gamevironments

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narrative

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Spirits in the Aether:
Digital Ghosts in Final Fantasy XIV

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Abstract

The rhetoric of ghosts has long accompanied electronically mediated technologies, such as the telegraph and the telephone. In the digital age, massively-multiplayer role playing game avatars, such as those found in *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn*, can be seen as continuations of this tradition of haunting as a means of negotiating anxieties incurred by navigating a rapidly changing world. The avatars' ability to occupy liminal planes of existence; manifesting on a server, within the game environment, and acting upon the body of the player, is reminiscent of prior conceptions of ghosts. Ghosts, like avatars, move between limbo and the embodied world and are consigned to repetition to complete their unfinished tasks in order to move on to the afterlife. Using multimodal semiotic discourse analysis, this research explicates ghostly themes that emerged over hundreds of hours of gameplay by an intrinsic/expert researcher and by reviewing individual scenes and gameplay mechanics by two extrinsic/novice researchers. These themes were conveyed through narrative, visual content, and gameplay mechanics, making them properly multimodal in their execution, setting them apart from literary precursors.

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In the augmented reality born out of the internet age, there seems to be less distinction between presence and absence, consciousness and unconsciousness, and more focus on how identities exist across multiple, simultaneous planes (Boyer 2007). In our shared rhetoric, users of new media depict themselves as transcending time, space, and materiality (Hillis 1999). This tendency adds new complexity to the otherworldly, or transcendent quality that has historically been associated with new technologies (Turkle 2011, Sullivan, Kosloff and Greenberg 2013, Rushkoff 2013). Identity and presence are continually reified in terms that incorporate our increasingly technological landscape.

For the gamers who engage in massively multiplayer online role playing games (hereafter MMORPGs), the conception of new media use as a mechanism for spiritual communication is particularly pronounced. In the following paper, we explore the presence of spiritual discourses in MMORPGs by concentrating specifically on the game world of *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn* (hereafter *FF14*).

At the turn of the last millennium, Bloom (1999, 226) highlighted the continued popularity in "a general belief in the paranormal" that he proposed was a ripe area for cultural studies research given the increasing prominence of technology. Some researchers addressed this gap by interpreting new media phenomenon in religious terms (Geraci 2012, Stolow 2010). This is understandable as Kern, Forman and Gil-Egui (2013, 3) note that even "in an increasingly secularized society there is still belief in an afterlife," and as Noble (1997) points out, technology has for centuries been ontologically, theologically, and epistemologically tied to spiritual and religious practices. Indeed, new media and technology scholars today see that religious doctrine and digital technologies often provide similar platforms for the exploration of human transcendence where the possibility can be treated factually and attested to by the experience of the individual (Stolow 2010). Some scholars note the interpretation of cyberspace as a celestial equivalent (Wertheim 2000) or as a liminal space for identity expression. Life online thereby becomes,

> "an inevitable extension of our age-old capacity and need to dwell… on other mythic planes, if only periodically, as well as this earthly one" (Benedikt 1994, 8).

While we accept the proposition that spirituality and technology are inherently intertwined, this paper avoids the confines of a religious approach to the spirit and instead chooses to also examine the online gaming environment in terms of the

"paranormal and the occult" as Bloom (1999, 226) originally proposed. We choose this in part because we believe that, like the fascination with the paranormal, technology is better understood today not as affirming religious belief, but rather as problematizing it. In cyberspace, a new form of life takes shape that is situated not beyond, but beside the living world in what Jurgenson (2011) calls an "augmented reality." The online game environment is a liminal space that affords its users an opportunity to extend, but not escape, their corporeal dilemma. Likewise, our research explores the apparitional image of the spirit that is not transcendent, as religion promises, but rather restrained, and consequently most akin to the popular construction of the ghost (Blazan 2007, Buse and Stott 1999).

Though some draw from phantasmagoric belief (Britzolakis 1999), and some from the occultist literature of those who research the supernatural with genuine interest (Bloom 1999) the unifying characteristic of all ghostly narratives is the notion that the ghost is an entity caught between two or more planes of existence. As Luckhurst (1999, 52) says "ghosts haunt borders." They are imagined to be "restless" spirits paying out their penance in a purgatorial state (Finucane 1984, 71). This understanding of the ghost led Benjamin to suggest that arcades (or loggias) on buildings are "prime examples of urban phantasmagoria" because like the ghost they straddle the domains of the inside and out (Britzolakis 1999). Derrida traced discourses of the ghost as a liminal entity through the works of Marx and Shakespeare as he postulated his theory of hauntology (del Pilar Blanco and Pereen 2013, Mapp 1999, Parkin-Gounelas 1999). This liminal space is ghostly as it induces

> "The deathlike state of Limbo [that] allows the truth of life, as inevitably fatal... to be understood" (Dalton-Brown 2011, 333).

