AUTHOR BIO

Dr. Poppy Wilde is a Lecturer in Media and Communication in the School of Media at Birmingham City University. Her background is in performance studies and drama, and her autoethnographic PhD project explored the lived experience of MMORPG gaming with particular focus on the avatar-gamer as an embodiment of posthuman subjectivity. Her research interests are posthumanism, digital cultures, embodiment, performance in online contexts and the lived experience in research methods.

Avatar affectivity and affection

Poppy Wilde

ABSTRACT

Avatars and gamers create channels of affective flow through their connection to a gameworld. Elsewhere (Wilde and Evans) I have explored this flow as an empathic exchange, wherein the desires of each must be aligned with the other in order to progress in-game. More than this, avatars themselves incite a range of affective and emotional responses. Drawing on my autoethnographic immersion in the game *World of Warcraft*, in the following article I consider feelings I have towards my avatar, ranging from affection to annoyance. Exploring her affective potential, I ask what these feelings can tell us about our relationships with technology and conclude that the way we are able to affect and be affected by others and environments around us shows us to be the entangled beings posthumanism suggests, and the avatar-gamer is one example that demonstrates the intimacy that emerges between human and machine in contemporary societies. This paper therefore contributes to debates that renounce the view of technology as subservient, seeing it instead as equal, thereby reworking past considerations through affective understanding.

KEYWORDS

Affect, avatar, autoethnography, posthuman, World of Warcraft

Introduction

The affective potential of games has been explored in a variety of ways, through studies focussing on the phenomenological experience of the game body (Crick) to those that consider the capital potential of affect (Ash "Attention"). Similarly, the relationship between avatar, as the on-screen digital body of the character-player, and gamer has also been explored extensively (e.g. Banks and Bowman; Gee; Filiciak; Sundén). Describing affect as "the 'feel' or intensity of a game" Shinkle claims that digital games "foreground affective responses in ways that moving images such as cinema do not. All digital games – even keyboard-based ones – engage the subject on a phenomenological or affective plane, … so that they not only look real, but 'feel' real" (Shinkle 23 and 26). However, beyond these explorations of the affectivity of games and of avatar-gamer relationships, there seems to be a lack of accounts that explore the subjective affectivity of the avatar itself, and how it becomes a site of affective experience. In order to address this gap, this paper seeks to explore the capacity of the avatar to incite affect and emotion in the gamer, specifically considering how the close intra-action between avatar and gamer is experienced. In doing so, I draw on my own autoethnographic experience in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* (WoW), considering the range of feelings I experience toward my avatar Etyme. Drawing on these experiences, I propose that we might therefore move beyond previous, humanistic conceptions of the avatar as a tool and understand our relationships with technology in posthuman ways. I argue that the mutual ability to affect and be affected by / through the avatar demonstrates that the avatar-gamer is an example of posthuman subjectivity (Wilde and Evans).

Affect and gaming

According to Gregg and Seigworth "affect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, non-human, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves" (1). Digital games are known for their affective potential, as, unlike media counterparts such as film and TV, they allow the gamer to undertake the game narrative quests themselves and to have a certain measure of agency in how the game turns out. Specifically, MMORPGs are worlds in which players can explore vast landscapes with their customised, humanoid avatar. Thousands of players can simultaneously play the game online, and encounter each other within the gameworld. My own research takes place in one of the oldest MMORPGs, *World of Warcraft*, which launched in 2004 and continues to expand both as a gameworld and franchise. *World of Warcraft* has its own histories and geographies, and is set in the fantasy world of Azeroth, where different races were created by titans, or mutated through magical encounters. There are two opposing factions of the Alliance and the Horde, and each faction consists of a number of races who are in allegiance with one another due to shared goals or historical fealties according to the background storyline. The Alliance and the Horde therefore battle through a variety of regions, and in different areas different factions

preside. Additionally, the world is inhabited by beasts and "baddies" of the non-player character (NPC) variety, providing the basis of "player versus environment" gameplay. The *World of Warcraft* gamer directs their avatar from a third person perspective around a 3-dimensional landscape to undertake "quests" given by NPCs, which lead to rewards in experience points, in-game currency and items. Different aspects within the world can be interacted with, for example in order to: fight monsters; converse with NPC tradespeople; gain new skills; and to communicate with other players to chat, share quests, and form guilds. As experience points mount up, the player progresses through different levels, opening up new abilities. The "world" of *World of Warcraft* encompasses a range of different regions, each designed to suit a particular playing level, and therefore the higher the level the player is, the more landscapes they can successfully explore.

Videogames have traditionally been labelled as an "interactive" format, as the player actively engages in the game in order for the story to progress. However, this argument has undergone some critique due to the fact that gamers are only able to engage in the game in preset ways, thereby creating an argument that they are "in many ways less interactive than their analogue predecessors" (Kücklich 233). Nevertheless, the ability for the gamer to have some measure of "control" (albeit limited by the game mechanics) over the actions of the avatar, and therefore the outcome of the game, allows for a particular investment in the affective potential of the game. As Lahti argues, "immersion into the fictional world and blurring the distinction between the player and the game world are such central, acknowledged, and celebrated parts of video games' pleasures" (164). In this way, affect moves the experience of the game from "virtual" to "physical" through the bodily experiences of the gamer and it is "precisely our capacity as sensual embodied beings in the world that allows us to engage with a game's artificial world in a way that would engage those senses in real life" (Crick 266). These physical experiences can be seen in a variety of ways, from trying to move your body to look around corners or duck from threats (Lahti 163) to feeling your heartbeat racing in response to excitement in the game (Crick 266) thereby demonstrating that "[w]hile playing, the body is directly connected to the action on the screen, entering into an affective physical relationship with the programming code" (O'Riordan 236).

