

A NARRATIVE OF SYNTHETIC FEAR: VISUALIZING DYSTOPIA
IN A GAMING WORLD

by

SHANNON O'BRIEN WILDER

(Under Direction of Carole Henry)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine how synthetic fear functions in a virtual world by focusing on the researcher's immersion within a video game. It takes the form of an arts-based autoethnographic study in order to interpret and creatively explore that experience. This study explores the concept of *synthetic fear*, the pervasive influence of created images of fear in digital visual culture by using this framework as a lens to explore themes in a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). Using alternative ethnographic methods drawing from arts-based educational research and autoethnographic methods, this study experiments with narrative voice to explore real and virtual experiences in the voices of both the researcher and the avatar, or game character. Themes such as race, gender, citizenship, identity, exploration, surveillance, and political rhetoric illustrate the way that synthetic fear works as an underlying framework for these gaming experiences. This study is not intended to prescribe art education curricula for incorporating digital media in the classroom, but is instead intended to raise questions and encourage art educators to look at digital media and its influence on students in a more critical way.

INDEX WORDS: Art Education, Visual Culture, Video Games, Digital Culture, *EVE Online*, Gaming, Gamers, Race, Gender, Image, Identity, Civic Identity, Citizenship, Fear, Synthetic Fear, Surveillance, Virtual Worlds, Synthetic Worlds, Political Fear, Art-Based Educational Research, Autoethnography

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Jim and Tommye O'Brien, who taught me to work hard and above all be kind, and, of course, to my husband Lance, who is a faithful friend and partner in everything.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: VISIONS OF DYSTOPIA IN TECHNOCULTURE

Prologue: Personal Journal Entry, November 2003

My fascination with monsters began the first time I read a children's version of Dracula as a second grader. It was during my daily trip to the school library that it all began. The rows of musty books and the graveyard-like silence can make the library a rather spooky place if you have the right imagination. The librarian, a kindly soul, warned me that Dracula might make me question whether monsters were purely fantasy or if they did exist in some shadowy part of our world. Later that night, this same school librarian (a friend of my mother) came to visit. To a second grader with a Gothic imagination, her visit was like an ominous sign. In my memory, she stood in the living room, delivering her warnings as lightning flashed in the windows behind her and thunder cracked overhead. At least, that's the way I recall it now. I have made my memory into a cinematic moment. It is this noir memory, this historical fiction, that marks the beginning of something new. A shift in thought? A half-formed observation? New shadows on my bedroom wall? In my mind, this memory is the first sign, the zero marker for why I find forms of fear an intriguingly powerful subject and object of attention.

Cyberspace and Science Fiction

“When the fear came, it was like some half-forgotten friend. Not the cold, rapid mechanism of the dex-paranoia but simple animal fear. He’d lived for so long on a constant edge of anxiety that he’d almost forgotten what real fear was” (Gibson, 1988, p. 18).

—Neuromancer by William Gibson

In William Gibson’s science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, the world is a consumer wasteland, controlled by a matrix of information and data that can be entered and navigated like a living landscape. Gibson envisions a dangerous, cramped, and violent world filled with solipsistic characters addicted to cyberspace, mind-altering drugs, and bio-technological implants, allowing them to operate more like machines than humans. Significantly, this urban Gothic tale—or cyberpunk fiction as the genre became known— was first published in 1984, the year, in George Orwell’s vision, of Big Brother’s constant surveillance.

That was also the year that Apple Computer released the famous “1984” television advertisement introducing the Macintosh. In this commercial that aired only once, an army of docile and gray clad workers sit listening to a fierce talking head on a huge projection screen. He praises a world “where each worker may bloom, secure from the pests of contradictory and confusing truths” (Scott, 1984). United by thought, united by ideology, united by technology, individuals are part of the collective, and the “I” ceases to exist. Like the 1990s version of the alien race The Borg in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, all individuals have been assimilated into a dystopian vision of technology’s domination of independent human biology. Suddenly a woman pursued by police in riot gear runs in and dramatically hurls a sledgehammer into the screen, liberating the oppressed workers from this tyranny of thought control with the promise, “You’ll see why 1984 won’t be like 1984.” This commercial event firmly established Apple’s image as a company of corporate subversives and radicals in a computing world that seemingly

was trying to turn us all into passive slaves at the keyboard. Instead, the Macintosh symbolized creativity, freedom, and individual expression through technology instead of oppression.

Amid the tension between fear and hope in this symbolic year, Gibson also introduced the term “cyberspace” into the lexicon of a newly emerging technological culture, or technoculture. Gibson’s cyberspace is a fully realized world separate from physical reality, not a location but a space visualized and constructed by the people who virtually entered this world, yet ultimately controlled by commercial interests. In an educational simulation from Gibson’s (1988) *Neuromancer*, a narrator describes the experience of cyberspace this way:

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts . . . A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding . . . (p. 51)

Words become abstract phrases, and language fails in its descriptive capacity because, in Gibson’s vision, cyberspace is conceived as a sensory experience visualized in the mind and experienced transparently by the body, much like the current conception of immersive virtual reality in which the medium or interface disappears (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). This erasure of media is what Bolter and Grusin call “transparent immediacy” (p. 23), or a quest for a more seamless and natural interaction between human and machine during which the mechanism of immersion (the medium or machine) becomes invisible. Such a merger is fraught with creative potential as well as truly nightmarish possibilities. In the history of technoculture, such fictional abstractions—visualizations of a digitally enhanced world—influence interpretations of personal experiences with technology. Such dark abstractions are part of a complex, Gothic narrative that

began before the invention of a *digital* technology. In the most primitive of forms, technology has always been a source of dark anxieties. Fear accompanies us into digital spaces like a stowaway rat carrying old plagues that mutate into new forms within the ecology of digital media. Whether the ghoulish science of *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1818/1996), the mutation of an organic yet mechanical menace of the *Alien* (Scott, 1979) series, the apocalyptic nightmare of machine dominance in *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999), or the strange permutations of mythology and biotechnology in Matthew Barney's (1994-2002) *Cremaster* film cycle, these images are part of a collective fantasy/nightmare functioning as a cipher for decoding the sociocultural implications of technological creation. "What have we done?" and "who have we become?" are old questions asked repeatedly through new fictions. These fictions, however, are powerful forces that influence how we not only "read" experiences but also create new posthuman cyborg myths, in order to make sense of the hybrid blend of machine and human biology that theorists like Haraway (1991) and Hayles (1999) insist we have already become.¹ Embedded in these fictions are hopes and idealistic dreams about technology's power over death, isolation, and the body, but also dark fears expressed through science fiction, virtual reality, nightmares of technological domination, savage mutations, beautiful monsters, posthuman evolution, and the strange and sometimes prophetic role of the arts, bent on creating new commentary about life intertwined with technology. Ontologically and epistemologically, all of these forces play a part in shaping the future and in changing who we are and how we know.

Within this *mélange* of technological fictions is the cultural discourse that takes place in and around digital technology. These discourses are varied and multi-stranded, so a study of

¹ I have borrowed the term posthuman from Hayles (1999), who uses it to define the cultural and physical merger of the human body and intelligent machines, and who describes this as "the unfolding story of how a historically specific construction called *the human* is giving way to a different construction called *the posthuman*" (p. 2).

technoculture in its entirety reaches beyond the limits of a dissertation. In this project, I focus on one important aspect of this discourse: synthetic fear as experienced in digital environments such as an online video game. Such a virtual world acts as an interpretative lens within the technocultural discourse that I use to examine and critique elements of digital visual culture. The central question for my project is this: what is the function of fear in visual digital culture?

CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SITUATING SYNTHETIC FEAR

The Problem: Got Fear?

People are afraid, and they like it that way. The multi-ethnic hip-hop group the Black Eyed Peas lyrically captures the public fascination with fear and terror in the media in their 2003 hit “Where Is the Love”: “I think the whole world's addicted to the drama / Only attracted to things that'll bring you trauma.” The purpose of this study is to examine how synthetic fear functions in a virtual world by focusing on my own immersion within a video game. It will take the form of an arts-based autoethnographic study in order to interpret and creatively explore that experience. This study is not intended to prescribe art education curricula for incorporating digital media in the classroom, but is instead intended to raise questions and encourage art educators to look at digital media and its influence on students in a more critical way. After all, monsters and horror stories are all around us now, woven into our cultural inbox, hiding in our networks, and stalking us through a daily barrage of media and digital technology. Language and visual metaphors of digital culture conjure images of fearsome predators in a digitally-mediated world: viruses, worms, Trojan horses, email hoaxes, code bugs, and spyware, along with the disembodied monsters of cyberspace such as hackers, chat room predators, cyberstalkers, rogue programmers, cyborgs, and (the ultimate specter of digital culture to some) Big Brother Microsoft.

Where do they come from, and why are images of fear so pervasive in digital visual culture? These mutated representations of visual culture “are never created *ex nihilo*, but through a process of fragmentation and recombination” (Cohen, 1996, p. 11) from dissected elements of postmodern culture. Are these digitized versions of Frankenstein’s monster the inevitable, cynical children of human hubris and new technology? Perhaps instead they are manifestations of what Lunenfeld (1999) calls the “cyberspace backlash” (p. 31) against the over-hyped promises of a utopian technoculture. After all, in the digital age, barriers to knowledge and power were supposed to vanish in an egalitarian online society. Instead, are old myths being resurrected in digital forms? Is the glow of the computer screen distorting the tangible, unmediated experience of life—if life without mediation is possible? Critics of an idealized vision of technoculture’s future, or “naïve realists” (Lunenfeld, 1999, p. 32), see the computer as a “subordinate device that tends to withdraw us from the primary world” (p. 33) and that should be destroyed if necessary. “There is fear that the same power elite who formerly ‘moved atoms’ as they pursued a science without conscience will now ‘move bits’ that govern the computerized world” (Lunenfeld, 1999, p. 33). Such paranoia makes the computer—the box of wires and silicon—the ultimate icon of fear in the digital age because of the power and dominance it possesses, yet the social processes and cultural practices embedded in digital experiences are not so easily unplugged. Technoculture is instead a tangled web of connected ideas, ephemeral broken links, and forgotten contexts. Baudrillard’s (1981, 1994) simulacra, or copies without an original, aptly describe the tangled web of endless links with no origin in digital visual culture. Artifacts like video games, web pages, and blogs make up this knotted web of digital experience. For the social scientist, this is fertile territory for exploring minds and lives in an active process of creating new communities. The creative spirit of technoculture is

intriguing, not because it is a wholly beneficial and idealistic process, but because a struggle is going on in digital culture to redefine and reclaim categories of experience and identity and to make sense of our relationship with technology. This study will expand on this observed fascination with fearful images by considering the following issues within the context of a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG): What is synthetic fear? What issues of access and social justice can be critiqued through an examination of synthetic fear in digital visual culture? How can themes from this study aid art educators designing instruction with digital visual culture?

Why Fear? Connecting the Problem to Contemporary Art Education

Why an inquiry into fear? Does it matter? Is this truly an important theme in digital criticism and visual culture? How does this study relate to contemporary art education theory and practice? While this study focuses on immersive experiences of the researcher within a video game, it does not attempt to prescribe art education curricula based on the lessons from this one experience. However, this study does raise questions and provide insights into digital experiences that are important for art educators grappling with incorporating digital media and visual culture in the art classroom; issues such as making choices, understanding how values and moral ambiguity are embedded and expressed in digital visual culture, and attending critically and responsibly to moral, social, political, and cultural issues involved in teaching such material. Tracing the layered and complex topic of fear through social and cultural theory is one way to examine these questions. Fear, in all its paralyzing and titillating glory, is not just an emotion or instinct. It is an intellectual and commercialized product, packaged, pasteurized, processed, and pressed into the machinery of our daily lives.

An examination of visual culture within this study allows for a social critique of how fear has evolved and mutated in intellectual thought and ideological representation. Because of the hyper-commercialized nature of digital culture and its pervasive influence on students and educators, educational researchers can ignore neither the manipulative effects of digital visual culture nor the unspoken ideological messages of such pervasive images. In art education, Duncum (2002) advocates inclusion of visual culture sources precisely because visual culture study examines important social questions that explore “how ideology works through aesthetic means or, conversely, how aesthetics works to promote ideology” (p. 10). Like images of fine art, images of popular culture are not neutral but instead do important cultural work and have easily personalized social relevance for students. Saying that visual culture performs real cultural work means that, while visual culture is part of the shared practices comprising culture², visual culture forms also shape meaning and construct understanding of critical issues such as race, gender, and community through the consumption and creation of these popular forms.

The changing nature of art education practice means that classroom teachers and researchers must find ways to critically examine the cultural work performed by digital media and popular culture and make difficult choices about how to address contemporary issues in the classroom that are prevalent in popular forms of media. Video games, for example, often create parallel fantasy worlds constructed as violent dystopias, or imaginary visions of worlds in which people live fearful and dehumanized lives. Violence, moral ambiguity, and shocking images can reinforce racial, ethnic, and gender stereotypes and are common in films, games, and other examples of visual culture. These same images can also be important texts for critiquing how systems and symbols of inequality are perpetuated and consumed in mass media culture without

² Culture refers to “the shared practices of a group, community, or society, through which meaning is made out of the visual, aural, and textual world of representations” (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, p. 3).

critical thought to the harm or negative values embedded in these popular images. Incorporating visual culture or digital media often requires educators to address uncomfortable subject matter that has been traditionally omitted in art education. Youngblood (1982) suggested that Lowenfeld's Romantic notions of the corrosive effects and interference of mass media on student development has made a lasting impression on art education practice by encouraging educators to reject the influence of popular culture and instead create classrooms that avoid the influence of mass mediated culture. Duncum (2006), in comparison, suggests that perhaps Lowenfeld's (1947) ideas are actually still strongly present in visual culture art education. After analyzing case studies of visual culture art education implemented in classrooms in a recently collection, Duncum (2006) notes that Lowenfeld's student-centered approach is common in many visual culture projects since students lead the artistic inquiry and creative investigation of techniques and methods of expressing ideas while being challenged to think critically about contemporary issues.

Burgess (2003) also observes that art teachers similarly hesitate to include contemporary art in the classroom in order to avoid potentially difficult or controversial issues:

Contemporary art's 'monstrosities' are all too often perceived as problematic, transgressive, even perverse . . . To welcome them into the classroom runs the risk of rebuke from senior management and parents alike. But by refusing to engage with potentially problematic practices are we, as educators, protecting students from unnecessary exposure to 'obscenities', or are we missing an opportunity to confront important personal, social and cultural issues? (p. 108)

As educators, what are our responsibilities to engage with difficult subject matter that arises in contemporary art and digital visual culture? Tavin (2003) suggests that art educators can help

students develop a more critical understanding of the didactic role of popular culture in their lives since they are learning from these forms:

Art educators can help students understand the pedagogical power of popular culture through an initial inventory of images that students are exposed to on a daily basis. By beginning with these images, teachers can help students articulate their particular investments—naming their pleasures, desires, and passions that derive from popular cultural texts. (p. 199)

Moreover, for educational researchers, studies of digital visual culture can reveal not only ideological messages but also moral issues of access and equity in education, as well as new questions of how civic engagement and the notion of citizenship evolve in a world dominated by a visual culture that is consumed largely without benefit of critique. Art educators are ideally equipped to deal with visual sources through the language of art, and must become more knowledgeable about teaching images of visual culture that are both popular *and* cross over into digital culture.

While this study does not fit into traditional categories of research in art education, I argue that it reflects the kinds of questions and inquiry rapidly becoming a dominant force in the more interdisciplinary approach of visual culture art education. Digital media and its effects on identity, learning, and pedagogy are central to any study of visual culture. Specters of fear exist not only in the alternate world of the digital but also continually influence and bleed into the real world. As Freedman (2003) observes, “Technological imagery blurs the boundaries between truth and fiction by acting as both” (p. 129). Such blurring also makes fiction an excellent method for exploring and analyzing virtual experiences, as the arts-based methodology for this study will further explain. As people move further “into the network,” it comes as no surprise

that everyday social and physical spaces are becoming increasingly interlaced with digital spaces such as cyberspace and online gaming worlds. This interlacing is what makes a fascination with fear in digital visual culture an important phenomenon for study in art education.

Key Terms: Exploring the Human-Machine Merger

I use the following key terms throughout this dissertation, and they are important in subsequent methodological discussions: technoculture, avatar, cyborg, and synthetic fear.

Technoculture refers to the culture of digital technology and is particularly concerned with the social practices of those involved in digital communities and discourses. In addition, technoculture describes a community of technology users inhabiting a social sphere that functions as an alternate or meta-reality. This meta-reality is an example of what ethnographer Wolcott (1997) refers to as a “microcultural system” (p. 330) that exists within other “macrocultural systems” (p. 330) and, in the case of technoculture, consists of a membership that resists demographic categorization because of constantly shifting boundaries. Nearly a decade ago, Turkle (1995) wondered how we would incorporate our on-screen lives with our daily lives in this new “culture of simulation” (p. 268) by asking, “Will it be a separate world where people get lost in the surfaces or will we learn to see how the real and the virtual can be made permeable, each having the potential for enriching and expanding the other?” (p. 268). This remains an important question as technoculture becomes ubiquitous and further shapes our identities. In the case of video games, players are often asked to take on identities that may not mesh with their identities in daily life. A game player may learn “that experiencing the world from that perspective (in one’s mind or in a video game) does not mean that he accepts in the sense that he wants, in his real-world identity, to adopt the values and the actions that this

perspective underwrites” (Gee, 2003, p. 143). In other words, we can live in two worlds that operate with different consequences and different moral codes. That we can have such experiences, creating and enacting virtual identities without adopting them in the real world, is a testament to the amazing flexibility of the human mind, yet also an important critique of technocultural experience.

Adopting virtual identities in gaming environments requires employing a surrogate in digital environments called an *avatar*. An *avatar* is the visual representation of a player in a computer-mediated environment, or as they are depicted in certain game genres, “computer-mediated fantasy characters” (Williams, Hendricks, & Winkler, 2006, p. 6). In an ethnographic study of female gamers in *EverQuest*, a popular online role-playing video game, T. L. Taylor (2003) describes avatars as “central to both immersion and the construction of community in virtual spaces. They are mediators between personal identity and social life” (p. 35) and as one of Taylor’s study participants put it, “they are the ‘material to work with’ when you are in a virtual world” (p. 35). Avatars are what economist Castronova (2005), in his important study of the business and culture of MMORPGs, calls a “synthetic body in the synthetic world” (p. 6). These synthetic bodies represent players in virtual worlds, video games, and other computer-mediated environments. Avatars may appear as simple graphics, shapes, and icons (as in Instant Messenger or Chat interfaces that identify users by simple icons), or as detailed 3-D graphic representations of humanoid forms. Reid (quoted in Filiciak, 2003) observes that avatars “are much more than a few bytes of computer data—they are cyborgs, a manifestation of the self beyond the realms of the physical, existing in a space where identity is self-defined rather than pre-ordained” (p. 90).

A *Cyborg*, another critical term, is a cybernetic organism, reliant upon a symbiotic relationship between biology and technology: these creatures are common in science fiction films such as *Terminator* and the *Star Trek* franchise. While Frankenstein's monster, the original cyborg, employs no digital implants or software, Mary Shelley's creation is still a potent symbol for digital culture studies. Each generation constantly resurrects and retells this tale, suturing new concerns about technology to the body of this Gothic novel. For many anthropologists and cultural theorists who study the impact of digital culture, however, the cyborg is no longer a fictional creature, and the question becomes "what happens when *we* become the monster?"

In her pivotal work "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," Haraway (2004) describes the cyborg as "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (p. 7). The cyborg, according to Haraway, lives in two worlds: a world of myth and fantasy and a social world dependent on progressive machines. Haraway (2004) argues that humans already straddle these worlds because in "our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs" (p. 8). Haraway (1991) proposes the field of cyborg anthropology as a way to study the symbiotic relationship between human and machine and to examine life within that intersection. While many studies in cyborg anthropology are located in the field of medical science (Downey & Dumit, 1997) and, particularly, reproductive technology (Davis-Floyd & Dumit, 1998; Rapp, 1999), others focus not on biological implants or invasive technology, but on the notion of cognitive cyborgs, a kind of "wireless" cyborg independent from the hardware of body or machine. Clark (2003) imagines that what is most important is "the *fluidity* of the human-machine integration and the resulting *transformation* of capacities, projects, and lifestyles" (p. 24). Such a transformation in lifestyles

may have already occurred to some degree, as our machines become extensions of the mind and heart.

Chicano performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña (2005) writes about the experience of the human-machine merger and the painful consequences of losing his “Neo-Aztec high-tech control center” (p. 94) when his laptop was stolen at LAX. Knowing the thief had access to his email, Gómez-Peña wrote him several letters, explaining the painful loss of his “parallel mind and memory” (p. 94). As a cognitive cyborg, he saw the crime not just as a theft of a useful tool but also as an erasure or murder of his memories and life’s work, the contents of his “cyberheart”:

By the way, how much did you get for my four-year-old laptop? Five hundred bucks? Seven hundred? Did you feel any guilt? Did you at least have the curiosity to investigate the mindscape of your victim, and read my love poems and political essays? The breakdown of my taxes, perhaps? My most intimate secrets? The ones I never even intended to publish? Did you access my e-mail, enter my cyberheart, and peek through hundreds of personal letters from friends, lovers, and family? Or did you throw everything in the virtual trash before you sold the machine? (pp. 94-95)

For Gómez-Peña and others who depend upon their parallel minds, digital technology is not the cold, impersonal, and dehumanizing technology of the Industrial Revolution. Instead, twenty-first-century technology is deeply embedded in human lives through emotional as well as intellectual connections. Our relationship to technology is like our relationship to our bodies: we care for it, criticize it, re-make it, and fear its loss. This symbiosis is part of the experience of being a cognitive cyborg and part of an evolving framework of what it means to be posthuman. What happens, though, when we look closely and discover that we have become a creature of

myth? What kind of shift in perception does such an understanding like that require? What new stories must we compose in order to understand our place in the world? In this study, I contextualize these questions in a virtual gaming world and examine the human-machine merger through the image of the avatar, or as they are depicted in certain game genres, “computer-mediated fantasy characters” (Williams, Hendricks, & Winkler, 2006, p. 6).

Finally, the term *synthetic fear* is my own creation, and, in rough form, has five main qualities. It is always 1) mediated through digital technology; 2) terrifying yet pleasurable; 3) a blend of fiction and reality; 4) dependent on the collusion of participants who are aware the experience is fictive; and 5) an elaborate illusion or fantasy that draws on real fears in order to assert social or political control.

An observable phenomenon within technocultural practices, synthetic fear is the sublime experience of pleasurable fear mediated through virtual experiences of digital media—all with the purpose of establishing some form of social control within the digital culture. These synthetic realities take the form of the fantastic, the thrilling, or the horrific with qualities gleaned from interaction with common social processes within technoculture.³ Synthetic fear works only by collusion, and participants are always part of the illusion, willing to ignore the proverbial man behind the curtain for purposes of entertainment and enjoyment or a sense of identity and community. This synthetic fear is deeply intertwined with digital culture and part of the cultural phenomenon preoccupied with understanding the posthuman condition.

³ Some examples of social forms of production within technoculture include “blogging” or weblog journaling, online gaming and role playing (the subject of this study), instant messaging (chat), avatar creation, and digital image editing and manipulation.

American Nightmares: A Cultural History of Synthetic Fear

Synthetic fear is part of a reflective and critical process of imagining the future and challenging us to make it better than our nightmares. A brief history of horror in American popular culture is necessary, however, in order to contextualize this cultural history of fear. Artifacts of American culture exist like monstrous time capsules full of fantastic inventions and monsters of imagination. As Cohen (1996) writes, monsters are embodiments of the cultures that create them:

Monsters are our children. . . . These monsters ask us how we perceived the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward expression. They ask us why we have created them. (p. 20)

Why indeed? Why has fear become such an important part of the discourse in American popular culture?

Latex Monsters. While early Gothic literature and horror movies featured exotic locales and monsters recognizable by their latex-covered difference, today's monsters are more malleable assimilations of digital culture.⁴ Embodied in these grotesque and sometimes deceptively beautiful forms are our collective desires, fears, and anxieties about difference and about what we are becoming through our immersion in technocultural experiences. After all, "the monster exists only to be read . . . Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself" (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). *What* the monster signifies changes with each generation as old monsters are resurrected into slightly different forms, mutating "each time to be read against contemporary social movements or a specific, determining event" (Cohen, 1996, p. 5)

⁴ The physical difference (latex masks) of monsters in these movies was meant to symbolize the moral difference or wrongness of these creatures (Cohen, 1996; Skal, 1993).

such as fear of nuclear annihilation, terror of diseases like AIDS and cancer, the horror of poverty, and the current spectral threat of terrorism. Each time the vampire appears or another monster is pieced together from cadavers, a story of a specific age runs in its veins and is sutured to its skin. People have always feared cultural, religious, and “ideological otherness” (Skal, 1993, p. 250), and horror movies in the early twentieth century provided a canvas on which to paint and critique our fears.⁵

Many early horror movies like *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931) were based on Gothic novels, giving horror films cultural legitimacy by linking them to familiar and often respected works of literature. The horror of the Great Depression was a daily threat to survival, and many Americans experienced real terror from monsters that took the form of hunger and unemployment. The popularity of monster movies during this period may seem unlikely for a public that needed entertainment and release. However, according to Skal’s (1993) *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*, an analysis of the popularity of horror movies during the Great Depression, “horror films served as a kind of populist surrealism, rearranging the human body and its processes . . . responding uneasily to new and almost incomprehensible developments in science and the anxious challenges they posed . . . to perception” (p. 114). Perhaps the fear of the technological change in everyday life made *Dracula* an attractive escape. After all, how likely is a blood-sucking vampire disguised as a bat to swoop into one’s home, destroy one’s will, and steal one’s eternal soul along with his or her blood? Skal also links the popularity of horror films to the impact of surrealist images such as the melting timepieces in Salvador Dali’s 1931 painting *The Persistence of Memory*, an image

⁵ During the Cold War, Hollywood commented on the growing paranoia surrounding bomb scares and the fear of Communist infiltration by creating subversive political monsters that represented the fear of “ideological otherness” (Skal, 1993, p. 250). The notion of subversive political monsters somewhere among us is certainly familiar in current political rhetoric in the United States and can be applied to many current science fiction movies for a new reading about the “war on terrorism.”

that captures the upheaval of the economic crisis in American life. In this image, Time, the drumbeat of American industrial progress and efficiency, was warped and destroyed by a much stronger force: the horror of poverty and hunger and basic fears of survival during the economic crisis of the 1930s.

The films *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* established three monster movie archetypes: the sexual and hypnotic blood-sucker, the body of science gone awry, and the split identity of modern man. In each of these instances, physical difference and abnormality was an important ingredient in the appearance of these monsters. Whether Dracula's teeth and ghostly white skin, the creature's regressive frontal lobe, or the battle of ego and id dramatized through the transformation of civilized Dr. Jekyll into savage Mr. Hyde, monstrosity was linked with the outward appearance of the physical body. Duncum (2002) says, "The history of representation is often far more determining of contemporary representations than anything in contemporary life. Where, after all, do visual stereotypes derive if not from previous visual representations?" (p. 8). Looking at these images in context is a reminder of the cultural bias reflected in such stereotypical portrayals of minorities and women—those who live their lives as the Other each day—and how very often they are abused by representations in popular and visual culture.

