Clearly We Do Nothing Else Here But F*ck: Assembling a Transfag Through Erotic Roleplay in *Final Fantasy XIV*

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Abstract

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This thesis describes the social practice of Erotic Role Play (ERP) as an assemblage through which the "transfag" as a subject is produced. This project does so by hewing together the multidisciplinary practices of games studies, trans studies, and fan studies. Moreover, I apply an autoethnographic practice, supplanting my own experiences as an expert-hobbyist throughout my thesis. This writing practice aligns with both games studies approaches by authors like TL Taylor as well as trans studies scholars like Susan Stryker, and calls attention to how both hobbyist and trans perspectives require personal and biographical intervention due to lack of scholarship. I suggest that, in order to better understand transmasculine subjects who ERP in the video game *Final Fantasy XIVI* (and by extension any other subject), one must juggle the "incommensurable" or seemingly incompatible nodes within the assemblage rather than "settle" them: transmasculine ERPing must be both a queer practice of cruising and a communal writing practice informed by fan spaces. Moreover, I not only resist the simplification of transmasc ERPers, but also disrupt the ways in which academia has thought of the transmasculine subject: as a limb of lesbianism, or through the lens of amateur queer porn or memoir. Instead, the transfag ERPer is a hacked-together machine whose desires are circuited through ERP and spaces which have historically been studied as exclusively female.

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I would also like to thank my family: my mother, Patricia, my father, Vincenzo, and my sister, Alexandra, who I historically haven't allowed to read my work but have supported me unwaveringly as an academic and as their trans son/brother.

Lastly, I'd like to thank Talah, my colleague, left hand right man and silly rabbit, who was kind enough to allow me to steal from him "fujoshi-to-male" as a term. Thank you to all the members of the Puk Pit, who make playing *Final Fantasy XIV* as a transfag as well as *writing* about *FFXIV* as an academic fun and worthwhile.

DEDICATIONS

To the guys who've fucked online – and especially the guys *I've* fucked online. To uncool transfags.

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Introduction

Final Fantasy XIV's (*FFXIV*) Balmung is regarded by the community to be not only a Roleplay (RP) server, but an "Erotic" Roleplay (ERP) server (Liang *The Gamer*).[1] Former Kotaku writer Harper Jay tweeted: "As a Balmung player, I gotta say I balk at the designation 'erotic roleplayer server.' As if nothing else happens. I'm concluding a plot today that's part of a months (sic) long arc. … But I guess I gotta hold the 'ERP server' card forever because clearly we do nothing else here but fuck" (@transgamerthink). Jay casts ERP as merely fucking, and in doing so distinguishes it derisively from traditional and ostensibly more "legitimate" ways of RPing. Jay's tweet frames ERP as a disreputable and unwanted element within the non-ERP roleplay community. It also reduces ERP's complex rethinking of erotics and gameplay to a singular and normative practice which generates nothing in comparison to what Jay would consider real RP.

Many academics have outlined the importance of fandom[2] and communities of play[3] but there has been very little writing about ERP's position within the community, especially within gay transmasculine role playing communities. I propose ERP generates research questions sexuality studies, video game studies, nor trans studies can answer on their own. By focusing my study on this condensed network, I will be able to help broaden the scope of what "play" looks like (in video games studies) as well as what "queer culture" looks like (in relation to trans studies). Moreover, ERP, and by extension "normal" RP shifts what traditional notions of "gaming" look like, as roleplay consists almost entirely of using the game's chat box rather than engaging in the core gameplay loop of gaining experience points, doing quests, and obtaining better and better gear. I have chosen to write about *Final Fantasy XIV*'s (FFXIV) ERP scene

rather than another MMO like *World of Warcraft* — arguably the most academically mature MMORPG to date — not *only* because FFXIV is the game I, as an expert hobbyist, have been ERPing within, but also because, anecdotally, the players I have interacted with on FFXIV are queerer and more trans than any other MMO I have played. As such, it is not only easier to find ERP partners, but also easier to trace a communal practice.

My goal is not to prove whether or not queer transmasculine people are doing ERP. Rather, I take this fact for granted. My question is not: "do transmasculine people ERP?" or "who is doing ERP?" as these questions disregard the community and hobbyist knowledge of the transmasculine ERPer, and furthermore do not clarify any of the intents of research I personally have at stake in this area of study. My questions are instead: "how does this transmasc ERP work? what does transmasc ERP *do*, affectually, sensorially, or physically? What does thinking about transmasc ERP as a complex cultural object do to the ways we think about the intersection between practice, culture, and queer/trans history? How do I write about an object without oversimplifying its history? How do ERP, fandom, and other online sex practices produce a transfag identity? And finally, how do I write about transmasculine subjects in ways that similarly do not oversimplify the trans experience?"

ERP is a highly complex network with varying affective components: ERP is a combination of collaborative narrative-building, cruising, and a kind of translational, becoming-cyber-sexual practice that extends beyond simply having sex online. I use the term "translational" here because I suggest that, rather than splitting the virtual and physical worlds, ERP reveals that engaging in the virtual in affective ways is a continuous attempt to translate the physical body (or its desires, or the senses of the body) through the tools and affordances provided within virtual "space."

I suggest that all members who ERP are *not* a coherent and unified community of players: rather, I aim to focus on a smaller network of trans-queer ERP practices, which enmeshes ERP within the historical cultural practice of queer cruising while at the same time closely resembling online slash (a romantic genre of fanfiction which pairs together two men) fanfiction practices. Players embody their own fictional characters rather than play themselves. ERP therefore cannot *just* be considered a practice of traditional cruising. It additionally draws techniques from the practice of writing erotica. However, the ways in which players "discover" each other echo the practices of cruising, a historically queer cultural practice. One perspective is not enough. ERP as an object of study is made more complex, more rich, by straddling both textual and social practice. They cannot be reduced or resolved by asking, "is ERP a practice of cruising, or is ERP collaboratively-written erotica?" ERP is both of these things, and importantly cannot *just* be one or the other. Instead, we should be asking: how do we theorize these kinds of hazy, interlocking, and seemingly incompatible or incommensurable practices?

All of the elements within this network create an assemblage of transmasculine ERP, a practice of both artistic and aesthetic creation as well as sexual and cultural production. Moreover, the fact that ERP is incommensurably both "real" sex and tied into the practices of cruising (and to a certain extent, sex work like phone sex) and "narrative" sex like the practices of writing erotica, I question the ways in which text and practice are often classified (*this* is a cultural text, *this* is an aesthetic text) in order to clarify and, deliberately or otherwise, universalize how we describe interwoven practices.

When I use "incommensurable" here, it is to signify a mode of engaging with two practices which, by virtue of their dissimilarity, are viewed as incongruous or "unintelligible." Slavoj Zizek's theory of the parallax view is helpful here: two opposing poles "can never be fully

mediated-reconciled" (21). My dialectic — a cultural history and practice of cruising, a cultural history and practice of erotic writing — should not be fully resolved or synthesized. Instead, I consider "the point of radical critique not as a certain determinate position as opposed to another position, but as the irreducible gap between the positions itself, the purely structural interstice between them" (20). By living with the difference, by earnestly engaging in an academic practice that does not attempt to settle or resolve but instead observe and connect, my aim is to build a network of objects, practices, and cultural study that would have otherwise been ignored (either due to the subject matter, the academic approach, or the subject in question).

This is not to say my connection between "written" and "practical" sex is novel or new (see Delany, Munoz); rather, the practice of ERP (or at the very least, the contained and particular mode of ERP I am describing throughout this paper) engages in erotics and the practice of "fucking strangers" in ways that are alien to how we think of cruising, while still being alien to how we think of writing erotic fiction. When one cruises, they obviously consider their position (their attractiveness, their preferences, their abilities, their mood), but they do not narrativise their cruising, or at least not in the way that an erotica writer chooses to write a sex scene in order to glean something *new*, interesting, or unique about their character. All this is to say that what I mean when I am describing ERP's "incommensurabilities" is that it would be reductive to call ERP simply cruising, or erotica-writing. It would be flattening the practice.

My methodological aim is to trace the kinds of autoethnographic or memoir practices other trans scholars[4] have relied upon in order to essentially create new texts through which they can formalize and ground their experience within academia. Conversely, it would be too convenient to my position as an academic in English Literature to declare *FFXIV* ERPers as a text that can be legible and readable through the techniques I have already learned. This is not an

ethnography not only because I have neither the time, resources, or even the experience to undertake an ethnography, but also because operating under the pretense of an ethnography would, intentionally or otherwise, be framing my research in ways that are not generative to the questions I want to ask about these practices. My methodology, by consequence, is quasi-autoethnographic: as a queer transmasculine man who is also someone who ERPs in Eorzea (the collection of city-states in *Final Fantasy XIV*'s setting), I write not only as an academic but as an expert hobbyist. I also recognize the limitations of this approach — the greatest of which is that my scope is necessarily limited to how *I* practice ERP, and how *I* personally play the game. This methodological approach takes into account two things: 1) calling to attention the necessity to treat expert-hobbyist accounts as academically relevant and generative, and 2) the fact that the trans-scholar-cum-test-subject has become (unfortunately or otherwise) the necessary autoethnographic opening move for queer and trans scholars, due to a lack of previous academic attention to these marginalized groups.

The latter issue becomes much more glaring when the subject at hand intersects with other academically marginalized groups: in my case, the transmasculine gay gamer. The fact of the matter is that seeking a comprehensive and totalizing account of even something as marginal as ERP within the community is impossible. The network is too large, the number of actors behaving in confusing and contrary ways immeasurable, the systems at play moving at speeds too fast[5] to account for totalizing accounts. My hope is that through smaller-scale, engaged, and careful self-observation, I can convincingly prove that this method is not only viable or valuable, but a generative method of observing communities of (game, gender, sex) play.