Elsewhere, Ash has written about the affective experiences in-game as being "technologies of captivation" – as players attune their bodies to the demands of the game and engage on that affective plane, they become more invested in the game and therefore more willing to engage with the franchise and continue to play ("Technologies of Captivation" 27). The affectivity of games is therefore important for both gamer and designer, so that "affective thrills can spill over into the player's space" (Lahti 163) making the experience feel more "real" for the gamer. These "sensual and perceptual relations in the body are organized and commodified by these games in order to create attentive subjects" (Ash, "Technologies of Captivation" 28) for the game designers, thus demonstrating the importance of affect both on gaming subjects and on the gaming industry as a whole.

The avatar is "the player's point of intersection with the narrative of the game and his/ her virtual presence in that space as a cyberbody or virtual self" (O'Riordan 230) and Crick accordingly argues that identification with an avatar may heighten a gamer's affective response to the game (264). As such, it is worth considering the importance of the avatar-gamer subject. In *World of Warcraft*, characters are "created" by choosing from 13 different races (ranging from gnome to undead) each of which have their own history and background within the world, as well as their own customisable aesthetic. As stated on WoWpedia, the *World of Warcraft* wiki encyclopedia, "the race you choose for your character determines their looks, voice, starting location, classes available, some racial traits, and the faction he or she will belong to" (WoWpedia, Choosing a race). There have been a variety of studies considering the representation of race within *World of Warcraft*. Higgin, for example, argues that some races in *World of Warcraft* are cultural appropriations of minor ethnicities: "[t]rolls have pronounced and unquestionable Jamaican accents and the Tauren are a mystical and tribal culture with Native American architecture and dress, among many other resemblances" (9). On a more macro scale, Langer argues that "*World of Warcraft* carries out a constant project of radically 'othering' the Horde, not by virtue of distinctions between good and evil but rather by distinctions between civilized and savage, self and other, and center and periphery" (87).

Despite the many options for races in the game, and the ability to customise avatars' face shape, hair colour and style, and skin tone, the gender options are limited to "male" and "female." This choice not only affects the body shape of the avatar, but it also affects, for example, the ability to customise facial hair (for males) and earrings (for females), and strong heteronormative conventions and stereotypes are displayed. The gendered and sexualised aspects of videogames have been written about extensively (e.g. Pulos; Eklund; Sundén and Sveningsson; Corneliussen). Huh and Williams state "video game characters still reflect offline gender inequalities.… Female characters are commonly sexualized while male characters are not" (165) although Brehm elaborates that male avatars are also subject to unrealistic body portrayals, albeit in more heroic and less objectifying ways (3). Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to cover an in-depth gendered analysis of the avatar-gamer experience, there are specific aesthetic and aural differences based on the gender of a chosen avatar: they look and sound different, which will affect avatar-gamer relationships and subjectivities based on those performative displays and social understandings and constructions of gender. Although gender choice doesn't affect avatar ability within the game, it is apparent that the online world "is clearly not a utopian gender-free space" (Huh and Williams 171; see for further relevant discussions of gendered aspects of gameplay Healey; Braithwaite).

Choosing a "class" (12 options, from monk to mage), on the other hand, has significant impact on avatar ability as your class denotes your role and primary playing style within the game. Each class has different capacities and limitations; a character's class determines "what abilities and powers are available to them; what weapons and armor they will use; what combat roles they can fulfil; and to a significant extent their strengths, weaknesses and playstyle. Your choice of class will affect how you play your character, and

how you play with others, and each class has something very different to offer" (WoWpedia "Choosing a class"). Classes align with the roles that players can adopt within group play, which are tanks, healers, and damage dealers. Whilst tanks (such as the warrior class) are more suited to drawing attacks and protecting group members, damage dealers (including a melee classes such as rogues and ranged classes such as hunters) attack their enemies, and healers (spellcaster classes including druids, paladins and priests) focus on keeping everyone alive and topping up the health of team mates. Player experiences even of the same quest can therefore differ greatly and the avatar in the gameworld is a figure that can be analysed in a variety of ways.

Avatar relationships

Although, as previously mentioned, some studies have focussed more on the embodied connections between avatars and gamers (e.g. Gee; Crick; Martin) these accounts rarely discuss the emotional affective connection between avatar and gamer, and the feelings that the gamer holds towards the avatar. Sundén has previously argued that there appears to be "something of a glitch in the translation from ontology to epistemology in the research of digital games" (165), as, although games are understood as sensuous, researchers generally fail to disclose their own ways of knowing the field. Often, avatars are described in relation to academic study with researchers explaining what their avatar race and class are (Blood Elf / hunter), potentially describing key abilities and aesthetic features, but rarely describing the feelings held towards them. The few accounts that do discuss this subjective, affective attachment in detail resonate deeply with some of my own in-game experiences. MacCallum-Stewart, in her intense debate around the different readings and understandings of Lara Croft, heroine of the *Tomb Raider* franchise, unapologetically states: "I have an abiding affection for Lara, both as a subject of critical debate and a gaming icon" and much of her argument echoes my own feelings towards Lara. Elsewehere, Sundén writes warmly of her *World of Warcraft* avatar Bricka in the following passage:

> I cannot help finding Bricka exceedingly cute – and to be perfectly honest, quite hot – in a proud and straight-backed kind of fashion.… Part identification, part desire, Bricka was my first World of Warcraft incarnation, a loyal companion, a tough cookie, a hot chick, and an overall brave heroine. Had I not enjoyed her company, sessions with solo play in the most repetitive of fashions would not have been half as enjoyable. (177)

Sundén's enjoyment of Bricka's company heightening the enjoyment of her playing experience aligns with Banks and Bowman's suggestion that "when the game is approached as "we" (perhaps with empathy, loyalty, and protection cues) rather than as "I," humans may enter into interactive media toward more meaningful experiences with digital bodies." The first aim of this article is therefore to contribute to these accounts in order to actively

explore and acknowledge researcher's positions towards their avatars, and consider these relationships as meaningful experiences.