Apart from its religious intonations limbo, is an apt comparison for the borderline spaces that ghosts are known to occupy. Dyer (1964) notes that limbo can be understood in several ways, but is most commonly understood, even in theological terms today, as the limbo imagined by Dante Alighieri. In Dante's view, the souls trapped in limbo are between heaven and hell, occupying an interstitial space where they suffer a permanent sadness brought on by their failure to know the wholeness of the spirit that is experienced only in heaven.

Most significantly, the concept of limbo has been widely contested specifically because it, like the new media iterations of identity that we see in MMORPGS, challenge the dichotomous relationship that humankind has always adopted regarding the concepts of life and death (Dyer 1964, National Catholic Reporter 2004). Similarly, ghosts, from their earliest appearance in theological debates (Finucane 1984), through the establishment of the gothic genre (Parkin-Gounelas 1999), to their modern day depictions in horror films (Natale 2010), represent a disruption in the natural order. For this reason Literary historians Cox and Gilbert (1991) argue that ghost stories do not answer, but elicit existential questions, and in so doing, contend with what Edith Wharton described as the erosion of mystery in society in the wake of scientific discovery. Sconce (1988) contends with this by considering how early communication technologies were rhetorically constructed as mechanical replacements for the spiritualist mediums who practiced séances in the Victorian era. The telegraph, for example, was believed by "American spiritualists" to have the power to intercept messages being sent by the spirit world (Sconce 1998, 212), while Thomas Watson, partner to Alexander Graham Bell, "developed an interest in using telephone technology to contact the dead" (Sconce 1998, 212). Because of the ethereal way wireless radio signals are transmitted, they were perceived to be traveling to the listener via the liminal

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space that literally and figuratively separates the Earth and the heavens. As technologies enhanced and obviated traditional forms of communication the public became unsettled (Sconce 1998, Summers 1994, Briggs 2012). The

> "boundaries of time, space, nation and body no longer seemed to apply..."
> challenging
> "...the security and stability of an older social order where body and mind had been for the most part co-terminus" (Sconce 1998, 214).

Like the wireless technologies, cyberspace invokes the same sensation of a perpetually changing, persistent world that occupies an intermediary plane between the material and immaterial worlds. (Hillis 1999). As such, cyberspace makes for an ideal environment for ghostly presence. Horror genre games, explicitly use ghosts and haunting as themes (Kirkland 2009a, 2009b) while game scholars explicate religious themes present in the narratives of mainstream and indie video games (Campbell and Price 2014). Leeder (2009) notes that both Peters (1999) and Kitler (1999) explicitly tie the ghost to technology in light of its popular function as an archive of identity and historical belief. In this vein "digital ghosts" are already being conceived of, not just metaphorically, but as digital repositories for the embodied self, functioning in accordance with the traces of identity that online engagement leave behind to haunt us (Steinhart 2007, Cunningham 2011). But according to Leeder (2009), haunting is not just about remembering the past, but in particular, the trauma of the past. This is why we contend that in the online game environment ghosts are not just narrative devices but coherent representations of the self that echo what McLuhan theorized as the trauma of psychic amputation that accompanies the extension of self through technology (Taylor 2002).

The enchantment of gaming is ingrained in the act of crossing the digital threshold (Thompson 2012), but to cross the threshold one must extend one's self by creating an

avatar. Avatars then, as cybernetic extensions of the self, evidence the corporeal limitations of the player (Biocca 1997, Paulos and Canny 2001) stimulating anxiety about embodiment and existence in the new millennium. This is compounded by the preponderance of supernatural themes in the game world (Thompson 2012, Geraci 2012) and while avatars afford access to these realms, they do so in remedial ways; often illustrating Freud's notion of the uncanny through their restricted movement and facial expression (Kirkland 2009b). However we argue that ghosts can be found even in games not explicitly meant to invoke supernatural horror, or their failure to accurately mimic the real. Even if they were to attain perfect mimicry, even if they were to afford transcendence, avatars, by their very existence haunt.

Previous research on digital gaming suggests the possibility of in-game, as well as experiential hauntings. The deletion of a gaming avatar after a server shutdown has been described as a "kind of death" or feeling of a "ghost limb" by those participating in virtual worlds (Pearce and Artemesia 2009). Gamer parlance features the term "spiritual successor" to mean a new game developed by the same creator of a previous title, or which displays features heavily influenced by prior works (Ladd and Harcourt 2005). Customizable avatar research, where the player may change the appearance of the playable character, typically focuses sharply on "living" avatars and their relationship to identity construction. Both single-player and multiplayer avatar studies have investigated gender (Eklund 2011, Hayes 2007), morality (Schrier 2012, Wolfendale 2007), and identity tourism (Huh and Williams 2010, McDonald 2012, Nakamura 2002) in this vein. Pearce, writing with her avatar Artemesia (2009), describes the intense communal, almost spiritual experience of *Myst Online: Uru* (2003) players gathering together online to await the shutdown of the game servers, and later mourning the loss of their avatars, even as their physical selves persist. Though the servers were lost, the

community continued on by moving successively to different platforms (There.com (2003), Second Life (2003)). On these new platforms, avatars were recreations rather than copies. On new platforms, each avatar instantiation took on unique characteristics, not shared by avatars in the previous iteration, even when made by the same player. "Dead" avatars took on (after)-lives of their own as they moved across digital spaces.

