my mind's eye of dodging around a space port; clambering along a Cabal ship's ramp as it flew; and that helpless moment in a grassy ravine somewhere outside the Last City, in the dark, Lightless. That helpless moment between story missions was the last that I ever played in the Red War, because I only returned to play *Destiny 2* myself once all that original content had been locked away.

Without that introduction via the Red War, your induction into *Destiny 2* is slow, lonely, and detached. You're told what and how things are, guided along by quest steps, unaware of the massive imprint of recent history on the very earth around you.

Here is the paradox: that the Guardian is an example of “what a revolutionary and liberated body might be,” that the story of every Guardian is how to engage with this kind of being while simultaneously grappling with the forces trying to exert their will over humanity and the universe—and yet the player is very much beholden to the whims of the game and its developers, and their virtual body and temporal history are confined and chipped away. The content vaulting of *Destiny 2*'s first few campaigns leaves a gaping wound in mechanical time, narrative time, and, perhaps most importantly, the histories of individual players.

Bungie, the developers of *Destiny 2*, likely didn't create their game thinking that after a few years, they would be taking huge chunks of it away from their players—huge chunks of story and gameplay, entire *worlds* disappearing with only the whispered potential of players ever being able to leap across their well-trodden surfaces again. But regardless of initial intentions, content vaulting happened. I've never gotten to wander the sands of Mercury or clamber into the Pyramidion on Io, and it's possible that I never will. So, no, there was no intentional incorporation of a queer affective experience on the developers' part when they sloughed off the first few campaigns of *Destiny 2*. That's not to say I didn't take advantage of it as best I could, when coming into the game with half the past torn out from underneath me.

My response to the loss of access to so much of *Destiny 2*'s history is largely one of grief and mourning, which is how a significant portion of the community has felt, as well (Eternal the Internal). It was a death, after all: the death of a living game as some people knew it and as some

people would never know it. Even though Bungie has sworn off content vaulting in the future, that doesn't resurrect what's been lost.

Here I turn to the concept of “hauntology” to understand how I've wrestled with the grief that alternately fades and strengthens as I immerse myself further into the world of *Destiny 2*. A framework of hauntology “helps explain how and why we yearn for what never was or will be, as that which haunts also drives us with memories we have not nor ever will experience” (Asling 154). This entire concept is made more complex by the multiplicity of meanings that both “memories” and “experience” can take on in regard to a video game—what constitutes my memories as a player, versus my player character's memories? Are they one and the same?

Damian Asling provides a view of hauntology from a video game perspective, where “hauntological forces such as specters comprise[d] of player history, narrative structure, and gameplay. Spectral forces that occupy our temporal space and attention are not specifically “physical;” rather, they occupy space in our minds,” (154). And although I have not worked with the hauntology of games before now, I have written previously about hauntology and hauntings in relation to queer time:

“There are many [ways] to make sense of the fact that queer people live outside of a societal notion of time, within disruptions created by their own queerness . . . whatever the language, there have been people . . . who challenged binary views of gender, sex, and sexuality. And we are separated from them, historically, temporally, and linguistically; there's an inability to reclaim any past we might have . . . [R]egardless of whether the past is left hidden or known, we are haunted by the potentials imagined across past [social] movements. That is, the queer community is haunted by unrealized futures that we could have experienced if things had gone slightly differently . . . For

older [queer people], haunted futures are the ones they almost had their hands on, time after time. But for younger [queer people], we're haunted by futures attached to a past we never knew" (B. Connell 3-6).

The union of these two conceptions of hauntology provides a hauntological theory of queer gaming, one that I think interacts quite well with the impacts of content vaulting on *Destiny 2* the game and *Destiny 2* the community. Instead of generations spanning real-world decades, there are pseudo-generations aligned with when players started playing *Destiny 2*. To keep things simple, I'll define three distinct generations of players: those who came to *Destiny 2* after playing the original *Destiny*; those who started with *Destiny 2* and the Red War when it was first released in 2017 (like my brother); and those who started playing after the release of the Witch Queen expansion in 2022 and the final content vaulting of story expansions (like me).