In order to do so, I believe a different model for understanding the avatar-gamer is required, and this is therefore the second aim of the article. Analyses of the avatar-gamer relationship vary between seeing the avatar as a "tool" for navigation (Collins); as an "ideal self" (Jin); as "characters" to empathise with (Belman and Flanagan); as a "representation" of the gamer's identity in the gameworld (Filiciak 97; Cerra and James 168) or as a "trace" of the human (Hillis). However, many of these analyses are humanist and anthropocentric in nature. Viewing the avatar as a tool, for example, implies a hierarchy wherein the avatar is an object both separate from and subservient to the player. There is also an implication of the rational actor worldview, wherein the avatar is viewed as an external, technological counterpart, an object rather than a subject. However, as others have explored, this analysis does not make sense of the distribution of agency that occurs between avatar, gamer and game (Ruckenstein; Carlson and Corliss) or the subjective feelings that emerge between avatar and gamer.

Banks has argued that many games analyses see the relationship between avatar and gamer as "parasocial" – a one-way relationship existing only in the mind of the gamer. As Banks explains, "[t]he parasocial perspective dismisses avatars' potential agency – the potential to matter in a relationship." To counter such arguments, Banks suggests that both avatar and gamer are mutually implicated in their material contribution to the relationship, arguing that the avatar-gamer relationship is one of shared agency, influence, and informational exchange. Banks' study is based on qualitative interviews that query the player-avatar relationship (PAR) that seeks to measure certain aspects including self-differentiation, emotional intimacy, perceived agency and the socialness of the relationship. Banks and Bowman created a four-point typology based on their findings, characterising player-avatar relationships as players either viewing the avatar-as-object, avatar-as-Me, avatar-as-symbiote, or avatar-as-other. I find Banks' study to be of particular interest in that she measures the emotional intimacy perceived between avatars and gamers, which can range from strategic attachment to social attachment to the avatar as companion.

For me, Banks' exploration of the social attachment to the avatar as companion is the most intriguing in terms of exploring affect (conceived of as bodily intensity) and emotion (conceived of as sense-making discourses of "feeling") as it indicates a less hierarchical view of technology. Whereas strategic attachment leans back towards more tools-based conceptions of the avatar, social attachment speaks to a potentially more rhizomatic relationship, wherein the avatar is seen as equal to the gamer and as possessing their own traits and qualities (Banks). However, even in this view that grants agency and qualities to the avatar, Banks and Bowman's notion of character attachment is seen through identification, control, suspension of disbelief, and responsibility. All of these suggest a higher degree of autonomy on the part of the "human" actor in the relationship even whilst suggesting that the closest connection between avatar and gamer to be that of "unification, in

which the player and avatar are indistinguishable" (Banks and Bowman 1259).

Conversely, the application of the posthuman alters how we view this relationship and the subjectivities that are formed. Posthumanism is a diverse field that covers a range of positions, however, the key arguments I draw on that are relevant for this article are a rejection of the idea that "the human" is a fixed, static, unified being, and a rejection of anthropocentrism. Pepperell states that "where humanists saw themselves as distinct beings in an antagonistic relationship with their surroundings, posthumans regard their own being as embodied in an extended technological world" (152). From a posthuman perspective "we can never determine the absolute boundary of the human, either physically or mentally. In this sense, *nothing can be external to a human because the extent of a human can't be fixed*" (Pepperell 22, original emphasis). I therefore argue that the relationship between avatar and gamer is that of a posthuman subjectivity, recognising that there is no primary subject, and instead demonstrating the ways in which feelings emerge through a network of intra-acting forces (see also Wilde and Evans). I draw on Barad's notions of entanglement and intra-action to explore the ways in which we are not ontologically distinct subjects (as the concept of "inter"-action might suggest) but are bound up in our relations to everything around us. Embracing the ontological inseparability of components of "self," "other" and "environment" forces "a displacement of the lines of demarcation between structural differences, or ontological categories, for instance between the organic and the inorganic, the born and the manufactured, flesh and metal, electronic circuits and organic nervous systems" (Braidotti 89). Therefore, rather than understanding the human as fixed, bounded and stable, in a position of mastery over the game, instead, I use posthumanism to view the intra-acting elements of avatar and gamer as non-hierarchically entwined.

In the remainder of this article I expand on this claim by exploring some of my affections and emotions towards my avatar Etyme through fieldnotes that specifically refer to my feelings about her. Through these moments I aim to unashamedly account for my connection with Etyme in order to demonstrate the depth of feeling that can occur in the avatar-gamer, and to explore the mutual and posthuman implication of both subjects in their understanding of one another. These fieldnotes attempt to show that we are affected in body and mind by the experience of gaming and the connection with the avatar, highlighting that "we are not singular and bounded, but rather permeable and open to being affected and affecting" (Blackman 77) and that the involvement with the game and the avatar is only available through that permeability. In this way the game behaves as television does – allowing for a "technology of intimacy; by bringing things spatially, temporally and emotionally close" through its "collapse of distance and time through the production of affective proximity" (Kavka 2008 qtd in Blackman 70).