Based on the understanding of ghosts, limbo, and the game environment that we have articulated above, we suggest that video games continue the tradition of enlivening a society undergoing hyperactive technological development with a return to mystery and fantasy just as ghost stories and spiritual rhetoric have done for previous media. Our research contributes to the tradition of mapping relationships between technology and spirituality by considering the limitations of technological extensions within a popular digital platform.

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Methods

Using semiotic discourse analysis in the cultural studies tradition, we examine the phenomena of ghosts online by focusing on virtual worlds depicted in MMORPGs. Our approach to semiotic discourse analysis follows the grounded theory tradition, which requires a researcher to examine their text through intuitive means in order to find patterns repeated to redundancy, which merit subsequent discursive explication (Bryant and Charmaz 2007, Glaser and Straus 1967). Semiotic discourse analysis facilitates in depth analysis of multimodal media (Bateman 2008, Kress 2010), in part through traditional textual analysis, which considers the given dialogue and a reading of it at the linguistic level (Fairclough 1995), but also by examining the non verbal discourses within the media artifact, using a semiotic analysis of the gameplay (van Dijk 1985).

The video game experience cannot be reduced to only text, only visuals, or only

gameplay, making it truly multimodal:

Multimodality describes approaches that understand communication and representation to be more than about language, and which attend to the full range of communicational forms people use--image, gesture, gaze, posture and so on--and the relationships between them (Jewitt 2009, cited in Hoksanova 2012).

Considering video game environments as multimodal artifacts allows for richer analysis that more closely replicates the gaming experience, rather than considering only visuals, only narrative, or only gameplay in an artificially parceled manner. Similarly, semiotic analysis extends the study of discourses beyond just a textual analysis of the game's dialogue and messages, to the discursive elements found in the interaction of play, the rendering of characters through performance, and in accordance with visual studies derived from film analysis (Bordwell and Thompson 2004). These discourses can represent deliberate social dispositions for, or against, presentations of identity being imposed on the player, just as they can respond to particular cultural discourses of the time (Fairclough 1995), both of which are apt for a study of digital ghosts in gaming environments.

Data Collection

For the purpose of our analysis we examine the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn* (2013) (*FF14*) as a gaming environment. While portions of our analysis are derived from gameplay sessions performed, in turns, by each member of the research team, a digital log of extended game play by one author (Neill Hoch) constitutes a substantial portion of the analyzed materials. Neill Hoch played *FF14* for hundreds of hours over a six-month period, from the time the game servers launched in August 2013

until February 2014, acted as a guild organizer, reached the game level cap of 50, and participated in end game raiding (advanced, team-based dungeon and boss fights). She also recorded over fifty hours of gameplay documenting various in-game levels, social interactions, and scenarios, available for later analysis by the research team.

We acknowledge that this research project addresses ghosts in game environments from two perspectives along a continuum. One perspective comes from an intrinsic, expert standpoint, and the other from an extrinsic, novice standpoint. The latter comes from researchers just becoming acclimated with MMORPG culture. This duality in perspective allows us to better address haunting themes through subtleties in game structure and advanced gameplay strategy, as well as more direct, initial impressions and processes of learning to play. Since our intrinsic researcher, Neill Hoch, had already adopted the gamespace as part of her augmented reality (per Jurgenson 2009) she was able to identify the ghostly rhetoric from the viewpoint of a frequent, habitual inhabitant of the environment. For our extrinsic researchers, Kruzan and Appignani, the gamespace was alien, a fresh territory, allowing us the objectivity to identify its other-worldliness.

These two samples may be considered separately in our analysis, though they are defined as the same source text given that the avatar we used for gameplay remained consistent (Neill Hoch's "Polaris," a "Hume" avatar, who somewhat resembles Neill Hoch in physical appearance, and primarily functions as a damage dealing (DPS) class). Finally, it should be noted that Neill Hoch's play sessions with the Polaris avatar were suspended for some months during the research process (February 2014-August 2014) so that play could be later resumed by the group, allowing us to examine the experience of an avatar returning after a significant absence, not an uncommon practice in gaming (Chen 2011). The avatar's temporary absence from the game world reinforces for other

players the notion of ghosts among them, and for us provides a historical component to the identity of the avatar that allowed for interesting discursive study.