Thanks to the temporal gap of vaulted content between the end of the original *Destiny* and the current start of the second game, Asling's "specters . . . of player history, narrative structure, and gameplay" hang over the heads of all *Destiny 2* players, regardless of their generation (154). While I would definitely say that the experience of "younger" or later generations is that of being "haunted by futures attached to a past [they] never knew," for the "older" or earlier generations, the haunting goes beyond "futures . . . they almost had their hands on" (B. Connell 6). It's about a tension between player history and narrative/gameplay. With the removal of years of both narrative and gameplay, the player history of earlier players is not only left inaccessible and behind in the past, it is effectively denied as having existed.

In *Time Binds*, Freeman discusses a Marxist view of hauntology where "the present is thereby always split, but split by prior violence and future possibility rather than simply by the nature of signification" (10). What is more of a violent prior split than the rending and then

denial of a past? Until Bungie promised “no more vaulting,” players’ grasp on the future was just as tenuous as their faltering grip on the past—even *with* that promise, there are still the seasons and their content that disappear after each Year (the time between DLC releases) of *Destiny 2*. With each transition to a new DLC and campaign, there is a year (not a game year, but a real life year) or more of seasonal story missions, seasonal activities, and various other forms of content, that is sloughed off of the bulk of the game and into the void that increasingly makes up every player’s past.

My brother’s connection to the character of the Hunter Vanguard Cayde-6 serves as a key example of how disparate our individual experiences of *Destiny 2* have been depending on the temporality of our entrance into the game world. For my brother’s character, Cayde-6 was everything; for my character, Cayde-6 is a stone bust in the corner of the social area called the Tower.

I asked my brother about how the developers’ choice to vault content impacted the key points through his *Destiny 2* history that shaped his story as a player, and his character’s personal story. In particular, I brought up the Forsaken campaign from 2018 because of the very sharp, impactful memory I have of the end of that story, and because all of the story content from Forsaken was removed just before I started my personal *Destiny* journey in early 2022.

My brother responded in reference to Cayde-6, who was killed at the beginning of the Forsaken campaign, and whose death was avenged at the end, saying:

“The problem is that [removing the whole Forsaken campaign] makes [Cayde-6’s death] so easily forgettable, because it feels like it’s not an important part of the story. But getting your mentor killed, especially as a Hunter—you don’t get to experience that as any other class in the game, which makes it so unique. You get your only connection

to a higher up figure—especially one that’s so funny, and so witty in a way that resonates with me and I’m sure plenty of other people—killed and it’s supposed to completely change the tone of the game. And for that purpose, it did; it completely changed the tone of the game and all of a sudden it was a lot more meaningful than anything had ever been. Taking away a main character like that, especially such a beloved one, it made you feel more connected to the game because—even if the campaign wasn’t the greatest thing in the world, even if the mechanics weren’t the greatest, it still gave you this sort of drive, because it was for vengeance. And that sort of stuff, really connects you to your Guardian in a way where Destiny takes you through grief in so many different ways as a game. It takes you through losing a loved one; takes you through losing a part of yourself.”

In this selection from the interview with my brother, he expresses intense emotional reactions to *Destiny 2*, particularly a desire for “vengeance” and a process of going through “grief.” These emotions not only “[connect] you to your Guardian” but also connect the player to the broader universe and chronology of the game. My brother’s continued use of “you,” and “your,” and “yourself” emphasizes how deeply personal these connections are, how there is a broad sense of ownership of the game and the experiences players both have and create within the game. The ownership is inclusive; it belongs to everyone who has played this part of *Destiny 2*.

Therein lies the issue, or the limit, to the inclusivity of “your” encounters with “grief,” “losing a loved one [and] part of yourself”: that those encounters occurred within specific parts of *Destiny 2* that are no longer playable. Newer players such as myself have never and *will* never live through the same degree of grief surrounding these characters and events, not only from the Forsaken campaign, but also from The Red War, the Curse of Osiris, and the Warmind campaigns that have been put into the Destiny Content Vault.