The Sublime. In the decades following *Dracula*, a legion of monster movies followed. Apparently, America needed scary monsters at the movies and as a result embraced a gallery of scarred, undead, hairy, and otherwise grotesque characters designed to make one sleep with the lights on. Ghostly images flickering on a movie screen were an escape from the fear of economic insecurity spreading like a cancer on the American populace. Such a notion of terrible pleasure was a product of the literary sources of 1930s horror films. The aesthetic of the

Sublime, articulated by Edmund Burke in his 1756 book *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, described the “strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke & Womersley, 1998, p. 86) and is the source of Gothic literature’s preference for pleasurable pain through contemplation of vast, infinite, and incomprehensible experiences. The delights of fear were best experienced through the senses, through immersive and unmediated contemplation. Such intense emotion caused by painful yet pleasurable contemplation of the Sublime is the inverse of the aesthetic experience of the Beautiful.

The Gothic. Irritated by the common sense, Reason, and Realism of other eighteenth-century novelists who, he felt, left no room for fancy or imagination, Horace Walpole was powerfully influenced by Burke’s perceptions of the Sublime. In 1765, he published the first Gothic novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, inventing many of the conventions that mark even today’s Gothic work. *Otranto* reflected an aesthetic that was neither Sublime nor Beautiful. In fact, Walpole took Burke’s notion of pleasure from pain to an extreme well beyond that of the Sublime. The aesthetics of the Sublime contributed to the development of conventions in Gothic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that emphasized vicarious thrills mediated by temporal or geographic distance. Such a shift from Burke’s notion of direct experience of the Sublime to a more virtual experience parallels contemporary experiences of digitally-mediated synthetic fear. Stories such as Shelley’s (1818, 1996) *Frankenstein* and Stoker’s (1897) *Dracula* were concerned not only with narratives of fear but also functioned, as literary critic Williams (1995) explains, with a didactic and moral purpose, employing fear as a tool of social control. The thrill of fear served not just as entertainment but also as an instructive enterprise that could turn the reader toward the good or warn against the dangers of falling into evil. Although *Frankenstein* is a Romantic novel, in its afterlife, it joined *Dracula* in speaking to a Victorian

culture increasingly concerned with issues of purity, sanctity, moral rigor, and character education. The novels took a black-and-white view of good and evil in a new urban, industrial society. Some intellectuals and artists began to see industrialism as a force of dehumanization bent on turning men into cogs in an impersonal machine (see Figure 1).

Through mass marketing and a huge surge in literacy during the early part of the nineteenth-century (an equivalent cultural experience to the explosion of the Internet), horror stories of the Gothic novel became contemporary fairy tales driven by a mass-market demand. In his book examining the effect of horror and images of fear on modern consciousness, Tropp (1990) suggests that, while “fairy tales were shaped by a juvenile audience that demanded the same few stories in thousands of guises, the somewhat older audience for horror fulfilled its needs by demanding literally thousands of versions of this same tale of terror” (p. 15). These same basic, powerful stories became repackaged Gothic myths, influencing moral codes and acting as interpretive mediators between readers and the horrors of daily life, much like horror movies functioned during the Great Depression.

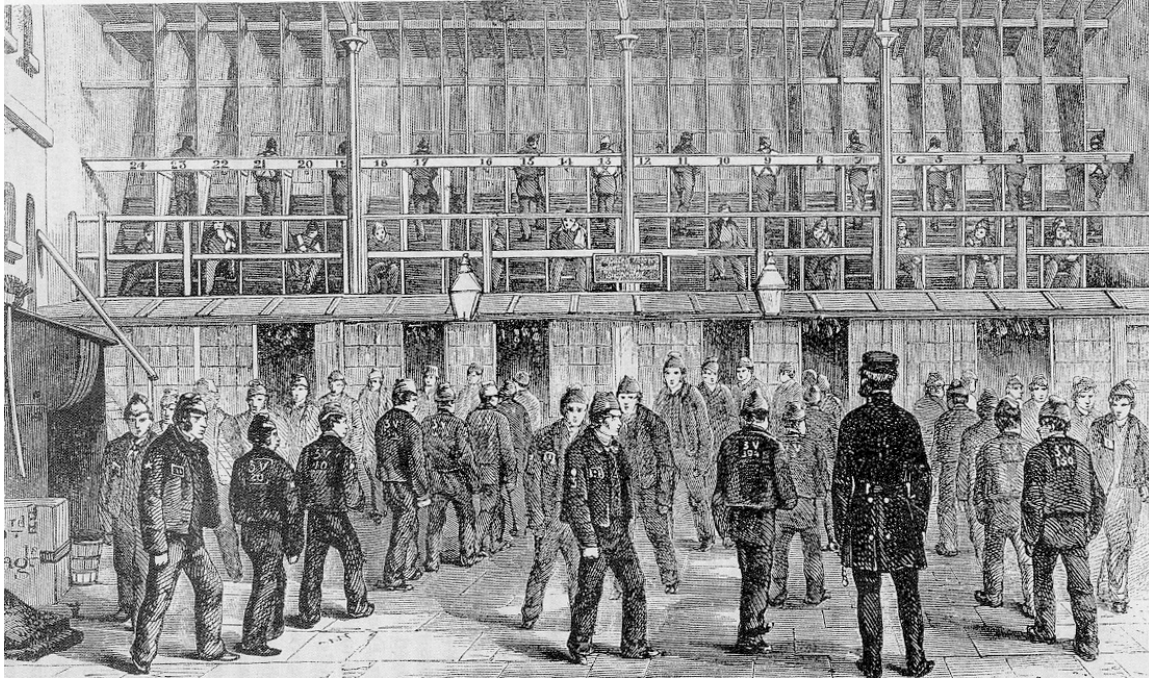


Figure 1. Illustration of a dehumanizing treadmill in a Victorian prison

Horrors of the Cold War. The dropping of the atom bomb ended World War II and, in American movies, began an era of mutants and monstrous creatures that were not preternatural creatures but by-products of the invisible germ of atomic radiation. One B-movie, *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman* (1958), depicted the tragic story of Nancy Archer, a boozing heiress accidentally exposed to intense radiation from an alien spaceship and who subsequently grows to giant proportions. With her newfound stature, she immediately seeks revenge on her wayward, cheating husband, destroying the town in the process. In this story, as in many others, technological discovery spawns harmful by-products such as the cellular damage of radiation poisoning. Manipulation, mutation, and insidious invasion are all themes explored against the backdrop of the atomic age as the beginning of America's Cold War was marked by extreme paranoia. Neighbors, friends, and family were all suspect. In the film versions of this paranoia, she may look like your wife or girlfriend, but could instead be a strange visitor from outer space,

an alien using advanced body-swapping technology for nefarious plots of world domination as in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *Them!* (1954), or *It Came From Outer Space* (1953).

Movies like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* provided horrifying entertainment as well as cultural commentary on both the paranoia surrounding the threat of a perceived Communist invasion and the emphasis on conformity in American life (Skal, 1993). In *Body Snatchers*, alien seed pods grow to replicate the bodies of human beings and eventually assume their identities, replacing them with unfeeling automatons bent on world domination. The pod people's absence of love, guilt, or any other feeling stripped humans of their essential quality, draining them of their humanity and also threatening to change the American way of life. Movies of the 1950s "pretended to scare audiences while delivering a perversely comforting message: the world *is* understandable, if only as a monstrous plot or cover-up. But rest assured you'll get the big picture, even if you become a pod in the process" (Skal, 1993, p. 250).

Such films and other artifacts of popular culture functioned as new cultural myths, bringing hopeful visions as well as dire warnings for what technology's unintended consequences could mean for humanity's future. The lesson seems to be that technology is always more than we imagined it could be; it is our curse and our salvation. In his study of the history of nuclear fear in American culture, Weart (1988) discovers that "radioactive monsters, utopian atom-powered cities, exploding planets, weird ray devices" (p. xi), and other images became symbols of how nuclear energy was visualized within popular culture. Such images, working in conjunction with "major social and psychological forces, have exerted a strange and powerful pressure within history" (p. xi). These terrifying images represent potent critiques, raising important questions about the uses and abuses of advanced technology. Such artifacts of visual culture do important intellectual and cultural work by allowing us to engage in irrational

scenarios that blend spiritual, technological, and fantasy elements into critical examinations of social culture. Now, in an age of immersive technologies such as video games, we can spend long periods of time engaged in simulations in virtual worlds, living essentially a parallel life (or a second life to borrow the title from another popular video game) in spectacularly visualized alternative communities.

Dimensions of Fear

Fear itself is a complex topic, explorable on physiological, psychological, and intellectual levels, areas already examined by cognitive scientists, biologists, psychologists, and others dedicated to these mechanics of fear. Worth noting for the educator among these mechanics is the phenomenon that, like other powerful emotions, fear can be a powerful aid to learning and memory. Not only does fear aid in cognitive adaptation, but it also imprints memories into the brain, as do more pleasant emotions such as joy (Marosi, Yanez, Varga, Bernal, & Rodriguez, 2004). Of course, using fear as a learning aid raises ethical concerns. Pedagogical applications of fear are already at work in schools through disciplinary procedures, the consequences of high-stakes testing measures, and punitive grading. Along with happier emotions, fear is a tool of social and political control already implicitly embedded in educational systems, not to mention in much modern intellectual and philosophical thought. Fear is especially part of the framework of modern government, politics, social institutions, and now the media. Like sailing to the edges of ancient maps, stepping “outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself” (Cohen, 1996, p. 12). A fear of going beyond the established borders of social control is also part of the constant media conditioning we experience through popular culture and formal institutions. Becoming monstrous or like that

which one fears is a great prohibition to behavior that is outside of social norms. As Robin (2004) observes, the theory of fear as a political tool can be traced to the seventeenth-century writings of Thomas Hobbes, who first envisioned political fear as a moral tool institutions used to establish an orderly community:

Fear was not a primitive passion, waiting to be tapped by a weapons-wielding sovereign. It was a rational, moral emotion, taught by influential men in churches and universities. . . . Fear had to be thought of as the touchstone of a people's commonality, the essence of their associated life. It had to address their needs and desires, and be perceived as defending the most precious achievements of civilization. Otherwise, it would never create the genuine *civitas* Hobbes believed it was meant to create. (p. 33)

According to Hobbes, fear can create a sense of communal unity; it can give us a shared purpose. Rather than an irrational, monolithic emotion, fear in this way is instead simply an *idea*, and like all ideas, it can be analyzed, deciphered, deconstructed, reconstructed, recycled, and redefined. It can also be played with as in the narrative framework of video games and other forms of immersive digital media. The idea of fear, then, can be examined and dissected within social contexts like any other idea, including within a *virtual* social context such as a video game.

Living in Code Yellow

In March 2002, the newly formed Department of Homeland Security instituted the Homeland Security Advisory System as a way of informing citizens and agencies about the nation's terror alert status. Constantly updated and available through the Homeland Security Web site, this coded system employs a spectrum of colors that visually depict the nation's state of emergency from "hot" (severe terror threats) to "cool" (low risk of terror threats). Since

implementation, rarely has the alert fallen below yellow, or elevated, status. In other words, we live in a constant state of “code yellow,” suspended between extremes and constantly on guard.

According to a guide sheet (*Citizen guidance on the homeland security advisory system*, 2004) published on the Department of Homeland Security Web site, during code yellow threat conditions, citizens should be on alert for suspicious behavior, develop and practice alternate travel routes for daily activities, check disaster readiness kits, and review emergency numbers. The message is: *be ready, be vigilant, and be afraid*. As an aid to vigilance, many news websites feature the current terror alert status in a slow crawl across the bottom of the screen with constant, twenty-four hour updates. Such a media echo chamber blurs the line between entertainment and reality because “fear has been transformed by an entertainment-oriented popular culture, including news organizations as well as public agencies and officials who have a stake in fear and who serve as news sources for the insatiable news-programming market for entertainment” (Altheide, 2002, p. 59). As Robin (2004) notes, “though Hobbes understood fear to be a reaction to real danger in the world, he also appreciated its theatrical qualities. Political fear depended on illusion, where danger was magnified, even exaggerated, by the state” (p. 33). The media’s “stake in fear” (Altheide, 2002, p. 59) is representative of just such a Hobbesian vision of eliciting institutional cooperation in upholding the current power structure by indoctrinating the populace about common political and cultural fears.

The experience of living in a media-saturated culture where entertainment and serious information are blended into one long media/entertainment cycle means “terror” is no longer just a noun representing fear, but a constant in daily life like the weather or stock market report. Entertainment, war, games, and other experiences of media all take place in this same windowed world where we view the fictive and the real images through the screen, shielded by wires and

glass and a transparent barrier that makes it difficult to separate that which we should truly fear and that which is merely thrilling or meant only to control, as in the case of synthetic fear in visual culture. Coupled with an unrelenting warning system that cautions Americans to maintain vigilance and to be ready to deter terrorist attacks, anxiety and fear related to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have left Americans on a slow simmer. From this simmering brew, the ephemeral and complex signs of a visual culture influenced by the specters of fear emerge in the networks and rituals of technoculture. An exploration of the monsters of our age, those images that both mask and reveal what we fear, helps us understand how such images affect and change institutions, such as educational ones, that we cherish, as well as how they color our attitudes and sense of self. In particular, technology's pervasive influence through media and digital culture requires a sustained inquiry of the unintended consequences of a highly networked society that values spectacle over reflection.

An illustration of such unintended consequences of technological discovery and its effects on humanity can be found in the short-lived television series *Firefly* (Whedon, 2002). The mythology of *Firefly*, a Western-themed show set in outer space, has no room for aliens. Instead, the monsters in this story are a race of humans known as Reavers, driven mad at the edge of space, becoming cannibals and interstellar pirates. They traverse the borders of space, poisoned by radiation from their own ships and terrorizing other space travelers also pushing at the borders of civilization. Reavers are never seen but, like monsters of myth, leave evidence of their existence only through death and destruction on derelict vessels discovered by intrepid explorers. At the edges of space, technology can take us to places, in the famous words from *Star Trek*, "where no man has gone before," and can change us horribly and irrevocably in the process.

Engaging with Fear in Digital Visual Culture

As we are enveloped by visual culture and digital media, making sense of the world requires multiple tools for deciphering heavily layered and interlaced messages. As Rogoff (2002) states,

Visual culture opens up an entire world of intertextuality in which images, sounds and spatial delineations are read on to and through one another, lending ever-accruing layers of meaning and of subjective responses to each encounter we might have with film, TV, advertising, art works, buildings or urban environments. (p. 24)

Add to this intertextual stew an expanding digital culture, and a flavor emerges of the socially constructed, horror-filled, and politically charged environment in which art educators must grapple with the influence of visual culture on the lives of students. Consideration of the social context of visual culture and the implications of visual technologies is a great challenge for educational researchers and classroom teachers alike. Freedman (2003) acknowledges that “the great power of the visual arts is their ability to have various and profound effects on our lives, but that power can also make them manipulative, colonizing, and disenfranchising” (p. 53). We must develop an awareness of the social practices, drawing from the myriad examples in digital visual culture, that our students are experiencing, interacting with, and perhaps even authoring. Obviously, that does not mean that these experiences are all good or educative, yet they are part of engagement in a larger digital culture that does not discriminate between harm and health. Burgess (2003) tackles a similar idea in relation to teaching contemporary art with difficult themes in the secondary classroom:

. . . deliberate avoidance of ‘difficult’ subject matter in art is tantamount to paranoia, a failure to acknowledge that it is all-pervasive in a society dominated by mass media and

its scopophilic apparatus. Although absent from the curriculum the monsters lurk behind the back of the teacher in full view of the students, the unacknowledged ‘other’ that in every other respect pervades their lives. (p. 108)

Fear, it seems, is part of the imagining, and synthetic fear a lens for creating stories of cyborg citizens engaged in new myth and meaning making. When it comes to young people and digital environments, government and educational institutions are often too busy protecting, sanitizing, compartmentalizing, and institutionalizing such practices to know what young people *actually* do in digital spaces. As educational researchers, we need to ask how young people’s social practices in digital culture change “what it means to learn, know and do things” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2002, p. 1) in more institutional settings such as the traditional classroom. Until we do, educators will continually struggle to incorporate digital literacy into traditional lesson plans that emphasize technology skills rather than more critical forms of digital literacy.

As I have said previously, images of popular culture, like images of fine art, are not neutral but are doing important cultural work and have easily personalized social relevance for students. For educational researchers, studies of digital visual culture can reveal not only ideological messages but also moral issues of access and equity in education, as well as new questions of how civic engagement and the notion of citizenship evolves in a world dominated by a visual culture that is consumed largely without benefit of critique. Analyzing and understanding such images means exploring research methods that include traditional and fictive forms, mirroring the blurring of the real and the virtual in technoculture and synthetic fear. As the next chapter describes, I have employed just such an alternative, arts-based methodology to explore the phenomenon of synthetic fear in the context of a virtual world.

CHAPTER 3

ARTS-BASED EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH METHODS IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

Central Questions

This study explores the concept of *synthetic fear*, the pervasive influence of created images of fear in digital visual culture. This study includes a series of character vignettes created from field notes and journal observations from immersion in a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) written from my perspective as the research and from the persona of my avatar. These stories are layered within chapters that further ground and contextualize them in the larger research frame of gaming and visual culture studies. Research questions include the following:

1. How is synthetic fear manifested in digital gaming culture? What does it teach us about the role of fear in visual culture?
2. What does it mean to occupy both virtual and physical realities simultaneously?
3. What issues of access and social equity are raised when one lives in a virtual world?
How do virtual experiences in a video game connect with social issues?
4. Through arts-based documentation of living in a video game, what are the implications for the place of digital culture in arts education and for arts-based research?

To explore these questions, this project uses an arts-based autoethnographic research methodology, employing a first-person narrative style of representation and analysis in the

research and writing. Through the writing process, I also explore what Richardson (2000) calls a process of inquiry, or a way of finding out about the world through writing about it.

Autoethnographic Research

Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 739). In autoethnographic research, the researcher’s experiences in a chosen field or personal setting are the focus and the filter through which readers and audiences connect to culture. Autoethnographic texts exploit the experiences of the researcher in an effort to analyze personal experience as a microcosm of larger cultural experience. Taking a page from feminist theory, proponents of autoethnographic research advocate that not only is the personal political, but also “the personal is the grounding for theory” (Richardson, 2000, p. 927). Such a notion is a reversal of traditional social science research methods that place little value on the personal experiences of the researcher and instead insist on a sometimes artificially distanced, empirical view of observed experience. Rather than wiping away the fingerprints of the researcher, alternative forms of ethnographic research show these messy smudges while also proudly framing and displaying them as valued additions to the research text. Eisner (1998) calls such differences between traditional and alternative forms of qualitative research the difference between doing art and doing science. While Eisner’s point about the inherently different methods employed in the arts and sciences is instructive, his view sets up art and science as oppositional forces. Rather, I prefer Richardson’s (2000) more nuanced vision of a “social science art form” (p. 937) attained by looking through the dual lenses of the creative arts and sciences to gain a deeper understanding of research questions. Such a blending of art and

science leads to what Ellis (2004) describes in this way: “As a form of ethnography, autoethnography overlaps art and science; it is part *auto* or self and part *ethno* or culture. It also is something different from them, greater than its parts” (pp. 31-32). *How* we see changes *what* we see. In keeping with this metaphor of gazing through the lenses of art and science in order to see research questions more deeply, Ellis and Bochner (2000) describe the process of autoethnography in similar language:

Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (see Deck, 1990; Neumann, 1996; Reed-Danahay, 1997). As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition. (p. 739)

In this way, the exposed, vulnerable self engaged in autoethnographic research must be open to the world and acknowledge how the self is influenced by cultural forces.

Autoethnographic research is one of many alternative ethnographic methods currently developing in social science research that privileges multiple views of experience as championed by post-structuralist theory. Post-structuralism attempts to analyze the constructed nature of human experience based on forces such as language, discourse, and power, and places value on the subjectivity of individual experience (Sarup, 1993). As Richardson (2001) aptly puts it, “Experience and memory is [sic] thus open to contradictory interpretations governed by social interests and prevailing discourses. The individual is both site and subject of these discursive struggles for identity, and for remaking memory” (p. 36). This view of the *individual* as

someone caught in the current of cultural forces rather than an island unaffected by them makes the role of the researcher more complex and less transparent. Such a notion is a revolution in social science research that traditionally avoids the personal experiences of the researcher, insisting instead on a distanced, empirical view of observed experience. The debate over the subjectivity and self-reflexivity of the researcher, particularly in qualitative research circles, brings to the fore the importance of the personal in any kind of research investigation. Reflexive investigations of cultural experience take on a new power with autoethnographic research as readers are invited into the experience of the researcher, as “the ‘research text’ is the story, complete (but open) in itself, largely free of academic jargon and abstracted theory. The authors privilege stories over analysis, allowing and encouraging alternative readings and multiple interpretations” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 745). “I” is not a tainted pronoun in autoethnographic research, as personal experiences become a vehicle through which more general, universal experiences can be shared with the readers and audiences. As in a case study approach, the autoethnographer crafts very specific and seemingly narrow experiences, often through literary forms, but still draws on social science methods of data collection such as participant observation and interviewing. While this study does not depend on participant observation and interview protocols, I would argue that *all* studies set in virtual worlds should instead start from an autoethnographic viewpoint because of the amount of gaming experience it requires to enter these worlds with enough cultural knowledge to interpret the experiences of other players—let alone describe the world with any degree of verisimilitude.

“Vulnerable Observers”

In autoethnography, personal writing is vulnerable writing, drawing from what anthropologist Behar (1996) calls “vulnerable observation” (p. 1), a form of writing that rejects the detached notion of scholarly observation and requires investment of heart, mind, and the whole person of the researcher. According to Behar (1996), vulnerable writing in anthropology or other social science research is risky since “a boring self-revelation, one that fails to move the reader, is more than embarrassing; it is humiliating” (p. 13). Behar’s work in *Translated Woman* (1993) and *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996) illustrates how the researcher becomes the subject without sacrificing the connection to cultural understanding or understanding of the Other important in traditional anthropological work. By reflexively analyzing her observations and acknowledging her subjectivity in her research, Behar is not detached but is instead engaged *differently* with her research by including emotional and evocative accounts of her experiences in the field.

Becoming the Other. In gaming research, vulnerable observation is even more critical as the traditional boundaries separating researcher from researched cannot be delineated neatly because of the multiple layers of experience in the virtual field. In virtual worlds, players must often become the Other, and in fact, as Waskul (2006) describes, avid players actually desire a kind of blended experience of character-player-persona:

Consequently, neat distinctions between person, player, and persona become messy; they erode into utterly permeable and interlocking moments of experience. Rigid distinctions between fantasy, imagination, and reality—between person, player, and persona—prove untenable. Instead, role-playing games necessarily involve, to borrow from Mead (1934),

“taking the role of the other”—but in this case the “other” is not another person; the “other” is a fantasy character who is, in fact, the player and person himself. (p. 31)

Such permeable boundaries between conceptions of self in virtual worlds beg for methodologies that embrace the vulnerability of the researcher as she becomes the Other to help capture such “interlocking moments of experience.”

Visual Culture and Vulnerable Observation. As a vulnerable observer, my relationship with images in visual culture is different from that of someone who is only a viewer or consumer. The consumer participates, but the vulnerable observer both participates and asks what cultural work these images, no matter how benign, truly perform. These images shape meaning and the way we experience our world even if we are unaware of how they affect us. In this way, they are like slow drops of water on a rock. Over time, the water wears down even the hardest surface and changes it with a slow but steady flow. The constant drips from a stream of visual culture and media are subtly changing all who take them in, yet we are not powerless like a rock, sitting silent and passive to outside forces. We have the power to interact, react, and respond. Tropp’s (1990) *Images of Fear* is a fascinating visual culture study that examines the effects of a stream of visual culture on consumers, although this historical study examines how nineteenth-century Gothic architecture, entertainment, and fine art reflect the influence of the period’s Gothic literature. From this large pool of visual source material, Tropp demonstrates persuasively how Gothic literature and romantic sensibilities affected social thought, images of women, and issues of morality during the nineteenth-century, eventually providing a visual framework for interpreting even the horrors of trench warfare in World War I. While this historical study did not address digital technology, it is an example of a visual culture study with

a wide-ranging data set that presents a cohesive argument for a particular sociocultural phenomenon.

Autoethnographic Research Studies

Vulnerable autoethnographic accounts often deal with personal and even traumatic experiences in the researchers' lives. Tillmann-Healy (Ellis & Bochner, 1996) uses her personal battle with bulimia as an entryway into cultural obsessions with thinness. In a later study (Bochner & Ellis, 2002), she also explores friendships between gay and straight men through her husband's relationship with a group of gay men on his softball team. Rushing (2002) explores erotic relationships between male mentors and female graduate students by looking back at her own graduate school experience from the viewpoint of a now-tenured professor. In an autoethnographic memoir, Ellis (1995) chronicles her experience tending to her dying husband and uses this experience to explore issues of illness and death in our culture. Through Ellis's (2002) personal experience of being on a plane headed toward Dulles International Airport on September 11, 2001, she explores many of the racial, emotional, and social impacts of terrorism. Crawford (1996) discusses the importance of paying attention to personal experience as a vehicle of culture because of an early experience he had watching a fellow Peace Corp volunteer die from a crocodile attack. While these autoethnographies deal with tragic and difficult events, autoethnographies as stories can also be about the tension in everyday experiences. All such work, though, requires a vulnerability on the part of the researcher/participant to reveal a fragment of the self in the research narrative. This vulnerability is something we as social scientists constantly ask of study participants. Experiencing our own vulnerability can allow us to see those we write about with more compassionate eyes.

Arts-based Research and Evocative Writing

The evocative nature of autoethnographic writing can be employed in much the same way that literary methods are employed in arts-based research. Arts-based research and autoethnography are often on parallel tracks. Bochner and Ellis (2003) suggest that arts-based research and autoethnography share many of the same goals:

1. Blurred boundaries between social science and the humanities;
2. Novel forms of expression such as poetry, fiction and other literary forms, visual arts, and performance;
3. Inclusion of the researcher as subject or a focus on the reflexivity of the researcher.