Methodology

Within game studies, approaches to research vary, yet an element of player involvement is often implicit. As Pearce and Artemesia state "you cannot observe a virtual world without being inside it, and in order to be inside it, you have to be "embodied." In other words, you have to create an avatar" (196). In order to explore how my intra-action with an avatar has felt, I produced an autoethnographic account that has allowed me to immerse myself within the game and the posthuman subjectivity at study, and to produce fieldnotes for analysis. The data used in this article has therefore been gathered from an 18-month long immersion in the game *World of Warcraft* with my avatar Etyme, a Blood Elf Hunter, as part of a broader research project I conducted in order to consider what it means and how it feels to be posthuman, by exploring how posthuman subjectivities are embodied, and what specific practices enable this ontological entanglement. Whilst I have played videogames from a young age, I had not played *World of Warcraft* before 2013, although I was aware of it due to its reputation and history. In *World of Warcraft* players can "create" a number of different avatars in order to play the game differently. I have explored a few avatar types but only played with these on a small scale, briefly and only at lower levels. Etyme is therefore the main avatar I have played *World of Warcraft* with, and I believe this contributes to the depth of feeling for and with and through her that I experience. Etyme is tall, slim and pale, with glowing green eyes. Skilled in ranged attacks with a gun or bow, she has strong connections with animals and nature, and is always accompanied by a beast companion that aids her in battle (Figure 1).

Fig. 1 Game screenshot, Etyme.

Fieldnotes were written by taking short "scratch notes" (Ottenberg 148) during gameplay in order to capture key data points to then be developed into extensive fieldnotes following each gaming session. This meant that gameplay was not overly disrupted, but that I was able to keep track of notable moments and elaborate on these further while the memory of them was fresh (see also Emerson et al. 354).

From a critical perspective, autoethnographic accounts might be seen to operate from a position of knowledge, control, and anthropocentrism. Grant

et al. explain that at times the voice associated with autoethnography can be aligned with positions including liberal-humanism, and "[t]he resultant product is the voice of the coherent humanistic participant or researcher, assumed to be already "formed" prior to her inscription within culture, … [s]uch a conscious, stable, unified, coherent, rational, knowing and a-historic self is assumed to have a will, freedom and intentionality" (8). As such, an "I" might be assumed to speak with authority from a particular position on a subject (Grant et al. 8) and therefore contradict an account of the subject as distributed, emergent, and posthuman. However, Grant et al. draw on poststructuralism to suggest that the writing of research should demonstrate "how subjectivity is produced rather than to display a privileged and secure, transcendent narrative identity position" (80). The autoethnographic voice is therefore "always provisional and contingent, always becoming" (Grant et al. 8). From this perspective, I argue that my fieldnotes precisely demonstrate the constant intra-action between myself and Etyme. Etyme and I intermingle in the fieldnotes, the notes are produced through our entanglement, as I explore further below.

According to Barad, "theorizing must be understood as an embodied practice, … theorizing and experimenting are not about intervening (from outside) but about intra-acting from within, and as part of, the phenomena produced" (52 and 56). *World of Warcraft* has given me a context to explore an aspect of posthuman-ness; gaming becomes a way to understand how some of the different components (avatar, gamer) that comprise a specific entanglement intra-act. Being able to explore this entanglement allows an active and embodied way to theorise, not only reflecting on my posthuman condition but having a specific context to explore it. It's important to note that this is just one of many entanglements and intra-actions with "others" that I am simultaneously involved in, but the hope is that through the specificity of the avatar-gamer an example is provided that allows us to critically examine how our connections with technology demonstrate complex feelings beyond hierarchical and humanist perspectives.

Entangled with affection and annoyance

There has been much debate from several different camps on what our increased connection, intimacy, and empathy with our technology means, and how it can be seen as an indication of the changes to our humanity that we will face as technology becomes even more advanced.

Sherry Turkle is a well-known example of someone previously a technological optimist, now turned sceptic. As Turkle explains: "when we are asked to care for an object, when an object thrives under our care, we experience that object as intelligent, but, more importantly, we feel ourselves to be in a relationship with it" (20). For Turkle this is a willingness to enter into a sense of complicity with the machine – we want to anthropomorphise, we want to connect, and share our emotions, and this allows us to feel intimacy and empathy for the other. However, Turkle's concern with such relationships is that "we expect more from technology and less from each other" (xii) and that as we enter into these relationships with our

technologies we imbue them with more human traits as we begin to dehumanise our fellow human being. Turkle argues that the convenience and control of a technological relationship encourages us to shy away from real human connection, and that we become reliant on technology to mediate the messiness of real life. She states:

> I am troubled by the idea of seeking intimacy with a machine that has no feelings, can have no feelings, and is really just a clever collection of "as if" performances.… Authenticity, for me, follows from the ability to put oneself in the place of another, to relate to the other because of a shared store of human experiences.… A robot, however sophisticated, is patently out of this loop. (6)

Lanier, in his book *You Are Not A Gadget*, discusses the circle of empathy, the idea of drawing an imaginary circle which "circumscribes the person at some distance, and corresponds to those things in the world that deserve empathy" (36). Lanier believes that there are "legitimate reasons not to expand the circle as much as possible" (37). He uses the example that in extending empathy to an embryo, we are in conflict with the rights of pregnant women, and so oppression could (and, indeed, has) occur in matters surrounding abortions (Lanier). Lanier's concern is that in our enthusiasm to embrace the technological we are changing ourselves in order to make the technology look better (39). He asks: "[i]f you can have a conversation with a simulated person presented by an AI program, can you tell how far you've let your sense of personhood degrade in order to make the illusion work for you?" (Lanier 32). He also warns that if we lose the finitude of the circle of empathy "we lose our own center and identity" (Lanier 38).