When I say that vaulting content in *Destiny 2* effectively unmoors new players after a certain point from time, I mean time in a whole host of contexts—I mean external, “real world” time in a developmental sense; internal narrative time in a game sense; personal narrative time both as a character and as an individual who plays a character. Instead of a build-up where players learn what it means to lose, what it means to feel truly helpless, we are launched into a world where the stakes have been long-established and yet we are missing integral information on why we should care.

Yet content vaulting also unmoors players like my brother who have been playing since the release of *Destiny 2*. It removes an entire chunk of their history that can never be revisited, and renders a significant segment of the personal narratives they have built around their characters null and void. My brother brought up a similar problem in regard to “sunsetting,” which means setting time limits on how long a weapon can remain a viable option to use in game (sunsetting no longer happens, but its effects are still felt within the community). In *Destiny 2*, the developers are constantly increasing the power levels that Guardians and their gear—and their enemies—can reach, in order to keep a sense of progression. “Sunsetting” weapons meant that after a certain period of time, the weapons could no longer be increased to a higher level, and thus would not be effective in most situations in the game. No Guardian wants to be facing off with a huge squadron of Cabal with a weapon that can barely do damage to the weakest enemies.

However, the kinds of gear being sunset were never random weapons that you could find just anywhere; these weapons were rewards gained after long and difficult efforts by individual players. I can remember how excited and proud my brother was when he finally got the Mountaintop and the Recluse, these guns that no one uses nowadays because the game has made

them not worth using. The thing is—these weapons had to be earned; they were the product of real sweat and tears and virtual blood. My brother describes getting these weapons as situations where “you had to prove yourself in the world of Destiny,” and it was “important to be able to allow these experiences where you can create your own story” considering how limited the actual narrative role-playing in *Destiny 2* is. So to sunset the weapons, effectively doing the same thing as content vaulting by making those weapon aspects of the game “unplayable” even if they’re not entirely gone, is to chip away at yet another part of what keeps long-time *Destiny 2* players anchored to their own Guardians’ pasts. It is within the portions of *Destiny 2* playable by gamers, but most particularly in the out-of-game world where *Destiny 2* is a series of related story expansions, that the wound is felt. The characters *in* the game don’t know that an entire portion of their history has been carved away, because it *hasn’t*, narratively; only mechanically.

The “stubborn lingering of pastness” and “the reappearance of bygone events in the symptom” that Freeman describes as part of “queer affect” are a fitting way to describe *Destiny 2*’s actions as it turns back to old stories and old places that are now detached from the game as it exists now, whether because of the loss via content vaulting or simply because of the atemporal, anachronistic connections forced into being by the return of old content. For the former, a prime example is The Season of the Haunted, where the bygone events were part of the now-vaulted Red War and Forsaken campaigns, and the symptoms were literal ghosts—haunting the non-playable characters as part of the narrative, yes, but also haunting the players as memories long past or as *lack* of memories.



Figure 15: My Guardian enters the Haunted Leviathan at the start of the Season of the Haunted, July 2023.

In the case of the latter, I refer to the King’s Fall raid, recently incorporated into *Destiny* 2. Originally, King’s Fall was a raid released as expansion content for the original *Destiny*; in it, Guardians face and kill the previously mentioned Taken King Oryx. So by the beginning of *Destiny* 2, Oryx is dead, yet with the reintroduction of the updated version of the King’s Fall raid to *Destiny* 2 . . . there are instances of time when Oryx isn’t dead? As the Reddit user *dustsurrounds* says, the *Destiny* 2 version of the King’s Fall raid is located in the “legends tab [of the destination menu, which] is all content which happened in the past” (u/dustsurrounds). This demonstrates that the raid’s recurrence is not meant to have any special meaning in the current narrative canon; but the fact that it is *intended* to be “a turning back” only makes the anachronism queerer.