While educational researchers are still trying precisely to define what we call arts-based educational research, Barone and Eisner (1997) identify an arts-based approach to inquiry as having “the presence of certain aesthetic qualities or design elements that infuse the inquiry and its writing” (p. 73). As educational researchers, we emphasize writing and narrative as the primary form in which we present our ideas and findings. Textual and verbal forms are the ways we primarily make sense of our world and communicate in an educational research setting—usually with a scholarly tone that implies the voice of authority. Barone and Eisner, therefore, focus on the literary aspects of arts-based research by identifying several characteristics found in artistic inquiry. Characteristics such as expressive language, ambiguity, creation of virtual worlds, empathy, and the imprint of the writer are traits of educational research studies that are arts-based in nature. Describing such characteristics is helpful, yet additional qualities include a certain standard of artistic craftsmanship (Piirto, 2002), as well as an evocative quality that makes arts-based research—and its companion autoethnography—a form that encourage *feeling* as well as *understanding*. Creating evocative virtual worlds in educational research means

bending the continuum between art and science until they are not poles apart but are instead points on a circle linked to each other through evocative and interactive storytelling. Springgay (2002) extends this notion of the evocative quality of arts-based research to the creation of visual art as a form of inquiry as well:

Evocation becomes central in understanding the merits of arts-based educational research. It is not the scholar who analyzes “data” and interprets them for the reader, but rather art establishes conditions where audience brings their own meanings to the work. In the visual art context, the art product is important for how it disrupts past patterns of viewing, collapsing the distance between art and audience, accentuating participation and shared understanding. (p. 13)

This emphasis on the story—or the art—rather than the analysis makes arts-based inquiry a form of representation that embraces open-ended inquiry and further questioning rather than seemingly definitive answers to research questions. Arts-based research raises questions and opens new avenues of inquiry because of the ambiguous nature of the research product, as Bochner and Ellis (2003) point out:

The product of research, whether an article, a graph, a poem, a story, a play, a dance, or a painting, was not something to be received but something to be used; not a conclusion but a turn in a conversation; not a closed statement but an open question; not a way of declaring “this is how it is” but a means of inviting others to consider what it (or they) could become. As a result, art as inquiry became a transgressive activity. (p. 507)

My own impatience with the state of digital culture research is another reason for using a blended arts-based autoethnographic methodology that employs expressive language and the creation of virtual worlds. Technologists rely often on abstract language with an antiseptic

quality that may interest me intellectually but does not move me or “break my heart” (p. 177) as Behar (1996) would say. Such new ways of writing about digital experiences can move readers and provide greater understanding through shared experience. Joyce (1995) powerfully describes writing about digital experience as “the nomadic movement of ideas . . . made effortless by the electronic medium that makes it easy to cross borders (or erase them) with the swipe of a mouse, carrying as much of the world as you will on the etched arrow of light that makes up a cursor” (p. 3). As both researcher and subject, I, too, am carried away on that “etched arrow of light,” and I am attempting to use expressive and potent language in hopes of describing *posthuman* experience in a more *human* way.

Narrative in Arts-Based Autoethnographic Writing

Moving “inward and outward” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739) between the personal and cultural in the writing and research process allows autoethnographers to craft stories that move beyond memoir to a variety of literary and visual forms such as poetry, short stories, journals, hypertext, even visual art—all often in a traditionally taboo first-person voice. In autoethnographic writing, we write our world into existence and create what we claim to know about the world through the stories of our lives. According to Richardson (2000), we write in order to discover something new:

Although we usually think about writing as a mode of “telling” about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of “knowing”—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable. (p. 923)

Educational researchers engaged in autoethnography are “figuring it out” through the narrative process. They learn something new with each writing form, whether novel, short story, poetry, weblog, or more traditional social science text. For example, Cahnmann (2003) suggests that poetry, like other alternate forms of expression in research, can reveal what one might otherwise overlook in prose “just as the microscope and camera have allowed different ways for us to see what would otherwise be invisible” (p. 31). Making the invisible visible through multiple forms of representation also allows for varied interpretations through a narrative framework. Additionally, Richardson (2000) writes that writing evocative representations requires thinking about one’s research from different perspectives:

Evocative representations are a striking way of seeing through and beyond social scientific naturalisms. . . . Trying out evocative forms, we relate differently to our material; we know it differently. We find ourselves attending to feelings, ambiguities, and so on; we struggle to find a textual place for ourselves and our doubts and uncertainties. (p. 931)

In this sense, making sense of experience in evocative ways, through a cohesive and constructed narrative, breaks down the traditional hierarchical relationship of researcher to audience. Instead, experimenting with new forms of writing and expression also opens “new spaces of relationship” (Gergen, 2002, p. 14) for the role of research texts in everyday life. Narrative creates a structure for research even in the most traditional forms of academic prose as the writer makes choices about what to leave in and what to leave out of a research text. As Denzin (2000) comments, “nothing ever tells itself, nothing stands outside representation” (p. 261).

Setting and Participants

EVE Online. The setting for this study is *EVE Online*, a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG),⁶ a type of game characterized by large numbers of players (thousands or even millions).⁷ Admission to these worlds as a player often requires a monthly or yearly subscription fee.⁸ As part of the game, players must choose and develop a particular online character within the game narrative. Often, MMORPGs feature different “races” that players must elect to join. *EVE* is a sci-fi genre MMORPG, although some games include other genres such as fantasy, first-person shooter, superhero, and social role-playing games. *EVE*, like most MMORPGs, takes place in a persistent multiplayer universe, meaning that the world of *EVE* continues to evolve even when a player is offline. As a persistent universe, *EVE* is truly an alternate world, continuously existing in a virtual reality in much the same way that our physical world continues to evolve as we sleep. In fact, development of character skills in *EVE* can continue even when a player is offline and not actively playing the game.

There are many MMORPGs I could have chosen for study, and some like *Worlds of Warcraft* have much larger subscription bases (see footnote 7). My selection criteria looked for games that were: 1) described as a massive multiplayer online role-playing game; 2) a science fiction genre game in order to tie into existing narratives of synthetic fear that features a technologically advanced culture; 3) affordable for a long-term subscription (*EVE*’s monthly rate

⁶ Also called massive multiplayer online games (MMOG), MMORPG is pronounced “MORE PEG” in some gaming circles.

⁷ As of July 2006, *EVE Online* had nearly 150,000 subscribers making it a smaller MMOG in comparison to a game like *Worlds of Warcraft* that boasted 6.5 million subscribers in July 2006. However, *EVE Online* is of the sci-fi genre of MMOGs, a genre comprising only 4.1% of the total MMOG market, so subscriber numbers are predictably smaller. Fantasy genre games such as *Worlds of Warcraft* are the most popular type of MMOG comprising 93.5% of the market share as of June 2006 (Woodcock, 2006).

⁸ This study focuses on computer games, or video games played on a personal computer, rather than console games such as games played on an Xbox, Sony Playstation, or Nintendo. According to the Electronic Software Association (ESA), computer game sales comprised 1.1 out of the 7.3 billion dollars in total U.S. video game sales in 2004 (*Essential facts about the computer and video game industry*, 2005). While computer games represent a smaller portion of the video game market, MMOGs are generally designed for play on personal computers rather than consoles.

is \$14.95); and 4) established and growing as a community. In the end, I chose *EVE* because the premise interested me, and I could imagine becoming immersed and staying interested playing the game.

Backstory. *EVE* is set in deep space 20,000 years into the future. Players choose from four different races (also known as empires) with unique histories, religions, technologies, cultures, and appearances, and then take on the role of spaceship pilots in this vast online world.⁹ In the history of *EVE*, explorers from Earth discovered a wormhole in space that took them to an unknown solar system, New Eden. This wormhole, the Gate of Eve, was a gateway for travelers from Earth's solar system to explore new worlds. Humankind quickly began colonizing this new solar system until a cataclysmic explosion collapsed the wormhole, closing the gateway to Earth forever. After being cut off from Earth's supplies, small colonies were left in a desperate struggle for survival, which few managed. So complete was the isolation that *EVE*'s inhabitants no longer know Earth's location or even whether or not it still exists. After years of war and struggle, five empires have risen to power, and the universe of *EVE* has settled into uneasy peace over the last century. Whether this peace will prevail or *EVE* will descend into another interstellar war is up to the inhabitants of this online world.

Participants. As an autoethnographic explorer of immersion in an MMORPG, I am the primary participant in this study. In *EVE*, each player has a pilot avatar and a ship that also acts as an extension of the character's avatar. While I as the researcher am the primary subject of the study, I have documented also the experiences of my character and explored this layered role of player-character-researcher through the use of a hypertext note-taking program called Tinderbox. As I explain in more detail in the data collection section of this chapter, images, links to

⁹ While there are actually five races in *EVE*, at this writing players can adopt only four. The fifth, the Jovians, are a mysterious race with superior technology that players may come across in their travels through *EVE* universe but cannot choose as their avatars.

documents, websites, and even video and audio files can be included in Tinderbox documents to create a “web” of interconnected thoughts, jottings, and ideas. During game play, I documented the experience, too, through screen captures of significant game experiences, settings, and events. While I was playing *EVE*, my character came across many other avatars, yet these hypertextual field notes focused primarily on my character’s experiences and journeys through the *EVE* universe.¹⁰

Virtual Worlds as Ethnographic Field

The fictional characters in *EVE* exist within a larger narrative with a particular purpose in this virtual world. In the world of *EVE*, my character has experienced decision-making and the consequences of those decisions just as I do in everyday life. As an educational researcher, I am intrigued by the thought of studying characters inserted into a virtual field—an ethnographic space—that I cannot truly enter myself without help from such a virtual character. A question I have asked throughout this experience has been, “If I follow her as a guide into a space with no air, no smells, and nothing familiar except the mediated sensation of the keyboard clicks, what am I learning, and how am I being changed?”

A growing number of research studies have examined immersion in MMORPGs from a variety of critical lenses and methodologies. In the largest, ongoing MMORPG study, Yee (1999) has currently surveyed over 35,000 gamers in an extended study of the psychology of MMORPGs, and has subsequently developed an extensive library of data and resources of particular interest to psychologists and sociologists. Castronova (2001) has studied the popular game *EverQuest* from an economic standpoint, examining the development and potential impact of virtual economies. In another study, Castronova (2005) examined economic issues of

¹⁰ Players in *EVE* can communicate via a chat interface using their character avatars to communicate with one another.

migration and residence in MMORPGs while documenting the actions and experiences of his avatar in Norrath, *EverQuest*'s fictional world. Taylor's (2003) two and a half year ethnographic study focuses on the experiences of female gamers in *EverQuest* through extensive interviews and player-to-player conversations. Castronova (2001; Castronova, 2005) and Taylor's (2003) studies rely on more traditional social science methods of participant observation and interviewing although both researchers acknowledge and write about their presence in the MMORPG. Markham (1998), in contrast, developed a study using alternative ethnographic methods that features interwoven autoethnographic texts documenting and reflecting on her online experiences and reactions while conducting a more traditional research study that examines what motivates people to participate online. While this study is not set in a MMORPG, it is an excellent example of a reflexive and engagingly written account of a researcher negotiating the as yet unmapped terrain of virtual ethnography and her grappling with her own virtual presence.

In this study, I actively studied my virtual self as an extension of the researcher, but also as a particular character within the context of the video game. This layered exploration of participant/researcher identity has allowed me to examine my virtual character as an embodiment of the cultural ideas I am scrutinizing in this study while still documenting first-person experiences. By documenting my character's experience as well as my own as a researcher and by traversing these two identities, I am actively engaged in the blurring that occurs between the cultural and personal that Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest is the goal of autoethnographic researchers.

Writing about digital space, an author must often describe a sense of place or setting, like describing an image pictured only in the mind—often pictured only in the researcher's mind.

When dealing particularly with experiences in cyberspace, an author can certainly describe and even reprint artifacts like images and text; any sense of context, however, is largely a personal, sensory experience. Being “in cyberspace” or “online” suggests that the body is in an indescribably amorphous space rather than a particularized place. For example, settings for more traditional ethnographic research are often a place or community a researcher can physically enter. While “going into the field” has exotic connotations for past ethnographic work, “the field” can be many places closer to home for a researcher or, in the case of an autoethnographic researcher, his or her *own* home and community. Ethnographic research in digital culture like video games conceptualizes “the field” as a virtual space for experiences and interaction rather than a physical place. Hine (2000) highlights this difference of space and place by suggesting that traveling to digital sites such as the Internet is “experiential rather than physical displacement” (p. 45). Video games differ somewhat from Internet sites because entering a game often puts the player into a virtual location, community, world, or even universe created by the illusion of realistic 3-D computer graphics. In an early study of video game culture written as a journal, Sudnow (1983) describes the video arcade of the 1980s as “a new species of public place” (p. 4). What was going on in these dark and noisy settings was still happening in a physical place separate from the life of the researcher. In contemporary video games, the arcade is the living room, office, airplane, school, or anywhere imaginable. Rather than physically traveling to a field site such as an arcade, a player’s immersion in a video game world is truly *in the game*. McMahan (2003) points out that one common understanding of immersion in video games actually “means the player is caught in the world of the game’s story” (p. 68). Within this context, immersion in a video game setting, as in my study, requires engagement with the game narrative in such a way that I become part of it through my presence in the game.

Profile of a Gamer

The popular stereotype of adolescent game players as the dominant force in gaming demographics is not accurate. According to the Entertainment Software Association (*Essential facts about the computer and video game industry*, 2005), the average age of video game players is 30, and they spend an average of 6.8 hours per week engaged in game playing. In fact, 43% of all gamers are actually between the ages of 18 and 49. Surprisingly, 43% of all gamers are female, and in addition, women over the age of 18 represent a greater portion of the game playing population (28%) than boys ages 6-17 (21%). In addition, ESA reports that gamers spend 23.4 hours per week on cultural, religious, sports, reading, and other personal activities compared to 6.8 hours spent gaming. My autoethnographic account of immersion in a video game is a record that should resonate with a large population of my demographic cohort, female game players between the ages of 18 and 49, as I am part of this important target group for game studies.

Study Rationale

The elements of visual culture I am concerned with require not just rigorous scholarly analysis, but also creation of a cohesive narrative out of disparate cultural artifacts. My own long experiences with technology coupled with an interest in the many ways fear functions in cultural discourse are largely the forces shaping this arts-based autoethnographic project. According to Barone and Eisner (1997), whether the immersed researcher achieves this task through fiction or nonfiction ultimately does not matter because the *intent* is the same. Instead, “the apparition of the storied world itself becomes a kind of heuristic device that speaks directly to familiar, nearby concerns as it raises questions about them” (p. 74). The questions raised by

the world I inhabit and the narrative I construct from my immersion in a video game environment represent a search for a cohesive story created from the din of visual culture. The stories researchers create when they write up their findings are always partial and incomplete fragments of reflected and translated realities, and my story is traditional at least in this way. As Richardson (2001) says, “What you write about and how you write it shapes your life, shapes who you become” (p. 36). Instead of a linear narrative, this work is more of a textual collage that has been forcefully shaped into its current form—one that is artificial but necessary because of the constraints of producing a study, even an arts-based one.

Data Collection and Analysis

I remained immersed in the world of *EVE* throughout the writing of this study, approximately 10 months, although I was not actively playing during this entire span. During this period of immersion in *EVE*, I kept a field note journal in the hypertext program Tinderbox (Bernstein, 2002), writing from the perspective of my virtual character as well as my own as the researcher-player. Using Tinderbox (see Figure 2) as a data collection, analysis, and writing tool, I documented the experiences of my virtual character and my observations as a researcher. In addition, because Tinderbox is a “sandbox,” a space for creative play and linking disparate ideas, I used this program to gather information on gaming research, for free-writing, and for early chapter drafts. In addition, I have also used Tinderbox throughout the dissertation process—from comprehensive exams to prospectus development and finally to data collection and writing. As Taylor and Carpenter (2002) observe, hypertext programs are not just tools but are “an apparatus that provokes and promotes intertextual thinking” (p. 7). While writing, I have frequently had a number of hypertextual maps open that I developed throughout stages of

doctoral work and that encouraged this connecting, linking and intertextual thinking. Hypertexts are living documents that are constantly being revised and reshaped so “new ideas may be discovered or even provoked through this hypertextual process of inventively linking” (Taylor & Carpenter, 2002, p. 7).

Tinderbox Nuts and Bolts. Tinderbox, by Eastgate Systems, is a hypertext software program created primarily as a flexible note taking tool that one can use also to create weblogs and web sites. As Figure 2 demonstrates, it has a flexible interface that allows users to outline or visually “map” the notes created in the program. Each note is like a virtual Post-it that may contain text, images, URLs, and links to other documents. Notes can be color-coded and linked to other notes to form a visual map of connections between information, allowing a researcher to see the connections between data while creating the map. The researcher can also name links as she connects the notes. During data analysis, I used these link names to scan for emerging themes in my research. In addition, Tinderbox allows one to add a feature called an “adornment” to the map. Adornments are color blocks with text or images that can be put in the background behind linked notes as a way visually to organize the space. I used these adornments to establish categories and themes in my research and writing and to group notes under these themes giving them a color-coded and titled area of the map on which to reside. Such themes eventually became the basis for the vignettes and analysis in the dissertation.

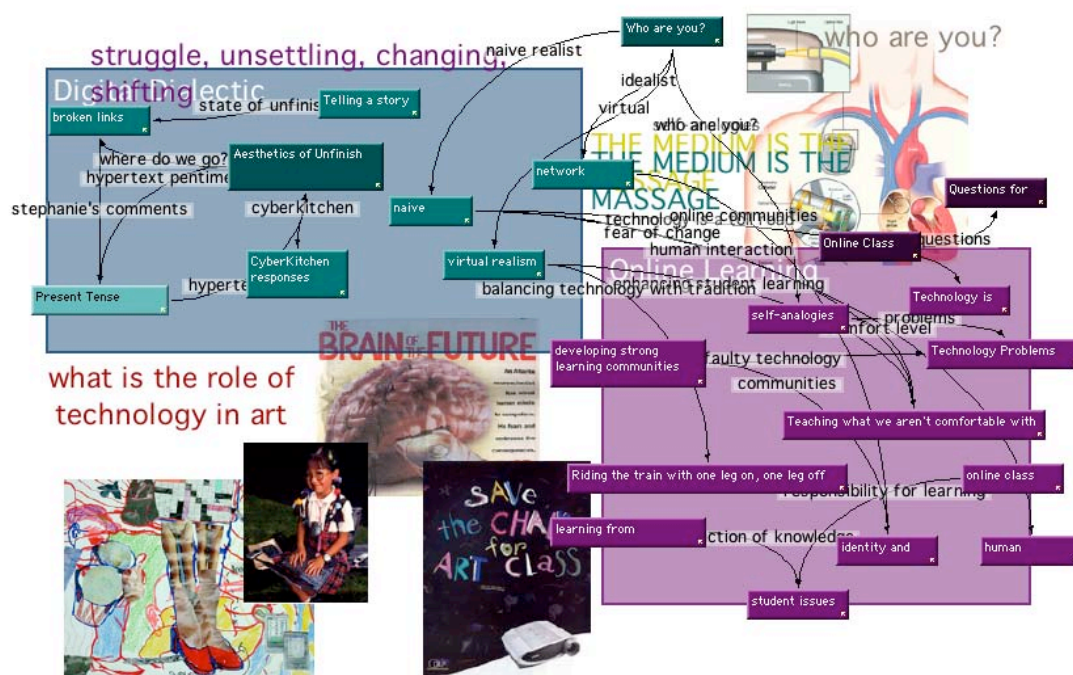


Figure 2. A Tinderbox Web

A New Eden?

EVE Online is a name with rich connotations. The name evokes a new dawn, new beginnings, but also the precipice of an event, a fall, a need for redemption. Intertwined with such meanings, however, is the myth of Eve—Mother of Humankind, Mother of Original Sin, Mother of the Fall, pain, death, desire for knowledge, desire for more. In the universe of *EVE*, as human beings have literally been evicted from the garden with the collapse of the Gate of Eve (the wormhole), transgression and a new fall of humankind are major themes in this online world. In *EVE Online*, the transgressive border crossings of atmosphere, planet, and solar system came with the wages of death for early settlers in this universe. However, even in the biblical allusion, in the Fall are sown also the seeds of redemption with the promise of a new Eve—or *Nuova Eva*—as the Blessed Virgin is sometimes known. With a name so rich in allusion, I have to wonder what New Eden this world will bring?

As an educational researcher employing alternative qualitative methods, I transgress borders into art-based research and personal narrative. In this study, I am playing a game on multiple levels as I attempt to represent the experiences of a researcher, player, and character. My gaming avatar is my proxy in a world where bodies are impossible. The virtual character I create in *EVE Online* must be translated from pixels on a screen to text on a page in the form of an evocative narrative that brings the character to life.

I am her ghostwriter.

And she is mine.

CHAPTER 4

ENTERING *EVE ONLINE*: AN INTRODUCTION TO A VIRTUAL WORLD

Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay
To mould me man? Did I sollicit thee
From darkness to promote me?—

—Epigraph from the title page of Mary Shelley's (1818, 1996) *Frankenstein*¹¹

The Avatar Chronicles, Part I: Birth

One day, for no reason, I was born.

I float, suspended in fluid like a baby in a womb, a mechanical umbilical connecting me to this ship's pod, my host and home. Unlike an infant, I am not born without awareness or knowledge of who I am. I don't have a history to speak of—no family or friends—but I have a heritage. My profile says I am a Gallentean Female with superior intelligence, a member of the University of Caille. It is my home base, the first place I remember being. I suppose that is where I was born. As part of the Gallente Federation, I have freedom and liberty to choose any path I desire. In the Gallentean way of thinking, free will and ingenuity make anything possible. (We are an idealistic people.) Of course, many of our enemies envy our freedoms, wealth, and prosperity and feel we have more than our fair share in this universe. There may be truth in that, I haven't really thought much about it.

I haven't thought about much of anything, actually. I just am. I came from nowhere and woke up hurtling through space, navigating through asteroid fields and warping through stargates. I'm going somewhere. I don't have many needs, but I do need to keep moving, to

¹¹ These lines are spoken by Adam after the Fall and taken from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

arrive at destinations, to make money and buy a bigger ship. My ship is my lifeline, so the better it is, the better I am. Suspended inside this pod filled with liquid cradling my body, my brain is wired to the ship's controls. My thoughts guide my ship's body, moving, turning, or defending from pirates and criminal gangs, and just generally working our way through the universe. The slightest electrical impulse in my neural pathways—the most fleeting thought—and the ship responds like a third arm or well-trained pet on a leash. My mind is the real pilot here, giving life to this mechanical host.

My true body is this vessel, traveling at warp speed through the vacuum of space. It adds three layers to my fragile skin—an energy shield, armor, and a hull, protecting this flimsy pod warehousing my body. This pod—my home—could easily be breached, venting my soft flesh into space. Then there would be darkness until I wake up again.

It is much harder to kill the mind than the body.

Connecting . . .

This chapter contextualizes the experiences described in this study by providing an introduction to the world of *EVE Online*. In particular, I examine the role of avatars in video games and introduce how characters are born into *EVE*. This introduction includes an examination of how the character selection process raises issues of race, gender, and appearance in *EVE* and also includes an overview of the game's interface and ships—secondary avatars in *EVE*. I will also introduce how each of these basic entry tasks serves as an initiation into the culture and community of *EVE Online*, adding layers to this intertextual experience of immersion in the visual culture of a virtual world.

I launch the program and hear the impersonal, metallic tinged voice of *EVE*'s narrator, a woman with a hint of a British accent. "Connecting . . .," she says as atmospheric music begins to play in the background, featuring the sound of heavy drums and a theme song reminiscent of a big-budget adventure movie. Suddenly, I am online in a virtual world of stunning and seductive graphics, all designed to help me fully act and react within the game's narrative. The world of *EVE* has a familiar aesthetic that draws from the science fiction genre and the actual world of deep space imaging captured by the Apollo moon landings, Hubble telescope, Mars rover, and other scientific explorations of space. As inhabitants of visual culture, we all know what distant nebulae, star clusters, and the surface of other worlds look like because images from space are mass-produced in popular and visual culture from both scientific and science fiction sources. These awe-inspiring images have provided an excellent setting for both utopian and dystopian narratives of space exploration, settlement, and myths of the last frontier. Designers, artists, astronomers, and science fiction enthusiasts alike have created a visual vernacular of space stations, vessels, and alien/human biology with endless permutations instantly recognizable in visual culture as the architecture and machinery of space exploration. Space is full of these strangely designed and aeronautically impossible spaceships and stations that are at once industrial and beautifully styled for cinematography. Terminology such as "warp drive" and "stargates" represents a science fiction vernacular as familiar as the whimsical language of a Dr. Seuss book.

In visual culture, we have erected a standard stage set for narratives in outer space drawing from layered and diverse elements. Rogoff (2002) describes the phenomena of visual culture as much more than *just* the study of visual images:

Visual culture opens up an entire world of intertextuality in which images, sounds and spatial delineations are read on to and through one another, lending ever-accruing layers of meanings and of subjective responses to each encounter we might have with film, TV, advertising, art works, buildings, or urban environments. (p. 24)

Certainly, we can add virtual gaming worlds such MMORPGs to Rogoff's description, further contributing to this layered, intertextual understanding of visual culture. In *EVE*, such layers of intertextual understanding acquire meaning through the conventions of the science fiction genre as not only an aesthetic, but also as a primer to understanding the way the game is played, to interpreting the culture of *EVE*, and learning to inhabit this virtual world. While *EVE* has its own story and narrative backdrop, it draws heavily on sci-fi conventions both visually and narratively. Drawing from my own intertextual understandings of visual culture from the science fiction and fantasy gaming genres proves useful as I try to make sense of the world of *EVE*. As a first step, I know I need an emissary in this virtual world—my avatar.

Enter the Avatar

In *EVE Online*, like most MMORPGs, entering the game means facing the many choices associated with creating an avatar, or the character in the game. In an ethnographic study of female gamers in *EverQuest*, a blockbuster MMORPG, T. L. Taylor (2003) describes avatars as “central to both immersion and the construction of community in virtual spaces. They are mediators between personal identity and social life” (p. 35). Avatars are what economist Castronova (2005), in his important study of the business and culture of MMORPGs, calls a “synthetic body in the synthetic world” (p. 6). Synthetic worlds, according to Castronova in this same study, are “simply intermediate environments: the first settlements in the vast, uncharted

territory that lies between humans and their machines” (p. 9). Avatars are the native guides in these worlds, teaching us what it means to be cyborgs.

Avatars are so central to game play in video games and to community and identity construction, it is difficult to imagine a game without some kind of representation of presence. For that matter, avatars of various kinds are important in basic computer action. Reid (quoted in Filiciak, 2003) observes that avatars “are much more than a few bytes of computer data—they are cyborgs, a manifestation of the self beyond the realms of the physical, existing in a space where identity is self-defined rather than pre-ordained” (p. 90). As cyborgs, these “manifestations” of the virtual self may also appear more like apparitions or impressions of presence in some games, particularly those that employ a first-person perspective. These games take place from the avatar’s point of view, using the computer screen as the avatar’s eyes. The blinking cursor is also a subtle but undeniable representation of this cyborg-self at work or at play on the computer. It announces, “I am here,” on the screen, acting in some instances as what Cubitt (1998) aptly names the “tourist mouse” (p. 85), wandering to scenic screen monuments whenever and wherever the user guides it. Rehak (2003) further describes how, in *Myst* (1993), a popular 1990s first-person perspective game in which players must solve complicated puzzles in order to unlock the family mystery behind a series of worlds, the avatar is an invisible presence signified only by the cursor hand:

Most striking to many was the eerie sense of stillness and solitude produced by *Myst*’s interface, which lacked visible avatarial forms. Players moved through the diegesis as though watching a slide show, clicking at the borders of each image to choose where they would go next. The only mark of this control onscreen was a cursor in the shape of a pointing hand. Omitting representation of the body in favor of a single, stylized point of

control, *Myst*'s interface epitomized the "tourist mouse" (Cubitt, 1998, p. 85)

aesthetic . . . (p. 117)

The wandering avatar is a virtual explorer and guide to a new digital typography in virtual worlds of MMORPGs. These on-screen cyborgs map and mediate virtual experiences by standing in for the user who is tethered by wires and mouse to digital space. Depending on point of view, virtual presence can thus be experienced as invisible, implied, or constructed in humanoid digital form in order to give players a sense of belonging in virtual space. Even the earliest on-screen games seemed to reflect an intuitive need to design an extension of ourselves as an object to manipulate and control. One of the earliest video games, *Spacewar!*, was written by students and faculty at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and resulted in the first avatar, an onscreen blip representing a rudimentary spaceship. Rehak (2003) observes how this first avatar evolved graphically in later science fiction games, such as *EVE Online*:

Eventually these points of light would evolve into icons of rocket ships, which, set against a starry background, engaged in warfare. Suggestive of a human ensconced within a mechanical shell, the rocket-ship imagery of the first avatars harkened to the external reality of the player seated at the terminal, hands on the controls. (p. 109)

Interestingly, these games with such rudimentary graphics and only the suggestion of avatarial representation—essentially blips on a screen so much like our blinking cursor today—are the narrative ancestors of more complex, graphically rich MMORPGs and other video games. In *EVE*, the avatar encased in a ship that must be maneuvered around the background of space is the descendant of *Spacewar!*'s avatar and other games that first introduced the notion of digital envoys sent to mediate virtual experience. In *EVE*, however, blips on a screen have become

fully rendered humans and exotically designed ships. These fully rendered humans are a product of the character selection process, a common gateway to game play in MMORPGs.