In understanding ourselves as differently configured it is understandable why some might be inclined to the extremes, taking up techno-utopian and techno-dystopian ideas, but as Herbrechter states "bemoaned "decentred subjects" are not only the product of post-humanizing technologies alone, but are an integral part of modernity as such" (111). Instead of viewing our relationship with technology in such black and white dystopian views there is another view, and I suggest we instead need to take up Braidotti's call "for resistance to both the fatal attraction of nostalgia and the fantasy of transhumanist and other techno-utopias" (90). It is unrealistic to assume that our relationship with technology will not continue to develop and evolve – and in doing so the nature and fabric of what makes a human "human" will continue to come under debate. As Toffoletti states, "the categories of embodied existence collide with virtual experience so that the two are no longer separable" (29).

The posthuman subjectivity emerging from Etyme and myself is one that acknowledges our ability to act within the game as a form of "entanglement." Barad claims entities are not distinct but are "entangled" and lack self-contained existence. Barad's work explores the notion of phenomena as "the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting 'components'" (148). In Barad's terms, the human does not operate outside or aside from technology. Instead, rather than two distinct categories of subject and object

"inter"acting, components "intra"act, meaning that the ability to act emerges from within entanglements rather than from outside of them. Responsibility is distributed and agency emerges as an ability to act within a certain context. As such our embodied awareness is "extended" beyond the "boundaries" of our skin, but this is not a new phenomenon. We have always been more than only "ourselves" and are constituted by everything around us, rather than being a static of stable "self" (Herbrechter 328). To a certain extent, understanding ourselves as entangled entities already implies a level of post-anthropocentrism (and therefore posthumanism) if, in our acceptance that we are constantly being shaped and formed by our intra-actions with "others," we also accept that they are a part of us, rather than merely being an "extension" or "addition." This destabilises the human as the centre of such encounters and instead views each component as equal, or, indeed, inseparable, and takes us into the realms of posthumanism as we accept that our "individuality" is in fact emergent and dependent on the contexts surrounding us.

In my posthuman subjectivity with Etyme, the fluctuation between the "me" and "she" is constant, a we/she/me/I negotiation that never quite stabilises, and I have written about these experiences elsewhere (see Wilde and Evans). From a posthuman perspective, and drawing on Barad's work in this area, the sense of difference that occurs when an "I" or "she" is employed in fieldnotes is not something that separates "subject" from "object" or "self" from "other" but is in fact a material-discursive practice of boundary making which only occurs through the entanglements of components. As Barad states, "[i]ndividuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating" (ix). As such the idea of the "human" as a separate entity, removed from or "pre-existing" society, culture, others and technologies, is flawed. However, through our specific intra-actions with other entities in specific contexts, a particular set of potentials emerges and this creates a sense of "individuality" amongst components. Thus, the "I" that appears within the fieldnotes is contextual, and the sense of agency experienced is also contextual. What I can do in-game is only possible through the avatar, and vice versa, and agency is therefore not a trait that we possess, but instead is an enactment, a "doing" or "being" (Barad 178). My feelings therefore emerge through our intra-action with each other, and the mutual ability to affect and be affected by that which is "outside" of our "selves."

These subjectivities and entanglements are highly specific, and my imagination entwines with Etyme's characteristics to allow different individualities to emerge, as demonstrated in the following:

> *When I log in I watch Etyme for a while, not for the first time inspecting her animate body. The avatars in WoW aren't usually completely still – if you stop controlling them they do not freeze, statue-like, but instead stop, human-like, with some small movements, some restless presence at play behind them. Etyme always strikes me as somewhat haughty when I watch her, a bit aloof with a somewhat bored demeanour. In a way I find her actions kind of… cute. It's kind of like she is waiting for me to come*

and adventure or play with her. She's not keen on the standing around admiring how good we look – there are things to be done out there!

In the above fieldnote I explore the feelings that I hold towards Etyme, viewing her not merely as object but as a subject who enables my becoming as I too enable hers. I do not see her as subservient but as possessing her own traits, abilities, and, crucially, desires. Moreover, I write about Etyme with a very apparent fondness and sense of intimacy, calling her "cute" and explaining her as having a life of her own. A posthuman viewpoint emerges if we consider the characterisation of Etyme as having arisen from our entanglement. Although the avatar is referred to as separate from the self in this section of fieldnotes (through use of words such as she, her, and her name) I also refer to how good "we" look. Furthermore, as Barad argues, phenomena are the intra-action between elements, but without the one, the other one does not exist. Phenomena are the "ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting components" where "phenomena are material-discursive, [and] no priority is given to either materiality or discursivity; neither one stands outside the other" (Barad 33 and 177). Applying this to the context of *World of Warcraft*, it is through the intermingling of avatar and gamer that certain qualities come to light. As such, in this scenario it might be suggested that the shifting of the avatar body that is read by me as a "bored" and "haughty" demeanour demonstrates one way in which this characterisation becomes an enactment or posthuman subjectivity that "emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating" (Barad ix). Neither the movements nor the interpretation of them operate individually in this context and there could be argued to be no inherent division between the "material" movement and the "discursive" reading of them.