I return now to the Season of the Haunted, which took place in the summer of 2022, a few months after I officially stepped into the skin of my own *Destiny* 2 character. This seasonal

storyline acquainted me with characters and storylines from *Destiny 2* that I myself had never been able to play (and some that I never witnessed, either). In this season, there were a multiplicity of hauntings going on: mucking with time and connections of time, asynchronicity but also atemporality. The narrative hinges on stopping a returned-antagonist, Emperor Calus of the Cabal, from gaining the psychic power to communicate with his new master The Witness, an even greater and more terrible enemy. In order to do so, the player/character needs to aid several NPCs, Crow included, in facing psychic projections of past trauma known as Nightmares. The broad range of NPCs and their Nightmares allowed the Season of the Haunted to serve as a recap of storylines that have been lost to the players via content vaulting, mainly the conflicts of The Red War and Forsaken. The Empress Caiatl faces her former mentor, Ghaul, who was the primary antagonist in The Red War; meanwhile, Crow faces his past self, Uldren, and the memories he now has of the things he had done as Uldren.

Whenever I think back to the Season of the Haunted, I find myself thinking of queer mourning, not only in a narrative context but in a literal, physical out-of-game-yet-in-game way. In a sense, Season of the Haunted provided me an opportunity to mourn what I never had, allowed me to see the histories I couldn't live and try to make sense of them. How different would that seasonal plotline have been for someone who started playing at that moment, and had never seen, watched, or witnessed the storylines in any way? I at least knew about Calus and Ghaul (as a suspicious sort-of-ally and an antagonist from the Red War, respectively), and I *certainly* knew about Uldren, if not Fikrul (both antagonists from Forsaken). And how was it for my brother to be reacquainted with those figments and remnants from his past in *Destiny 2*, things that he knew and had witnessed intimately and had a serious emotional connection to? As I texted my brother, "[I'm] thinking about how the Nightmares in Season of the Haunted haunted

you in that they were things you'd encountered in the past that had returned, but haunted me because they were echoes of a past I never lived/experienced."

Elizabeth Freeman elaborates on a form of queer historiography that "does not write the lost object into the present so much as encounter it already in the present, by treating the present itself as hybrid. And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter" (95). This is quite literally what the *Season of the Haunted* does: it brings "the lost object"—that is, characters and storylines that have already played out in no-longer-playable content—into the present of the game not as it was, but in a different, more ephemeral form. In *Season of the Haunted*, "the present itself is hybrid" in that remnants of the past, not the actual objects themselves but "Nightmares," appear in the present to be dealt with. The Nightmares who appear are dead—have been long dead—and they are phantoms, specters, the recurrence of energies and problems not yet reconciled.

These Nightmares are not merely ghosts; these are manifestations with real presence and the ability to interact with physical objects and forms. They haunt very specific people almost as if they are carried within or alongside those peoples' bodies. The pain is real, and must be conquered physically, mentally, emotionally. Even when most of the physical brunt can be borne by Guardians as surrogates, the physical presence of the sufferer is intrinsic to the process of working through grief effectively. We turn again to the wound, the injury—not merely embodied, not merely spatial, but felt throughout time.