Character Selection

Creating an avatar in *EVE* requires a number of decisions before one ever enters game play. During character selection, I spent a great deal of time making choices about my character and the appearance of my avatar (whom the remainder of this chapter will describe). This process, called character selection, is the first step in *EVE* after setting up an account with credit card information, login id, and password, and downloading the game client to the computer.¹² Character selection is the first introduction to the game and serves as a kind of initiation into the virtual community by defining a character's gender, race, skills, heritage, allegiances, and appearance. Each choice in character selection affects not only how the avatar will look, but also what kind of skills the character will be "born" with and even what race and culture a character will "inherit" in the game and take with him or her into the virtual world of *EVE*.

Race Selection in Character Creation

The first step in character selection is choosing a race or empire to join.¹³ In MMORPGs, selecting membership in races, bloodlines, tribes, or nations is not unusual and is considered a basic part of game play that also allows players to set up initial alliances in a virtual world. Belonging to a culture is an essential component to immersion in a game like *EVE Online* because it immediately creates a sense of belonging and connection to other characters in the

¹² The game client is a program that is downloaded and installed on the computer's hard drive and serves as a connection to the online game. *EVE* automatically installs an icon on the desktop that asks for a login and password with each entry. At login, the client also downloads new software patches and updates as they become available.

¹³ Race and empire are the terms used in *EVE Online* during this stage of the character creation process.

game who share a common empire affiliation. Many popular MMORPGs—particularly those of the fantasy genre—base races on legendary archetypes such as dwarves, elves, wizards, and ogres with accompanying lore and magical skills who play alongside avatars with more human characteristics. Race and gender are complicated constructions in MMORPGs because these representations walk a fine line between a color- and gender-blindness to character development and a heavy reliance on gender and racial stereotypes (a sort of social shorthand) in order to summarize and categorize character skills, personality traits, and playing abilities.

There are four empires players can join in *EVE*, each with very different cultural backgrounds, histories, and governments (Table 1). Citizens of the Gallente Federation, my chosen race, are descendants of French explorers who set out from Earth to New Eden 20,000 years ago. Players select characters based on the skills they find most intriguing, desirable, or potentially entertaining after reading summaries of each race. Each race represents direct descendants of cultures on Earth and how they might have developed in different environments after a mass migration to new planets 200 centuries earlier.

Table 1
Characteristics of the four empires in EVE characters can play

Empires	Government	Culture
Gallente Federation	Only democracy in <i>EVE</i> . Democratic elections headed by a president as chief executive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descendants of Tau Ceti Frenchmen • Believers in free will and human rights • Economic class extremes: great wealth and extreme poverty among the classes • Market driven economy • Masters of mass-production and mass media • Home to all races in EVE seeking political asylum or freedom from ideological persecution • Called “defenders of the free world”
Amarr Empire	Amarr Emperor rules as an autocrat in the Imperial state. Considered divine because of cyber implants that allow him to live up to 500 years.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deeply religious • Largest empire covering 40% of inhabited solar systems due to aggressive expansion and conquering of other states • Slavery an integral part of society • First race to re-discover Warp technology • Enemies of Gallente and Jovian*
Minmitar Republic	Clan or tribe-based governing structure based on shared profession or activity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clan-based society often at war with other tribes • Once a flourishing, technologically advanced empire. • Enslaved for centuries before revolting; Slavery resulted in a Minmitar diaspora • 1/3 still enslaved by Amarr Empire • 1/5 live in Gallente Federation • Many live as freemen, migrant workers, pirates, or operate large criminal gangs
Caldari State	Corporate state controlled and run by a few mega-corporations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No private ownership; all property is owned by corporate interests • Strong economy and military • Fought for independence from Gallenteans in a long, bloody war • Huge gambling industry • Disciplined, rigid society that does not tolerate outside traditions

**Jovian is not a race players can elect to play. They are instead examples of artificial intelligence operating in the game narrative.*

Source: EVE Online character selection screen.

Choosing Bloodlines and Gender. Once players have selected a race or empire, they may also choose to play a number of different bloodlines within each empire and select a gender. For example, the Intaki and Jin-Mei are additional racial bloodlines that can be played in the Gallente Federation, and each bloodline has attributes reflected in character traits and appearance. Each empire in *EVE* presents images in character selection as basic character templates for understanding ethnicity, identity, community, and citizenship in *EVE* (see Figure 3).

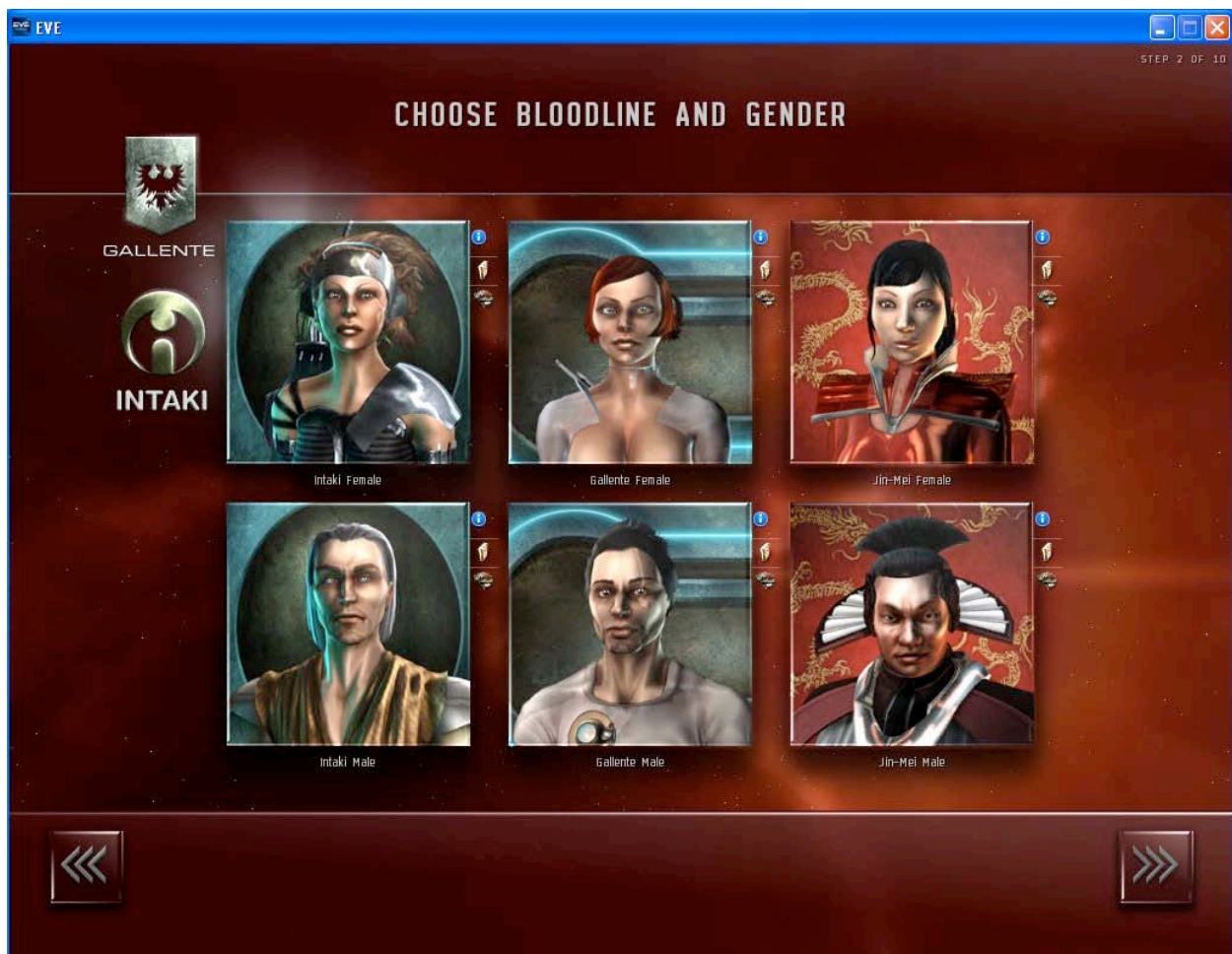


Figure 3. Selection screen for choosing a bloodline and gender in the Gallente Federation

Significant and telling from an observant researcher's viewpoint, the descriptions of each race and accompanying gender selection are thinly veiled references to cultural and political stereotypes in the real world. This intertextual representation of race and gender in *EVE* and in other MMORPGs creates connections between the real and the virtual and serves as a primer for understanding the context of game play in *EVE*. Predictably, though, such a strategy does not avoid problems of stereotyping by race or gender. For example, Gallente females are "considerate and kind, their spirit out-going and lively" as well as "easy-going, cheerful and carefree," and valuing "self-empowerment" and "creativity." Gallente males in comparison are described as "driven and ambitious," "self-righteous," "generous," and "courageous when they feel their way of life is under threat."¹⁴ These descriptions are familiar gendered stereotypes used to describe masculine and feminine traits in the real world. Descriptions such as "cheerful" and "easy-going" suggest female strengths are social and interpersonal, while, in contrast, males are described in more career-oriented, militaristic terms like "driven" and "courageous."

Interestingly, these descriptions make little difference in game play because they are purely part of the pre-game narrative. What matters in game play are the attributes that characters acquire, and in the game logic, descriptions notwithstanding, Gallente females and males start with exactly the same attributes.¹⁵ Numerical rankings are assigned to five characteristics: intelligence, charisma, perception, memory, and willpower. The higher the number, the larger proportion of a particular attribute a character possesses when he or she enters the game. Bloodlines within each race, however, have quite different levels of these attributes. (See Table 2 for a more detailed breakdown and description of attributes in the Gallente Federation.) The Jin-Mei bloodline, in fact, is the only one of the three bloodlines with no

¹⁴ These and subsequent descriptions come directly from the bloodline and gender selection screen in *EVE Online*.

¹⁵ This assignment of the same character attributes to both genders in a bloodline is consistent in all the empires and bloodlines in *EVE*.

attributes ranked above seven. Gallente and Intaki both have at least one attribute with an 8, and pure Gallente—perhaps given preference as founders of this empire—have two attributes with a score of 8. At first, this seems telling, particularly since Intaki and Jin-Mei bloodlines were described as “primitive” cultures until their absorption into the Gallente Federation. Closer inspection, however, shows that the numbers for all bloodlines add up to 30. Each bloodline begins with 30 points, but the distribution of points appears to favor one bloodline over another with higher scores in some more desirable attributes. Which attributes, though, *are* more desirable? Ultimately, this judgment depends on which attributes an individual player values most in his or her selection.

Table 2

Comparison of character attributes assigned to both male and female characters in bloodlines of the Gallente Federation

Character Attributes	Gallente Female & Male	Intaki Female & Male	Jin-Mei Female & Male
Intelligence	6	8	5
Charisma	8	6	7
Perception	8	3	6
Memory	4	7	5
Willpower	4	6	7

Women as Monsters: The Problem of Female Characters in Video Games

Associated with gender selection is also the problem of the depiction of female characters in the wider world of video games. Very little has not already been written about sexist imagery in video games, particularly in the aggressively sexual depictions of female characters. Bodies in video games are idealized as digital stereotypes. As Schut (2006) observes,

The men are “real” men: old and wise wizards with flowing robes, lean and athletic thieves or bards, or (best of all) ridiculously powerful, muscled warriors. The women are similarly idealized: regardless of profession, almost all of them are curvaceous yet athletic, clothed in lycra-tight apparel and/or armor. In each case, the bodies conform to the ideal standards of the roughly masculine male. (p. 112)

Of particular interest to scholars is the question of what ideological messages are embedded, displayed, and enacted through images of overly-sexualized yet powerful warrior-women such as Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series and just about any idealized female character in action or fantasy genre games. These are dangerous armor-clad women gifted with the same skills as male characters, intentionally designed to enact male roles in games, yet rendered too, as desirable goddesses and Lolitas. They are a digitized Lamias—a legendary and lethal serpent disguised as a beautiful temptress. In a fascinating way, video games have updated ancient images and myths of dangerous beauties and have drawn inadvertently on the myth of the Lamia, also known by the more familiar Latin translation Lilith, or dark-Eve. Common in early Judeo-Christian writings, she is represented as a female night demon. Early Jewish tradition also refers to Lilith as the first wife of Adam who flew away to become a demon (Hastings, Selbie, Davidson, Driver, & Swete, 1898). In Hebrew tradition, she was feared as a succubus who drank the blood of newborn children in the night, and as a creature that could seduce and bring disease to men (Douglas, 1962). In Isaiah 34:14, the earliest conception of the femme fatale or warrior woman, she is the “night hag,” another description that associates Lilith with vampirism (May & Metzger, 1977). In later Christian iconography, the temptor of Adam and Eve is often represented by a Lilith image of a serpent with the head and torso of a woman.¹⁶

¹⁶ A familiar example of this representation of Lilith is Michelangelo’s *Temptation and Fall* in the Sistine Chapel. In this painting, the upper torso of the serpent is rendered as a shapely blonde female with the lower body of a snake.

Lilith represents a balancing force to prelapsarian Eve, the good mother. Instead of a nurturer, she is a destroyer. In comparison to Eve's role as the mother of mankind, Lilith devours offspring and represents the antithesis of obedience, virtue, and sexual purity. In her analysis of the role of the Lilith in modern fantasy writing, Schaafsma (1987) cites Neumann's identification of Lilith as "symbolic of negative transformation; her influence leads to a dissolution of consciousness through seduction, intoxication, ecstasy, and madness" (p. 53).

In *EVE Online*, this ironic comparison to the dark-Eve arises in the process of character selection. Female characters are designed as strong and empowered characters equal in ability to their male counterparts, but pictured in the aggressively sexual imagery of these warrior-women or digital Amazons. There can be little misunderstanding that the bodies of these female characters are on some level designed for the pleasure of male players, subject to the male gaze. While games put forth the ostensibly positive image of empowered, strong female characters who exhibit masculine traits and abilities that allow them to play like men, video games are actually also repackaging the image of the *femme fatale* or female monster common to film noir and horror films. These women are powerful only because of their desirability to men. Without their sexuality, these dangerous beauties lose their power over viewers. In video games, this image of the Amazon woman or the woman-warrior as an object to be tamed or vanquished has been variously described as "casting female characters in typically male roles as a method of disallowing women a place in the game" (Nephew, 2006, p. 131) or more colorfully as "welding brass tits on the armour (quoted in Oliver 1995:60)" (Nephew, 2006, p. 131).

Gender Representation in *EVE*

The way *EVE* assigns attributes is fascinating because there is an attempt at gender-blindness, but not as seen in many fantasy and science fiction genre MMORPGs by “welding brass tits on the armour,” or making female characters men dressed as women. The avatar in *EVE* is not depicted, as I will discuss later in this chapter, in the same way as avatars in many other MMORPGs. In fact, the bodies of male and female characters are not actually displayed from the bust down, and like *Spacewar!* and other games set in space, these avatars are not actually seen as they pilot a ship—the true avatar in *EVE*. Since the outside view of the ship is what all players see as they traverse space, sexualized imagery has no great value in *EVE Online*, although still apparent in the somewhat provocative rendering of cleavage and breasts in *EVE*. In *EVE*, gender has in some ways been erased because the avatar one presents to the world is the ship with one’s character stowed safely inside a liquid-filled pod. Since ships are traditionally called by feminine pronouns, one could argue that feminine avatars reign in the *EVE* universe. In that way, it makes sense that female and male difference is constructed only in the narrative of the character selection but has nothing to do with the actual abilities of players.

Great disparities, however, do exist in the abilities between bloodlines that suggest outdated anthropological notions of biologically determined racial inequality.¹⁷ *EVE*’s making gender inequity a non-issue in character selection and to some extent in racial selection by giving each race a particular strength—whether intelligence or willpower—is a standard approach in MMORPG design. Perhaps in *EVE*, racial bias begins to take shape when players bring their own assumptions into the game by placing more value on certain attributes such as intelligence,

¹⁷ It is only fair to say, that while one plays the game, all of these attributes can and do change. It is possible to increase intelligence attributes during game play, but some bloodlines start out in a much better place than others as they inherit traits by mere virtue of being Gallente or Intaki. The playing field is not meant to be a level one. Instead, players can choose races and bloodlines based on attributes and strengths that are most desirable to them.

perception, or charisma and then comparing these qualities between bloodlines. Designing a game that is neutral in respect to gender or race is perhaps impossible. Pointing out the danger of such assumptions, however, T. L. Taylor (2003) examines the impact of designing for gender- and color-blindness and the privilege associated with such a choice:

The idea that colour-blindness (or in this case gender-blindness) can simply be achieved through discounting the power (or value) of these categories is problematic. Indeed, the ability to even suggest such a position can often only be taken by those who aren't subjected to its force and weight. The rhetorical effect is that issues pertaining to gender and race get taken off the table as areas to be articulated, debated, and confronted. While the impulse behind adopting a colour-blind approach is admirable, and may in fact work well for some aspects of design, in the absence of explicit critical thinking and practice it can end up feeding back into stereotypes. (p. 35)

In Taylor's analysis, ignoring issues of race and gender is, in fact, a privileged position that instead leaves cultural constructions such as race and gender unexamined, possibly reinforcing prejudices. Of course, these questions of race and gender representation in *EVE* and other MMORPGs are complex ones because, on some levels, the game designers have tried to make diversity an accepted and desirable part of game play by offering choices in skin color and bloodlines that offer connections to ethnic groups found in the real world rather than relying on seemingly neutral images of aliens, a frequent and passive tactic often found in the sci-fi genre that avoids any earth-based stereotypes or "real world" racial issues.

Racial Bias and Racism in Video Games

As I will discuss in a later chapter, a large part of playing *EVE* is also understanding political and racial tensions between the different empires, some that exist purely for purposes of fear, others to understand the complexity of the cultural framework employed in *EVE*. There are, however, examples in this virtual world of truly loathsome cultural practices. For example, in the Amarr Empire, slavery and human trafficking is an accepted business practice. In regions of space controlled by Amarr, human slaves can be bought from the market in *EVE*, and ships are designed to hold human cargo. This type of problem is not just part of the game mythology or narrative, but can be performed and enacted. Players can become slave traders.

Unlike the setting of *EVE*, video games set in particular historical settings, such as medieval or historical periods, with different attitudes toward gender and class issues often operate under the assumption that equality would actually be an anachronism in particular time periods. Therefore, there is no need to justify or explain misogynistic or discriminatory practices in historically-based games, even if the genre actually blends fantasy and reality and could conceivably bend historical reality. Schut (2006) points out, however, the dangerous and intentional naïveté of designing a game that promotes gender and class inequity in a false attempt at historical realism:

. . . including the historical facts of sexual inequality and other discriminatory practices as part of the game setting allows male players to escape into a game world that validates their own sense of worth by making their characters physically and socially superior to others around them, whether those “others” happen to be monsters or women. . . . Role-playing games that incorporate historical information usually don’t include footnotes to indicate historical sources, for example, so the reader has no way of finding out which

elements are only products of the writers' imaginations. This mixing of historical reality and fiction allows the players free rein in constructing their own male-dominated fantasies. (p. 130-131)

Slavery in *EVE* is embedded in a purely fictional narrative rather than a particular historical time period, despite the fact that *EVE*'s backstory does suggest actual human civilizations.¹⁸ In fact, the game attempts what could be considered a social critique of human trafficking by presenting slavery as abhorrent to other empires such as the Gallente Federation, who are specifically said to value human rights, or the Minmatar Republic, whose citizens were and are enslaved by Amarr. In a virtual world with complex political and social tension, such behaviors—like other forms of criminal behavior and exploitation—must exist to move the game forward and to provide a degree of verisimilitude. However, choosing to play a character who could become a slave trader was something I could not bring myself to do, which was partly why I chose to join the Gallente Federation. I imagine I am not alone in this decision.

While this is one example of how a moral dimension exists in tension with an understanding of the real and virtual divide in game play, many other video games push extreme and dangerous racial and ideological agendas. Games with so-called “white power” themes distributed by the National Alliance, a neo-Nazi organization, offer a truly disturbing look at how playing a game can become deadly serious. In his intriguing book on war and video games, Halter (2006) unsettlingly describes some racially charged games such as

... *Ethnic Cleansing*, in which the player moves through a virtual New York City in order to slaughter blacks, Latinos, and Jews. The player can outfit his protagonist as a contemporary skinhead, or in more retro Ku Klux Klan hood and robe. Earlier versions

¹⁸ Reading through Table 1 should make readily apparent that the empires in *EVE* are loosely modeled on existing nations. In particular, the characteristics of the Gallente Federation are closely linked to the United States, including the familiar political rhetoric that Gallenteans are defenders of liberty and freedom in the universe.

of the same idea include the German game *Concentration Camp Manager*, a crude simulation that awards points for killing Jews and Turks . . . a *PacMan* takeoff called *SA Mann*, *Concentration Camp Rat Hunt*, which involves shooting Jews inside the Auschwitz death camp, and something simply called *Shoot the Blacks*. (p. 304)

These underground games are propaganda employing entertainment as slick, seductive recruiting tools.¹⁹ Such games take little description to turn the stomach, yet they are only one segment of a video game market that includes an expanding range of games that examine anger after 9/11 on both sides of an extremist divide. An October 2006 article in *The New York Times* examined Islamic video games with titles such as *Jihad Growing Up*, *Quest for Bush*, and the specifically named *Bush Hunted Like a Rat*, saying these games

. . . champion issues from an Islamic perspective, in stark contrast to many Western-made games that generally cast Muslims and Arabs as the bad guys. Furthermore, they underscore a brewing game-design war between East and West, a simmering tension of who's writing (and rewriting) history. (Vargas, 2006, n.p.)

This rewriting of history through game design is also an attempt by groups with religious or political perspectives not commonly represented in mass media, or who are commonly stereotyped as “evil” or the “bad guys,” to present starkly different worldviews that disturb the traditional accepted historical and media narrative.

Games such as MMORPGs are seductive, then, in the way they ask us to make broadstroke decisions about race, bloodline, and gender or present a worldview or perspective

¹⁹ Racist groups such as the National Alliance are, of course, not the only special interest groups to use the popular medium of games to recruit members or push an agenda. In fact, in 2002, a video game created by the United States military entitled *America's Army* was released to rave reviews and has been used a strategic recruiting tool for the U.S. military in the midst of the “war on terror.” According to one game review site, the game was the “Best Misappropriation of Taxpayer Dollars Ever” (Halter, 2006, p. ix).

that has an ideological or political agenda, as Rogoff (2002) observes about images from digital culture:

Images convey information, afford pleasure and displeasure, influence style, determine consumption and mediate power relations. Who we see and who we do not see; who is privileged . . . which aspects of the historical past actually have circulating visual representations and which do not; whose fantasies are fed by which visual images? (p. 25)

Through this visual culture framework, we can start to sift through layered strategies of how race and gender are constructed in synthetic worlds such as *EVE*. The added mechanism of synthetic fear that exploits social constructions of gender and race to embed fear of difference and elements of horror into video games is also at work. In *EVE*, these are merely first steps in constructing one's identity in a synthetic world that relies on and leverages stereotypes of culture and draws on values, assumptions, and underlying prejudices the player brings with her into the game to make these choices.

Painting a Portrait of the Avatar

In *EVE*, the act of creation is inscribed in the title of the game, and players learn early on that one can discard choices easily during character creation and even create multiple characters for gaming in *EVE*. Once one has assigned race and gender to her character in *EVE*, then the player must choose his or her appearance. The cosmetic choices allow players to create a unique “look” and profile for the avatar (see Figure 4). Everything from hair, eye, skin color, dress, decoration, background graphics for atmosphere, makeup, and even dramatic lighting must be chosen before a player can even learn the rules of the game. This digitally powered version of

dress-up dolls allowed me to start with the basic template of gender and race and customize from there. In fact, the process is mesmerizing because of the range of possibilities and the way each of these choices affect the emerging personality and identity of the character. Beyond the obvious choices for the avatar's appearance, a menu of more subtle choices also allows one to morph the shape of the eyebrow and chin, curve of the lip, to change the tilt and angle of the head, or even to shift the focus of the eyes to create a truly personalized avatar with a unique expression that moves the character selection process beyond mere digital dress-up.

During this process—before I had even named my character—I really started thinking about *who* she would be, especially as I started working with her expression. A subtle tilt of the head and change in hairstyle made her seem more whimsical, maybe even kind. With changes in clothing, she suddenly looked like a warrior, then perhaps an interstellar office worker, or rock star. Of course, if all of this choice is too tedious for the player, there is also the option of allowing the program randomly to assign these traits. Randomness is an intriguing idea in character selection—what I call the software-as-god concept—but I had too much fun playing creator to give choices over to fate. Styling the virtual image was like the first line on a page describing who, through my avatar, I myself would be in the game. Clearly, the role of the avatar is not something inconsequential and takes investment of time and thought in order to begin “coming to own the avatar,” as Castronova (2005, p. 45) describes the process of beginning to think of the avatar as a true extension in a synthetic world of the player's own body.