However, my feelings about Etyme are not always experienced in "positive" ways, as at times the agency that Etyme has jars with my perceptions of the subjectivity that we hold together. The below fieldnote, taken in response to the in-game responsibility of guarding a particular territory, does not seem to suggest an affection or equality between us:

Etyme completely pisses me off in this moment. We are diligently keeping watch making sure there are no enemy players coming to attack us, or kill us as we attempt to claim these territories. I am engrossed in my own guarding of the landscape and in the affection that I am feeling towards my pet whose stern gaze seems to match that of mine. Suddenly, I notice that Etyme is displaying the usual signs that she does when left unattended. This time, rather than seeing her behaviour as an alluring aloofness (which I know is an act) I am frustrated with her. We are waiting, diligent and alert, on edge and present in the moment ready for attack. Yet her physical presence reflects none of this, her body is bored and I am annoyed. I tap the keyboard to move her, to shake her out of this state.

The feelings of annoyance captured above are captured through my language – being "pissed off" with Etyme – but also through my in-game actions. Annoyed at the avatar's apparent lack of interest in the game scenario, I actively seek to control her attitude through "controlling" the avatar body

and "shaking her out of this state" by adjusting her physicality. Whereas the first fieldnote demonstrates fondness and a sense of equality, recognising life and vitality in Etyme, this fieldnote could be argued to fall into a humanist and anthropocentric attitude, the "human" exerting control over the "avatar."

However, again the possibilities for action are entirely emergent within the preset conditions of the game. My annoyance only emerges in line with the "external" factors – the game, the avatar, the imagery, the situation, the story – and therefore this affect that drives me to action is in itself not "owned" by "me" as an individual entity. Rather, the ways in which the gamer is influenced and implicated in the webs of connection with "others" within the game, guided by quests, non-playing characters, and by the avatar or game environment, demonstrates the affective attachments and networks at play. Rather than demonstrating "self-referential disciplinary purity" (Braidotti 145) this creates a form of (posthuman) subjectivity that instead "reshapes the identity of humanistic practices, by stressing heteronomy and multi-faceted relationality" (Braidotti 145) through the implication of different affects and the actions they enable. From this perspective we can view our entanglements as the lack of an "independent, self contained existence" (Barad ix). Any affects are an indication of this, the ability of that which would traditionally be seen as "external" to become "internalised" through bodily-cognitive reactions reiterates the instability of such binaries in the first place. Accordingly, posthuman subjectivity is a mutual construction – more than just inter-acting with an "other" this builds a subjectivity that is intra-dependent on other components.

However, there are often times when this intra-dependence does not feel comfortable.

> *In the battleground I'm struggling with Etyme. The one thing that I really dislike about her is her voice. She's usually silent, but whenever she does speak it is so reprimanding… I don't like her voice. I don't think it suits her, or me. It seems to belong to some third person that isn't Etyme and it isn't me, and to be frank I'm not sure there is room for a third entity here. It jolts me out of my easy relationship with her, our companionable silence, which suits us so well the rest of the time, is disrupted when she reprimands me in this way – and so loudly and publicly! Not that anyone else can actually hear, but it's as embarrassing as if it were a public declaration.*

> *"I don't have a target!" She points out, as if I were stupid.*

> *"I neeeed to target something first" she tells me, when I am trying to tell her to attack and she doesn't have an enemy engaged. I mean come on Etyme, you're surrounded! Take your pick! And this is an issue of agency – sometimes in-game she will decide to engage but mostly it is down to me. I still expect her to have some level of autonomy, which is odd.*

*"I CAN'T carry anymore!" she hotly declares when her bags are full –
full of other junk I have crammed in there. OK, this one is kind of fair
enough, and actually serves to make me feel almost guilty. And stupid.*

*"That spell isn't ready yet" she mutters, or sometimes, more believably:
"not ready."*

The above fieldnote makes my discomfort with Etyme's "individuality" apparent and demonstrates this external voice is disruptive precisely through the break that it provides in the sense of self or subjectivity in the game. Whilst it is apparent to me that Etyme has a different body to my own, and this does not trouble me, nor do I think that her body should be mine or look like mine, the voice seems to aggravate me entirely. Furthermore, the sense that she is "telling me off" puts me on the defensive for what I am doing and thus seems to break me from my coalition with her. The affective experience of being "jolted" from my relationship with Etyme is made sense of through emotions of annoyance. This annoyance then also enters into an affective network that brings about further feelings of embarrassment, guilt and stupidity, again emphasising a sense of responsibility towards Etyme. The fieldnote demonstrates the complex feelings and affects that arise between avatar and gamer, often neglected from academic accounts of gaming. Further, the fieldnote starts explore the negotiation of agency in intimate relationships with technology as being "posthuman", where actions are distributed amongst intra-acting agents.

I would argue that there is no such thing as autonomy or agency in a posthuman subjectivity; as Hayles states, in the posthuman view "conscious agency has never been "in control." In fact, the very illusion of control bespeaks a fundamental ignorance about the nature of the emergent processes through which consciousness, the organism, and the environment are constituted" (288). However, this is not how it *feels* in terms of how we make sense of our actions. I would suggest that we still feel, for the most part, as though we *do* have agency and autonomy and that our choices are our own, even if we know that they are in fact socially organised, culturally influenced and distributed across a range of factors. What the above fieldnote demonstrates is actually how I have become aware and complicit in the distributed agency which I experience in the game – I do not claim for it all to be "me" but am aware of her ability to act and, indeed, want her to do so. Consequently, rather than viewing technology as merely a "tool" for human use, we can conceptualise the relationship between biology and technology as a "relational ontology." Relational ontology, as suggested by Barad "does not take the boundaries of any of the objects or subjects of these studies for granted but rather investigates the material-discursive boundary-making practices that produce "objects" and "subjects" and other differences out of, and in terms of, a changing relationality" (93). Such a relationality implies a more rhizomatic relationship between human and machine, as each is dependent on the other in order to emerge as an entity, rather than one being seen as superior. This may be seen as a radical claim, but acknowledging this intra-dependence is necessary in order to move beyond anthropocentric worldviews.