This is also not to say that smaller-scale autoethnographic methods are unprecedented. I am indebted to trans academics like Susan Stryker and Jacob Hale, who have proven within their

own field the value and necessity of limited but comprehensive self-reflection. I am also particularly indebted to McKenzie Wark's writing practice in *Raving*, which ties together "autoficiton" and "autotheory," as well as positions herself and her experiences (real or "otherwise," as she suggests in her introduction) as valuable, enactable, "theorizable" datasets from which a scholar can draw.

I have split this project into two chapters. The first chapter is about the "meat and potatoes" of ERP. In other words, I describe exactly what ERP practices look like, with the caveat that the method I trace is only one of multiple ways one can "do" ERP. I also ask: how do ERPers learn how to ERP in the first place? How do ERPers navigate spaces that, by the nature of the MMO, are not meant to be platforms on which a subject has sex? The "private public" space ERP operates within is one that questions how we talk about sex-play in games, how a public is negotiated within the space of games, and how ERP functions as a game or a text or a cultural practice. I posit that ERP does all three of these things. Moreover, this split between practice and play demands that I think carefully about the historicization of cruising and sex, as well as how we talk about history frequently as linear.

I am also invested in interrogating how we as scholars take for granted the "natural" or "intuitive" ways we draw timelines or make connections. For example, by drawing a historical connection between queer cruising and ERP, what I'm doing is *not* saying that there is a cause-and-effect, where cruising transforms *into* ERP. Rather, what I think is valuable in drawing this connection is instead that by linking these two cultural practices, I make obvious the importance of considering similar practices as *informing* the other. My position as an academic engaged in these hobby-practices calls to question the ways in which academia prioritizes the perspective of the academic from the "outside" looking in, rather than the comprehensive knowledge an

academic accumulates throughout their life exterior to their identity as a scholar (as a hobbyist, as a trans person, as a cruiser, as a gamer). This chapter not only describes the stakes of the practices in question, but also the ways in which a methodology of careful observation of said practices allows for me as a scholar to think critically about my research object.

The second chapter is concerned with *why* my focus is on gay trans men who ERP in particular, and why I choose to articulate my subject as hewing closely to the practices of fandom alongside a historic practice of cruising. I discuss the figure of the "fujoshi," a term originating in Japan but often used derogatorily in fandom circles to describe women who are "obsessed" with fictional gay male relationships. But what happens when once-fujoshis transition to faggy transmascs? Do they *stop* becoming fujoshis? I ask how obsessing over fictional gay men negotiates a transfag's gender and sexuality — especially when we relate these fujoshi experiences to transfag *FFXIV* ERPers. I suggest that the ways in which fan studies has historically marked those who write and read "slash" as largely consisting of cisgender women (Jenkins 197) results in an accidental erasure of a community of trans men who engage with "slash." There may be some overlap between my work and the ways scholars like Henry Jenkins write about women in fandom — that women projecting onto gay fictional men transforms not just the work itself but the ways in which women desire and *write* about desire — but I argue that there must still be a "trans intervention." I relate texts like Jacob Hale's "Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies" to fandom studies, in order to critically think about the ways in which kink and fandom practices engender their transsexual subjects in particular and novel ways.

Trans studies is as equally unequipped to deal with these vagabond transfags as fan studies is. The object through which trans studies scholars have historically negotiated transsexual desire has been through amateur porn or memoir (Adair and Aizura 52), not

fanfiction or ERP. Trans studies's tools remain valuable, but fandom, especially "slash," warrants serious discussion within the field. It is a space and a hobby that is easily accessible online, is free, and it is made up of expert-hobbyists who aim to write for limited audiences. ERP, in practice, works similarly: nobody is publishing their ERP logs for mass audiences to read, ERPers continually seek out other expert-hobbyists to play with, and are invested in expanding an already established virtual world while leaving their own mark, however small. Moreover, the subset of ERPers I aim to discuss within this paper overlap with fandom communities and fan spaces. To be an ERPer in *Final Fantasy XIV*, one has to have at least a glancing investment in the game's lore in order to at the very least orient their original character (OC) within the space of play. Drawing the connections I make expands the possibility space of *how* we talk about cruising, or ERP, or erotica. This network is not a text to be read, but a set of social relations to negotiate, which produce particular kinds of subjects. How does internet sex reveal or explode the ways in which we talk about transness?

It is thinking through these linkages in careful and observant ways that makes these inquisitions into "Trans Historiography" important. ERP, like erotica, like trans bodies, like cruising and flânerie, is assembled and hacked together — I could have instead traced a history of ERP via IRC chats, or pornographic letters. I could have followed the historiographical lineage of frat boy jock amateur porn that Adair and Aizura describe in their writing. But the fact remains that what "looks" like a common history is in fact a set of techniques for us to find community and similarity. The fact that I have chosen these nodes in this assemblage is political and deliberate. I want to address and build theory that has not been given proper airtime within academic circles, and address the need for scholars like me, who for the moment, do not feel like Trans Studies knows enough about video games, while Games Studies similarly does not know

enough about trans people. Trans Studies is indebted to the work of scholars like Stryker (and more recently Adair and Aizura) who map trans history and trans practices through the sex dungeon, or ftm4ftm sex. Academics like Bo Ruberg have done the work of discussing representation (representation of queer characters, representation of queer game developers) within Games Studies.[6] But my subject (gay transmasc ERP) is not a site of discussion in Trans Studies at large at the moment, while my methodology (trans cultural critique) is not a widespread practice in games studies.

I do not want to be an unmoored academic. I want to create a future wherein these incommensurabilities between practices and academic departments become sites of vigorous and generative inquest.

What I'm really trying to say is that we need more nerds in trans studies, and more transsexuals in games studies.

Chapter 1: A/S/L?

> "A glib wisdom holds that people like this just don't want relationships. They have 'problems with intimacy.' But the salient fact is: These *were* relationships. … Intimacy for most of us is a condition that endures, however often repeated, for minutes or for hours. And these all had their many intimate hours. But, like all sane relationships, they also had limits."
>
> -Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*

Cassius sits at one of the Mahjong tables in the Gold Saucer — Eorzea's premier (and only) casino. He's on a losing streak. Three bad starting hands, some lucky draws from the dealer. To keep sitting in his wind would be bad luck, so he gets up and decides to spectate. His lynx-like ears are drooped with annoyance, and his tail thrashes about on the plush pillow on which he's kneeling on.

A new opponent appears — rash grin, quick hands, sharp eyes. He wins the first round without much spectacle. All simples, self-drawn. But Cassius knows enough about mahjong, and has the advantage of seeing all the other players' hands, to know that this player won just to keep another player from winning big. One tile away from a self-drawn hand of triples. He also knows that in the next round, the man does a quick cheat: "moving the caterpillar," where the player stacks the wall (the "deck" everyone draws from) so he can win on another self-draw. This win is a yakuman, the highest-scoring hand, and it immediately bankrupts the dealer, ending the game early. When the newcomer looks over his shoulder to grin at Cassius, the cat knows what he wants.

Four rounds later, he gets it: Cassius on his knees in the Gold Saucer's bathroom.

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I have read and written erotica and erotic fanfiction for over a decade. Before that, I pretended I was a 16-year-old in Habbo Hotel and sat in "kissing booths." Habbo Hotel was a browser game wherein your character could socialize, as well as create their own rooms and apartments. From what I could tell, the game was aimed at older teens, but I am convinced now, in retrospect, that most of us were likely somewhere around 13. Habbo Hotel, like many other chat rooms, had a near-ubiquitous greeting: "A/S/L?" which cut right to the chase. What was your (A)ge? Your (S)ex? Your (L)ocation? It didn't take much more questioning to get to the meat of the matter: do you want to have cybersex?

A/S/L is rudimentary but effective. It immediately allows for extremely rapid exchange of information pertinent to both users, and cuts to the chase of social interaction. If a user is too young or the wrong gender for the player in question, then the interrogator can just ghost them and move onto the next warm, digital body. And if the user is the *right* kind of age and sex combination, then they can move onto the main event: typing *makes out with u* or *takes off your skirt* or *pulls my d!ck out* — censored, of course, because this was a social game which disallowed cursing of any kind. Asterisks, the universal sign of action in the chatbox, framed every sex act. The sex acts themselves were basic and somehow both vague and descriptive, mainly, I expect, because the people on both ends of the keyboard were inexperienced preteens. Sex happened, and then it ended. There was no foreplay (if you were lucky you'd maybe get a *fingers u*). It was not so much sexting as sext-sprinting. A three h*mmp (sic) chump.

I mention Habbo Hotel cybersex because it is decidedly *not* what the negotiated practices of *FFXIV* ERP are like, despite their similarities. Obviously, both of these interactions end with two (or occasionally more) players having sex, but the techniques as well as the subjects involved are dramatically different. Simultaneously, I cannot ignore the fact that my own — and

presumably other subjects' — experiences with sex online does not start with the kind of ERP I aim to describe throughout this text. The avenues *to* ERP are multiple, perhaps too multiple to chart within the constraints of this paper. The goal here is not to close doors, however. It is to open the possibility space of this practice. I also note my prior experience with Habbo Hotel because it shows that these practices do not emerge out of nowhere, that subjects do not come into a new practice like newborn babes. Practice accumulates like sediment. When a subject enters into a new hobby space, or even a political space, they do so with all the baggage of their past. Prior practice, or affect, or relation to space, no matter how small, clings to a subject.