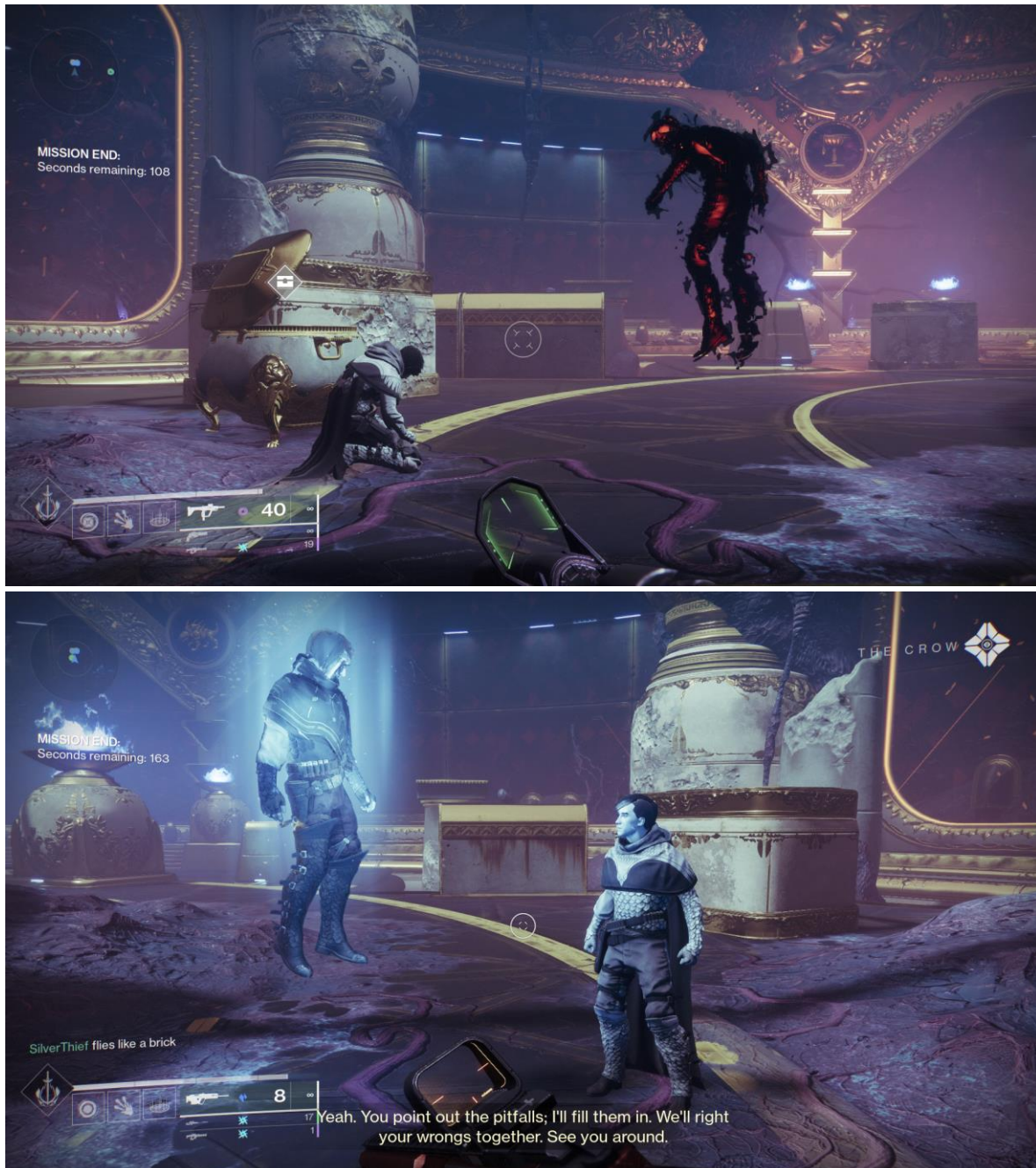


Figure 16: Screenshots of Crow and Nightmare Uldren from the Season of the Haunted, July 2023. Top: Crow (left) and the Nightmare of Uldren (right), after Crow has failed to control his reactions to the Nightmare's goading; Bottom: Crow (right) and the Nightmare of Uldren (left) after Crow has accepted Uldren as a part of his past.

Coda

“Melancholia connotes inward movement, for it preserves the lost object as an aspect of one grieving person’s subjectivity, interior, unconsciousness” (Freeman 70).

Even before I started saving clips of *Destiny 2* for thesis purposes, I was recording and taking screenshots of hours of content, cutscenes, and play; even now, truly, only part of my saving process is thesis-related. The content-vaulting of *Destiny 2*, as well as general trends in the video games industry (digital over physical copies of the game, everything being stored in the cloud, a general lack of ownership or stability regarding games old and new), made me acutely aware that games are ephemeral. There is no promise that you will have the same game, or even *any* game, to play a few years in the future. I’ve started my grieving process early, before anything has even died or ended, because I don’t want to be left with empty hands and my own untrustworthy memory if something does happen to *Destiny 2*.