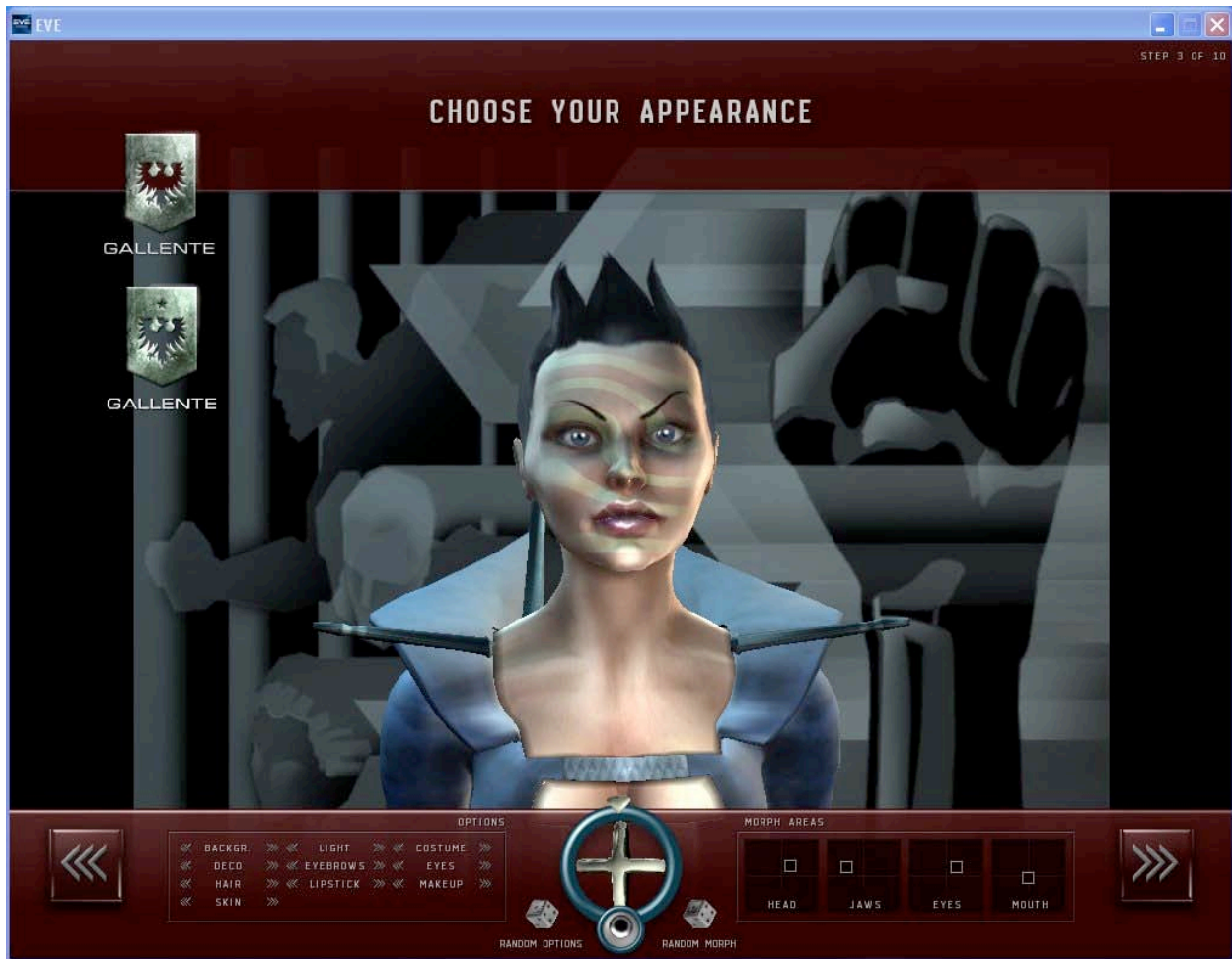


Figure 4. Selecting the appearance of one's character in *EVE*

Naming. It is not easy to name characters in MMORPGs because of the vast number of players who have already named their characters. In a science fiction MMORPG like *EVE*, names like Captain Kirk, Spock, Yoda, Skywalker, and other legendary space monikers were already taken. I named my Gallente avatar Janusa (see Figure 5). The name Janusa was inspired by the image of the double-faced head of the Roman god of beginnings and endings, Janus. I chose this name to symbolize my role as the researcher-character in *EVE*, but also because the image of Janus has always suggested to me the idea of increased awareness, reflection, and

outward observation. Janus was often carved on portals such as doors and windows, which also seemed fitting since the avatar represents my doorway into a virtual world.

I feminized Janusa's appearance in ways that are unnecessary in this game since she essentially has the same skills and attributes as her male counterparts. I suppose, unlike the appearance of other female characters that can be played in *EVE*, my character is clearly female. Why did I model her appearance in this way? I could just as easily have played a male character or made my character appear more androgynous. Perhaps my initial discomfort entering unfamiliar virtual terrain caused me to gravitate naturally toward familiar images, cultural descriptions, and gender. *EVE Online* is a complex and intimidating world, and just learning to navigate and understand the interface takes a great deal of time for new players. Selecting and creating an avatar who shared at least some characteristics with me, the player, was a cautious response to being thrown into an unfamiliar space. She looks like someone with whom I might become friends.



Figure 5. Image of Janusa, my character avatar in *EVE*

Avatar Tools: The *EVE* Interface and the Ship

Once character creation is complete, it is finally time actually to enter the synthetic world of *EVE*. A player starts in a space station assigned as the “home” station of her character. Once a player enters the game, she must assemble her ship and get ready to begin learning the interface of *EVE*. A tutorial is available to new players with extensive introductions on navigating and establishing a character’s profession and profile. *EVE*’s interface is designed with multiple layers of controls for navigating the ship, developing character skills, and traveling throughout the world of *EVE* (see Figure 6). The interface in *EVE* is quite complicated, but in general the ship’s controls are found along the bottom of the screen. Along the left side are icons that open

tools and information about the character, help and chat channels, maps, asset summaries, and other helpful tools for use during the game. The window in *EVE* where game play takes place is actually quite cluttered. In fact, many of the windows are translucent and hover over the main action creating a complex collage of information that helps a player navigate through space.

Perspective. Figure 6 is the typical point of view of the player in *EVE*. Rather than a first-person perspective like traditional first-person shooter games or a game with first-person cursor control such as *Myst*, *EVE* employs a third-person perspective that displays the action as if a camera or “eye in the sky” is constantly hovering just outside the ship. Narratively, this could be considered a third-person omniscient point of view because essentially this perspective gives complete control over the angle of view. Using the mouse, the player can rotate the ship in any direction. In addition, a player can zoom in and out on the ship at any angle and at extreme distances, which is a great advantage when hurtling through space at warp speed. In addition, the character selection is really the last time a player will see her character except as a small screenshot in the upper left corner of the screen. Other players can view the image of one’s avatar as they encounter her in space, but ships are the first point of contact. Space travel, after all, requires a ship. Ships in *EVE* are more important avatars than the actual characters and can be upgraded and replaced as need arises.



Figure 6. Janusa's ship setting out from a space station with third-person perspective

Death, Resurrection, and Synthetic Bodies in *EVE*

In *EVE*, what is true of ships is also true of other synthetic bodies. Death in *EVE* is not final as in most traditional video games whose narratives eventually end in a “game over” screen. MMORPGs are ongoing stories, and resurrection is too common to be considered miraculous in these synthetic worlds. Death does, however, have severe consequences for players. Training character skills in *EVE* goes on all the time, so characters are not stuck with the original attributes shown in Table 2 throughout the game and can add many other types of skills during game play—and even when offline. In fact, players are encouraged to take advantage of *EVE*'s

status as a perpetual world by training skills even when they are offline and away from the game. The more skills one has, the more she can do in *EVE*. In fact, just as in the real world, certain professions and missions are closed to avatars until they have trained particular skills. Training skills takes a serious investment of time. For example, training Research skills to Level five could take *weeks*, but can continue even when the player is offline since the clock in *EVE* continues to tick regardless of which players are logged in.

Death in *EVE*, or being “pod killed” as it is called, results in a loss of skills as the avatar’s clone is resurrected. Anything can be bought in *EVE*, so an investment in a better quality clone pays off in more skills transferred to that clone and more time saved in re-training skills. The “pod” in *EVE* is a special area of the ship that houses the body of the avatar in a special biochemical liquid. In *EVE*, pilots are actually hard-wired into their ship’s controls, an image drawing on *The Matrix*, *The X-Files*, and *Neuromancer*. These popular culture references continually help players understand the synthetic world of *EVE*, and the game recycles these stories and images in new ways during game play. Freedman (2003) writes that, when interacting with or viewing visual culture artifacts such as a video games or film, “we engage with the creators as we seek to understand their creation while we create our own images and stories at their suggestion” (p. 132). This notion of creating personal stories in response to visual culture is a powerful one in MMORPGs, sites that essentially exist as visually-rich sandboxes ready for creative, community play with narrative. Part of experiencing synthetic worlds is experimenting with new stories, new ways of sharing experiences, and creating new categories for how real and virtual life are blending into one another.

CHAPTER 5

HALF-DRAWN CHARACTERS: IDENTITY CREATION IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

The Avatar Chronicles, Part II: Lost

Today, I lost myself.

A remote camera allows me to view my ship from the outside and see it as it turns in any direction. When I roll the ship, for a moment it looks like a bug flipped on its back, helpless and flailing. I watch my journeys unfold like a travelogue or documentary playing on a wide-screen, the only audience an apparently self-obsessed voyeur. Zooming the camera out, my ship becomes a tiny dot against the background of space, an inconsequential fleck in the void that surrounds it. It is like staring at a dab of gray paint in a canvas of black. When I squint my eyes, it finally disappears in a fuzzy haze, lost in its surroundings by a trick of the eye.

This abyss is mostly silent except for the atmospheric sounds of music piped into my head to fill the void left by sounds of wind, trees, gravity, and bodies. The sound of my ship's creaking joints and hypnotic drone is familiar company, like an old house settling and whirring around me. The metal bones of human life litter space like a cosmic junkyard, creating what seems like a ghost town. Space is instead inhabited by cargo containers, mountainous space stations, and billboards lining the entrance to stargates. Advertisements for Quafe energy drinks blink at passing ships, while digital "WANTED" posters scream, "Dead or alive," to passing pilots entombed in metal hulls on their way to other solar systems.

Approaching a space station, my ship is dwarfed by the shadow of massive towers that glow with colored lights, looming, imperial architecture carefully designed to lure and intimidate wary space travelers. They are a monument to our civilization's inventiveness, examples of advanced technology meant to inspire awe and respect with its immense visual weight and power. My body floats in its pod while my camera eye roams outside of both bodies, floating invisibly through space as smells of tomatoes and garlic waft from somewhere outside my field of vision. These soft, warm smells are intruders in my world of liquid, wires, and the sterile, sharp edges of space. It must be a programmed memory or illusion coming through these hard-wires and making me remember something beyond my life in this world. These smells are signs of a presence, guiding me like I am guiding my ship. I feel an invisible tether to something bigger as I jump from solar system to solar system, carrying out missions and stockpiling assets.

I am lost in the shadow of something immense, something that is also calling me to dinner.

Composite Characters

I sit in an orange laminate booth, eating an overly large burrito. It's called a "fatty" because of the addition of guacamole and sour cream, but I am sure it is also a reference to the future waist size I can expect from such a large lunch.²⁰ Grudgingly bowing to vanity, I eat only half. This place is more of a "joint" than other trendy cafés where most professionals spend their lunch breaks in this southern college town. In here, denim and t-shirts dominate rather than suits and ties. We are the exception in our respectable clothing, tucked, pressed, and accessorized for

²⁰ In keeping with the arts-based methods used in this dissertation, the narrative "Composite Characters" is a composite of a series of conversations presented and written as a way of thinking through how characters are created and constructed in video games. Names have been changed and narrative license has been taken in order to illustrate how much of ourselves goes into creating the half-drawn characters inhabited and role-played in video games.

office work and committee meetings. I dip the tortilla chips in green sauce and savor the spicy flavor. It is bright, alien green like kryptonite, or comic-book sludge, but that is probably just my imagination at work, considering the subject matter of today's lunchtime conversation. One of my two lunch companions, Jake, is a computer specialist on campus who, in his spare time, writes character books based on popular video games. He is one of the many English-majors-turned-computer-geeks I know who is endlessly fascinated with science fiction and horror movies, as well as fantasy video games that encourage players to create back-stories for cardboard digital characters fitting certain standard archetypes—dwarves, mutants, wizards, aliens, the usual gallery of gaming rogues.

“I’m working on a new script right now for an enemy book based on a video game. I have this idea for a character that I think you two might like,” Jake says while munching on chips.

Companion books, such as enemy books, written to enhance video game storylines and player performance add additional revenue to the \$7.3 billion annual U. S. video game sales.²¹ It is one example of how multiple media forms such as film and publishing converge in the video game market. Even literature such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, or Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, find new life in video game adaptations. Enemy books, rule books, and “cheat” books provide insights into the thoughts and feelings of characters in video games, the mythology of different worlds, and tips for progressing through difficult game levels. These reference books help readers “play smarter” with more information and provide dedicated players with a stronger and more developed narrative for their favorite games, adding to the game-playing experience. Published cheaply on paper similar to children’s coloring books, these

²¹ Figure based on 2004 figures from the Electronic Software Association.

books are also a lucrative market for part-time writers, like Jake, who profit from their pop cultural knowledge of the fantasy genre.

“This one,” Jake explains, “is set on a college campus in the South. It’s just a convenient setting for the storyline since I can write from experience, and most of the characters will not be what they appear. You know—demons, monsters, clones, evil scientists, and hideous creatures disguised as professors, grad students, and campus groundskeepers. Who doesn’t like to make fun of academics?”

“Sounds hilarious,” I say sarcastically, then think better of it when I recognize how many people would truly relish stories about college professors meeting an untimely death from bio-toxin or vampire. “Actually, it does sounds like a promising idea. Do you need our help or something?” I glance at my friend Sharon, our other lunch companion, who has stopped eating and is listening intently to Jake’s latest idea.

“Well, it’s just that I have this idea for a character,” he pauses, “based on you two. It’s actually an honor if you think about it.” Jake takes a huge bite of his burrito, shifts in his seat and looks out the window, chewing intently, making us wait for the rest of the story. Sharon and I look at each other and roll our eyes at the dramatic pause he has inserted into the moment. He’s dragging this out because he knows that secretly we are thrilled we might become part of something as exotic sounding as an enemy book.

“How would you base a character on both of us,” Sharon asks, “and what kind of character are we talking about?” She and Jake work in the same office and know each other well from years of conspiring on practical jokes aimed at other office colleagues. They also share an easy friendship in the midst of a highly demanding workplace. Despite such warm respect, she also remembers Jake’s misguided desire to set her up with a single friend of his whose hobbies

included collecting commemorative Star Trek plates. Not exactly a match, aesthetically speaking. “I need more information,” she says looking bemused.

“Hear me out. I have this idea for a character based on both of you. It won’t be exactly you, but a blend of your personalities, an homage, if you will. You know—sexy, smart, funny.” Jake pauses and absentmindedly sweeps some chip crumbs strewn on the table into a neat little pile with his paper napkin. “Well, you know, except she would also be evil, or *wrong* as we call it in this video game’s mythology.”

There is, I think, something appealing about being *wrong*, as Jake puts it. The thought of being inserted into a fantasy world like a game piece on a Monopoly board appeals to my imagination. Instead of the shoe or top hat, this fictional self would exist within a fragmented story and with an unknown purpose. It might be like having a doppelganger who wreaks havoc in her corner of the world, but leaves my ordered existence untouched. This conversation marked the beginning of my thinking about how identity and image are created in video games and what fragment of myself might be written into a game narrative or enacted through my avatar. What is possible? Who can I be? How are digital bodies *wrong*?

Digital Bodies

Writing this composite conversation was an important part of understanding the assumptions about identity and character I was using to interpret experiences in *EVE Online*. In fact, looking back, I realize how naïve my assumptions were about role-playing and what it means to inhabit my character, Janusa. I expected her to develop in layered and nuanced ways (as if she would do this on her own with minimal care like a house plant) and assumed experiences mediated through my avatar could be easily separated and categorized into virtual,

as opposed to real life and identity. This distillation proved much harder than I imagined because of the complexity of the world of *EVE* and the limited opportunity for role-playing. I do like to think, however, that the template for my character, the basic material of Gallente female with specific attributes and skills, was perhaps sketched out in a similar manner on napkins over a lunch conversation. Perhaps, her creators thought, she might become a digital body players might want to inhabit, enjoy, and use as a way to learn more of themselves through game play in *EVE*.

One can view the digital body in the form of the avatar as a representative of what Bolter and Grusin (1999) observe as the “increasingly complicated relationship between the body and technology in contemporary culture” (p. 237), and “how the body itself functions as a medium” (p. 237), a relationship that is deeply explored by feminist writers such as Haraway. As a medium for digital experience, avatars are intertextual digital bodies that can be sliced, ripped apart, and reassembled with other cultural fragments in a bizarre experiment at creating identity in a virtual world. Rose (2001) describes intertextuality as “the way that the meanings of any one discursive image or text depend not only on that one text or image, but also on the meanings carried by other images and texts” (p. 136). Such collaged and fragmentary identity in virtual worlds, it seems, is a product of this layered and sometimes violent suturing of meaning to digital bodies that exist in a kind of half-life on the screen. We have a hard time figuring out why we create these extensions of self in digital life and what place they have outside of the virtual. This chapter will examine how identity in these half-drawn digital characters is collaged and constructed through experiences in MMORPGs such as *EVE Online*.

Journal Fragment

She is like an unruly pet that does not respond to any of my commands. What am I supposed to do with her? How can I control something that does not yet make sense to me? We are sutured together by this umbilical cord of mouse clicks, but I am at a loss. She was born into this digital world but depends on me for commands and for her very life. I am supposed to “play” her, but it seems the other way around. I am not having fun.

“Owning the Avatar”

In *EVE*, becoming psychologically and emotionally invested in a character—or “coming to own the avatar” as Castronova (2005, p. 45) describes it—is not an easy or intuitive process. Just as the *EVE* interface is complex and layered, so are the many barriers put in place between player and avatar. These barriers include the setting of the game in outer space which does not allow the player to move her character in any way that seems natural. In fact, the body or image of the avatar’s body is immediately encased in a protective fluid-filled pod that cannot be seen or experienced. The avatar I spent so much time creating becomes almost entirely textual in the game because it exists only in the form of communication in the built-in chat window in *EVE* and in the narrative of the game. Aside from setting, the third-person perspective of game play is also a barrier to feeling fully invested in the character. In the “Avatar Chronicles” excerpt at the beginning of this chapter, I attempted to describe the sensation of being an eye in the sky or an omniscient viewer in *EVE*. This perspective—and the lack of choice about the perspective—makes playing *EVE* seem more like *watching*.²² Watching is interesting but is also passive and removed. At times, I felt like Jimmy Stewart’s character in *Rear Window* (Hitchcock, 1954), a voyeur rather than a participant.

²² Some MMORPG games offer players a choice of first- or third-person perspective.

Another potential barrier to character development in *EVE* is the lack of interaction with other characters that would have allowed for a more authentic role-playing experience in the game. It is remarkably easy to spend most of one's time in *EVE* isolated from other characters. The game is designed with a number of chat channels whose windows one must always keep open to facilitate conversation and community development. Players are also encouraged to join corporations in *EVE* and are, in fact, "born" into a particular corporation when first beginning the game. One can apply for employment in corporations, form one's own corporation, or form gangs with other players one meets in *EVE*. These gangs are often criminal gangs of roving pirates who take over certain sectors of space, generally terrorizing other players. Nevertheless, one can also remain completely isolated in *EVE*. Players can choose professions like courier or miner that can completely isolate them from other members of the *EVE* community. Cultivating community in *EVE* takes effort. In my local channel, I witnessed a chat that illustrates how players reach out to one another in *EVE* to form a community:

13Guy > Make any good friends yet?

Artist > no

Artist > wanna date me hahahaha

13Guy > hahaa

Artist > jk, im predicting that ill quit in about three or four weeks if i dont meet any people on here

Artist > like i usually do

Shaman > Artist you will meet very good friends in this corp

These players proceeded not only to give encouragement and advice to rookie player “Artist” but also to give him money to upgrade to a better ship.²³ It was a welcoming gesture. In addition, they also proceeded to warn each other of another player in *EVE* who was developing a reputation as a “scammer” in the game and had been “blocked” by other players because of unethical and illegal activities:

13Guy > I dont trust that [name deleted] person

13Guy > Whatever price we offer, i dont see her selling it to us.

13Guy > She wins eve, if the goal was to get blocked by the most people in the least number of days.

Shaman > could mean she won by scam or she won bpo

13Guy > whats bpo?

Shaman > blue print original

Shaman > scams r not illegal in eve i think

Shaman > kinda like economic piracy

This kind of conversation goes on constantly in *EVE* and is a way that players get to know one another inside and outside the game, learn how to play *EVE*, and decide what kind of profession—illegal or otherwise—they will try to join in *EVE* (and even what kind of person they want to be). Conversations about current events in the real world also go on in the chat channels, generally interspersed with tips on good mining locations or tips on outfitting ships.²⁴ This seems a natural mixture in this textual community since I am sure other players are moving

²³ It is possible to add money to other players’ wallets in *EVE* as a kind of social gift or business trade.

²⁴ One example of this mixing of current events in the chat channels was when Steve Irwin, the so-called “Crocodile Hunter,” died. His death was a consistent topic in the chat channels as players shared their grief with one another, often in poignant ways.

through multiple windows on their computers, playing *EVE*, checking email, browsing websites, and generally multi-tasking in multiple windowed views of digital life.

Character Sheets. Characters are, for the most part, developed or reduced to the contents of the character sheet found in *EVE* (see Figure 7). The character sheet consists of skills, attributes, augmentations, jump clones, biography, employment history, standings, security status, and kill rights. These make up a character profile available also to passing players as pilot information. This information affects everything in *EVE* from what kind of missions a pilot is allowed to undertake to what kinds of things a character can buy from the market in *EVE*. It is also a way for characters to get to know each other and know with whom to form alliances and whom to avoid. Often biographies include information, such as where the player lives, for anyone to read.



Figure 7. Character sheet

The Problem of the Real/Virtual Dichotomy

The mingling of online/offline and real/virtual worlds is difficult to categorize in MMORPGs such as *EVE*. I found it particularly interesting how corporations in *EVE*, in order to recruit members, often have web pages outside of the game that contained information about joining the corporation, current political news and events, links to personal pages, and a general

blend of what would be categorized as real/virtual identities. Internet researcher and social scientist Markham (1998) reflects on her own discomfort with the online/offline dichotomy in a study examining motivations of Internet users and how they perceived time spent online:

. . . I am imposing a false dichotomy on my participants. I can see that their experiences belie my categories of real/virtual, online/offline. Yet even as I try to give voice to *their* experiences, I find myself slipping back into *my* categories. By even addressing how they *do not* talk about “real” as opposed to “not real,” I am still drawing a box, if only to describe what they have stepped out of, or where they are not. (*Perhaps this the bane of research. It bothers me, but I write on.*) (p. 167)

In this study, like Markham, I seem to be stepping out of one box and into another as I find myself throwing out categories like real and virtual when analyzing experience in *EVE*.

Nonetheless, while writing from the perspective of my avatar in an attempt to understand the experience of inhabiting this character, I find I am still imposing categories and ideas on these stories as well. Forcing structure on real/virtual experiences as if the boundaries between them were solidly built is at once inevitable and impossible. I find myself even structuring the narrative to emphasize boundaries between researcher, avatar, and personal voice by creating discrete headings that clearly delineate which voice I am using.

With Internet technology and MMORPGs that exist in virtual places, ritual is a fitting word to describe the routines we sometimes go through to connect and stay connected. Though fading technologies, rituals of “dialing up,” connecting, and then “going” online were not long ago potent and hypnotic routines of pushing buttons and hearing the attendant beeps and static like an electronic chant or hymn. Waiting for the first web page or email to load sometimes seemed like a kind of technopagan rite complete with wondering what incantation would appease

the Internet gods when I could not get online. *EVE* itself has a login screen and a button that says “Enter the Game.” Pushing this button seems like a conscious choice to leave somewhere else.

Of course, even rituals associated with going online have changed in the last few years—erased by technological innovation and progress—now that my home, office, and even a favorite lunch spot are enveloped in wireless clouds. I can—and have—surfed the Internet in my kitchen while waiting for something to cook on the stove or in the living room while watching television. I am literally breathing and bathing in this constant signal. How does this change my thinking about entering cyberspace since I am not sure the last time I actually left it? Going online does not really seem like going anywhere separate anymore. Stepping from one box to another has become a seamless and fluid motion.

I write about my discomfort with categories and dichotomies such as real/virtual or online/offline so often used in research about gaming and the Internet because something has shifted in my thinking while playing with my avatar in *EVE*. While *EVE Online* seems truly a foreign place when one first enters it, I cannot escape the idea that its narrative has in large part been created by each player. We inhabit and construct the backstory and the myths that are written about *EVE* as a way of explaining our presence and identity in the game. This fantasy is a collective one that seems less about ways of going some place and more about building and playing with ideas. These ideas represent visions of identity, community, and even citizenship in the world of *EVE* that are constructing a dystopic and sometimes frightening world, but one that is constantly being written as a fascinating digital palimpsest for thinking through ideas about who we are and how we know the world. We are creating images in *EVE* that stand in for identity—images that have power in the virtual world of *EVE*.

Image as Identity

In *EVE* and other MMORPGs, creating an *image* in the form of an avatar is the first step toward *identity*, a concept all too familiar outside of virtual experience. After all, image is something we all cultivate in our professional and personal lives, expressing identity and using products and objects as a way “of shaping ourselves through consumption and constructing our own image” (Filiciak, 2003, p. 95). Such a consumer-based, mass-mediated conception of image-identity construction is reflected in the way character selection plays out in *EVE*. The styling of the avatar’s *image* is the first introduction to the culture of this virtual world and suggests that surface and spectacle are important values. In virtual worlds, image is a vehicle for communicating who one is becoming in the game world and what kind of skills or powers he or she possesses. In the previous chapter, I described character selection as a framework to begin thinking about identity. Janusa, my avatar, is never fully removed from me and instead exists as a fragmented image I can develop throughout the game. Even after I have spent 10 months playing the game and trying to record observations from her point of view, she is not fully formed to me. She is a half-drawn character. In fact, I have never quite lost the feeling of being a tourist in *EVE* and wonder how long it takes actually to feel like a citizen of this world. Janusa is, like all children of the imperfect gods in this virtual world, thoroughly at the mercy, ignorance, and whim of her unqualified creator. She is a story unfolding with a character that has been only half-written. She is an unfinished, fragmented text, more surface than depth.

“When You Have No Identity, Look for Image”

Identity in video games is established with intention and unfolds over time. In fact, in *EVE* and many MMORPGs, an ongoing goal is acquiring objects, skills, and assets that give the

player some form of social or cultural power. In her ethnographic study of female gamers in *EverQuest*, T. L. Taylor (2003) observes that obtaining gear and equipment in a game has a powerful role in identity creation as these items “all become artifacts of mastery and signal to both the user and the server community their skill at the game” (p. 28). In *EVE*, this rule applies as gamers are always trying to acquire more ISK, the currency of the game, as well as greater skills, attributes, clones, and ships. Since all information about one’s status is publicly available to everyone in *EVE*, the more a player has, the more options and standing she has in the game. The character sheet provides an image of success or mediocrity in the game.

Filiciak (2003) details how we construct the images we project to the world in our usual reality as an interesting parallel to the way we conceive of interaction on screen:

We construct this image by surrounding ourselves with the objects, which, beside their utility, are used to define and emphasize our image. It can even be said that the image offered is the one of the most important values of the product. At the same time, we ourselves become like the products, which by means of their image, engage in competition; for an attractive partner, for a well-paid job, for a social respect. Jean-Luc Godard said: “When you have no identity, look for image.” Today, image and identity are interchangeable notions. (p. 95)

Digital bodies in the form of avatars are the images we manipulate to act out our imaginations and project identity online. This act can be as simple as choosing an icon for Instant Messaging or as complicated as crafting an image for an entire virtual world. The basic code of numbers, language, and pixels that is the meta-level of what we term *digital* calls out for a hacker’s imprint, an artist’s editing, or a user’s commentary on a public blog like so much digital graffiti. It is this constant re-inscribing of a cultural palimpsest that powers digital culture—that gives it

so many complex layers that constantly reference one another in an intertextual web of meaning. Intertextuality is also a reflexive process as images and texts self-consciously cite and reference one another in many forms of popular culture. They are in conversation with one another, writing and rewriting one another in a pop-cultural dialectic. Users of this pop cultural raw material reach through the screen, dipping hands in the code and pixels, splashing around in the contents of our social and technological networks, creating images of deeper, layered complexity to project a mingled construction of real/virtual identity.