When Cassius, my character in *FFXIV*, does ERP, it does not at all resemble, in a textual, literary sense, the practice of Habbo Hotel "cybering." However, there is *always* going to be a link between chatroom cybering and ERP. Both ERPers and cyberers are attempting to forge social links by describing sex acts with another player and user. In ERP, the intention is the same as it was in Habbo Hotel (find someone → have sex with that person), but in practice there are quite a few formal distinctions. There isn't an asterisk in sight, for one. My goal is to roleplay *a character* and have the wants and desires of that character fulfilled — to find a hot, like-minded player with an appealing original character (OC) and have them fuck Cassius's brains out. There is a minimum amount of investment in a character required for both *my own* engagement and the engagement of who I want to ERP with. A user must pass a certain threshold of character investment (e.g. character background, interiority) in order for me to want to seek them out as an ERP partner. Of course, these thresholds are all relative, but the difference lies in how users who have cybersex (like on Habbo Hotel) are ostensibly playing themselves — if not idealized, superhumanly sexually skilled versions of themselves — whereas ERPers are playing characters who are established through play or writing.

My inquiry into transmasculine ERP is inspired by my research into how the queer archives of Montreal historically situated gay male bath house cruising. The archive is "selective" in what it includes. It is not necessarily a bad thing; archives cannot be comprehensive. But this leaves a gap in the ways in which one can understand the bath house, which within the archive is articulated as a hypervigilant, policed space (through the preservation of arrest records and newspaper clippings of sauna raids) rather than sites of desire, where gay men fucked each other. The sauna was a place where men were able to covertly cruise one another for decades until they suddenly couldn't. In *FFXIV*, ERP is just as precariously situated: it is difficult to archive and players must use particularized practices in order to prevent themselves from being reported for sexual activity.

Additionally preserved within the archive were boxes upon boxes of catalogs, advertisements, and mail-in forms for erotic photographs and writing. Their presence was the sole respite from police documents and news stories describing the abject existence of gay men in Montreal in the late 20th century. My attempt to understand a particular space as the contents of an archive led me to stop thinking about the space itself and instead made me ask *how* to think about how the archive functions as a particular technique of preserving history, which necessarily cannot preserve everything. It made me think of how I could resist the ways in which sites of queer pleasure could be renegotiated outside of a framework which thinks only of pleasure's permissibility — and how erotica functions as a way to think about a kind of queer expression that is made invisible through that framework as well.

When I resist "linearity" or "oversimplification," I work against the desire for a singular, overarching, and cohesive narrative accounting for transmasculine ERP (and by extension, gay transmasculinity writ large) experience. This thesis works against the desire for cause-and-effect

queer histories that present neat, comprehensible practices and posit singular origins. This desire is evident, for example, in the drive to discover who threw the first brick at the Stonewall riots, who thereby arguably kickstarted the gay rights movement in New York City (when in actuality this movement has multiple and diffuse origins[7]). Another example of this kind of assumption of linearity is that there is a "first" anything (e.g. the first trans person to medically transition). I do not want to take for granted the "mess" of time. Nor do I want to take for granted the richness of seeing time, practice, selfhood, and community as an interconnected network of nodes, unbeholden to chronology. All of these considerations allow me to make complex and unexpected links and generate new ways of thinking about my object of study.

The archive is also a useful technique for me. I can use it to "organize" the assemblage by way of deciding what elements of a given object are actually important to my particular study. Rearranging the nodes — the order of the archive — also generates new avenues of understanding how all of these articulations impress on one another and builds an assemblage.

Using articulation and assemblage as methods allows for me to describe the important ways seemingly unrelated elements are in fact deeply generative avenues of study. Articulations draw "attention to the contingent relations among practices, representations, and experiences that make up the world" (Slack and Wise 151). In the case of ERP, this includes, on one level, how ERP is depicted within the game, how *FFXIV* behaves like an engine or vehicle for ERP, how the myriad practices of ERP players affect how ERP "works," and the ERPers themselves. The constellation stretches outwards: the transmasculine faggots within the node of ERP practitioners, the attitudes of non-ERP players towards the practice. As you expand your view of the assemblage further outwards, this *also* includes how the practices of cruising operate, fandom fanfiction writing practices, the aforementioned technique of archiving, fuhjoshism (more on the

last node in the subsequent chapter). All of these "nodes" make up the constellation of an assemblage: the "structuring and affective nature and work of these articulations" (152). Stuart Hall writes: "In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them. In part, we give things meaning by how we use them, or integrate them into our everyday practices" (*Representation* 3). It is the *drawing together* of these nodes which makes up the assemblage; the novel ways in which thinking about cruising practices influence how we as both scholars and as practicing ERPers receive ERP. By extension, it is the drawing together of these practices through which my subjects are produced in the first place. This isn't a crude "smashing together" of objects — it is a careful, negotiated reflection of how placing similar practices together allows one to inform the other.

In the same way Adair and Aizura focus their interests on a transmasculine for transmasculine erotics via pulp porn, my aim is to delineate the ways in which a queer erotics emerges from specifically transmasculine Erotic Role Play. Exclusively thinking about ERP as either a literary practice following in the footsteps of erotica, or of fandom, or a social practice stemming from chat room cybersex would be insufficient. It is also why extending the personal experience of myself as a transmasculine ERPer and thinking about how someone who looks like me, writes like me, and thinks like me, renegotiates the kind of work ERP *does*—not only to my own understanding of gender, but to how trans and games studies think about gender and gender performance. When I write about ERP — and especially *trans* ERP — it is with the conscious decision to be as precise and specific to a certain kind of erotic roleplay instead of attempt to describe all RP (or even all ERP!) which, even isolated to just *Final Fantasy XIV*'s scene, is expansive and complex. When I engage in ERP, I produce in myself and in those I ERP with a subject whose investment in their characters' pleasure results in a stronger attachment to said

character. I think about what my original character (OC) wants, and how he should go about wanting — and in turn, it makes me reflect upon how *I* want. It makes me think about how I invest in myself a kind of practice of becoming-transfag. When my OC Cassius bottoms, or when I bottom, we don't bottom because we have a vagina: we bottom because we're transfags. The communal nature of ERP forces me to contend with how I depict not just myself, but the idealized trans erotic body to my peers. What kinds of sex practices not only *turn me on*, but produce in my OC narrative tension? Why does Cassius like being tied up? How does Cassius medically transition in a fantasy world where on the level of gameplay, drinking a bottle of Fantasia can instantaneously change one's gender and race? How does the narrativizing of sex make me turn inwards and think about transmasculine gay sex writ large, and the communities who have a stake in having (and enjoying!) transfag sex?

Assemblages also must have a certain level of "tenacity." Slack and Wise describe the "technological assemblage" as "not a simple accumulation of a bunch of articulations on top of one another, but a particular concrete constellation of articulations that assemble a territory that exhibits tenacity and effectivity" (157). Additionally, in his interview with Larry Grossberg, Stuart Hall suggests that, as assemblages are produced (and continue to produce subjects), they are also actively being enacted upon. A tenacious articulation does not necessarily mean that it must remain that way — or even that this articulation is the "correct" connection from one element to another: "[articulations] exist historically in a particular formation, anchored very directly in relation to a number of different forces. Nevertheless, it has no necessary, intrinsic, trans-historical belongingness. Its meaning — political and ideological — comes precisely from its position within a formation … Since those articulations are not inevitable, not necessary, they can potentially be transformed" (54). So, where a practice of cruising may have strong tendential

force with the bath house, or where a practice of fanfiction writing may have a strong link to female writing practices — this does not mean they cannot be un- and re-linked. That the practices themselves cannot mean other things to other groups of people — and that those practices can therefore produce entirely different kinds of subjects to whom the rules have bent, and shifted, and to whom the produced meanings relay entirely new and novel ways of seeing and inhabiting our world.

As such, I'm not just describing the assemblage but building, deconstructing, rebuilding. Slack and Wise write: "a video camera post-9/11 may look just like a video camera pre-9/11, but it is not the same from the perspective of the technological assemblage" (159). Throughout this paper, my aim is to deconstruct and reconstruct ERP when you begin to interlink these practices with other interrelated sexual practices. This constitutes a *de-* and *re-territorialization* as Deleuze and Guattari describe — the dual processes, respectively, "by which an assemblage changes when certain articulations are disarticulated, disconnected, unhinged" and "by which new articulations are forged, thus constituting a new assemblage or territory" (158). By extension, the practices through which I am articulating ERP themselves become a little foreign: gay public sex becomes alienated when rendered through ERP; fanfiction writing turns on its head when written collectively, privately.

I also would like to suggest that the smaller scale my analysis is operating at is important. In texts like *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, there is one chapter dedicated to roleplay, out of a total of thirteen chapters. The section dedicated to *sex* in roleplay takes up half a page, and furthermore handwaves its involvement with RP by quoting a player: "'WoW is many things, but roleplaying? Lying 'naked' on a bed, with another guy, cybering via /tells in the Goldshire Inn is not roleplaying" (qtd in MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 238). There

are many assumptions being made here. Scholars take RPers who don't ERP at their word: they take for granted the fact that these RPers call those cybering in Goldshire Inn (a location in *World of Warcraft*) men, take for granted the fact that these men are looking for contact in "desperate" kinds of ways, take for granted that the only people who want to cyber are straight men looking to get their rocks off, and take for granted that these ERPers do not themselves have complex and novel communities of play. Neither MacCallum-Stewart nor Parsler spoke to an ERPer (or a "cyberer," to use the interviewed player's terminology) and asked them about *their* experiences. This oversight reveals involves two ommissions: first, it overlooks that there are players invested in totally different kinds of roleplay than other members in the roleplay community (and that this play can be regarded as adversarial) and, second, that ERP has not been adequately been given "its fair shake" by those studying Role Play as a practice within MMOs.

Writing about roleplay to begin with is writing about a fractionally small userbase. Writing about *trans men who ERP*, it follows, is an exponentially smaller userbase. But I think we gain something by focusing on these smaller sets of users: we gain what would otherwise be overlooked by broad analyses of roleplay — we expand that singular half-page, and engage with the practices at play seriously.