Discourses

The ghost is not the spirit that lives in the ether, nor, is it the embodied self that has died, rather the ghost is the spectral image that the spirit projects into the living world in order to be seen (del Pilar Blanco and Pereen 2013). Ghosts are representations of spirits. They are a form of apparition. In our work we operationalize these interchangeable terms- ghost and apparition- by borrowing directly from the definitions used by the society for psychical research. A ghostly apparition is defined as a non-physical entity that appears indistinguishably from the "material figures" with which they interact (Tyrell 1953). The ghost is then the representation of the spirit. But to understand the relationship we posit between the spirit and the ghost, one must also understand how we interpret the relationship between the player (the embodied player) and the avatar. The embodiment of the player limits her ability to inhabit the game world so she operates the avatar as an extension of herself. The avatar, then, serves as a character in the game, thereby affording entry. Significantly, the player is bound to operate the avatar in order to participate in the game world. The corporeal body cannot directly enter the digital environment.

However, where the avatar depends on the player to function, the player exists even when the avatar dies in gameplay or is deleted. Given this one can see that the relational dynamic we imagine between the player and the avatar mirrors the relational dynamic posited by western religion between the spirit and the body. We use the term mirror to explain the comparison we make because like a mirror image, the two dynamics we compare are inverted. Where in religious scripture the material body is a temporary

vessel for the eternal spirit to achieve divinity on Earth; in the gamespace the immaterial avatar functions as a temporary vessel for the physical player to achieve an accomplishment that belongs to the player, not the avatar. In this ghostly form players are capable of haunting the gamespace and the other players who engage with it. But not as a matter of pleasure. They do so largely because, as we will illustrate, the gamespace compels them through the game's replication of a limbo state.

Findings

Ether, Aether, and Crossings

FF14, from its first cutscene onward, is a game about hauntings. It bridges a receding past to an uncertain future, and requires the crossing of multiple planes of existence. After creating an avatar and entering the game space as that avatar, the player is immersed in a complex ontological narrative- what Galloway (2006) calls the "exigetic" moment- that builds as the avatar travels the world of Eorzia, facing trials preoccupied with what was and what could come to be. Within the first few minutes of gameplay, the player learns from a series of preconstructed, cut-scene narratives that her avatar (who is customizable by a number of fantasy races, gender, and appearance) is re-entering a world partially destroyed and then rebuilt in the aftermath an event ambiguously called The Calamity. The world ended, but without its inhabitants dying, opening up the question to their true state of existence. This introduction is narrated through printed text on screen, with light music in the background, and continues to unfold with only clicks of the 'x' button by the player. The narration reveals that the avatar has crossed a literal sea and entered into a new life in search of opportunity.

This new life is one without a concrete history because The Calamity partially erased the memory of Eorzia's population. During *FF14*'s introduction, gameplay involvement is low

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(one must only press 'x'), while narrative unfurling is high. The player must acclimate to the new existence and rhetoric such as, "heroes of light saved the world....and it took the bleedin' memories too," which further demonstrates the necessity of accepting the consequences of a forgotten past. Polaris, our avatar, then takes on the burden of the "fallen" human man, as imagined by some Christian theorists (Noble 1997), in that she must recover knowledge that was once known to her, but is, at present, lost. Her time in Eorzia, like man's time on Earth is theoretically a state of transition aimed only at proving her own virtue (Noble 1997) in order, as Geraci (2012) states, to achieve "transcendent benefits" for the character, and through gameplay for the player. In this context the avatar is ever ghostly given that her goal is to transcend the liminal state she finds herself occupying in a new and unimagined dimension. The Calamity did not universally decimate the culture, technology, or knowledge of Eorzia, but did erase part of its history, and therefore a sense of continuity for the characters. The game's narrative positions them as returning to a world they have forgotten; a world where they are told to interpret their disorientation as a penance for whatever part they played in the collective failure of The Calamity. The avatar arrives in Eorzia with two or three battle skills and the clothes on her back. At the onset of the game, the avatar's personal history is empty, but still she is left with a sense of sadness for her condition, in no way different from the souls that Dante imagines lingering dejectedly in limbo (Dyer 1964). Still, Eorzia is the character's home, and if she is to linger there she is told that she does so as an apparition of her past self.

The crossing of a threshold between the lived experience of the gamer and the virtual world is what Thompson (2012) identifies as the key to the enchantment of gaming. In *FF14* the threshold crossing, where the being transcends into the digital- one that Lash describes as "eroding" (Sandywell 2003, 116) is in fact highlighted as a key feature of the