My brother is going through his own process of grieving, as well; his own haunting by *Destiny 2* as it was, as he’s surrounded by people who only have ever known it as it is now: fragmented, decontextualized, beautiful but undeniably fragile. I’ve reproduced a section from an interview with him at length below, since it perfectly encapsulates the mixture of passion, frustration, and melancholia that he has expressed over the years in regard to content vaulting:

Interview Transcript from Jason, Jan. 3, 2024.

“It’s hard because you have to go through all these stories and you remember all the good parts of it, but at the same time you feel embarrassed going through the stories because there’s no . . . there’s nothing to it for [new players]. They don’t have any sort of

stake in it, because they took out [everything] that builds up the stake. And even if you were to play [the original] *Destiny*, you'd still have this huge chunk of time where you're like, what the hell happened here? Then there's no sort of stake in playing it. You're just playing it to do the campaign, you're not playing it to experience the story. And if you want to find anything story-wise—they did a good job of implementing the Timeline [in the *Destiny 2* menu] but that doesn't really do much at all especially when it's hidden away in a corner of the screen. And the average player is going to get into this stuff nowadays is going to skip all the cutscenes . . . even these super important cutscenes that are integral to the story, they're going to be skipped because there's no . . . background to center yourself on. So it's hard introducing people to [*Destiny 2*] at this time.”

So there is mourning, yes, and plenty of it. The *Destiny 2* community is well-acquainted with grief—within the game, and within the real world. As I write this now, it has only just been one year since the passing of actor Lance Reddick, who not only voiced Commander Zavala in the *Destiny* universe but was an avid player of *Destiny 2* as well (and a Warlock, to boot; a win for the Warlocks). Reddick's passing caused a large-scale, ongoing disturbance in the normal temporality of *Destiny 2* as players struggle with what it means to lose an integral part of the community but still hear his voice and *interact with* an embodied fragment of him that's been left behind. The flesh of time has been rent and then messily knotted back up, left in queer turmoil, as a character continues to exist even after the man who made him who he is has passed on. And Commander Zavala's story *will* continue on, at least through the upcoming expansion in June 2024, less than three months from now; as Reddick was unable to do all the voice lines for Zavala, actor Keith David will be stepping in to take up the mantle (*Destiny 2* Team). But it's not

the same. It can never be the same. “We are not who we were. Who we were no longer exists” (“II—Savathûn—Imago”).

Yet the player/characters of *Destiny 2* have a remarkable ability to persist through the sometimes crushing press of grief. It is a beautiful world that Bungie has created, and a beautiful sociocultural ecosystem that all player/characters have contributed to. The moments of loss can stop us in our tracks or tear holes through our lives, but we readjust. We stitch ourselves back together, and the shared losses synchronize our multiplicity of temporal experiences, if only for an instant. Once again, there is no better example of this than Lance Reddick’s Commander Zavala, and the in-game reactions to his death. Countless players organized vigils at the Tower, a common social area where Commander Zavala himself has stood vigil for years, looking out over the Last City that he’s fought to protect. These vigils began on the very day that Reddick passed away. The player/characters visited Zavala to honor Reddick because Reddick was Zavala, often affectionately laying claim to the character even in the real world. In words alone, it seems trite to say that player/characters celebrated and paid their respects to Reddick by emoting in front of a video game character. But it’s another thing entirely to see it—to see Guardian after Guardian, virtual strangers, uniting to pay tribute to the memory of their Commander; swords and shields made out of Light raised in salute, sparking against the night sky.

Keep the vigil. Build the memories into yourself. Eyes up, Guardian.



Figure 17: A vigil for Lance Reddick next to Commander Zavala in the Tower social area, from a video by LLUSHIC posted on YouTube the day of Reddick's passing.

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