By extension, looking at these practices of play — gender-play, game-play, role-play — we are able to observe how transfags rebuke or negotiate norms of "how to play." Play as a verb is malleable and multiple. The word invests in a subject a world *outside* of work, inside leisure, outside of capital. This does not mean that "play" is non-political. Choosing to play, to transform, to negotiate and become and rebuild is an actively political and ideological process. Cultural production allows us as subjects to "simulate, reproduce, reiterate, and recapitulate" while at the same time recognizing that "there is no one, final absolute meaning — no ultimate

signified, only the endlessly sliding chain of signification, and, on the other hand, the assertion that meaning does not exist" (Grossberg 49). At the same time, it is impossible to ignore that a player's investment to ERP within the world of *Final Fantasy XIV* is also reliant upon living within a commercialized video game space. A question arises: is ERP really a rebuke if it is an identity formed around consuming and commodifying a game space? I suggest that because these practices at hand cannot be absorbed by the game itself — in order to remain a family-friendly platform, *FFXIV* can never use a player base's interest in having sex on their servers to bring in more users, to increase their subscriptions. ERP can only grow popular through word of mouth — and continues to be a contentious (and for some, a bothersome and abhorrent) mode of play.

Fifteen years has made little difference in the ways in which players perceive ERP in games. Here are the top three results I get when I Google "How to ERP reddit ffxiv": "Can someone introduce me to ERP in FFXIV?"[8], a sincere post on the r/ffxiv subreddit asking where they can learn how to ERP, with answers that vary from "talk to players in the game" and "touch grass"; "ERP in FFXIV: What is it, and how do I get started? A Guide,"[9] a tongue-in-cheek post on r/shitpostXIV whose tl;dr: is simply "stop making fun of my """""""hobby"""""""""; and "How the ERP scene is slowly driving me away from RP on FF14,"[10] a post on r/ffxiv from a player who does not ERP who feels uncomfortable with the amount of times they are propositioned by players while trying to RP non-sexually. As quoted in my introduction, Harper Jay expressed their dislike with *FFXIV*'s RP on the Balmung server being associated with "only" having sex. Reddit user Persies writes that the presence of ERP in *FFXIV* "definitely drove [him] away from RP entirely" (Persies). The overt animosity toward ERPers reveals a kind of ideology at play within RP spaces: that there is a "correct" way to invest oneself in a narrative and a playspace, as

well as a deviant, "pathetic" way. Traditional RPers encode this ideology in the ways they play. The community generates a "set of extremely tightly coded rules … whereby stories of a certain recognizable type, content, and structure can be easily encoded" (Hall 262). There is no "objective" method by which a roleplayer, erotic or otherwise, can describe what kinds of RP are permissible and which are not. Traditional roleplayers encode values (about one's body, about one's sexuality) in the ways in which they engage with each other. Looking for sex online signals to a non-ERP player that this person cannot "get any" offline. ERP can never be a mode of storytelling, or of community building, if we are to believe exclusively the experiences of players (roleplayers and other kinds of gamers alike) who actively dislike the idea of ERP existing within player communities.

Erotic roleplayers encode and decode as well, of course — but what is being encoded by the transmasculine ERPer is a set of assumptions on how and why we build these communities of eroticism. The assemblage is gummed up with all of these affects; boundaries are formed between adversarial kinds of play.

For a Non-ERP Roleplayer, the possibility space of what constitutes "good" or "normal" RP is an extension of the gameplay and objectives of the game itself: joining guilds, slaying foes, crafting tools, speaking in taverns, political espionage. What is not permissible is sex — in the ways in which writing sex or sex scenes provide alternate ways of investing your OC in the world of Eorzea, of how sex functions within cultures, or even sex for sex's sake. This also ignores the ways in which queer players necessarily have to build *outwards* in order to make their experiences visible to themselves and other queer players. After all, there isn't a "transgender" toggle in the game's character creation. What ERP does is allow for different kinds of affordances in the playspace: to shift the perspective of player goals and interests from

winning battles or socializing in particular ways to exploring how the denizens of Eorzea may or may not have distinct sexual lives of their own. If we are to take as a given that ERPers are roleplaying erotically simply because they want to have sex "in real life," then does logic not follow that other RP practices only exist because *those* players want to, for example, kill monsters and create guilds in real life as well? This latter kind of play is not necessarily acting out a practice not available in the real world, but about the role playing practice itself. Why is this assumption not extended to erotic roleplay, even by other RPers?

So what does the ERP I aim to describe *look like*? And the answer, from the outside looking in, not much. In ERP, mechanics presumed to aid in reaching a "win-state" — such as it can be in an MMORPG — like better gear, higher levels, proficiency in completing end-game raid bosses are made entirely secondary. This "topsy-turvy" effect to the game mechanics' importance is interesting because it demonstrates that the game is not *just* about winning and losing, but that interacting in the game with other players itself presents its own set of practices and rules built organically by players. Roleplayers formalize these new social rules when they create ways to find and interact with other Roleplayers. ERP players interact with other people who also want to ERP, and, moreover, use the tools the game gives them for more effective combat (targeting, examining, the chat box). However, ERPers use these tools in a way that does not advance the state of play (increase currency, experience, complete a quest, defeat a monster, or even complete an achievement) while simultaneously still "existing" within the game and by all appearances playing the game. After all, they still pay a subscription to play, and when that player types in /playtime into their chatbox, the game will include this time spent (any time logged into this character at all) as "time played."

The kind of ERP I am describing within *FFXIV* is contained entirely within the chat box. Rather than using /say, a channel through which every player within a given radius would be privy to their conversation, ERP is mainly written in /party chat (a separate chat channel reserved for members who have grouped up in the same party) or through /tells (a private form of communication wherein only the two people involved in the /tell can see what they are saying). In this moment, about seventy-five to eighty-five percent of the screen content ceases to exist, or, at least, ceases to be relevant.

The player avatar does not move nor does it perform actions (outside of, perhaps, walking to a secluded destination where the player characters can have sex away from prying eyes — since voyeurism isn't on the table). *Final Fantasy XIV* as a game becomes a glorified chat room. All of the affects and senses of sex — and of character traits, of narrative sense, of "gameplay" — become reduced to words in a chat box. In that very reduction of engagement with the interface, ERPers are able to convey this affects in ways that are not possible using normative gameplay or normal modes of interfacing with the game. As such, reduction itself becomes an expansion.

What I find interesting about this practice is that all of the moments leading up to this practice depend *entirely on* what a player sees in another player's character. On the main screen: the character's race, gender, appearance, name. On a mechanical level: targeting the player, which makes the user's avatar turn their head to look at the target. At the level of interface: looking at the character's target-of-target bar[11] to see whether or not this character is looking back.

It is entirely through this "misuse" of the tools and affordances provided by *Final Fantasy XIV* that new meaning can be produced: the avatar stops being a simple extension of the

player and instead absorbs the intentions and interests of other players. The chat box exists "outside" of the player avatar and yet is used as a kind of "double scansion" for the player and the character: out of character, each player is attempting to cross a boundary in order to understand an absolute truth about not only the person they are playing with, but an absolute truth about themselves *and* their character. I can only play Cassius if other people recognize in me someone they want to play with; without engagement with the other (and without their assumptions about who I am), there can be no initial meeting and therefore no play. What this means is that players have to therefore generate some sort of meaning-making in the other before they can continue to play. As Marx writes: "since he comes into the world neither with a looking-glass in his hand, nor as a Fichtian philosopher, to whom 'I am I' is sufficient, man first sees and recognizes himself in other men. Peter only establishes his own identity as a man by first comparing himself with Paul as being of like kind" (qtd in Žižek *The Sublime Subject of Ideology* 19-20). But these assumptions cannot ever be fully-formed: because these are strangers, I implicitly guess at what my potential partner's likes, dislikes, character goals, etc are. And these guesses (these "misrecognitions," to borrow from Zizek and other Marxist psychoanalytics) become my truth, regardless of whether or not they are "true," because they ultimately say more about *my* wants and desires than what is inherent to the people I ERP with.

ERP requires multiple levels of proficiency that neither cybersex, nor erotica nor cruising alone account for. You need technical proficiency to create an appealing "hook," you need a working knowledge of how to write erotica, and you need to know how to talk to people out of the "sex scene" (out-of-character, or "OOC"), to establish working relationships that last past a quickie behind the bar. Furthermore, when navigating this world as a transmasculine person, I must keep in mind how to safely play a character who is trans with partners who are strangers.

How do I disengage when my character's sexual interests are being misunderstood? How do I find other trans OCs for me to ERP with? How do I signal to these users that my character is trans without inviting the possibility of harassment from bigoted users online? *Where* do I learn all of these practices?

The insular nature of ERP communities (especially trans or queer ones) necessarily means that one does not learn how to "do" ERP in public forums. They don't get taught publicly because there always runs the risk of that user being reported or harassed by users who dislike or are disgusted by the fact that people ERP. What gets picked up is learned in play with other ERPers. That is, a user learns by example rather than being taught. Their skill at *writing* ERP can emerge from a variety of places. One may just slowly pick up the flow of writing a sex scene from doing a lot of ERP. Someone else may simply use their experiences with "actual" sex. I hesitate to use "physical" sex as a descriptor here, as I want to broaden our understanding of what sex looks like and necessarily blur the lines between what we think of as "just sex" and "just erotica" when we think about online sex. My ERP practice is necessarily entwined with writing "literary" erotica, erotic fanfiction, watching/playing a variety of porn (both animated and live action), and reading academic texts *about* sex and cruising.