Returning to Banks' spectrum of player-avatar relationships, this sense of mixed agency avatar and gamer aligns with what Banks terms the avatar-as-symbiote. Banks describes this relationship as the intertwinement of avatar and gamer, involving "mixed player and avatar agencies." Although this relationship most accurately aligns with my own experiences with Etyme, I believe that a posthuman account extends the conception of the experience between avatar and gamer to actually claim an emergent subjectivity. From this view agency is again, as per Barad, an action rather than an attribute that is "owned" (178).

My feelings for and about Etyme therefore fluctuate and change in response to the situations we find ourselves in. I am strongly affected by and through her body, but I am also emotionally attached to her as subject.

> *I line her up for a photo and have a flash of joy thinking "God, could I love this girl any more?" it's a rush of affection which isn't completely abnormal or irregular but it catches me in that moment as I am documenting her. I'm amused at the image I take when Etyme gives an irregular smile, as though really posing for a photo or making light of the situation herself. She returns to her haughty self not long after – making the ears even more amusing as they snuggle cutely with her ponytail between, but I don't manage another picture before they fade.*

In this moment, "photographing" Etyme is actually taking a screenshot of her in the game. This demonstrates my desire to keep a record of her in much the same way as I would photograph a human loved one, whilst simultaneously taking responsibility for "lining her up" for the photo. The captured image is therefore again a demonstration of our distributed agency – me taking the screenshot, her providing the smile – and my feelings of affection, love, and amusement that are evident in the fieldnote speak of our bond.

Conclusion

The first aim of this paper was to address a gap in current literature surrounding games studies. Whilst the avatar-gamer relationship is seen as important to player experiences of games and some researchers have gathered data from players to analyse (e.g. Jin; Banks) there has been a lack of researchers who have shared their own in-depth accounts, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. MacCallum-Stewart; Sundén). In order to demonstrate the wealth and depth of experiences that emerge from the avatar-gamer I have drawn on my own experiences of playing *World of Warcraft* with my Blood Elf hunter avatar, Etyme. I have shown a range of responses to Etyme, characterised from affection to annoyance, and have signified how these feelings demonstrate my understanding of Etyme as a subject. Further, I have considered how these feelings become part of a wider web of affect through inciting additional feelings such as embarrassment and guilt.

The feelings experienced have demonstrated our ability to affect and be affected through games and within the avatar-gamer relationship. Having

considered previous analyses of the avatar-gamer, the second aim of this paper was to propose an alternate analysis which made sense of this in a less humanistic and hierarchical way. I therefore used these fieldnotes to suggest that the avatar-gamer is an example of posthuman subjectivity. We have always reached beyond the boundaries of our own skin, have always formed relationships with human and non-human others. The posthuman view acknowledges and embraces the blurring which occurs between self, other and environment, and accepts the fact that we are entangled beings. Accordingly, this accepts that "[d]igital technologies are part of this world and of our worldview; they are part of what shapes us materially and ontologically as embodied subjects" (Shinkle 30) and "[t]he relational capacity of the posthuman subject is not confined within our species, but it includes all non-anthropomorphic elements" (Braidotti 60). As such, extending empathy, care, affection and even annoyance to non-human technological "others" is an important step in acknowledging their importance, agency, and affectivity, in order to more honestly account for our own intra-dependence on and with them, and what Braidotti describes as the "humbling experience of not-Oneness" (100).

As Pepperell states, if we do not see ourselves as separate from others in ways traditionally posed by humanist subjectivity, this can alter our treatment of others, and this relates to both human and non-human others (172). I suggest that the intimate feelings shown in the above fieldnotes that emerge from my intra-action with Etyme demonstrate the first step towards a more relational and rhizomatic understanding of the intra-dependence between human and machine, turning away from an anthropocentric hierarchy in which machines are viewed as objects unworthy of our affective and/or emotional responses.

Works Cited

Ash, James. "Attention, Videogames and the Retentional Economies of Affective Amplification." *Theory, Culture & Society* 9.6 (2012): 3-26.

---. "Technologies of Captivation: Videogames and the attunement of affect." *Body and Society* 19.1 (2013): 27-51.

Banks, Jaime. "Object, Me, Symbiote, Other: A social typology of player-avatar relationships." *First Monday* 20.2 (2015). http://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v20i2.5433

Banks, Jaime and Bowman, Nicholas. "Avatars are (sometimes) people too: Linguistic indicators of parasocial and social ties in player–avatar relationships." *New Media & Society* 18.7 (2016): 1257-1276.

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway.* London: Duke University Press, 2007.

Belman, Jonathan and Flanagan, Mary. "Designing Games to Foster Empathy." *Cognitive Technology* 14.2 (2010): 5-15.

Blackman, Lisa. *Immaterial Bodies*. London: Sage, 2012.

Braidotti, Rosi. *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

Braithwaite, Andrea. "'Seriously, get out': Feminists on the forums and the War(craft) on women." *New Media and Society* 16.5 (2014): 703-718.