gaming experience. Adhering to what Galloway (2006) calls the first moment of "gamic action," the opening narration of *FF14* is set to a visual crossing of the sea that coincides with the entrancement the player experiences as they enter the game world for the first time. The idea of crossing the sea at the beginning of *FF14* syncs with the pronounced tie between ghostly media technologies of old and the metaphors of the ocean that accompanied them. In particular the radio- originally a maritime device, was strongly associated with references to what Sconce (1988, 215) calls "the etheric ocean" in the discourses surrounding its spectral quality and malevolent potential. The ocean represents the primal human conception of separation between worlds- the land being the domain of man, and the sea being a separate entity for other ghostly creatures. Later, as Sconce (1998) and Leeder (2009) note, the sea came to symbolize the zone that separated not only physical places, but time zones as well. For Sconce, identifying the "etheric ocean" with radio emphasizes wireless media as having the power to allow humans to transcend time and space. Wireless technologies were an instrument to connect with the spirit world. This notion has predictably resurfaced with the introduction of all new internet-based technologies. The notion of the ether is a common reference to spiritual worlds shared by MMORPGs and rhetoric surrounding early radio and the internet (Sconce 1998). In *FF14*, "the Aethernet" allows avatars to travel between distant map locations via crystals located in town centers. Before accessing fast-travel via the Aether, however, the avatar must cross the sea by more modest means.

In the opening scene of *FF14*, the narrative, and rhetoric used to build it, additionally relies upon the metaphor of light and dark across a divide in order to set a dichotomy of good (that which is current) and bad (the past), and distinguishing between the heroes (the players and their avatars) and villains. In contrast to this use of grand metaphor, the

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game also refers to "bleedin' memories," which can be seen as a deliberate colloquialism in an otherwise serene space, bringing an embodied component back into the narrative, further obscuring the exact state in which the avatar exists. This combination of fantasy tropes and casual speech reminds the avatar's physical counterpart, the player, of her vulnerability as a corporeal being. Spaces within the game are permeable, as is the boundary between the game and reality. Still within the first few minutes of gameplay, text reads "people might fear for the future if they can't rightly recall the past." This verbiage emphasizes the unique intermediary existence a player occupies in the game.

Consequently, the digital gaming platform itself functions as a state of limbo. The gamespace is neither a physical world, nor is it a fully virtual world, where the player exists apart from her body. In order to engage the gamespace successfully, players must focus their offline bodies on the task of adroitly manipulating their controllers in order to successfully control their avatars. The focus that this requires demands that the body attend the virtual space by absenting itself from any other social function offline by embracing a state of self imposed exile from the society of those around them in the embodied world. Lacan classed this type of exile a "social death," which Dalton-Brown (2011, 333) reads as a form of "in-betweeness, a form of living death" that she terms limbo. It is limbo because the absence from the embodied social world is only a precursor – a practice – for the absolute absence from the physical world that is yet to come.

Mason, Bohringer, Borisoff, and Birch (2004) demonstrate that with current technology, one may only need a brain-computer interface to interact with digital games, taking the liminal element of game play even further. Bowker and Tuffin (2002), and Pearce and Artemesia (2009) include accounts of people with disabilities using game environment

technologies and their largely-positive attitudes towards game participation in light of their disabled embodiment. Actions of the individual player are transposed across the divide into the virtual environment. The identity of the player is split between their representation online and their corporeal self offline, but that split is never complete, nor is it ever unified. After hours of raiding, the player's hands tire and underperformance is berated within the game. Corporal changes offline decrease the desirability of the avatar. This divide constitutes another form of existential limbo in which the player finds herself

> "dwelling instead in a 'melancholy' state that may repress but never fully 'exorcise' the pain occasioned by the violent processes of modernity" (Galvan 2014, 325).

Augmentation and Sensory Engagement

Sensory awareness and the orientation towards survival are highlighted in the design and early narrative of the game. When acclimating to the gamespace, players are at first uniquely attuned to their body's clumsiness. Wrists, hands, and fingers are limiting, and then liberating, in that the avatar's movements are carefully orchestrated through human hands, but the threat of unskilled, slow, or tired hands threatens the success of gameplay. As gameplay progresses (within ten minutes for Appignani and Kruzan) sensory awareness transforms. The player no longer concentrates on the discomforts held in the body, but rather enters a flow state (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi 1990, Cowley, Charles, Black and Hickey 2008, Jones 1998) where motion becomes fluid, without second guessing where one's hands should sit around the controller. One focuses on the virtual space as if it is a construction of the mind, itself. When the player's attention is relocated, and projected, into the body of the avatar a complex shift occurs. Sensation is no longer strictly corporeal, but digital, and sometimes visual. For example,

the avatar expresses an emphasis breath when shocked. The player comes to breathe at the same moment as the avatar. While breath may seem like a subtle aspect of the game's design, it highlights the compare/contrast relationship between one's offline existence and online existence. Breath (both symbolically and literally) has come to signify life, or vitality, in both existences, even if on a subconscious level. The player comes to mimic this gasp themselves.

Carruthers (2007) considers online and offline bodily representations of people with disabilities, but the comparison is also quite acute with the online and offline experiences of *FF14*. He notes that humans are adept at creating physical distinctions between what they experience sensually and what they imagine themselves to experience. In the gamespace of *FF14*, both Appignani and Kruzan experienced a detachment from physical, bodily experience as they became more and more attuned to the experiences of their avatar. As Carruthers (2007) notes, the visual messages being received by the players ultimately trumped their haptic experiences until the sensations they experienced as tactile were in fact only responses to what they were seeing happen to their avatar on screen. This response illustrates how enmeshed the player becomes in their liminal state of embodiment.