But ERP isn't *just* writing a scene. Before two (or more!) characters can have sex, they need to first be appealing enough for a user to want to fuck them in the first place. My OC Cassius is a large transgender anthropomorphic cat. I make him appealing not *broadly*, as that is not the kind of net I want to cast in the first place, but appealing to people who would think a large transgender anthropomorphic cat is sexy in the first place. I emphasize his roguish charms, I lean on the archetype of the "mean girl" (the Cheryl Blossom of *Riverdale*, Regina George of *Mean Girls*, Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie in *The Simple Life*), I put him in skimpy armor. I

commission art of him in outfits from *Dirty Pair* (1985). In other words, I make Cassius legibly a faggot being played by a faggot. He is the bait I use to trawl for other faggots. Sometimes this results in nothing; but I don't want to cast too wide a net. Failing at finding a partner is just as much a part of ERP as finding one in the first place. It means you either have to try again another time, or you need to broaden your selection, spice up your profile to make yourself more appealing (accentuate the body rather than personality, maybe) to find a different kind of ERP partner.

There must be mutual interest on the ends of both ERP partners. If we were cruising "in real life" or at a sex party, looking at another person, talking to them, hearing them speak to others or talking to people who know them would be the primary mode of deciding whether or not one would want to engage with someone else. If this were Grindr, I would have photos, the person in question's description, and perhaps additional personal details if they decided to fill those in. For an ERPer, there's more to it than that: the RP Profile. On some level, ERP puts the experience of both seeing someone virtually while also glancing down at your phone to read their Grindr profile. Furthermore, it would be reductive to view the kind of attention-catching practices ERPers perform as solely practices of cruising or online dating, as that would disregard the community practices of roleplayers. Walk-up RP, roleplay profiles, and character commission art are all practices RPers writ large engage with, and as a community have been building standards RPers follow in order to most accurately find suitable roleplay partners. ERPers just so happen to occasionally mention the size of their testicles or cock in their profile, a practice most non-ERP RPers don't engage with.

But these profiles cannot be hosted on *Final Fantasy XIV*, not only due to their content ("normal" roleplayers use profiles, too), but because there is no place for a user to host large

amounts of texts or photos locally in *FFXIV*. The solution is to bring the outside in: to use the fact that we are playing on a computer, already connected to the internet, and hosting our profiles on the web. Often, this is in the form of creating a website on "carrd.co" or by directing a player to their profile on f-list.com (a website which hosts not only art of a character, but also lists their sexual preferences in comprehensive "loves," "likes," and "no's" as well as a brief description of their personality or history). These profiles are then linked in a player's search information (or, search info, as it is more often referred to). Search info is a space reserved for a player to enter up to 60 characters of text all other players can see. Because of the 60-character limit, and because you cannot click links (a user needs to manually type in the web address), users typically use a tool like tinyurl or tiny.cc to shorten the link to their profile, although this is not always necessary. Cassius's link is short enough as well as simple enough to remember to slot into his search info without the use of tinyurl: cassb.carrd.co. What this does is then expand the "game" outside of its bounds. It puts into relation sites which contain further information on a given player's character. There are third-party plugins (tools created by users, unsanctioned by Square Enix)[12] which allow for the text content of these carrds to be displayed on the in-game screen as soon as a player right-clicks and chooses to "examine" another player character, which allows for a user to read through the contents of a site without having to navigate outside of the game, as it were.

Cassius's carrd home page includes the essentials: name, age, sexuality, where he lives. The return of A/S/L. Were this Habbo Hotel, or even Grindr, this may be enough for someone. But for an ERPer, this is not sufficient. There needs to be more for a player to chew on if there's to be a *scene* and not just cybering. Past the homepage, then, is a gallery: a collection of the commissioned art of Cassius. This is important, because what he looks like in-game is not how

he *really* looks in the fiction of (E)RP: he is fatter, with different fur colouring. It also serves to make him feel more "real" for another user if he has drawn art; one gets a sense of his personality in the way he poses. He then has an "at first glance" page: a brief written description of his appearance, a list of "hooks" — You may know Cassius if… — and finally, a set of rumours: common knowledge, lies, hearsay. I first came upon the practice of adding rumours to a RP profile through https://wiki.ffxiv-roleplayers.com/, a site that rarely gets linked in-game but was presumably useful for those who roleplay on https://ffxiv-roleplayers.com/, a now-defunct Roleplaying forum for *FFXIV* players who wanted to write character scenes outside of the game.

What I have carefully laid out here is a set of practices which rely on the foundation of the game's tools at every player's disposal, except these tools are being used in ways that are unintended (or are at the very least not primary). Search information is not intended to host links to RP profiles, looking at another player character is not intended to signal interest in virtual cruising, the chat box was never supposed to be the receptacle through which many players spend their time and their monthly subscription fee looking at and engaging with.

These practices reveal that there are few affordances given for players to leave any lengthy or in-depth writing available to read in-game. Thus, players need to shift the scope of "where" the game is in order to roleplay. ERP makes obvious the amount of effort players in spaces will make in order to broaden the horizon of a given play space. The most impactful piece of information another erotic roleplayer may need to know about a character may be completely invisible up until the moment they press alt and tab to move outside of the game and read it in a Firefox window. After all, the *base* game all *Final Fantasy XIV* players open up doesn't include the option to show and edit a character's genitals — we have to leave that for the dedicated NSFW modding scene, instead.[13] What this *also* does is introduce a kind of patchy network of

tools that seem, to most non-roleplayers, completely "useless" (as in, ultimately adds no benefit to gameplay: it does not improve targeting, or spellcasting, or track the abilities of a boss, for example) but are in truth some of the most necessary components a roleplayer has in their arsenal. The game stops being ffxivboot.exe and instead requires the ability to open browser windows, install a plugin launcher like XIVLauncher, and make the most out of a desktop environment.

But then again, the browser inserts itself in other ways while playing *FFXIV*: I may open a new tab on Firefox to look up a guide for the next step of a quest. I may use a user-created website to better track which enemies I need to kill for my daily "hunt" quests. I may look up a YouTube video in order to watch a guide another user has recorded to learn how to fight a boss in the game. This kind of effusive paratextual content which emerges from an MMO like *FFXIV* naturalizes the user to be comfortable opening and digesting external links to better understand the content of the game. None of these Firefox tabs I have open in order to better navigate Orbonne Monastery or Eureka Orthos will ever "touch" the game. Community discussion will be archived on the web, in a Discord server, or in a Twitter thread, but the game will remain as though untouched by it. Mia Consalvo writes: "the 'real world' will always intrude on game playing, in multiple ways, and players respond to those intrusions dynamically, negotiating a reality that is 'continually in dynamic tension'" (415). Treating the game itself as a pure object through which players singularly interface with, as we do when we think about games as "magic circles" or games through which we enter modes of "flow" disregards the myriad other ways players live within the digital space.

ERP spaces function similarly. Players cannot *change* the spaces they exist within in fundamental or particular ways, aside from their very presence in a space. Character avatars do

not leave a "trace" of themselves, a collective memory or affect of lust; cruising becomes atomized and individualized. By this same token, the spaces ERPers and any other player inhabit are one and the same. This causes some level of friction which isn't nearly as prevalent in "historic" cruising spaces. In *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Samuel Delany takes his friend Ana to a movie theatre he cruises at. At the end of the session, Ana remarks: "you didn't tell me … that so many people say 'no.' And that everybody pretty much goes along with it," to which Delany replies: "when so many people say 'yes,' the 'nos' don't seem so important," and Ana closes the thought with, "well, there're still *more* 'nos' than 'yesses'" (30). Propositioning is common and frequent. In a space *about* sex, then what is permissible — as well as the affect of the "nos" — is different. The players who already barely tolerate ERP in *Final Fantasy* who then get propositioned don't "go along with it," as I have already described. Not everyone in *Final Fantasy XIV* is "in" on the scene; there is no "mass" site of ERP — even if we were to believe that roleplayers on Balmung do nothing but fuck. What happens in the game is discreet, enclosed, individuated.

"When I come in here," Delany writes, "I usually take a quick tour of the whole place, just to see how things are looking" (26). He notes to Ana after their tour through the porn theater that at least three pairs of men were giving each other blowjobs, and he also is able to spontaneously join a pair of men in the middle of a scene. This is simply not possible to emulate in *FFXIV* ERP. The /party chat function of ERP, a social practice designed to keep ERPers out of trouble, to prevent prudish onlookers from reporting them for misuse of the game, also forecloses the ability for the kinds of spontaneous voyeurism or engagement that is so important to "real" cruising. One can *assume* what players are doing, avatars tucked closely together in the corner of the bar of the Quicksand, or the back alleys of Ul'dah, but they can't engage with them. They

can't enjoy watching a scene, unless specifically directed to. The mechanisms that function to protect players also foreclose the "typical" or "historical" practices of cruising. A heritage of looking *simply* at cruising is insufficient. The assemblage must be reterritorialized.

ERP makes evident the moving and shifting forms of interfacing with the game all the more obvious. The player avatar, as when Alexander Galloway describes Rockwell's "Triple Self Portrait," appears on multiple levels of the interface (34). It exists as a physically rendered 3D object on the screen, but also in the physical world: "interfaces are thus manifest (as screens or keyboards), but also latent within software as the mediation between internal and external levels" (74). These levels are not "simple and transparent," but instead are a "fertile nexus" (32). The character exists through the appearance and personality descriptors on the roleplayer's carrd. It exists in the text box through which the player is describing the moving action. The diegetic and nondiegetic space of the MMO continually mediates the ways in which players interface with and process not just *Final Fantasy XIV* but the desktop computer. Pippin Barr's description of the interface is also helpful here: "video game interfaces are there because, quite simply, we aren't" (70). His writing on games about interfaces — primarily his own game, *It is as if you were doing work* — also work in ERP because ERP necessarily is a game of interfaces. The practices are "neither inherent to the game nor the player" and instead emerge "out of their interaction" (4). ERP cannot exist without the engagement of the player on systems of the interface that have otherwise been deprioritized. These elements *should* (and in other cases are) be "transparent and unobtrusive" but in ERP they explode. They become the game itself. The hierarchy upends, like a day of carnival.