Annlee

Once such example of the complex quest for digital identity is Annlee, or the literally half-drawn manga character who was given an identity and story by a series of artists exploring how digital characters are active palimpsests for understanding virtual experience. The piece presented in this chapter is yet another experiment with arts-based narrative that I have been drafting and redrafting throughout this study. Performance is another vastly different lens for revealing issues of digital identity. The following is meant as a Reader's Theater piece based on Annlee, this half-drawn character who was filler for backgrounds until these artists gave her a voice and life.

Background. Created personas and characters in digital spaces represent attempts to give form and texture to the placelessness of digital worlds. We can populate the virtual with avatars that help us explore the issues and complexities of virtual existence. Still, avatars represent potential entities with only something like a life, like a twenty-first century Pygmalion, an uneasy prospect for their creators. In 2003, the traveling exhibit *No Ghost Just a Shell* ended with a “death” and “burial” at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The exhibit was

conceived by artists Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno after buying the exclusive rights to an unknown manga drawing in 1999. Manga is the term for Japanese comics, and it is common practice for manga characters drawn for these books to be sold for productions. While popular manga characters can actually become anime characters, they must first prove their value and appeal in order to be worthy of the investment of an animated feature. In the Japanese world of commerce, where characters are drawn and sometimes invested with psychological traits, abilities, and backgrounds, some other unlucky characters are drawn as blanks. These drawings fill space and inhabit crowds in stories but never have a story of their own—extras that can easily be replaced and discarded. By acquiring the rights to this particular manga drawing, Huyghe and Parreno's idea hoped to change this character's fate by first giving her a name and then a life as art. She became Annlee, was digitized, and subsequently loaned to other artists who crafted her persona and used her as a star in a variety of stories, thus "filling Ann, the empty sign, with significance" (Nobel, 2003, n.p.).

From the beginning, Huyghe and Parreno planned to end Annlee's life and take her out of the cycle of art and commerce. Using their legal control over her image, they had the power to transfer "the Annlee copyright back to Annlee. Beyond the works already made and a forthcoming Annlee anthology, use of Ann's likeness in any medium will be forbidden, a ban enforced by association lawyers" (Nobel, 2003, n.p.). The body of work by fifteen artists will comprise her life story of exploitation, commerce, and a reflective digital image. Annlee, in the 17 works in which she appeared, offered commentary on her existence and her experiences as a lifeless manga character and was given what could be considered something close to a nearly-mortal lifespan. Unlike the continual death and resurrection of characters in MMORPGs or familiar characters in serialized popular culture forms who have no claim over their own image,

Annlee was removed from the perpetual cycle of duplication through product licensing. Nobel (2003) describes a portion of one of Annlee's appearances in a short film by Huyghe, *Two Minutes Out of Time*:

In *Two Minutes*, her debut under Huyghe, Ann is pure, self-aware, and declarative. She appears head and shoulders against a morphing pastel sky and describes herself in the third person: "Nobody planned that she would ever have to speak," she says. "Given no particular ability to survive, she would probably be dead by now. This is her true story: a fictional character with a copyright designed by a company and proposed for sale. That's it. While waiting to be dropped into a story she has been diverted . . . and has become what she is now: a deviant sign." (n.p.)

Annlee's story and creation embodies the anxiety and mystery of the creation of virtual identity. True to the original spirit of this project featuring Annlee, I have imagined my own script to help me make sense of the virtual, as many who viewed her works and heard her remarkable story have probably done as well. In my story, Annlee describes her existence, her lack of place and control, and the pull of the voices of her operators in the digital void she inhabits. Annlee is my mediator—my avatar—in the following performance piece. The following creative analysis exhibits my own questions about virtual experiences, my own subjectivities, fears, and sadness over Annlee's fate. In a performance, I envision it read aloud by two people who remain unseen while the audience sees only a spotlight on a projection screen. (I imagine her voice is like a child's, and the "Voice" is soft like a whisper.)

Annlee: A Reader's Theater Performance Script

Annlee: I don't know how to explain what it is like most of the time, waiting for a story.

Usually, I just—float. Like a balloon. You know, like one that a child forgot to tie to a chair, or got bored with and let go. I pretend I am a rag doll, floating, black all around me, holding me up . . . Suspended . . . like one of those specimens in a lab jar. Slowly losing color, moving subtly in slimy preservative. Something undead on a shelf. Still.

[pause]

Annlee: [talking very fast] Suddenly, things speed up again, and there is light and other people like me spinning, spinning, spinning into place. Into a place where the edges and borders blur and fade. Do you understand? There is nothing beyond what is in the frame. The pictures just stop at the edges. Like now, I am in a crowd of people just standing around staring up at the clear blue sky, no rain or night

Voice: [Whispering in the background] *Annlee, point at the sky and say "Look!" to the person next to you.*

Annlee: *Look!* [points upward]

It's a giant dragonfly with enormous wings and purple and green rainbow streamers flowing and flying and whipping around like tentacles. Someone next to me says it's a kite. That's a new word, but I understand what it is. I always know what things are in the story. It just floats above us, and a boy—sort of like me, but with a story—is holding a string attached to the dragonfly. He laughs and runs and guides the string. With each flick of the string, the kite twitches on its lead. It is straining in the wind, but *he* [with emphasis] keeps it under control, keeps it from spinning out into the

edges. I cannot feel the wind, but my hair moves all around, tentacles of hair as if I am a kite . . .

Voice: [Whispering in the background] *Annlee, take your right hand, and brush your hair back from your face.*

Annlee: [Annlee brushes the hair away from her face] My hair is all the wind touches. The wind is edited here.

Annlee: The boy is laughing, and the crowd watches him, like something delicious and savory. He is something with plot. I have to look around people to see him because I'm always in the back of the crowd. Sometimes, when I am standing behind people, looking out, I can't see my legs. Not all of me is necessary. It's not that they've been erased or destroyed, they were just never drawn. Overlapping objects allows for cutting corners and no need for drawing legs. I would still like to have them, though, to know that, if *they* needed me, I have the potential to move somewhere closer to the middle of the story. I want to run to the boy with the kite, to make my legs appear and get further into the frame, but there is no *where* for me to go. You see, there are directions. I hear them, telling me to move my head this way, to speak certain words.

Voice: [Whispering in the background] *Annlee, move to the left. With excitement, say the words, "Look at the kite! Look how high!"*

Annlee: "Look at the kite! Look how high!"

[pause]

Did you hear it? Did you hear the whispering? How can I explain? It's as if there are invisible threads that shoot off my arms and legs and head, like a giant spider web. I'm an insect bound by these sticky threads. Sometimes they vibrate as if from

the weight of an invisible spider advancing on me, sending a jolt to my hand to brush the hair off my face in the wind. They whisper for me to dance or sing or stand perfectly still. If I could follow one of the threads, I might be able to go somewhere. If I could figure out where the threads begin, I could know something else. Maybe if I followed the thread, in the end I would just find someone like that boy, controlling my strings like a straining kite.

Voice: [Whispering in the background] *Annlee, turn around and walk away. Look back over your shoulder as you walk.*

Annlee: [Turns, starts walking, looking back]

I'm part of the crowd. That's my place: "Anonymous crowd member." That means no name, but I do have a name. Annlee. I've heard it whispered before. The boy with the kite is running off . . . everything is dissolving again.

[Screen turns black. Annlee whispers slowly.] I didn't go anywhere. The frames moved on without me.

Annlee was eventually buried in a coffin specially designed by artist Joe Scanlon for the SFMOMA galleries in 2003. Where she exists now is as mystifying a question as where she was before. Janusa could be her cousin, existing and growing in the world of *EVE*, with me whispering in her ear in the pages of this study.

Composite Characters, Continued

Sitting in our orange booth, Sharon and I laugh together at the notion of becoming part of this strange little corner of popular culture called enemy books. She asks, "So let me see if I understand. We—*She* would be an evil monster of death based on a blend of our personalities?

You know us so well.” We giggle at the thought of this composite character, created not as a mirror of who we are but as a passing tribute, an inside-joke from our friend.

“I think you are looking at this all wrong! Don’t get hung up on the evil part. Besides, wouldn’t you rather be the villain? Don’t the villains always get the juiciest parts on television or in books?” Jake sits back smugly and crosses his arms across his chest as he continues, “You two should be thanking me. I could have made you into the helpless damsel in distress—with lots of cleavage, of course.”

Synthetic Fear and Half-Drawn Characters

I laughed at Jake’s joke about video game women and their unusual physique and remember an experience I had several years ago while working as a graphic designer. A co-worker came into my office and handed me a torn piece of thick cardboard, probably from some kind of computer packaging. In the corner was a blonde woman, obviously rendered by 3-D software, with her tight red leather suit unzipped provocatively, just low enough to display the upper crescents of her full, plastic-looking breasts. Her hands were balled into fists, resting on flaring hips connected to a microscopic waist. She was not smiling, but looked directly at me through coal-rimmed eyes like some goth-Barbie doll. Handing this fragment to me, my co-worker said, “I saw this and told my girlfriend that it looked just like you. Thought you should have it.” He chuckled in his smug way and walked out of my office, leaving me bewildered at the comparison to a monstrously proportioned digital creation. I stood there, dressed demurely in my sweater set and skirt and, at first, was stung by the comparison to a digital creature. Wounded, I felt certain this must have been some kind of sexist jab, but truthfully, I just did not get it. I looked at her—blonde bob, red lips, cantaloupe breasts—and felt no connection to this

cardboard character. Picking up a thumbtack, I stuck it right through one of her cardboard breasts (to my disappointment, it did not deflate), hanging her on the bulletin board next to my computer. There she hung for a long time, impaled on her thumbtack, with her hostile glare and intimidating breasts, no legs just a cardboard gash right below the waist. Even with half a body, she still looked as if she could kick some ass. Hanging on that corkboard shrine next to pictures of my husband, dog, and a random collection of things-I-can't-throw-out-yet-but-felt-compelled-to-pin-up, she watched over me like some monstrous icon. She's *wrong* with her pornographic body and her probably freakish abilities in her native gaming world.

In a synthetic world, are not all of our images and identities a little *wrong*? My first response to this caricature taken straight from a video game was to categorize her as a monster, an image mediated by fear and suspicion when someone suggested this could be me. These half-drawn characters, these digital bodies, avatars, monsters, aliens, cyborgs, or whatever we label them, are the Other. In *EVE* as well as other MMORPGs, an underlying framework encourages players to intimidate by accruing more and more skills and assets, and to experiment with forms of terrorism by forming gangs. Often, criminal or prurient activity is rewarded by making the perpetrators infamous within the context of game. This is part of the fun game play, and in fact, I discovered the game is more fun when I steal or somehow break the rules, and when Janusa and I are wrong. Synthetic fear, this underlying narrative framework, is vital to identity construction in virtual worlds like *EVE*. It is, after all, thrilling to be a fugitive when one knows she cannot die or be locked up somewhere.

The Avatar Chronicles, Part III: Theft

Today, I am a thief.

I needed to make some money—in between courier missions, while I am training new skills to become a researcher in a corporation, my chosen profession—and decided to do some mining. Mining is easy money for pilots, although, while easy, it is truly tedious and boring labor. All it takes is time and available space in the cargo hold for storing the ore from asteroids that litter each solar system. Find asteroid. Mine. Fill cargo hold. Take to space station. Sell. Repeat. It is the routine tedium of mining that makes pilots look for other more exciting professions. While mining is a good stand by to make ISKs while training some better skills, it is mind-numbing.

I have been exploring a lot lately, venturing further and further from my home station at the University of Caille. I haven't been home in weeks, in fact. In the course of exploring, I discovered this particular asteroid belt was also littered with something else—cargo containers just floating in space, apparently abandoned or jettisoned by another pilot. On closer inspection, I discovered some were quite flimsy and designed to last only about an hour in deep space. They were also full of objects like criminal DNA that would fetch a high price on the market.

Money. It is everything in this universe.

When I looked in the container, a warning sounded, alerting me that the contents belonged to someone else. Would they be back? They don't appear to be nearby. Perhaps they purposely jettisoned this cargo because they didn't need this anymore.

It was impulsive, I admit, but the lure of big money without the tedium of mining was too much to resist. Quickly, I loaded everything I could carry and set the autopilot back to the

closest space station. Now, I am being hunted. The aggression countdown started immediately. 12 minutes, 8 minutes, now 4 more minutes that someone is allowed to kill me for being a dirty thief.

I am not a pirate yet, but it sure beats mining.

CHAPTER 6

VIRTUAL CITIZENS: EXPLORATION AND ENGAGEMENT IN VIRTUAL WORLDS

The Avatar Chronicles, Part IV: Mission Accomplished

***Pilot's Log Entry:** "Docking permission requested," whispers my ship's computer as we approach the giant space station with its imposing refinery towers venting columns of steam into space. Her calm voice, with its flat computerized vowels and sharp, metallic consonants, is my only constant company on these long voyages. In fact, immersed in this silent biochemical pool as the digital sound waves are piped directly into my neural network, she is the only familiar voice I hear. These sounds, combined with personal thoughts and daydreams, as well as images from the holoreels I play for entertainment and news, create a montage of sounds and voices in my head. This constant sensory stimulation keeps me alert and engaged as I go about my business alone, my own "voice" reduced to bursts of text messages to passing pilots.*

We are returning—armor battered and out of ammunition—from Reika 5 after completing a mission to terminate a nest of pirates and to avenge a murdered pilot of the local corporation. I am not a member of this corporation and never knew this obviously valued employee, but corporations sometimes hire private mercenaries to settle the terms of broken contracts that escalate rapidly to blood feuds. Such missions are an act of corporate pride and revenge for those who have died in service to the organization. In many corporations, it is actually considered a benefit of employment and a sign of deep respect for the employee who lost

a body and, more importantly, an expensive ship and cargo. “What a senseless destruction of property and assets,” the holoreels repeat in digital obituaries.

“Another great loss to the corporation.”

Such losses are common in certain quadrants of space with low security ratings. Concord, the interstellar police force, cannot control every asteroid belt and remote space station despite ceaseless surveillance at stargate borders. Concord flash bulletins stream over the news channels and warn of rogue attacks in dangerous regions. To preserve your assets, it is always best to be cautious, alert, and armed in red security zones since Concord patrols are always strangely absent when a real terrorist attack comes—though the authorities are eager to broadcast news of the aggression across the networks and steer pilots away from certain territories. It has become the job of citizens to protect themselves, always remaining vigilant and alert to security threats or, if not, always maintaining a sizable insurance contract on ships and a decent-grade clone in bio-storage. Such investments are expensive but worth the peace of mind in a hostile world, and insurance companies are always ready and willing to profit from the rising threat of danger by charging exorbitant fees. Instead of patrolling vast areas of space, Concord now mainly concerns itself with the borders, congregating by stargates and scanning passing ships for stolen and illegal goods in cargo bays. A pre-emptive attack proceeds immediately if Concord discovers contraband, and many smugglers lose their ships along with their bodies by trying to flee through police-controlled stargates to sell stolen goods on the market in distant systems. Concord’s leadership would rather see contraband destroyed than allow it to undercut corporate profits on the market.

Why do so many pilots turn to piracy and criminal action? According to Concord profilers, pirates and terrorists are callous and greedy sociopaths—monsters really—driven by a

need for careless destruction, for breaking things and leaving them in shattered and worthless pieces. All this violence and destruction is not only to protect their illegal drug and trade operations, but also to limit and ultimately destroy the freedoms we in the Gallente Federation once enjoyed without fear of attack or threat to body and profits. Anyone who flies too close, no matter how unarmed or unskilled he or she might be, is labeled a threat to interests of these criminals. Because of this increased aggression, we must now endure constant terror threats and news bulletins, reminding all citizens of the terrible cost of piracy.

Recently, Concord has received unsubstantiated reports from former collaborators and allies of the Serpentis Corporation (a large criminal gang) that these so-called monsters might actually be monsters after all. News stories and holoreel films mass-produced by the Gallente entertainment industry portray the worst of these gangs as mutated, dangerous creatures. Instead of using the standard biochemical mixture that nurtures the body, mind, and ship, these pirates have—according to the holoreels—altered the biochemical fluid in their pods to create a toxic stew of synthetic speed and growth hormone, criminal DNA, and high levels of radiation. They have grown into their ships, flesh, muscle, and nerve twisting through the circuitry into the metal skin, like an invasive species, consuming and displacing the host. Unlike most pilots with a detachable neural net umbilical, they can no longer think or act separately from the ship's body, armor, and defenses. They are no longer ship and pilot but have instead become something else, a new entity with an apparent need for destruction. Perhaps they are lashing out at the gods of technology or greed that have doomed them to this fate? It is also rumored that, because of the altered nature of their bodies, they can no longer beam to clones for resurrection because their minds succumb immediately to extreme shock and suffer fatal strokes when entering a new, unaltered body. The mind can no longer comprehend the feel of skin and

independence from machines. Despite every pilot's reliance on her ship, most of us can still transition to earth or space station where our bodies must be detached from our ships. With these criminals, in a perverse reversal of the natural order of things, the mind rejects its host, evaporating into mindless energy in the vacuum of space.

Those are the legends anyway. Of course, these could also be fantasies created by the Gallentean entertainment industry, designed to sell more horror holoreels. They have been known to work with Concord to promote propaganda that supposedly protects the public good by instilling fear in the populace, but there must be some element of truth since stories swapped among pilots are still more horrifying than the official statements on piracy. At a space station in a distant portion of the Amarr Empire, a pilot recently told me he had rescued some former prisoners of the Serpentis Corporation who told tales of cannibalism and torture that certainly made the pirates sound not like criminals, but true monsters existing on the fringe of space. This is why, according to Concord, it is a moral imperative and duty of citizenship to exterminate these creatures that have gone beyond humanity and seek existence outside of laws and on the fringe of civilization. Our very freedoms depend on ending the attacks.

The need is dire, for the threat is everywhere now, in every empire, preying on local populations and enslaving them in drug, weapon, or bootleg media factories. It is so easy to exploit men and women who have settled farther and farther into space, looking for a little freedom outside their home planets and some small measure of solitude away from the eyes of Concord and the central surveillance settlements of the empires. After terminating the pirates on my current mission, I left some such poor settlers enslaved by the pirates stranded on a nearby asteroid just as I was instructed by my agent in the corporation. They are cut off now from supplies, income, and transport, but my mission agent guaranteed the corporation would send a

rescue party for these people once the threat was eliminated. Perhaps this will happen. Perhaps these people have instead been left to die on this barren rock. They may be deemed of little financial value, an unnecessary expenditure to the corporation. Labor is cheap in this solar system, and unskilled laborers like these settlers are practically worthless to a large corporation. It is not within my mission parameters to worry about such things or to question the instructions of my agent. There is no profit in questioning.

“Docking permission granted,” whispers the voice in my head. As I am towed into the station and prepare for docking, I text my agent two words to receive my payment: Mission accomplished.

Gray Animals in Electric Caves

In Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), the world has become saturated with interconnected media. Books are banned from homes and burned by “firemen” because between the leather clad covers exist contradictory ideas, dangerous in their inconsistency and varied views. Instead, in Bradbury’s dystopian vision, people live in homes where every wall is covered with giant screens that display cacophonous moving images. People are literally surrounded, housed, and immersed in mass media. They carry around “seashell” inserts for their ears that constantly connect them to disembodied voices, an image reminiscent of the white-wired iPod people who walk our streets (myself included). These voices are “the family” because mass media has been transformed from information and entertainment to an intimate relationship, inseparable from reality and comprising the most pleasurable and emotional moments in a person’s life. The very notion of being a good citizen in *Fahrenheit 451* is about finding—or losing—one’s identity within the experience of media.

In the climax of the story, Guy—Bradbury’s antihero—runs for his life after hoarding books rather than burning them. Desperately, he runs toward the river where he can drown his scent to escape the mechanical hound tracking him to inject lethal poison into his bloodstream—a public execution captured on surveillance cameras and broadcast to the world. It is a scene that plays out like the premise of a contemporary video game: the hero is unjustly hunted and must avoid the mechanical paws of death at any cost. Fear drives him to the river, hunted and alone. In Bradbury’s book, the media joins in the search for Guy, calling on everyone connected to the giant surveillance network to peer out their windows in an attempt to spot the fugitive who runs through dark neighborhoods. All have become the eyes and ears of Big Brother. There is no questioning *why* they are helping hunt down a human being running for his life; questioning dulls the thrill of the entertainment. Everyone instead wants to witness the blood sport because, on the big screen, who can tell the difference between a real or virtual death? People are suspicious of this fugitive only because they are told to be. It all *looks* the same in these houses of media and more importantly *feels* the same to the inhabitants who need greater stimulation and simulation. All experience is *virtual* in this culture of simulation where there is no room for an ethos of caring, empathy, and respect for others in mass-mediated experience. Some may experience sadness, terror, suspense, or anger as they watch this hunt, but in the end, it will remain merely a grainy *image* of death.

Bradbury imagines the populace in this alternate world as scared gray animals, peeking fearfully out of “electric caves,” incapable of interpreting the world without mediation. How easy it would be to become such gray animals hiding in “electric caves” without some understanding of how to interpret and respond to visual culture and mass media, yet how do we know when we have begun to inhabit these caves and no longer desire to stick our heads out into

the world? After all, mediated experiences—real, virtual, or in-between—all take place on the same electronic stage, the computer screen.

In MMORPGs like *EVE*, the goal is to immerse oneself in these fully realized alternate worlds, virtually closed off in a medium parallel to Bradbury's electric caves. I sit here, navigating through *EVE* with my headphones on, everything drowned out except for the experience of the game. I am immersed in the game's rhetoric, exploring while also being constantly tracked by the game, doing my best to become a virtual citizen of this world by accepting constant surveillance and learning the political rhetoric embedded in the narrative, a tactic that I hope will help me accumulate the points and skills I need to become an even more engaged inhabitant of this world. In this chapter, I will examine how such issues of exploration and surveillance in this immersive environment create notions of virtual citizenship and engagement. I will further demonstrate how virtual citizenship in *EVE* is constructed and understood through the experience of controlled exploration, surveillance, and narratives of political fear mirroring current events in the real world.

Virtual Citizens

When one thinks of citizens, one thinks of inhabitants or residents of a particular place who, by virtue of their allegiance and industry, enjoy certain rights and privileges. This concept of citizenship is one that influences notions of community, *places to be*, or, more importantly, places one *chooses to be*. Castronova (2005) calls this kind of community a “lifeworld,” or the place where one lives out the most significant and meaningful portions of his or her life. As the boundaries between real and virtual blur and in some cases vanish, it is becoming evident that “lifeworlds” are virtual as well as real places, and the primary feeling of residence is based on an

individual's sense of belonging. One can claim to be a citizen or settler of a virtual community in the same way one can claim citizenship in an actual city, state, or nation. In a 2001 study, Castronova (2005) asked players in Norrath, the fictional world of *EverQuest*, where they perceived their lifeworld to be located. This survey asked participants to choose phrases they most strongly agreed with, such as "I live outside Norrath but I travel there regularly" or "I live in Norrath but I travel outside of it."²⁵ He subsequently discovered that "we can characterize about one-fifth of Norrath's users as more or less fully immersed; they treat the game as their life world" (p. 59). These individuals have upended the traditional sense of real and virtual and chosen the virtual world as their primary residence, viewing real communities as a place they merely visit.²⁶ Virtual worlds and digital culture are increasingly primary sites for how professional, political, personal, cultural, and educational dimensions are worked out in contemporary life. They are influential forces in identity development. For some, a virtual world is their homeland, and digitally mediated experiences have created a mutated genetic code for what we could term a new virtual ethnic minority. Such allegiances raise additional questions as to what it means to belong to such a community and about what values are expressed by belonging to this virtual ethnic minority.

Civic Engagement. A sense of belonging and identity motivates individuals to devote energy to a community. Civic engagement is defined as "the many ways people may get involved in their communities to consider and address civic issues, build social capital, and encourage civic participation" (Korza, Bacon, & Assaf, 2005, p. 298). In short, citizenship and

²⁵ Castronova's (2005) study had a sample of 3,916 respondents and was drawn from responses to a survey posted on an *EverQuest* fan site. Results were then weighted to account for a sample that, because of the nature of the site, probably attracted highly active and engaged players (pp. 58-59).

²⁶ Castronova's questions assume that players make a distinction between real and virtual when choosing their lifeworld by asking players to imagine they are crossing boundaries when entering and leaving Norrath. It may be more accurate, with the blurring between real and virtual spaces, that many players actually feel they have dual citizenship in a real and virtual community.

civic engagement in the real world are terms associated with positive and inspiring values that ultimately benefit communities with the good intent of improving society. Civic engagement is further linked to moral and personal identity development and suggests a level of thoughtful, dedicated action and a way of conceptualizing the importance of the individual to the collective. A profile of engaged, thoughtful citizenship includes a complex variety of discourses and understandings individuals must develop by working together for the common good:

Fully effective citizenship requires a well-developed capacity for effective communication, including moral and political discourse; skills in political participation; the capacity to work effectively with people, including those who are very different from oneself; and the ability to organize other people for action. (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003, p. 100)

This description is one of the action, leadership, high standards, and complex skill development necessary for engaged citizenship. With a history of volunteerism and community service in the United States, the term civic engagement expresses a collective vision of working toward a *better* community for citizens and inhabitants. A virtual world with transferable and positive notions of work for the common good is certainly conceivable.²⁷ In fact, many video games are designed to educate, provoke, or promote a specific social or political cause.²⁸ One excellent example is *Kabul Kaboom!*, an anti-war game designed to express game designer Gonzalo

²⁷ There are many examples of world-building games, such as the *Civilization* series first published in 1990 that actually tasks players with creating a “great” civilization (however that may be defined by the player and the conditions of the game). This game series asks players to consider many of the complex ideas embedded in civic action, citizenship, and political involvement, while making decisions with consequences that directly affect citizens and the future development of civilizations in the game.

²⁸ *Peacemaker* is one such game designed in 2005 by Carnegie Mellon University that allows users to explore peaceful solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by providing scenarios from current events in the region that players must address through diplomatic means (Halter, 2006, p. 291). Another interesting example of a game tackling controversial political and social issues is *The RX Zone*, a simple website-based game produced by Planned Parenthood of Illinois in the run-up to the 2006 mid-term elections. This game is designed to demonstrate and simulate the difficulty women face obtaining legal emergency contraception from pharmacies (Friedman, November 2, 2006).

Frasca's discomfort with the constant bombing and destruction of Afghanistan, a very poor nation, by the most powerful nation in the world.²⁹ Frasca's game is described as a "humanitarian game" in which

. . . players try to catch hamburgers falling from the sky without getting struck by missiles that rain down with them. The player's character is an image lifted from Picasso's *Guernica* of a woman wailing to the heavens as she cradles a dead baby. One quickly discovers the game is almost impossible to play, and it ends abruptly; the final screen is a photo of a bombed-out building strewn with more *Guernica* body parts and a restart button marked "GAME NOT OVER—PLAY AGAIN." (Halter, 2006, p. 312)

A game like *Kabul Kaboom!* is an expression of social thought and concern designed to provoke thought about the voiceless victims of war rather than as a game played for entertainment.

Through intertextual images from Picasso's famous anti-war painting that captured the horror of Franco's bombing of the Spanish village Guernica in 1937, images of all-American hamburgers raining down with missiles, and the design of an unwinnable game scenario, the game's tone is in sharp contrast to the jingoistic voices and images of war commonly found in video games like *America's Army*, an Army recruiting tool, or the *Tom Clancy* game series. Anti-war games and others that express alternate views outside the media mainstream provide a creative outlet for designers and players to express civic values and explore contentious or provocative social issues.