In a sense we experienced what Heim (1993, 89) postulated prior to the consideration of avatars, that when our observation is

> "suspended in computer space, the cybernaut leaves the prison of the body and emerges in a world of digital sensation."

The mind of the player expands (extends in McLuhan's (1964) vernacular) to allow for digital sensations. Where a ghost can move through a wall with ease, free from physical

pain, the avatar can be shot through with magic or struck with a blade and remain relatively unaffected. Like a ghost, an avatar, experiences sensations, which one would chiefly experience in the body, without a direct physical consequence or reaction (Tyrell 1953). Nonetheless, the player gasps when the avatar gasps.

Gated Spaces/Liminal Spaces

The interstitial state that players reckon with in order to experience the game environment is replicated in the mechanics of the game, such as how space is restricted and opened. As the avatar progresses in the world, new dungeons and free-roam areas become available for exploration. There are two ways in which such areas are gated to prevent avatars from entering too soon. Essentially, players must earn the right, with time, commitment, and skill, to enter new areas of the world. Instanced dungeons, which are tackled in four to eight person parties, cannot be entered until the avatar reaches a minimum level. For example, level 12 avatars are prohibited from registering to enter a level 15 dungeon, even if they form a party with higher level avatars willing to shoulder the burden (a practice called "carrying"). Such hard gating measures are typical of such games and prevent frustrations when the low-level character cannot complete assigned tasks. However, *FF14* also makes use of softer gating measures to prevent avatars from moving too quickly through the world. Monsters in open areas annihilate those avatars who are not sufficiently leveled.

During one play session, Appignani and Kruzan created a new level 1 avatar. When exiting the city and exploring the surrounding environments, they were able to defeat a few monsters, despite the avatar being low-level and their relative inexperience with the MMORPG genre. However, upon trying to travel deeper into the open environment, a more powerful monster killed the avatar, forcing them to teleport back to the home city.

Such soft gates reinforce the notion that the game environment exists beyond the immediately visible, but the avatar is shackled until they have paid proper penance in leveling up and acquiring better equipment.

Due to the game's design the player is stuck in limbo at each level in the same way that the ghost is stuck in between the living and dead. The avatar, like the ghost, faces objectives they must complete in order to transcend into other spaces beyond the immediately accessible. The ghost is not stuck between worlds, between states, arbitrarily. It has objectives that require its intercedence into the world of the living (Tyrell 1953). Like the ghost, the avatar is assigned tasks to gain experience, and raise her level, which permits the transversal of boundaries, not only in advancing the narrative, but opening up opportunities for additional play. This follows concisely the inverted parallel of virtual reality and the living world. The player attempts to convince both other avatars and non-playable characters (NPCs) within the virtual world to help them, just as the ghost traditionally seeks aid from those in the living world (Tyrell 1953). While the ghost reaches from the spirit world into that of the living, the player reaches from the living world into the virtual.

Repetitive acts of seeking information also reinforce the avatar's limbo state. This limbo is highlighted when communication must take place at two planes at once: first is the plane of the individual player within the game structure, the second is the individual player reaching across the digital environment to interact with other players. In this way, the player is reminded of the fact that she is communicating across planes of existence; one artificial and pre-scripted (NPCs, the narrative) and another live and interactive (other players). By communicating with others, the avatar accesses the other player's physical reality by demanding that the other player reacts by manipulating the controls

in his hands. In other words, by operating the controls in physical space, one crosses into the gamespace and demands reciprocal action by other players, as did the spiritual medium of generations past (Moore 1975, Natale 2010). Only now the body, that acts as a channel, is digital, not corporeal. The game space thus becomes the meeting place of two live players, who are dependent on their intercommunication in order to satisfy the demands of the game structure. The fact that this happens over and over again, illustrates how the repetitive task of communicating within the game becomes a form of what Finucane (1984) described as the penitent work of the ghost. Like the ghost doomed to haunt interminably the avatar's work may never really finished. There is always another quest to gather animal pelts, there is always the opportunity to run another dungeon for the tenth time to collect equipment, and there is always the challenge of defeating a boss faster, with greater efficiency.

Just like the player whose avatar is tasked with meeting certain conditions of the game structure, even those unknown to her, the ghost must find a way to meet the demands of the metaphysical world. Tyrell (1953) notes specifically that apparitions, despite their immaterial form still negotiate furniture chairs and doorways when they appear before the living. Ghosts interact with the physical world as players interact with the digital, but neither complete the crossing in its entirety. This limbo state is one where the ghost, like the player, cannot exit one plane and enter another at will. The ghost is trapped between the world of the fully embodied living beings and the eternal land of the disembodied spirit. Of course, the ghost has no way of knowing whether such a world exists or what it may look like. The ghost only knows that it must accomplish certain tasks in order to move beyond their present state, and so like the player, they repeat their behaviors over and over, moving one step closer at a time to an unknown fate that they imagine is better than the one they currently occupy (Dyer 1964).