We as players utilize the framework of interlaced interfaces to make the non-diegetic elements of the game; when Galloway writes "Gauges and dials have superseded lenses and

windows. Writing is once again on par with image" (42) I would instead suggest that the chat box and browser have superseded the image (the avatar, the game space) in *Final Fantasy XIV*. The 3D avatar is the locus through which initial contact is sparked (one player is interested in the other player often at first glance) but is hierarchically the least important factor in actual roleplay. So what is the avatar? The peacock plumage of a player? A kind of form of flagging? In a game where aesthetics are everything[14], the ways in which the importance of the avatar falls away when ERP becomes the primary mode of playing is of great interest to me. Armor, weapons, titles — signifiers of proficiency at the game, or seniority due to possessing legacy items which can no longer be obtained — no longer matter when the goal of the game becomes who and when you fuck. When the artifice of the avatar falls away, what moves in to replace it? A given player's ability to implement the coded language of ERP — a "very complex nondiegetic mode of signification" (Galloway 42). The practice of essentially writing the most attractive Craigslist Missed Connection listing fills the power vacuum. The conventions of attraction — and the mode of the game itself — shift to a narrative mode.

I also think it is pertinent to make a distinction between the ERP I am discussing and cybersex. Up to this point, I would argue that the practices of the ERPer and the cybersex player are indistinguishable. Let me first define what I consider to be "cybersex," or even "sexting." In cybersex and sexting, the parties in question are coming together in order to more or less simulate "real" sex. They are looking for a partner through which they can get their digital rocks off. I would compare this practice more closely to something like phone sex, or even chatroom cybersex. But even this distinction isn't really enough to separate cyber sex to ERP, as someone who is an Erotic Roleplayer may very well be doing ERP with the intention of having virtual sex and simulating chatroom sex. Sandy Stone uses "bandwidth" as a metaphor in order to

adequately describe the ways in which sexual activity like phone sex uses one "mode" of communication in order to construct a "whole" desire. "Reality," Stone writes, "is wide-bandwidth, because people who communicate face to face in real time use multiple modes simultaneously — speech, gestures, facial expression, the entire gamut of semiotics," whereas something like cybersex or ERP

> is narrow bandwidth, because communication is restricted to lines of text on a screen. … For symbolic exchange originating at and relating to the surface of the body, narrowing the bandwidth has startling effects. A deep need is revealed to create extremely detailed images of the absent and invisible body, of human interaction, and the symbol-generating artifacts which are a part of that interaction. Frequently in narrow-bandwidth communication the interpretive faculties of one participant or another are powerfully, even obsessively, engaged. (93)

Stone makes a case for these kinds of obsessive, low-bandwidth methods of communications relying on "highly compressed token[s] of desire" which results in "meaning that is dense, locally situated, and socially particular" (95). ERP takes this a step further. These tokens are not just sexual tastes, but the emotions and desires of our characters. This is part of what separates ERP from cybersex. It is not sufficient to want to have sex — to describe sex acts. They are *characters* first and *players* second. My ERP character, Cassius, is not me; he is born from my desire to play a large anthropomorphic cat man who is also a transmasculine Nicole Richie, the son of a mafioso, and is all-around mean and bratty. He has a concrete past, which influences his tastes, his desires, and his needs in particular ways that differ from (and overlap with!) my own. There are storylines I want to play through, dramatic ironies, and I require him to not only be deeply embedded within the lore of *Final Fantasy XIV* but a vehicle for me to further expand

who constitutes this world. By extension, the partners I want to roleplay with must be on the same page as me. If I wanted to simply have sex, I would go outside.

But again, the line between sex and "narrative" sex here is fuzzy and ambiguous. You may ask, how does this desire for narrative differ in any way to sexual role play? What separates this from puppy play, or BDSM? Or even pornography? Those practices, too, have an element of performance and story-telling. The pizza delivery man, after all, needs some kind of reason to accept sex as payment. There will always be overlap. There will never be a way to fully disengage ERP from other sexual practices, nor should this be anyone's goal. What the aim here is to point at this practice and note how ERP expands outwards; it is *alike* but is *not*. Let us draw together the tokens and the interface: players are not just speaking to other players, as I have said. They must speak *through* the computer, *through* their search information, *through* the chatbox, *to* their peer. That is why ERP is not simply erotica, either; it is deeply mediated through playing to see what happens, and through allowing the investment of another character's desires (sexually, narratively) to be imposed on your own character.[15] But are there other players to whom this is important, or am I the black sheep in a sea of folks who want a quick fuck?

Wark performs a "trick" in *Raving*, which serves to pinpoint the "kind" of raver she's interested in. She mentions two types of ravers she has no interest in examining: Punishers and Coworkers. A Punisher is a raver "who is going to make it hard to get your rave on, one way or another" (3) whereas a Coworker "just want[s] a night out so they can talk about it around the office on Monday" (4). These archetypes are mentioned in *Raving* in order to shift perspective *away* from them throughout the rest of the text. They are not participants who are there "for the love" of the rave. They may appear throughout, but they are by no means the subject of *Raving*, by no means the "raver" Wark and her theory are invested in. By this same token, cyberer-

ERPers, while present and valuable members of the ERP community, are not what I am interested in studying. There are players who visit the Balmung world in order to gawk at how "depraved" and "pathetic" erotic role players are, to find elements of other players' characters to ridicule. Additionally, while there are other people, cis and straight like, who ERP, my narrow focus on transmasculine queer ERP serves to tighten my focus around a particular *kind* of practice. I am not going to deny the fact that there *are* skeevy ERPers whose singular interest is to have sex — but they are also cyberers, whereas the practice of ERP I am describing does not align with cybering in both appearances as well as intention.

There are other elements that go into ERP: modding a character, doing ERP on other servers like Discord, through Twitter, or by other means. However, I wanted to focus on ERP-via-chatlog for a few reasons. It forces the player to rely on a very particular set of practical skills: writing erotica, creating an engaging character through text, creating a character that other players *want* to have sex with. The state of preservation for "Not Safe For Work" modding, as well as the preservation of "erotic game photography" is a much more active practice in the *FFXIV* community. One only has to search "#NSFWGPOSER" on twitter and have their eyes relentlessly aggrieved by all manner of modded, nude Warriors of Light, and there are websites dedicated to archiving visual mods (including NSFW mods)[16]. More selfishly, chatlog-ERP is simply more *interesting* to me not only as an academic, but as a hobbyist erotica writer as well.

The bulk of ERP text is ephemeral, unarchivable in the traditional sense. When a player logs out and logs back in, all traces of the chat from the previous session disappear. There *is* a way to preserve the logs: a player must navigate to "C:\Users\[USER HERE]\OneDrive\Documents\My Games\FINAL FANTASY XIV - A Realm Reborn," navigate to the character in question's folder — in my case, the folder for my character Cassius is named

“FFXIV_CHR004000174C0E9BAE” — and then finally enter the “log” folder in order to view a collection of the chatlogs from previous play sessions of the game. But much of it is unparseable, and it includes *all* chat events, not just the ones from “whisper” or “party” chats. By unparseable, I mean to say that much of the log file reads as so:

> Gwagwa GwaGwagwa Gwa' ÏÿYAdamantoise waves to '*ÿFudge BrownieFudge Brownie' ÏÿYZalera.,°£c+8 The House Durendaire guard uses Shield Bash.,°£c*; î¯ The attack misses the snow wolf pup.*f*°£c); The House Durendaire guard hits the snow wolf pup for 31 damage.*f*°£c
>
> 'BÿSchmeepo SchultzSchmeepo Schultz' ÏÿYMidgardsormrphage do u like among us,,°£c
>
> '*ÿ

The problem is not just that no one seems to be able to discuss the objects I want to discuss — it is also that the very *action* of archiving material — which is by design fragmentary, momentary, and more often than not meant for only a small group to read in the first place — is, at best, a sisyphean trial. Moreover, because of the partially-encrypted nature of the logs, there are no timestamps, and many of these individual logs are scrambled. Gleaning a direct record of chronological events is once again impossible.

This is not to say that this is an issue which plagues only *Final Fantasy XIV*. I would not be the first to argue that the difficulty of citing games writ large is a pain point in games studies. What I *am* arguing is that the nature of ERP itself — the inability to easily record or archive chatlogs within the “vanilla” architecture of the game, *as well as* the cultural practice of not actively archiving ERP flings — reveals what this problem *does* to games studies.

Chapter 2: FTM/Fujoshi-to-Male

"Andrew, we're complex.
We contain both the evil of men and the evil of teen girls."
-Hal Schrieve, *Vivian's Ghost*

In the last chapter, I discussed how games are impure objects: they are layers of sediment, layers of interface, built one on top of the other. Additionally, this also means that ERP itself is not a "pure" invention. There is no one entry point to roleplay. Often, the historiography of roleplay within games is traced back to MUDs or MOOs, text-based multiplayer games.[17] Chronology of roleplay gets built around "where" people are roleplaying — what games they have inhabited. Moving from MUDs, to *Everquest*, to *World of Warcraft*, to *Final Fantasy XIV*. This is perhaps a sufficient enough timeline, but as I stated in my previous chapter, RP and ERP necessarily involve elements of the desktop PC that *are not* the game. A player brings not only themselves in the game, but all the *junk* that makes up that player's identity as an ERPer and as a person. Because ERP is a shared writing practice, not just a game, we must also consider the ways in which other shared writing practices contribute to the "circuit of culture," to use Hall's metaphor: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation all come together to form the circuit — to make meaning (*Representation* 1).