Still, translating the concept of civic engagement and citizenship to a virtual world like *EVE Online* generates many problems and questions. What does it mean to become a citizen of a

²⁹ Frasca's game explores the political rhetoric used in the build-up to the post-9/11 war in Afghanistan that at times framed military action as a humanitarian response designed to free people from the tyranny of the ruling Taliban. The game itself explores the contradictions inherent in a war that inflicts suffering on those individuals it is also trying to "save" (Halter, 2006, pp. 311-312).

virtual world, and how do these experiences affect notions of civic engagement in the real world? How is such a complicated idea like citizenship constructed in the world of *EVE Online* or other MMORPGs? Furthermore, is it even possible to construct a meaningful definition of civic engagement when the foundational concepts of virtual fantasy or sci-fi worlds generally build on a vision of dystopia and synthetic fear rather than idealistic visions of society? Is such a construction just an expression of the real world once illusions of idealist civic engagement are discarded?

Exploration as Engagement in *EVE*

The first sensation of undocking my ship and heading out into space was thrilling to a new explorer in *EVE*. It is difficult to describe the sensation of immersion, the nerves, and the general excitement I felt zooming my rookie ship through a universe with breathtakingly realistic graphics easily confused with images straight from NASA. *EVE's* graphics are aesthetically beautiful and overwhelming and perform an important function in forwarding the game narrative by creating a realistic and engaging setting in which to play. Motivating and engaging players with eye-catching graphics in order to draw them further into the virtual world of *EVE* means also creating a universe where players always have the potential of coming across new and visually interesting sights and landmarks. While I have yet to come across the largest cosmic ball of twine on the backroads of a solar system, *EVE's* universe is full of enough eye candy, visual variation, and intrigue to keep players interested and motivated to explore further. It is also full of enough danger and frightening and suspenseful situations to complicate the experience of inhabiting a virtual world primarily designed as an imperfect civilization. *EVE's* solar system's name, New Eden, is actually a misnomer for the inhabitants of *EVE*. This world is not a paradise. It is instead one built on war, pain, and strife, full of inhabitants who work

together not for the collective common good, but for the good of corporate or individual profits. Sometimes corporate interests are in the public good, but often that is just a by-product of profit. It is an overwhelming world, frightening in its complexity and intimidating in size and variation and the sense of the unknown. As I navigate, I feel a mixture of fright and anticipation at each new planet, asteroid belt, and passing ship. The fear comes from not knowing what to expect and not being a true resident of this world. In my mind, I am on alert. Sitting only a computer screen away, I find it easy to imagine being in the cockpit of my vessel, hurtling through space with stars, nebulae, and planets zooming past my window. Figures 8, 9, and 10 (see Appendix A) are screenshots that demonstrate what the visual experience of being *in virtual space* actually looks like in *EVE*. Each solar system is, in fact, quite different. Some are black as night; some are filled with greenish clouds like a thick pea soup; others have a red glow as if they are on fire. These shifts in the look and aesthetic appeal of solar systems give the game a sense of infinite space and diversity, important concepts for MMORPGs that are designed as alternate worlds. Often, solar systems are painted with an ominous brushstroke as if suggesting they are dangerous places—and very often they are.

Designed with few boundaries or barriers, virtual worlds are not “flat earths,” and players never reach the end of the world. In an online virtual world, the knowledge that one is embedded in a mass-mediated environment further enhances this sense of exploration. Mass media itself has endless boundaries as its empire extends through real and virtual worlds. One can rarely leave behind the influence of mass media and visual culture, giving the illusion that we are always seeing and exploring new aspects of uncharted webs of media. In this respect, exploration and engagement in *EVE* is an exploration of a rapidly expanding media frontier.

The New Frontier

How big is the universe of *EVE*? One will certainly never reach the “end” of it, since travel through the universe is not some attempt to get from point A to point B. Also, unlike traditional video games, *EVE* is not experienced as a quest, journey, or game with levels that lead to the end. Instead, *EVE*’s universe and narrative comprise a complex, three-dimensional web of solar systems that can be graphically mapped using the Map tool in *EVE*. The map in *EVE* (see Figure 11, Appendix A) lays out solar systems in both two and three dimensions, pinpoints locations, and maps routes to one’s chosen destination. It is also full of exotic places with interesting descriptions. I have spent a great deal of time clicking on landmarks in *EVE* just to read about their history, culture, architecture, and founders. Exploring the map in *EVE* also provides a true picture of how fully the mythology and narrative history of this world has developed.

To travel from solar system to solar system requires setting a destination in *EVE* and then warping to and “jumping” through stargate portals to other solar systems. Once a player sets her destination in *EVE* and turns on autopilot, *EVE* keeps her updated on how many jumps she has left. There is a real sense of actually traveling somewhere when traveling to a destination in *EVE* because of the amount of time it takes to get where one is going. For a while during game play, I decided to pick intriguingly named solar systems on the map and travel to them just to see and experience the geography of *EVE*. Substantial rhetoric in the game encourages becoming contributing, productive citizens in an empire, but early on in game play, I really wanted to experience the unknown and just explore as if the game was truly a new frontier.

For one jaunt, I selected a destination with 24 jumps that took close to 45 minutes to complete. During this travel time there is nothing for me as the player to *do* except wait as the

autopilot navigates to a new location. I actually ended up leaving my computer to fold laundry, eat a snack, and wait for arrival at this far-flung destination, a process that completely interrupted the feeling of immersion in the game and an example of how fragmented and embedded in the real world virtual experiences have become. Tasks like traveling in *EVE* simulate the experience one would have performing similar tasks in real life. Warping to destinations is the equivalent of running errands—tedious but necessary. While jumping to a new solar system really takes little time in the game, it takes at least *some* investment in actual playing time. This helps players make decisions about what they are going to invest their time in because many activities in *EVE* take more of an investment than they are actually worth. Economically, wandering through solar systems was not actually a good move for my character. As in any game, *playing* involves many activities that sometimes seem more like tedious, mechanical activities than *fun* activities. Such activities actually add authenticity to the game experience according to Chee, Vieta, and Smith (2006). In their study of *EverQuest* players, participants describe the game “as a productive and engaging space in how there are everyday tasks, errands, and obligations to be done which are intimately linked with player conceptions of ‘real time’ that also require emotional and bodily commitments” (p. 163). This feeling of authenticity further blends the real and virtual as players begin to feel obligations to perform rote, everyday tasks in virtual worlds. My own experience in *EVE* confirmed this fact as I often scheduled time to start training new skills when I knew I would be offline. In a perpetual MMORPG world such as *EVE*, any action requires a corresponding sacrifice in time that eventually leads to more challenging and often more fun opportunities and adventures.

In this study, *EVE* and other forms of digital culture have been described as an alternate world created by a vast community of “cybernauts” (Batchen, 2002, p. 238) and avatars who

actively explore and construct communities in the synthetic and disorderly space at the borders of the real world. Virtual worlds are often framed as a form of border crossing (as seen previously in Castronova's (2005) study of *EverQuest* players' perception of place of residence), which associates immersion in digital experiences with metaphors commonly used to describe frontiers and explorations of other worlds. As Salomon (2002) writes in *Mazes of the Serpent*, the concept of "crossing" is closely associated with entering a new reality and with the fundamental nature of horror narratives:

Horror narrative involves thresholds—a narrative in which two worlds, settings, environments impinge, where crossing (and the resulting experience of horror) is the basic action. Movement (at least in many explicitly fictional contexts) can be in either direction in these mirror worlds. (p. 9)

The fluid nature of this movement between the real and the virtual means there is always the possibility of bringing something back through the threshold into the real world. The concept of exploration's being linked to horror narratives is an interesting one to explore in virtual worlds such as *EVE* because of the tension existing between worlds with different structures, aesthetics, mores, and values. It is in this place of tension that borders shift, dissolve, and expand as players make choices about which lifeworlds to inhabit. Salomon (2002) also describes the genre of American literature known as Frontier Gothic, noting that "critic after critic has pointed out that to cross the boundary in the United States between so-called civilization and wilderness is to move from a rational order in one form or another to perilous and irrational disorder" (p. 10). This ontological movement into a disorderly and irrational realm changes the way people experience the real world and can easily be applied to the experience of exploring the wilderness in *EVE*. While boundaries between the real world and virtual frontier are constantly

expanding—along with one’s experience of exploration—virtual worlds count as their citizens those who can no longer experience either world without drawing on experiences from both environments. In all of these explorations through the world of *EVE*, unlike the wilderness and frontiers in which a person can get lost and truly find solitude, in *EVE* someone is always watching. Virtual citizenship is impossible without surveillance, and the absence of privacy associated with virtual existence.

Surveillance

Technologists, students, artists, and consumers are busily creating and exploring the digital frontiers of an unmapped and seemingly endless online world, a concept that can be confining rather than liberating when contemplating the vast, unknowable, uncontrollable, and rapidly expanding borders of the network and its many types of communities. The experience of traveling through endless space in *EVE* is much like the painful pleasure characterized by the aesthetics of the Sublime capturing the “strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (Burke & Womersley, 1998, p. 86), an aesthetic shared by many video games set in overwhelming environments and also an important aesthetic of synthetic fear. The vast, infinite, and overwhelming aesthetic in *EVE* results in a setting designed as an agoraphobia-inducing geography as well as a place of contemplation, pleasure, engagement, and creative response. *EVE*, with its highly rendered, almost photographic graphics, is a true experience of the sublimely beautiful that awes in its immensity, complexity, and fully realized and articulated visuals.

The experience of exploration is actually a controlled experiment in *EVE*. As avatars make their way through the landscape, they are under constant surveillance by other players, the

perspective of the game, and the software that tracks every move a player makes. Surveillance is the ultimate form of social control in *EVE*, and there are, in fact, many layers to surveillance in this game world. The character sheet, described in the previous chapter, provides information about players to every member of *EVE*'s community. There is no way to block any of this information to other players, probably because, in the game's logic, surveillance disguised as information about other players serves as an introduction and potential trigger for building community and links between players.

The third-person perspective also adds an additional level of personal surveillance, a perspective that encompasses what I have described previously as turning a player into a "self-absorbed voyeur." This perspective is akin to a personal panopticon, or being housed in a jail in which one is one's own jailer. This concept is similar to Bradbury's (1953) vision of an interconnected network of people and media sources that make up a vast surveillance network able to spy on one another, all for the greater good, or at least greater entertainment. This surveillance network forms its own technological body, an organism designed to be completely connected and wired at all times. We often visualize the Internet and online spaces as operating like a technological body comprising a network of interconnected computers. The metaphor of networks is based on abstract processes that occur unseen within the human body and within the code of cyberspace or other online spaces. While we are able to use technology to view and alter the source code of both the human body and the digital body, the abstraction of these inner workings is still mysterious and somewhat beyond our control. We fear what is under the surface of the technological body partly because the code and our involvement in it are always under surveillance and revision.

Cloned Citizens. Bodies in *EVE* are actually complicated social constructions of this technological fear of the replication, assimilation, and reprogramming of the very code of our physical bodies. Cloning technology is controversial in the real world because of its potential power and misuse and, ultimately, because of the fear that it will change how we think of embodied experience. In *EVE*, bodies are assets like a ship or other kind of possession that can be bought or sold. Because of the threat of violence in the game, being murdered—or “pod killed” as the game developers call it—is not difficult, but death is, of course, not final in *EVE* since cloning technology in the game has become so advanced (and because the game would otherwise end quickly). According to scientific articles on the game website, if the pod that houses one’s body inside layers of hull and ship armor is in anyway breached, one’s ship euthanizes the pilot and then takes a snapshot of her neural network at the exact time of death. Players then wake up in a cloned body, memories intact with some skills lost depending on the clone grade. This kind of resurrection is not unusual in popular culture of the moment. In fact, the SciFi channel’s original series *Battlestar Galactica* (2004)—a remake of the 1970s original series—features an entire race of Cylons (artificial intelligence machines who look like humans) who have created endless clones of twelve different human forms, and when their old bodies die, can be downloaded to new ones on resurrection ships. They are constantly resurrected, killed, and resurrected again all the while collecting a formidable arsenal of memories and experiences that are transferred from one body to another and existing in a computer network. Such a collective exchange of memories and individual experiences is truly the ultimate act of surveillance. The message is clear to the humans in *Battlestar Galactica*’s mythology—as human beings you are trapped in your bodies. When humans die, there is no coming back. Cylons were human creations that evolved beyond their creators and developed abilities that only

a networked machine can—the ability to triumph over death and to carry memories to new bodies, an immortality impossible in the real world. It is an astounding and disturbing vision of how machines could outlive and evolve beyond their creators, yet there can be no private or solitary moment of life or death in *EVE's* or *Battlestar Galactica's* vision of the world.

Thoughts, memories, feelings, and individuality become imprints to be transferred and embodied elsewhere, making death a truly insignificant experience and merely a memory in itself.

In *EVE*, humans have developed the ability to live symbiotically with their ships—like a cyborg—and to depend on them for mercy at the end of bodily life. A merciful end when faced with the vacuum of space means that life goes on for inhabitants of *EVE*. In fact, depending on how much money one invests in a clone, a player may lose very little in the way of character skills if he or she upgrades to a high enough level. In my own game play, I could not afford a truly expensive clone, so my “pod murder” in *EVE* was a sacrifice. It was, however, easy to die. I just waited around for some pirates in a dangerous solar system and let them kill me. First, they shot through my shield, then my armor, and then, when I did not flee in my pod, they killed my pod and me along with it.

Such actions are tracked by the authorities in *EVE*, whether the insurance company who automatically replaces my ship or the Concord security force that delivers warning to aggressors or scans cargo bays at stargate borders. Existence in *EVE* is framed by constant surveillance of one type or another. Tracking makes sense because the whole notion of gaming is to be present and active in the game. A player cannot go unnoticed or untracked in the game world. That seems to be an impossibility of software. Still, living under constant surveillance in a virtual world also has potential effects for how we perceive surveillance in the real world. It is a very fact of civic engagement (if we can call it that) in a virtual world that no aspect of identity or

action goes unrecorded—no distinctions between public and private. It is not a difficult leap to think of surveillance that serves the purposes of the common good of the game as very similar to the notion of living under constant satellite, camera, and Internet surveillance for the common good in the real world as well. This has certainly been a popular argument in the current “war on terror” during which the government has sought greater and greater access to personal information by using fear of another terrorist attack. Is it possible, as we get used to inhabiting virtual worlds where characters have no sense of privacy, that this experience could also help shape the civic notions of privacy and personal boundaries in contemporary American society? Is it possible to fragment notions of privacy and become conditioned to surveillance in one setting but not in another?

Ripped from the Headlines: Political Rhetoric in *EVE*

Along with exploration and surveillance, civic engagement in virtual and real worlds also has a political dimension that, in *EVE*, is expressed through news items that construct the illusion of an active political realm. Often these stories mirror current events in the real world, but they also take political rhetoric, particularly rhetoric of fear and divisiveness, to absurd levels. A news release before the fall elections in the Gallente Federation was widely available on *EVE*’s login screen. Before entering the game, players can read a news blog that consists of news set within the context of the game alongside updates of downtime and server reports from *EVE*’s designers. Appearing in late October 2006 right before the mid-term elections for the United States Congress, the following comments from Senator Blaque, a political candidate in the Gallente election, mirrored hotly debated real-world topics such as immigration, racial profiling, and rising nationalist rhetoric. Every day a news item such as this appears on the entry screen,

usually referring to politics, riots, human trafficking, genocide, or some social issue that is often a timely reference to political events outside of *EVE*. These items raise social awareness, yet they also further the dystopian narrative underlying the structure of the virtual world. Senator Blaque's *EVE* news headline ran as follows:

According to early numbers just in from the Gallente Electoral Commission, presidential contender Mentas Blaque currently leads incumbent President Souro Foiritan by a five-point margin. Votes have been fully counted from 233 districts out of 528.

An interview with Senator Blaque was aired two hours ago on a popular Gallente feednet, wherein the Senator reaffirmed the driving points of his campaign.

"I think Gallenteans should be proud to call themselves Gallente . . . I, I think that there is such a focus on being open towards other cultures that people will . . . sometimes they will tend to forget that they have a rich and proud heritage of their own to draw on. The citizens of our great nation should be more aware that we are just that, a great nation," he said.

The Senator furthermore expounded upon his platform's proposed shifts in focus towards what they term "domestic naturalization," a process involving state-sponsored segregation of immigrant populations to areas specifically designated for them, referred to in the doctrine as "cultural habitats." (Login screen, *EVE Online*)

Senator Blaque lost the election because of—according to later news reports—a high turn-out of immigrant and ethnic minority voters in some sectors of the Gallente Federation who were protesting this call for segregation and Gallentean nationalism. This illusion of civic engagement in *EVE* is a fascinating construction or confection of fear-based political rhetoric that ultimately results in a civic uprising, resembling, in the Gallente Federation, democratic action. It is,

however, only an illusion in this virtual world because it is not actually possible for players to vote. Instead the election is merely part of the illusion of the game narrative. It is telling, nonetheless, that game designers would go so far as to create such elaborate constructions of civic life.

Escaping Electric Caves

When considering civic engagement in both real and virtual settings, the term “virtual citizens” captures the layered and complex feelings and identity construction associated with both. The sense of isolation and lack of belonging, helplessness, and sense of disenfranchisement of individuals in the real world serves as a kind of virtual or simulated citizenship. Such virtual citizenship in the real world perhaps prompts individuals such as those in Castronova’s (2005) study to take up residence elsewhere. Like Bradbury’s vision of a mass-mediated society that transforms engagement, interaction, and intimacy into a web of virtual experience, could virtual citizenship—with its complex layers—be a critical response to a lack of political and social access in the real world? In *EVE* civic identities are transformed by and shaped through the conventions of a fundamentally dystopian gaming world. Through exploration, surveillance and political rhetoric in this virtual world, however, *EVE* can ultimately be seen as a mirror or expression of the changing nature of civic engagement in the real world.

CHAPTER 7

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCERNS: ARTS-BASED RESEARCH AND DIGITAL CULTURE

This is supposed to be the end but feels instead like another beginning. Stories usually have to have a final chapter that ties up the unruly strings and brings the journey to a close. In this case, though, I have to end by circling back to the beginning, by revisiting the place where this started and where ideas first took root. Like the ancient image of the Ouroboros, the serpent that forms a perfect circle by eating its own tail, the conclusion is a new beginning. This study began by questioning *why* images of fear are so pervasive in digital visual culture. Digital technology has changed how people work, play, and communicate and has augmented and transformed even our closest relationships and most basic, everyday routines. It is also, however, a creative medium for exploring and visualizing not only what we have gained but what we have lost in our dependence on digital technology. Idealist visions of digital culture's long-lasting benefits to thinking, feeling, and acting are one half of the human-machine narrative. Like Janus, the double-faced Roman god of beginnings and endings, this human-machine narrative also has a more disturbing side that envisions a future dystopia down another, darker path or holds up a mirror to the one we are currently traveling.

A dystopia is an imaginary vision of a world in which people live fearful and dehumanized lives. Like its lighter sister, utopia, it is a symbol of what one may *become* as an individual and what one may *build* as part of a community. Digital visual culture is a space for spectacle, performance, and simulation of these vital dreams and nightmares. It is a critical

space for playing with ideological messages of technology's domination or partnership with humanity, and a place where enacting dark desires may be not only tolerated, but also embraced as a form of cultural entertainment, and possibly art. This study began with a question of why we envision a grim future as a consequence—penance—for worshipping and fetishizing digital technology. Through television, film, email hoaxes, Websites, video games, and other elements of visual culture, we build, reference, and link to larger ideas that question the nature of human-machine relationships. Do we have something to fear from these machines we have created and come to depend on? As networked communities and individuals, we are caught in a web of technology that grows ever tighter and more intertwined with minds, hearts, and bodies. In many ways, each of us is like my companion, Janusa, our minds connected by an umbilical cord of digital technology that we depend on to meet our everyday needs. This image of floating, inconsequential bodies fed by machines is one of our nightmares, whether it refers to a very real medical scenario or an image from *The Matrix* (1999) or *EVE Online* (CCPGames, 2003). In these dystopias, we are prisoners of machines that we originally created to help us live, explore, and interpret the world in new ways.

In this study, I have constructed a narrative that began with a question about the Gothic nature of our vision of humanity's future dominated by digital technology. This narrative, like all examples of visual culture, is intertextual, a collage of ideas and juxtapositions that link together to form the framework for synthetic fear in visual culture. Synthetic fear is ephemeral in nature and, like all specters and apparitions, appears fleetingly in one's peripheral vision. We piece together a narrative of synthetic fear from these collections of fleeting visions, these dark fantasies of enslavement and annihilation by smarter machines, and these virtual worlds that invite inhabitants to build dystopian communities.

A Review of the Central Questions

This study explores the concept of what I termed *synthetic fear*, the pervasive influence of created images of fear in digital visual culture. In keeping with an arts-based methodology, each chapter experimented with narrative voice and genre to explore experiences in a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), *EVE Online* (CCPGames, 2003). Narratives and critical analysis examined themes such as racial and gender constructions, citizenship, identity, exploration, surveillance, and political rhetoric and illustrated the way that synthetic fear works as an underlying framework for these gaming experiences.

Research questions included the following:

1. How is synthetic fear manifested in digital gaming culture, and what does it teach us about the role of fear in visual culture?
2. What does it mean to occupy both virtual and physical realities simultaneously?
3. What issues of access and social equity arise when one lives in a virtual world? How do virtual experiences in a video game connect with social issues?
4. Through arts-based documentation of living in a video game, what are the implications for the place of digital culture in arts education and for arts based research?

Each of these questions guided the construction, interpretation, and creative exploration of this study's themes. While generalizing traditional findings for these questions in an arts-based study is difficult, this inquiry did further the understanding of each research question by generating new avenues for research in digital visual culture and deepening understanding of how video games function within visual culture. As the findings will show, there are significant applications for educators in studies of digital culture that ask phenomenological questions steeped in the critical space where humans and machines connect. Through *situated*,

experiential methods of practice and engagement, digital culture is fertile ground for educators and social scientists.

Research Question One

How is synthetic fear manifested in digital gaming culture, and what does it teach us about the role of fear in visual culture?

I have used a specific lens, synthetic fear, to examine experiences in a virtual world. Originally, I described the term *synthetic fear* as having five main qualities: it is always 1) mediated through digital technology; 2) terrifying yet pleasurable; 3) a blend of fiction and reality; 4) dependent on the collusion of participants who are aware the experience is fictive; and 5) an elaborate illusion or fantasy that draws on real fears in order to assert social or political control. This framework and description guided my understanding of how identity, notions of citizenship, constructions of race and gender, and issues of surveillance and political fear function in *EVE Online*. The concept of synthetic fear, as the conceptual framework for this study explains, is constructed from disparate elements of popular and visual culture that assimilate and transform how fear is manufactured in digital visual culture. As this study has developed, and my own understanding of synthetic fear has evolved, I have started to see it not as a discrete, identifiable concept, but instead part of an unfolding, hypertextual narrative performed in spaces such as *EVE Online*, and myriad other examples of digital culture. Simply put, it is one kind of story that can be told from digital experience.

In this recursive and reflective inquiry, I continually returned to an early notion that synthetic fear is created by discourses that actively construct fearful imagery and employ language and images that describe digital culture. As I said previously, monsters and horror

stories are all around us now, woven into our cultural inbox, hiding in our networks, and stalking us through a daily barrage of media and digital technology. Language and visual metaphors of digital culture conjure images of fearsome predators in a digitally-mediated world: viruses, worms, Trojan horses, email hoaxes, code bugs, and spyware, along with the disembodied monsters of cyberspace such as hackers, chat room predators, cyber-stalkers, rogue programmers, cyborgs, and (the ultimate specter of digital culture to some) Big Brother Microsoft. Embedded in many of these terms is the concept of surveillance, these digital hauntings that breed suspicion, paranoia, and a sense of disempowerment and dehumanization, all seeds of a growing dystopia.

In *EVE Online*, the discourse of synthetic fear is woven throughout gameplay, particularly in the development of my avatar as an individual and a citizen of *EVE*. In some of the examples and scenarios presented in this study, fear is not present in an obvious form. However, what is obvious from immersion in *EVE Online* is that synthetic fear, with its pleasurable terror and reliance on narratives that blend fiction and reality to create dystopian narratives, is an underlying element of every experience in the game. This became clear to me when I realized I was suspicious of my own avatar, Janusa. I was suspicious of her not only as my digital mediator but also as a character in the game. She is fundamentally uncontrollable because, as an avatar, she operates not as a puppet on a string, reacting to my actions, but instead under the conditions of the game world. Ultimately, she is something separate from me, straining—like Annlee and the kite—to be set free in this digital world where she belongs. She is software with its own routines, language, and way of interacting with others, and I was never fully in control of her. My suspicion of her behavior stemmed from this knowledge and colored all my experiences in *EVE*. In the language of an earlier chapter, she is *wrong*. These

underlying notions of synthetic fear, suspicion, and wrongness also extend to all players involved in MMORPGs because fundamentally no one is in control. It is in this tension that all of our fears about technology's domination and influence over life are enacted in virtual worlds and visual culture. We create dystopian visions and inhabit them in MMORPGs as a way of exploring this tension between technological desire and fear of its consequences.

Synthetic fear is a thread running throughout identity creation and citizenship in these worlds, yet it is not limited to virtual worlds. Digital spaces are places in which we enact our anxieties, paranoia, and frustrations with contemporary life—or a place to flee from them. Castronova (2005) observes that “whether the synthetic world grows does depend on the nature of experience within it, but, critically, it also depends on the nature of experience here on Earth. People will go where things are best for them. It is an issue of migration” (p. 71). For some, experiences in virtual worlds may be more fulfilling and allow deeper levels of personal or civic commitment than can be found in the real world. This may sound sad to those who value and are valued by their real world communities, but in a political environment in which we are “living in code yellow,” in conflict over race and gender, and in our anxieties about disenfranchisement and lack of civic action in our real communities, the digital migration patterns will continue as people look for communities that do offer something better. Refuge may be found even in worlds like *EVE* that are imperfect models because not everyone there is searching for a utopia. In some instances of visual culture, technologically advanced utopias are actually pictured as the true dystopia. Halter (2006) chronicles another fear fed by our dependence on computers—the dehumanizing face of humanity turned to code—by examining George Lucas's first film, *THX 1138* (1971):

. . . THX and LUH live in ultramodernist monochromatic white environments, as pure and clean as data itself, stripped of all the visual noise and informational clutter of everyday living. For a computer, such a world of pure, clean data would be the apotheosis of its being, a utopia; for humans, it is experienced as a blank, passionless hell. (p. 73)

EVE is nothing like this sterile environment. Though a sci-fi genre game set in the future, it is not sterile but is instead gritty as a space-themed Western full of pirates, fortune hunters, cyborg-pilots, and death in every solar system. As Duncum (2002) observes, “visual representations are sites of ideological struggle that can be as deplorable as they can be praiseworthy” (p. 8). Such examples of visual culture allow one to hold a mirror up to a dystopian vision of virtual worlds so we can see what possibilities exist for resurrecting idealistic—even utopian—visions in the real world, visions of community, civic engagement, and social understanding. Through the push and pull of this struggle we understand how studies of visual culture through immersive sites such as MMORPGs can provide situated, experiential learning and living environments.

Research Question Two

What does it mean to occupy both virtual and physical realities simultaneously?