While paratextual resources may allow the player to "spoil" what awaits them at the end of the game's narrative (Consalvo 2007, 2009), the game environment itself can only hint at what is to come through the narrative progression. Otherwise, the avatar must simply progress, one step at a time, sometimes repeating the same step multiple times as they fail their task. Furthermore, the MMORPG practice of grinding, defeating like-leveled monsters over and over in order to reach a higher level, elegantly summarizes these processes as similar to the metaphysical penitence of the ghost (Finucane 1984). The MMORPG, often financially driven by a month-to-month subscription model, cannot properly end. One cannot transcend the world, only seek to make incremental improvements over time. A better and better ghost is rended through repetition, but the haunting does not cease.

Life and Death: Avatars and Demigods

The life and death cycles of online gameplay often suggest a trivial impermanence as who was once dead can easily be revived. The transience of mortality in *FF14* is reinforced by gameplay and dialogue. Death and mortality play key roles in the MMORPG genre (Barnett and Coulson 2010, Chen 2011). However, there are still many opportunities to revive your avatar (healers, returning to a crystal marked as your home location) if it does indeed die. In this sense, avatars exist on borrowed time in the same way ghosts do. Rather than strictly worrying about a terminal death, death becomes only a delay in progress. The game's narrative emphasizes that the player's memories were lost in The Calamity, and the fact that such memories begin returning to the avatar as the game progresses, reminds the player that there is a space between life and death. It is not as simple as being alive and active or being dead on the field of play, rather existence operates as a continuum. The idea that there are multiple planes, or

dimensions, of existence is not novel. Dyer (1964), in explicating liminal spaces, recognizes this multiplicity—an avatar occupies an interesting and arguably indefinable space somewhere along the ultimate existential continuum having qualities that are at once alive (animal-like, human-like) and otherworldly (ghost-like, god-like).

Mortality is, at best, ambiguously defined in the game. Yet, survival is still of the utmost importance when players are prompted to create, or modify their avatar. While avatars are vulnerable to attack and injury throughout their journey, they are also, in contrast, able to transcend human-like limitations with their power, strength, body armor, and their ability to "die" and be revived. The desire to survive, to avoid vulnerabilities, and to avoid needing to be "healed" is emphasized in the creation of an avatar that is most fit (mentally and physically) for the journey ahead. Non player characters comment upon the avatar's fitness, comparing her to the "Heroes of Light" who saved the world from utter destruction during the Calamity. Though the faces of the Heroes are not remembered, their importance is. Here we see a concrete tie between the prevalence of mortality in avatars as a video game construct to the prevalence of mortality in the construct of the ghost. That both avatars and ghosts are understood by popular culture as visual symbols representing the identity of a human being (alive and dead) only further strengthens the comparison between the two.

Ghosts may function as a coping mechanism when psychical security is fraught, such as in times of great technological change. In the same way avatars may alleviate the offline player's tension with one's corporeal vulnerability. For instance, research has shown that measures of existential anxiety (of which corporeal discomforts are associated) are greatly reduced after participants consider themselves within narratives that allow them to fly (Cohen et al. 2011). It is arguably in the player's remediation as an avatar, and

likeness to a ghost, that the fear of death and the supernatural can be suspended. The game both allows and requires the players to suspend those fears to participate. In other words, dying and resurrection are an expected part of the mechanics of the game as one progresses. Players, as avatars, must not be bothered by death in the same way that their otherwise mortal condition entails. Avatars, like ghosts, exist in limbo where death and life take on a different, less definite, weight.

References to an avatar's current state of existence complicate our preconceived notions of mortality. The avatar is both alive and dead. When entering the game, it is clear that all avatars are leaving a previous, pre-Calamity world, now inaccessible, and entering a new supernatural world, one imbued with fantastic powers. However there are instances in which the player is reminded of her physical vulnerabilities and the vulnerability of her avatar. For example, when interacting with the boss character "Titan," he says to avatars, "I shall grind you beneath my heel mortal." This language reminds the player that the avatar is intended to be treated as "mortal" but the actual dynamics of the game confuse this. When the player fails to avoid Titan's attacks, the avatar dies. However, healers can "Raise" avatars which gives them another life. Furthermore, while the avatar may be dead, the player is often still called upon to remain active, encouraging other players via chat or making apologies or excuses for her death. The player may also plead for the healer to "Raise" when his attention may be focused on other tasks (curing still alive players, adding buffs, avoiding attacks). In the Titan battle, avatars can be knocked from the battle platform, into the lava below. If knocked off, the avatar cannot be revived unless the raid starts over from the beginning. The player must then apologize for their mistake to the group. While the player is active, the avatar is functionally still dead, confusing alive and dead states. Titan, as a boss, is not bound by the same rules of mortality that the avatar is. He may be defeated, and his death simulated upon

completion of the raid, but he is not accountable to players. He does not need to make apologies or excuses from beyond the grave. While there are many opportunities to revive the avatar if she does indeed die, everyone lives on borrowed time. Part of that borrowing requires continued interaction with other players even when dead.