To state more clearly, what I want to do is think about what other cultures gay transmasculine ERPers are invested in, and how the myriad subject positions they involve allow us to think about not only ERP, but also transmasculinity. The circuit is a helpful metaphor, as it orients my goals as a scholar in similar ways to articulations or assemblages: it enmeshes practices, subjects, and culture. It shifts the hierarchy from one of chronology (historically, a larger issue in trans and queer studies) to reception and meaning-making. I think about "circuits" rather than simply just articulations and assemblages because circuitry necessarily invokes an

image of circling back — of continually self-replicating, of feedback loops. I use this term to complement rather than replace articulations or assemblages. The circuit of culture is itself an assemblage. For my purposes in this chapter, however, I think it is pertinent to think about cycles, repetition, and the machinic qualities circuitry. Hall's notion of the circuit also helps orient the direction of my questioning: What do transmasc ERPers do outside of ERP? How do these practices circle back to the practices of ERP? How do transmasculine ERPers form their identity around these practices?

The ways in which I ERP and the ways in which I form my transfag identity are negotiated partly through the genre of yaoi and of the cultural identity of the fujoshi. Yaoi is a Japanese subgenre (inclusive of manga, anime, and games) which focuses on the love —or lust— between two men. Academia's historical understanding of Yaoi Visual Novels presumes that Yaoi VNs are played largely by women (Nagaike 76). There's a word for girls who read yaoi: a fujoshi. If yaoi is not consumed by women, logic follows that a game where gay sex occurs is played by cis gay men. None of the writing I was able to find while researching (McLelland, Suzuki, McLelland et. al., Zsila et. al.) indicated that these academics had considered trans gay men as an audience. Zsila et. al., who offer the most recent survey I was able to track down, noted multiple demographics: straight men, gay men, straight women, gay women. However, they did not include trans identification as an option, and so even here there is not a single dataset which includes gay trans men.

I make the link from yaoi and "slash" to ERP because both practices involve people investing their creative energies into an already-built world. In the case of ERP, subjects create OCs and inhabit the world of *Final Fantasy XIV.* They think of novel ways to embody their character, to engage with the game lore, to find alternate modes of play within the game space. I

cannot help but make the link from (E)RP to the practice of writing "slash" fanfiction because, in my experience, one practice led to the other. When I write or read fanfiction, many of the skills of writing and thinking about sex can be transferred to ERP. When I ERP with someone, I may find new or novel ways to describe or think about sex acts. Both of these communities form around free (in all definitions of the word — ERP and fanfiction are by definition *free* practices) exchange of ideas, around transformative works.

Jenkins's landmark chapter on "slash" communities stumbles into the same pitfalls as writing on Yaoi. He defines slash as "pornography by and for women" (196).[18] Jenkins suggests a myriad of reasons as to why women in particular are fixated on slash. And of course, as with Yaoi, there is a need to add: "Slash readers do not display a literal wish to become male" (198). The practices he lays out: a desire for sexual representation which lies "outside" commercial pornography, the amorphous shifting of identification — physically desiring both men in the relationship while still wanting to "be the bottom" — the element of concealing identity so as to not be "outed" as a slasher in public life. All of these practices are *the same* as my own experiences as a trans man. Fanfiction did not *make* me a trans man. However, it allowed a certain kind of malleable subject formation that went unquestioned by myself and my peers; after all, in slash circles, it was natural to want to be a man who was fucked by other men. It was natural to want to *see* men kiss and fist and suck. What slash did to my teenage years was allow for me to brush up against the cultural boundaries of both what it was to be a man embedded in a world where men could have sex with men *and also* project my unconscious desire to safely be a man without 'outing' myself. The same could be said of (non-E)RP; even out of character (OOC), I was not myself. I was a gay teen boy with whom I roleplayed. I deceived them as a form of "internet safety" — a lie, obviously. But no one asked any questions. I could just be a

gay man, and no one would assume otherwise. In the circuit, meaning is continually produced; of course, the majority of those embedded in a culture of slashing *are* cis women, but to gay trans men, while the practices remain the same, the circulated meaning is altered dramatically.

The absence of gay trans men from any kind of academic consideration in fandom reveals an opportunity for someone like myself to swoop in. After all, I have both the "amateur hobbyist" experience of what it looks like to be a visual novel player as well as the academic interest to figure out why players like me would be a compelling research object. I argue that the transmasculine subject as articulated by yaoi and slash complicates how we think about time with relation to the self. For example, I started reading yaoi (and later playing yaoi visual novels) and "slash" fanfiction when I was a young teen, when I thought I was a lesbian in my late teens, and finally now as an adult gay trans man. All the while, I was roleplaying, at various levels of eroticism, at varying levels of engagement, in various online locations (although primarily on forums). As a teen I would often say, "if I was a guy I would definitely be a gay guy," a normal thing cis straight girls or lesbians probably think and say all the time. Did this make me the kind of girl that Jenkins describes when he writes about the fangirl? Is there a certain point at which I stop being a girl and start being a trans man? Is it when I "first" realize I am a man? Is it when I first come out to someone? Is it when I change the name that I go by? Is it when I first inject myself with testosterone?

Jack Halberstam has done some of the work untangling the trans body from time (from "firsts," from "origins"). He writes "when logic that fixes bodily form to social practice comes undone, when narratives of sex, gender, and embodiment loosen up and become less fixed in relation to truth, authenticity, originality, and identity, then we have the space and the time to imagine bodies otherwise" (xii). A body is classified out of a need to prescribe "scientific

distinctions between normal and abnormal bodies," and thereby produce a subject whose existence is predicated on a study which lends credence to "white supremacist projects that [try] to collapse racial otherness into gender variance and sexual perversion" (6). Thus the power in classifying trans bodies rests historically with "doctors and psychologists, social workers and academics … and joins it to a system of knowledge that invests heavily in the idea that experts describe rather than invent" (8). Halberstam posits, and I am inclined to agree, that this attempt to make naming clinical — to make naming *descriptive*, is itself an invention. Sexology gave way to Freud, which gave way to Foucault (7). There was nothing natural or inherent to how each of these frames of study came to describe the trans body. Halberstam writes: "as we know from watching the slow implosion of seemingly 'natural' systems from one hundred years ago, naming fixes bodies in time and space and in relation to favored social narratives of difference" (8).

The implication of "linear" history is that there are precise moments in time one can pinpoint in order to say where one thing starts and another thing ends. It frames time (and life, and by extension, selfhood) around recognizable, fixed, and common events. It pathologizes gender by expecting a root cause, and by precipitating that root cause by forming a set of expected behaviors trans people have in common. All of these moments can be cleanly separated from each other. These moments are causal: first this happened, and so this happened *next*. A trans subject looks like *this*, reacts *like so* to cultural objects, has *this* ideology, docked firmly to the political interests of showing a "common" trans history. As I demonstrated with the figure of the slasher, while the practices or history may be similar, the reception and subsequent representation with those cultural objects may differ vastly between subjects. However, believing in a common trans history strengthens the position of the trans figure, as a common history for

trans people allows for them to be read as any other kind of class formation. This is not in itself a bad thing: it is politically expedient to mobilize the trans body as a unified force in order to resist marginalization. But this is a double-edged sword: the instant one argues that, *no,* these formations (man, woman, trans, cis) are malleable, complex, and *not* necessarily innate is when the language we have used in order to unify ourselves politically limits our ability to speak or write about the "strangeness" of the trans body in time.

Framing history in this way denotes a keen desire for narrative. It is an impulse for the trans body to be read as legible — as normal. The "born in the wrong body" narrative is cloying, and it makes the trans body — an accidental freak, a freak who wants to be normal — legible. I stop being scary. I stop being monstrous. Chronology reframes me to be, on the one hand, someone who was once a confused woman (and therefore can perhaps someday realize this mistake) and on the other hand, always a man (the Born-This-Way routine, disregarding my weirdgirl childhood) who had the misfortune to be born in the wrong body. I start being pitiable. And, by extension, I start to be understood by the state.

Historically, FtM transsexuals have been described as "by definition, not true transvestites" (Rubin 494). They were considered "psychopaths who want to attract attention" (Hertz and Westman qtd in Rubin 494). Because of these attitudes, trans men therefore had to provide *physical* evidence of their transness: by "claiming to have a testicle, this patient could locate his condition in his body and indicate that his true sex was male" (495). Otherwise, these men were simply considered madwomen. Furthermore, the trans men who received treatment most frequently were those who "also asserted that they were not homosexuals" (495). By and large, trans men have historically been regarded by psychologists as "at worst deluded, and at best strategic" (496).

Under this historical framework, "better science or more nuanced history [can] accurately identify and distinguish between categories of sexuality and gender" — a desire resulting in what Henry Rubin describes as a "positivist" view of transsexual history (483). Furthermore, this selfsame framing assumes trans men are "separate … yet still dependent upon female homosexuality" (483). The only visible form of deviance, to both transsexual historiographers as well as medical practitioners of the 19th and 20th century was a trans man who necessarily manifested his "inversion" by "cross-dressing, smoking," displaying a "dislike for needlework" (483). These kinds of demonstrations of masculinity allowed them to be seen as acceptably deviant. Of course, being acceptably trans to the state was not necessarily accurate to the actual lived experiences of many trans men. Nevertheless, the state's desire for a "legible" trans male body resulted in producing a narrative through which trans men could be understood. They played with trucks as children. They were tomboys. They insisted at an early age that they were men. They were exclusive, obligate heterosexuals. They were terrified of being penetrated vaginally. Any alternate narrative was discarded, and this rejection of alternate trans experiences resulted in a kind of survivor bias. If all these men (who had been told by other trans men to hew close to what the medical community was "looking for" in order to gain access to hormones and surgery) were saying the same thing, then surely the doctors' initial understanding of trans men was true.[19] The "presumption of a past lesbianism" or "the agonizing ascension of trans men into straightness" (Adair and Aizura 51) haunt the study of trans men.