This question has become problematic because I no longer think there is a clear distinction between “real” (physical) and “virtual,” and existing simultaneously is a matter only of existing in different situated and mediated contexts. Now, after I have been deeply immersed in a virtual world—creating, engaging, adding my own narratives to an ongoing story—I am rethinking what I have previously written about the borders and boundaries between virtual and real life. They have turned into vanishing horizons. I have always thought of these boundaries as porous, which sound leaky and messy anyway. Now, however, I have started wondering who

drew these borders to begin with? Was it me—*the researcher*—who needs to make sense of things and categorize experiences for analysis? Or was it the me—*the player-character*—trying to contend with the fluid back and forth between worlds and situated experiences with differing qualities? Throughout this study, I have used and cited language of migration and travel as a metaphor for entering and leaving the virtual world of *EVE* despite the growing suspicion that virtual and physical realities are equally important realms for experience. Still, I use these terms because I do not have better ones, so I continue setting up this seemingly false dichotomy between real and virtual experiences. In *EVE*, my avatar exists as a continual presence in a perpetual world living as a “synthetic body in the synthetic world” (Castronova, 2005, p. 6). As I have said previously, Janusa can go where physical bodies are impossible, but still carry me with her into this new context for understanding and developing another fragmented and partial piece of my identity. I see Janusa as my surrogate and mediator, as something/someone separate from me in the sense that the half-drawn character she is becoming is not necessarily a reflection of my values or goals. Nonetheless, simulating experiences in a virtual world does affect my perspective (those porous borders) in the real world. All these experiences, real or virtual, are situated in specific contexts that have different meanings and messages that I take with me into every experience. While my identity is fragmented because of the many real and virtual contexts I inhabit, inhabiting them simultaneously adds richness to each subsequent experience.

Labeling, categorizing, and coding experience is—from a social science perspective—one way that we, as researchers, try to elicit meaning from everyday rituals and activities. Now that I am faced with writing a conclusion—a wrapping up of these ideas, a summary of findings—it makes sense that I would need to think in metaphors and labels in order to categorize these new experiences. Creating tidy boxes labeled “real world” or “virtual life” is

convenient and comforting. I suddenly realize that the real/virtual dichotomy is too easy, but persists because that other category does not have a name yet. Lunenfeld (1999) describes this search for a third thing as an aesthetics of digital media, an aesthetics of the unfinished:

To celebrate the unfinished in this era of digital ubiquity is to laud process rather than goal—to open up a third thing that is not a resolution, but rather a state of suspension. To get to that unresolved third thing—that thing in abeyance—we need first to acknowledge the central effects the computer has had on art and culture. (p. 8)

In actuality, the process of getting to that “unresolved third thing,” is the intellectual, spiritual, and social process enacted while occupying real and virtual spaces. It requires unpacking these tidy boxes I have created and constantly examining, re-arranging and critiquing the contents to see what we can *do* with this stuff anyway. This is living unfinished and discovering that, like Janusa, we ourselves are half-drawn characters under constant revision through experiences occupying real, virtual, and unnamed spaces.

Research Question Three

What issues of access and social equity arise when one lives in a virtual world? How do virtual experiences in a video game connect with social issues?

As a social world, *EVE Online* is a ripe and rich setting for critiquing, questioning, and engaging with issues of access and social equity. This fertile ground for inquiry in *EVE* is one that I explored in every chapter by examining issues of race and gender in character selection, identity and image development, and dimensions of civic and political engagement in the game. The representation of each of these issues emphasizes the importance of considering critically what ideological messages are encoded in images and interactions in visual culture. While this

study focuses on immersive experiences of the researcher within a video game, it does not attempt to prescribe art education content based on the lessons from this one experience. However, this study does raise questions and provide insights into digital experiences that are important for art educators attempting to incorporate digital media and visual culture in the art classroom; issues such as making choices, understanding how values and moral ambiguity are embedded and expressed in digital visual culture, and attending critically and responsibly to moral, social, political, and cultural issues involved in teaching such material. The intertextual nature of visual culture and the ability to manipulate narrative in virtual worlds complicate issues like race and gender even further, for they become layered constructions that must be examined within the context of the game and must not be accepted as correct or simply the status quo. In fact, digital worlds are malleable constructions, affected by the preferences of players who often engage in a kind of social action by asking on message boards and fansites for changes in the game. Virtual worlds are not mirrors of the real world. Instead, they are evolutions of that world based on the narrative and players who often dictate the development and social nature of the world. Players are part of world-building because they are also customers. Like other ethnographic sites and cultures, researchers must understand the situated nature of social issues in *EVE* and other MMORPGs and must examine emerging online social issues as authentic, powerful examples of how issues like access and social equity are negotiated within synthetic or artificial worlds.

An important finding in this study is that, because of the manipulated intertextual way potent social issues are often being “played with” and constructed in virtual worlds, researchers must engage seriously with these sites of visual culture as important artifacts *and* communities of practice. The alternative, treating popular and visual culture as merely transitory, vacuous

examples of consumerism and mass media is a dangerous position to choose. Smith (2003) argues that sites of visual culture—such as the mall in this example—are unworthy of intellectual or spiritual inquiry and could never be examples of art:

With its fast food courts, middle class-targeting stores, and occasional “special event” (Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, car raffles), it provides a cornucopia of unexamined, pastless, futureless consumerism. Malls are not meant to arouse intellectual or spiritual inquiry—two of the characteristics of art, whether “fine” or traditional craft. The pleasures of the mall experience, while real, are passing. Such delights are something like eating candy, pleasant enough and harmless in moderation, but ultimately not healthful if repeated too often. (p. 6)

MMORPGs could easily be similarly characterized as “a cornucopia of unexamined, pastless, futureless consumerism” because they are essentially theme parks appealing to mass audiences (hence the name *massive* multiplayer online role-playing game). Nonetheless, serious expressions and critiques of social issues go on continually in games like *EVE*. As I discuss in Chapter 6, the *EVE* news blog often presented political news that referred to events in the real world. Situated in the narrative of the game, it is possible volatile issues such as racial discrimination and the politics of immigration are open to examination in new ways. Even my avatar, Janusa, is an exploration of identity as both I and Other, Subject and Object. Allowing players to become the Other through role-playing avatars situated in vastly different cultures is one example of how virtual worlds like *EVE* are built on complex understandings and visualizations of social issues. *EVE* addresses issues such as racial and gender stereotyping and bias, corporate politics, terrorism, and nationalism. In *EVE*, each of these issues is evident and

examinable in disturbing ways, yet this is the critical edge that we—along with our students—must cut ourselves on in studying visual culture.

Also in this study, I provided examples of games designed to present fringe or alternative worldviews, such as games like *Ethnic Cleansing*, produced by the National Alliance. These are deeply disturbing products circulated in underground and out-of-the-mainstream communities. Nonetheless, such examples of dystopia can become rich areas for critical examination, manipulation, and understanding of social issues such as racism, violence, and political action and for exploring how these ideas are promoted and promulgated. Video games are lightning rods because they package entertaining visions of violence, hatred, fear, and dystopia, and, in a classroom context, such subjects can be difficult to explore. Moral issues and values embedded in video games are, as in the case of *Ethnic Cleansing*, not always representative of the higher values that educators and parents try to instill in students. Educators who want to bring digital culture into the classroom should set specific goals for what students are to learn from these images and make responsible choices about how graphic or explicit exemplars should be. It must be understood that within virtual worlds, issues such as death, murder, and violence have different, more ambiguous moral meanings. In *EVE*, for example, players can select to play a character in a race that practices human trafficking. What does it mean for someone to select a character that could possibly become a slave trader? Is this choice morally wrong? This is one example of the kinds of issue that make parents and teachers uncomfortable about critiquing digital media in the art classroom; virtual experiences can bring into question sensitive moral issues and value judgments. Burgess (2003) says that “young people may well be denied access to ‘monstrous’ representations of childhood via restriction to media technologies in school but find easy access in their ‘playground’ (home computers, clubs and internet cafes)” (p. 111). It is

in these spaces outside of the classroom that students most need the critical thinking and reflective skills to deal with such “monstrous” representations in a way that makes them *critical* consumers. Through my immersion in *EVE*, I was experiencing this world as a player and a researcher, a role that required me to be the same kind of critical consumer. Just as our students benefit and are changed by responding to visual culture in a conscious, reflective dialogue, I will never be able to enter this world or any other MMORPG without a heightened sense of critical understanding. In this study, it is evident that players are asked constantly to assimilate and react to social issues as members of a virtual community. Clearly, MMORPGs and other games are important cultural texts that actively shape understandings of social issues and create exciting possibilities for engaging with these issues in interesting, educational, and inspirational ways.

Research Question Four

Through arts-based documentation of living in a video game, what are the implications for the place of digital culture in arts education?

Ambiguity and Arts-Based Research. To explore each of these research questions, I employed an arts-based autoethnographic research methodology through a first-person narrative representation and analysis of the research. In the writing process, I also explored what Richardson (2000) called a process of inquiry, a way of finding out about the world by writing about it—writing as inquiry. As I wrote, I *learned* and was able to explore ideas and uncover additional layers of complexity in ways impossible with traditional scholarly prose. The differences in writing in the voice of my avatar, producing a Reader’s Theater piece, or creating a composite conversation and narrative allowed me to bring each theme in my research closer, rather than keeping it at arm’s length as a traditional social science observer. In the initial

discussion of methodology, I noted Cahnmann's (2003) suggestion that poetry, like other alternate forms of expression in research, can reveal what one might otherwise overlook in prose, "just as the microscope and camera have allowed different ways for us to see what would otherwise be invisible" (p. 31). Making the invisible visible through multiple forms of representation was an invaluable aid in analyzing virtual experience. In addition, stepping outside the boundaries of traditional scholarly prose helped me appreciate important ethical considerations of arts-based research and standards of craftsmanship that are pivotal to alternative methods of research (Barone, 2001; Barone & Eisner, 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Piirto, 2002).

As I reflect, this project was as much about the methodology as the subject of study. Arts-based methods can be so bold and jarring to readers of scholarly texts that I was constantly on guard that the study not descend merely into a narrative experiment. This problem of representation is not easily solved with arts-based research, largely because of our consciousness about *how* things are written with evocative, literary prose, at times at the risk of leaving the *why* as a secondary matter. I have struggled to find a balance in this study, although I have also discovered that the *why* often emerged in more sensitive and complex ways than when explored in academic scholarly prose.

As an experiment, this study was never designed to be wholly one style of narrative. Instead, I wanted to let the subject matter lead the creation, which led to a collage of narrative forms and experiments. In practice, the creative pieces often led me to a better understanding of the themes in this study. In the true spirit of Richardson's (2000) notion of writing in order to find something out, there were many times in the writing of the "Avatar Chronicles" that I discovered something about my experience *because* it emerged through creative exploration.

This has led me to theorize that something was “turned on” (cognitively speaking) when I was thinking and writing through the viewpoint of my avatar that was not turned on when writing from a more distanced scholarly perspective. I cannot account for this phenomenon other than feeling that it validates how important and rich the work of poets and artists can be for scholarly understanding.

In this study of a MMORPG, experimentation in data collection and analysis and constant grappling with how to represent and capture experiences in virtual worlds were productive ways of confronting the questions in this study. Just as new categories of experience in virtual worlds blur with real life, arts-based forms can be difficult to define because they seek to represent experience in less sanitized and objective ways. In many ways, the messiness of both site and method helped this experiment because the very act of existing in a virtual world is one of construction and creation. Inhabiting a MMORPG is an arts-based experience in itself. Arts-based methods offer an appealing transparency that meshes well with attempts to understand the process of immersion in a virtual world. These methods provide an outlet for describing virtual experience with creative responses to capture the first-person perspective of fragmented, half-drawn characters playing in virtual worlds.³⁰

Virtual experience is, after all, an elaborate performance or spectacle. It is constructed, artificial, and most successful when narrative and spectacle combine to create a compelling fantasy or confection. In terms of social structures worthy of study, the myriad aspects of these social worlds invite and demand far more research, including and among many others, an arts-

³⁰ Fans of MMORPGs are themselves conducting a kind of action research using arts-based methods in the writing of “fan fiction” that is often posted on gaming Web sites or published independently on other Web sites. This interesting genre of writing combines immersive experience, game mythology, and completely imagined fictive elements to create short stories, teleplays, and novellas that are making sense of virtual experience and constructing new scenarios for game designers to incorporate into the narrative.

based method that accepts ambiguity and even creates new artworks that serve as interpretative texts for virtual experience.

I have found throughout this experience some of the best explanations and expressions of arts-based methods have been written by poets, songwriters, and authors who were not writing about arts-based methods at all.³¹ Still, these expressions have helped me make sense of what it means to be an arts-based researcher and to embrace words in all their ambiguity to describe lived experience. In her poem “Transparencies,” Adrienne Rich (2004) captures a feeling of what it means to be an arts-based researcher, although she probably did not have educational research in mind:

That words are windowpanes in a ransacked hut, smeared
by time’s dirty rains, we might argue
likewise that words are clear as glass till the sun strikes it blinding

But that in a dark windowpane you have seen your face
That when you wipe your glasses the text grows clearer
That the sound of crunching glass comes at the height of the
wedding

That I can look through glass
Into my neighbor’s house but not my neighbor’s life
That glass is sometimes broken to save lives
That a word can be crushed like a goblet underfoot
is only what it seems, part question, part answer: how
you live it (pp. 49-50)

Part question, part answer, these images are metaphors that capture the lived experience of blending social *science* with *arts*-based research. Metaphor and imagery express this idea better than scholarly prose sometimes, and in studies of virtual experience, arts-based methods can sometimes illuminate what scholarly prose hides.

³¹ See also the children’s book *Ish* (Reynolds, 2004), which should be a required text in all arts-based research methods courses.

The Problem of Arts-Based Research. This study is truly a hybrid, or—in the language of synthetic fear—a mutant monster, in its construction, as it tries to accomplish more than one goal. Indeed, I see this as my own Frankenstein’s monster of collected pieces sutured together into a recognizable form as both art and a scholarly study. This is one of the challenges of doing an arts-based study since the categories of social science studies often do not quite fit, and as a result, the seams sometimes show.

In some ways, conducting this study has made me more skeptical of arts-based research because it is such a messy methodology. While, this messiness can be an asset to studying virtual worlds, its ambiguity can also be the Achilles heel of arts-based research. Conducting any arts-based study requires a great deal of discipline, rigor, and restraint on the part of the researcher to avoid being carried away by narrative and evocative prose that could obfuscate the point of the text. Knowing precisely where the line is between illuminating narrative and pure fiction is challenging. In my own work, sometimes I wonder how much of what I am observing and experiencing is influenced by my own interests, readings, and desire to see certain themes. Throughout the writing process, I have constantly interrogated myself, asking questions such as these: “Did I make choices in the video game and on the page because they would make a more interesting experience for the reader? How would I have played if I were not doing research and critically questioning every decision? What would have happened if I were actually playing the game *just to play*?” These are actually critical questions for all researchers engaged in MMORPG research—regardless of methodology—because they examine the role and subjectivity of the researcher.

An analogy to this reflexivity and interrogation is the problem of reality television. Reality television is actually a highly edited and produced *version of reality*, specifically edited

to tell a story. Stories are consciously edited from vast amounts of footage, presenting a cohesive narrative out of hours of probably mundane events that did not originally tell a linear (or interesting) story. Is arts-based research sometimes a scholarly version of reality television, editing out the slow stuff to move the narrative along? I hope not, but this question is a critical one for examining and evaluating how arts-based research studies are rendered.

“Playing the game” has a layered meaning for gaming researchers because the motivation for entering a gaming environment for pleasure or work has an effect on the way the game is played. In this study, was I playing at playing? I remember one day, reading through local chat channels while looking for a mission from an agent in a space station. Many of the players were talking about losing two and three ships on Level I or II missions—missions that are supposed to be easy. I had been doing missions for a while and had never lost a ship. I remember thinking, “Huh? This seems like an experience I should have. What happens when your ship is destroyed? Let's try it.” At that point, I set out on a mission to kill some Serpents space pirates and promptly lost my ship. That was something I had not experienced previously as a player-character, but one that I desired as a researcher—just so I could write about it. I was conscious of this desire to generate more fodder for a *thrilling* narrative while I undocked and set off for dangerous territory.

Since then, I have thought about the contrived and intentional nature of this experience. I am not sure it makes it any less valid than other constructed experiences in research settings, but I do wonder how—and if—it can be avoided. Is intentional action to move the narrative or research along an unavoidable consequence when one imposes any kind of structure or critical consciousness on lived experience? To me, it seemed like an experience that was tainted, yet it also led to a deeper understanding of the community in which I was involved. I am not sure,

however, if I ever will feel a real sense of belonging in *EVE*—until maybe the day I enter this world as a true player rather than a player-researcher.

Implications for digital culture in art education. Video games in various forms are powerful tools for learning and for examining underlying ideological messages in visual culture. Digital media and their effects on identity, learning, and pedagogy are central to any study of visual culture. As Freedman (2003) observes, “Technological imagery blurs the boundaries between truth and fiction by acting as both” (p. 129). Such blurring also makes fiction an excellent method for exploring and analyzing virtual experiences, as the arts-based methodology for this study illustrated.

Throughout this study, I have looked at how elements of *EVE Online*, as a complex artifact of digital visual culture, express ideological, social, and cultural ideas within the framework of synthetic fear and dystopian visions of possible worlds. In art education curricula, Duncum (2002) advocates including visual culture sources precisely because visual culture examines important social questions that explore “how ideology works through aesthetic means or, conversely, how aesthetics works to promote ideology” (p. 10). Video games and other elements of visual culture are not neutral but do important cultural work and have easily personalized social relevance for students. Art educators—with the help of their students—can incorporate and explore video games in arts-based and more conventional ways as part of new curricula in art education that incorporates elements of digital visual culture.

In bringing digital culture into the art classroom, whether K-12 or higher education, teachers must learn and work along with their students. The fluid and fast-paced nature of digital culture and technology makes all members of a classroom community learners, users, players, and teachers. It is naïve to think that students, many of whom are already deeply involved in

social spaces on the Internet and in gaming, are not already affected by a pervasive digital culture that informs and invades their everyday fashion, speech patterns, hobbies, and views on knowledge acquisition and expression. Bringing digital culture into the art classroom means teachers must be willing to make mistakes, experience failure with technology (or of technology), and ask students—who often have higher levels of digital literacy—to take control of their own learning. Part of this learning is developing critical literacies through engagement with digital visual culture. Duncum (2002) cites representations of “visual stereotypes” such as “gendered images, images of violence, beauty, motherhood, family authority” (p. 8) and other representations that go often uncontested and repeated and repackaged continually in mainstream cultural sites. In visual culture, questioning the encoded cultural meaning of images and text is part of the process of discovery and understanding that often leads to sites of struggle and conflict between mainstream culture and the student’s own cultural values. Visual culture and critical literacy encourage students not only to decode cultural representations through criticism activities, but also “to engage in cultural action to ‘rewrite’ these texts differently: to show them for what they are and to challenge and contest them” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2002, p. 5). In this way, young people can become empowered producers of cultural knowledge and add their own voice and critique to the larger dialogue in digital culture.

Incorporating digital culture in art classrooms practice can also extend to graphic and Website design projects or to include visual culture critiques of popular games as well as game design, using affordable software. In a higher education classroom, one possibility would be to ask students to subscribe to a MMORPG such as *EVE Online* in place of buying a textbook so that they can study any number of issues raised in their engagement in an online gaming

community.³² Alternatively, students could examine many free, online games as visual culture artifacts, exploring issues of gender, race, community, and political discourse.

I am also intrigued by the notion of game design as artistic practice, or as a form of social protest, political expression, social critique, or cultural commentary, as in the example of *Kabul Kaboom!*. Games such as *Kabul Kaboom!* function more as interactive public art, provoking thought through a visual culture form that appropriates and manipulates images and text into a new, original artwork. Early in the planning of this study, I was introduced to a program called StageCast that allows children to design and program their own video games by using a very simple drag and drop interface.³³ In addition, Flash, a popular animation program, is frequently used for game design, and legions of Flash games are currently on the Internet. Just as arts-based research provides an alternate lens for looking at research sites and depends on artistic forms to uncover meaning, game design is another intriguing area of digital visual culture that could be a powerful tool for both art-making and critique in the art classroom at any level.

Implications for Future Research

Investigating these kinds of cultural questions in a virtual environment without ceding some of the pleasures reported by gamers is perhaps simply impossible. Can one truly become invested and immersed in a game when she is also trying to look at it with a critical lens? I have many questions about my gaming experience and how it is categorized as research. Ultimately, I think reflexivity is good for a researcher, but I also feel strongly that arts-based research has far

³² *EVE Online*, like many MMORPGs, is available as an affordable monthly subscription currently priced at \$14.95.

³³ I was first introduced to StageCast at a digital media conference after viewing games produced by college students at the University of Denver that were being used to critique social issues such as immigration. One game was called *Crosser*, inspired by *Frogger*, which puts players in the viewpoint of immigrants attempting to cross the border illegally. Another, *La Migra*, is modeled on *Space Invaders* and asks players to become border patrol agents preventing illegals from crossing. These games were presented as a dialogue for critiquing immigration issues.

to go in terms of providing models and practices of ethical behaviors and data collection procedures for researchers.

Virtual worlds in the form of MMORPGs are vast and fertile sites for social science research in the form of educational simulations, ethnographic immersion studies, visual culture studies, interactive narrative text, communities of practice—the list is longer still. In addition, many genres of games present completely different ideologies and narrative structures than from those of my own site, *EVE Online*. In future research, I am interested in examining further the civic dimension of MMORPGs from aspects other than synthetic fear in *EVE*. If notions of citizenship continue to develop in digital worlds, in what ways could visual culture in MMORPGs influence and shape notions of synthetic citizenship and civic engagement? Another promising area of gaming research is civic education, and a study of the ways play affects gamers' understanding of citizenship could prove fruitful.

Leavings

As I said, this is supposed to be the end but feels instead like another beginning. Stories usually have to have a final chapter that ties up the unruly strings and brings the journey to a close. In this case, though, I have to end by circling back to the beginning, and what I find waiting for me is Janusa, my companion in this study. I said at the start that she would be my proxy in a world where bodies are impossible and where our experiences must be translated from pixels on a screen to text on a page in the form of an evocative narrative that brings the character to life.

I am her ghostwriter.

And she is mine.

The Avatar Chronicles, Part V: Death

Today, for no reason, I died.

More accurately, I took my own life by getting in the way of some Serpentis pirates. They are just common terrorists, the whole lot of them, and I helped them by straying too close to one of their drug dens. I was just curious, wanting a brief look, but I might as well have strapped a bomb to my ship and pushed the button considering how suicidal my actions really were. At least that way, maybe I would have taken out a few of these monsters along the way, leaving the universe with one less menace. Surrounded, I watched my ship succumb and then waited for the inevitable pod killing. The Serpentis pirates never let you warp away in your pod to safety. They go for the kill. I have to admire their principled professionalism in that regard. Thorough annihilation is certainly the mark of someone who knows his craft.

My pod acted in self-defense, protecting me from a final grave. I felt the puncture of the needle into my spine and then blackness from the neurotoxin injected into my system, effectively killing my body before the vacuum of space could extinguish both body and mind. At the precise moment of my death, my pod took a snapshot of my neural networks as it is programmed to do as a first gift to my next cloned body. This new body now floats, suspended in fluid like a baby in a womb, nurtured through this mechanical umbilical connecting it to a new ship's pod. It is the same story as my original birth and one that will probably be told again and again in the course of countless lifetimes. Fear and death, it seems, always find you in this universe—and that is yet another story.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: ADDITIONAL FIGURES



Figure 8. Screenshot of ship and interstellar billboard in a distant solar system



Figure 9. A screenshot from travel in *EVE*.



Figure 10. Janusa's vessel docked in a space station

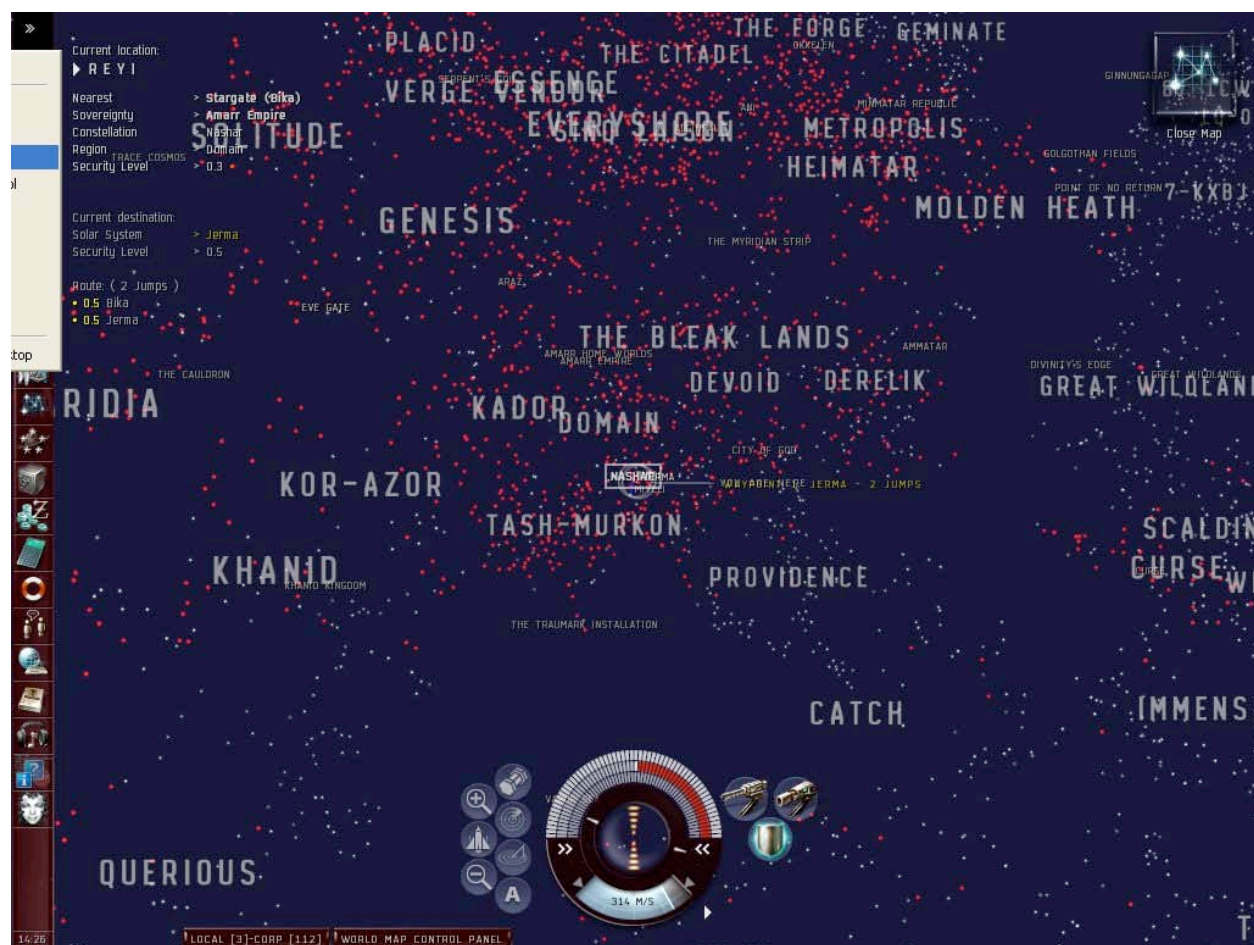


Figure 11. Map view of solar systems