Brehm, Audrey L. "Navigating the feminine in massively multiplayer online games: gender in *World of Warcraft*." *Frontiers in Psychology* 4.1 (2013) doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00903

Carlson, Rebecca and Corliss, Jonathan. "Rubble Jumping: From Paul Virilio's Techno-Dromology to Video Games and Distributed Agency." *Culture, Theory and Critique* 48.2 (2007): 161-174.

Cerra, Alison and James, Christina. *Identity Shift*. Indianapolis: John Wiley & Sons, 2012.

Collins, Karen. "Making gamers cry: mirror neurons and embodied interaction with game sound." *Proceedings of the 6th Audio Mostly Conference,* 2011. http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/2095667.2095673.

Corneliussen, Hilde G. "World of Warcraft as a Playground for Feminism." *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Eds. Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg. London: MIT Press, 2011. 63-86.

Crick, Timothy. "The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming." *Games and Culture* 6.3 (2011): 259-269.

Eklund, Lina. "Doing gender in cyberspace: The performance of gender by female World of Warcraft players." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 17.3 (2011): 323-342.

Emerson, Robert M., Fretz, Rachel I. and Shaw, Linda L. "Participant Observation and Fieldnotes." *Handbook of Ethnography*. Eds. Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland and Lyn Lofland. London: Sage, 2007. 352-368.

Filiciak, Miroslaw. "Hyperidentities." *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Eds. Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron. London: Routledge, 2003. 87-102.

Gee, James Paul. "Video Games and Embodiment." *Games and Culture* 3.3-4 (2008): 253-263.

Grant, Alec, Short, Nigel P. and Turner, Lydia. "Introduction: Storying Life and Lives." *Contemporary British Autoethnography*. Eds. Nigel Short, Lydia Turner and Alec Grant. Rotterdam: Sense Publisher, 2013. 1-16.

Gregg, Melissa and Seigworth, Gregory J. *The Affect Theory Reader*. London: Duke University Press, 2010.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman*. London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Healey, Gareth. "Proving Grounds: Performing Masculine Identities in Call of Duty: Black Ops." *Game Studies* 16.2 (2016). http://gamestudies.org/1602/articles/healey.

Herbrechter, Stefan. "Posthumanism, subjectivity, autobiography." *Subjectivity* 5.3 (2012): 327-347.

---. *Posthumanism*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Higgin, Tanner. "Blackless Fantasy:The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games." *Games and Culture* 4.1 (2009): 3-26.

Hillis, Ken. "The avatar and online affect." *Networked Affect*. Eds. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2015. 75-88.

Huh, Searle and Williams, Dmitri. "Dude looks like a lady: Online game gender swapping." *Online worlds: Convergence of the real and the virtual*. Ed. William Sims Bainbridge. Guildford: Springer, 2009. 161-174.

Jin, Seung Annie. "'My Avatar Behaves Well and This Feels Right': Ideal and Ought Selves in Video Gaming." *Social Behavior and Personality* 39.9 (2011): 1175-1182.

Kücklich, Julian. "From Interactivity to Playability: Why Digital Games Are Not Interactive." *Digital Gameplay*. Ed. Nate Garrelts. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2005. 232-248.

Lahti, Martti. "As We Become Machines Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games." *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Eds. Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron. London: Routledge, 2003. 157-170.

Langer, Jessica. "The familiar and the foreign: Playing postcolonialism in world of Warcraft." *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Eds. Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg. London: MIT Press, 2011. 87-108.

Lanier, Jaron. *You Are Not A Gadget*. London: Penguin Books, 2011.

MacCallum-Stewart, Esther. ""Take That, Bitches!" Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives." *Games Studies* 14.2 (December 2014). 8 March 2016. http://gamestudies.org/1402/articles/maccallumstewart.

Martin, Paul. "Embodiment in skateboarding videogames." *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 9.2 (2013): 315-327.

O'Riordan, Kate. "Playing with Lara in virtual space." *Technospaces - Inside the New Media*. Ed. Sally Munt. London: Continuum, 2001. 224-238.

Ottenberg, Simon. "Thirty Years of Fieldnotes: Changing Relationships to the Text." *Fieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology*. Ed. Roger Sanjek. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990. 139-160.

Pearce, Celia and Artemesia. *Communities of Play*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009.

Pepperell, Robert. *The Posthuman Condition*. Bristol: Intellect, 2003.

Pulos, Alexis. "Confronting Heteronormativity in Online Games: A Critical Discourse Analysis of LGBTQ Sexuality in *World of Warcraft*." *Games and Culture* 8.2 (2013): 77-97.

Ruckenstein, Minna. "Playing Nintendogs: Desire, distributed agency and potentials of prosumption." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 15.3 (2015): 351-370.

Shinkle, Eugenie. "Corporealis ergo sum: affective response in digital games." *Digital Gameplay: essays on the nexus of game and gamer*. Ed. Nate Garrelts. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2005. 21-35.

Sundén, Jenny. "Desires at Play: On Closeness and Epistemological Uncertainty." *Games and Culture* 7.2 (2012): 164-184.

Sundén, Jenny and Sveningsson, Malin. *Gender and Sexuality in Online Game Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Toffoletti, Kim. *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls*. London: I B Tauris & Co., 2007.

Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together*. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

Wilde, Poppy and Evans, Adrienne. "Empathy at Play: Embodying Posthuman Subjectivities in Gaming." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* (2017). https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517709987

WoWpedia. "Choosing a class." Gamepedia. 2018. Web. 26 May 2018. https://wow.gamepedia.com/Choosing_a_class.

WoWpedia. "Choosing a race." Gamepedia. 2018. Web. 26 May 2018. https://wow.gamepedia.com/Choosing_a_race.