You're Ancient History

One final haunting occurs when the embodied player exits the game for an extended period of time, leaving their avatar in statis before returning. The avatar's temporal absence and later reappearance sharply illustrates one way in which an avatar may come to haunt another, even as they both exist on the otherwise equal plane of the game environment.

The avatar Polaris reached maximum level (50) in September 2013 and was used for cooperative end-game raids until February 2014. Because Polaris was used extensively the course of several months, she amassed a collection of advanced weapons and armor, including some pieces which had the best offensive and defensive statistics in the game. In *FF14*, avatars have the option to "Inspect" each other to view what gear is currently equipped. Players can appraise each other's gear and make judgements regarding their suitability for certain raids based on what equipment they carry (Chen 2011). What was an advanced avatar that clearly demonstrated ability and status in February 2014 was outdated by August 2014 when gameplay resumed. Polaris' equipped gear was judged as antiquated relics of little use. Allowing avatars to "Inspect" Polaris prior to joining raid groups after a long absence of play produced discomfort in other players regarding whether such an out-of-place avatar could join the raid group. One player commented that her gear set was at once too "old" and "too good" for the raid. She should have had some equipment from the newly added dungeons, and she

should have progressed further in the raids than she had, given the level of her equipment. Polaris no longer fit the image of the high-level avatar, and instead stood apart from the more active avatars with newer equipment with better statistics.

Like the ghost, which concretizes the fear of technological progress and social change by calling back to a fixed moment in time (Summers 1994), the unused, then resurrected avatar induces anxiety in other players who encounter it in the game world. The avatar who has been absent and then reappears suddenly does not assure gaming competence; instead it invokes uneasiness and uncertainty. Polaris was once advanced, with a coveted weapon. Now she is next to useless. In a way, she reminds the players of the temporality of their own avatars. If they do not keep updated, following new expansions to the game, striving to complete increasingly difficult raids for better and better equipment, they too may become obsolete. When they cease playing, their avatar sits in the interstitial server space, frozen in time until later activation.

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Conclusion

Whereas once it was imagined that death brought the soul out of its temporary housing in the body and into a more advanced ethereal state, scholars similarly argue that the transition from the physical world, to the virtual world allows users to explore their identities in a more expansive fashion then could be achieved by the fleshed body (Eklund 2011, Hayes 2007, Huh and Williams 2010, McDonald 2012, Nakamura 2002). Some have noted that for this reason gaming appeals to specific demographics, such as those with disabilities, or people seeking to explore their gender identity by engaging avatars of a different gender or sex (Bowker and Tuffin 2002, Mason, Bohringer, Borisoff, and Birch 2004, Pearce and Artemesia 2009). We argue that the gamespace represents the same plane of existence that was previously designated as the domain of the

supernatural spirit, rendered visually as the avatar. Like the ghost world of literature, the virtual world exists alongside the physical world, and allows its users to imagine themselves transcending beyond their physical limitations. Just as ghost stories once provided a psychic relief by assuring the public of the existence of an afterlife, video games portend for their users a reality that may outlive them, one where their participation has meaning that extends the value of their life offline.

Avatars are therefore not just game pieces that can be randomly assigned to one player or another, they are a virtual representation of the embodied user, and their existence is imbued with greater meaning because of this. As McLuhan (1964) noted, the extension of any man is tantamount to a simultaneous amputation. By this he means that by conceding the need for a technological extension, humans are implicitly acknowledging the deficiency of their own bodies. In the gamespace, the extension of one's identity into a digital avatar is not simply about extending the physical reach, but rather extending the reach of one's consciousness. In so doing, the gamer tacitly acknowledges that they view their embodied offline self as being limited by the physical world, in the same way that many people fear that their death will wipe out any trace of their existence. The gamer views her spirit as separate from her embodied experience, and therefore her avatar as deserving of an opportunity to live on after her. Even after exiting the gamespace, Polaris' image can be viewed online, clad in the armor she wore when she signed off for the final time.

The gaming avatar, as it transverses planes of in-game and out-of-game existence, draws stark attention to the negotiation of boundaries, physical and psychical. The avatar is digital, but relies on the embodied individual to act; it may die but is easily revived; and it calls attention to the immediate limitations upon the player as she

manipulates the controls with her body. The interstitial state where the avatar makes its home both defines the anxieties of our increasingly digital lives and offers a balm to help us come to terms with the fact we may be everywhere haunted by digital presences, which both are and are not pieces of ourselves.

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