By extension, for someone to be "acceptably" part of the slash or yaoi community, they historically have to be straight women, invested in the relationships between men for "the right reasons." Sex between men in slash should be a "meaningful exchange between equals, not anonymous or depersonalized," emphasizing the "sensuality" of sex "rather than … penetration

and ejaculation" (Jenkins 197). The (cis) readers should be projecting onto the (cis) men in ways that resist depictions of sex within "typical" forms of (commercial) pornography. The mere existence of trans men within these communities disrupts this framework. The characters themselves do not even need to be altered — although in my experience, trans writers often make one or both men in a slash pairing trans men[20] — the reception and subsequent altered meaning is already enormous. By extension, a trans man who ERPs does not necessarily have to play a trans male character for it to be a "fujoshi-to-male" practice of ERP.

It feels like it is impossible for a trans person to *not* be rendered through the eyes of the state.[21] If we can only understand what gender means via the DMV, for example, our potential identities are limited and fixed: F, M (and sometimes X) on a driver's license. My doctor must write "transgender patient" in the section meant for doctors to add additional context whenever I go to get a blood test, or get a pap smear's results. There is *no* passing, no getting around my medical transness when I enter these spaces. By that same token, if I am anonymously existing within a fujoshi circle, the expected gender configuration I have is that of a cis woman. To be anything else is out of place and odd. My existence in this space in turn transforms the ways in which I negotiate my gender and the *expectations* of my gender.

It is limiting to affix or understand our positionality in culture solely through the ways in which the state exerts its power over the trans body. It transforms the subjects within this state as "trivial machines" — and alters the culture(s), the "rich history of cultural symbolism" and "complex, meaningful transactions" of cultural objects articulated within the state to be "no more than shadowy derivatives of stimuli and structures" (Carey 40). So where do we look? I argue that we should be looking at those selfsame "rich" and "symbolic" cultures which Carey notes are being inadequately studied — albeit rendered *through* the trans subject. By doing so,

fujoshism or fanfiction writing or ERPing or stamp collecting or *whatever else* become interconnected, ritually-negotiated practices through which subjects understand themselves and each other. These state apparatuses are what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari call "masses," which operate "at different speeds and paces" and to whom their seeming incompatibility are "not contradictions but escapes" (220), and the state is itself "not a point taking all the others upon itself, but a resonance chamber for them all" (224). So while there is no *escaping* the state, there are instead lines of flight through which an assemblage can be reterritorialized and reorganized. I'm not attempting to overstate the value of trans male fujoshis, of course. I am suggesting that by understanding a person and the "narrative" of that person outside of the singular history the state allows us, we open up an entire avenue of life and study. Two things happen when we challenge the historical narrative of both transness and yaoi culture: firstly, my own perspective as both a trans man and a yaoi enjoyer become clarified and involved in academic discourse rather than rendered invisible, and secondly, this kind of study reveals, to a certain extent, that there are the same kinds of assumptions about "who" gets to be a fujoshi, or what gets to be part of the transmasculine canon at work, as who is able to medically transition.

Understood through "linear" time, the trans man is either "always" a man, or at a certain point "becomes" a man. This results in a reductive understanding of how trans men exist in the world, as well as an understanding which belies an interest in the body and subject as an individual rather than a subject shaped by practice and technique. Moreoever, the disjunction between "explained experience" and "lived experience" demonstrates, clearly, that there must be other ways of talking about time (and, by extension, assemblages). To become should be differentiated from Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-. Becoming- resembles the chain of mimesis: "either in the form of a chain of beings perpetually imitating one another, progressively

and regressively" (235). In turn, to become- is to understand ideas and the history of ideas as "never … continuous" and "wary of resemblances, but also of descents or filiations; it should be content to mark the thresholds through which an idea passes, the journeys it takes that change its nature or object" (235). To become- is not to start as one thing and end up as another thing. The man who became- a dog, as described so famously by Deleuze and Guattari, did so because he already *was*, paradoxically, a dog. His desire to never be hungry is what made him a dog, not the shoes he tied to his hands, nor the fact that he used his mouth to tie the laces. But then again, those actions added to the affect of dogginess — just as my investment in fujoshism paradoxically both makes me become-fujoshi while at the same time encoding within myself a kind of faggotry through practice.

My aim is to layer my teenage girlhood, my adult manhood, my strange in-betweenness, and instead of trying to understand where one part begins and the other part ends, attempt to think about the trans body and something like ERP as particular, interconnected, and messy networks. Furthermore, inserting fan studies and fujoshism into the assemblage serves as a way to "reterritorialize" it; as I noted in my previous chapter, looking at ERP as an extension of public sex or of gay male cruising is insufficient, as the tools and methods of the expert-hobbyists involved are drawing from other cultural practices — tabletop roleplay, for one, but also fanfiction practices. To cover the entire assemblage in this paper would be a huge undertaking, and not only outside of the scope of my studies, but more importantly would result in a summation of a subject that I feel would be so broad, drawing from so many experiences as to only conclude with "some do this, some do that." This is why I argue looking at *my* particular ERP subject is productive. It localizes the practices and interests of smaller groups of subjects, yes, but it also results in forcing the scholar (me) to think of what these links *mean* rather than

just how they are formed. It also allows for the knowledge and understanding as a fan to blend with my understanding as an academic. When I connect the practice of cruising to transmasculinity to "slash," I am by extension asking how we should be studying communities within communities, and asking how a scholar's knowledge as an expert-hobbyist can be leveraged within academia.

When we discuss sex online, we disregard the ways in which fanfiction as a practice *is* a kind of online sex. As I've highlighted, the practices of cybering and of ERP are interconnected, even though why or who these practices are for differ. But by that same token, ERP is also a unique kind of identity-formation for trans men that trans studies scholars have not thoroughly explored. Not all gay trans men do ERP — and not all ERPers are gay trans men (would that they were, for my sake!) but the ways in which these two identifiable "practices" (because being a trans man *is* a culturally negotiated practice) of mine intertwine are novel and interesting. Considering the trans body in the context of chronology or history necessarily complicates the concept of linearity, especially once you deprioritize the desire to make the trans body legible to the state or the medical system. The body still must remain legible — but the question then shifts to ask: legible to whom? And for what purpose? And further down the line: what narrative unspools from this new "legible" articulation? Why don't we think of the trans body and trans culture like a machine — hacked together, assembled, tinkered with, culturally negotiated — rather than a timeline?

The kind of trans history that Adair and Aizura record is so unlike my own experience of self-discovery through the other that it feels almost alien. I know nothing of the bro-ey jock-faggot porn they talk about and have no desire to *be* a bro-ey jock-faggot. I'm too much of a nerd for it — they'd be stuffing me in a locker as soon as I got in the gym at the local YMCA. They

are describing a world of transmasculinity with which I have no connection or commonality. This is not to say that their work is unimportant, or inaccurate, or even disharmonious to my own writing as an academic — what I mean to say is that here is yet another field of study that has no idea what to do with Yaoi and the transfag fujoshi. The disconnect between *my* transfaggotry and *their* transfaggotry also serves to demonstrate what thinking about a "linear" or "common" history even within communities nested within communities *does* to time. Time gets flattened, even when the goal is *not* to describe what all trans men are, or what trans erotics should be. What is the solution here, if we cannot find commonality in the "things" trans men historically discover or "become-" trans through? There is a precarious bit of tightrope walking I want to do here: I want to simultaneously discuss the "transness" of my object while questioning what "transness" even looks like.

Aizura and Adair provide a way of thinking through depictions of sex as affectively engaging with the role of erotics, community, and intersubjectivity. They capitalize on the language of contagion — of trans men "stealing" their tomboy daughters from innocent parents — and reclaim it as a signal of desire "to be" and desire "to fuck." While their research objects may differ, they agree with my consensus: that there is a marked "archival absence" (58) in trans studies about gay trans men — especially t4t gay trans men. They write: "[There is a] radical disjuncture between our community knowledge of ftm4ftm relationships and their abundance (and drama), versus critical analyses of such relationships, which are so scant that it seems that all the trans guy scholars must be fucking one another and thus are simply too busy to write at all" (47). Chronology creeps up on us again here — when sexuality and the act of sex is bound up and pathologized under the microscope (by parents, by scholars), the resultant conversations we have are necessarily "stuck" in time. One shouldn't transition unless they haven't "skipped

the step," or "naturally form[ed] their gender identities through having sex" (49). There's a natural order to things — a natural common sexual history — that women should follow. At the same time, emerging trans men's desires to be (inside, pierced by, like) other trans men are discarded; having a "bad" "erotic object choice, regardless of orientation" results in a failure to "reproduce the mythical innocence and vulnerability of cis femininity" (50). This is also why I scoff at the ways in which Jenkins describes how cis women prioritize the soft and sensual in slash fiction;[22] for it to be an adequately feminine practice, the subjects must have objects of desire (and must project *onto* those objects of desire in ways) that are frictionless, safe, and correct. Nevermind that cis fujoshis are among the greatest freaks I've ever encountered online — I say this with great love and fondness for them. What we are all doing, fujoshis cis and trans alike, is bucking against the "mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship" (Berlant and Warner 549).

Transmasculine ERP and all of its interconnected practices (cruising, fandom, yaoi, fujoshism) work as a machine through which the engine of desire shreds through preconceived notions of what it is to desire "correctly" and what is "naturally" desired. Nothing about ERP is natural or organic. Scenes are pre-planned, characters preconfigured, liked and disliked sex acts prenegotiated. Of course, finding a new thing that arouses oneself through play is both not unwelcome nor unsurprising, but that only serves to reinforce the machine. Breeding kink? Screw that into place, feel the engine purr. ERP is not just the meeting of two people, it is in fact the meeting of at least four: the two players and their two characters. I fuck someone else's character but I am also fucking *my* character, being fucked *by* the scene. We are all holes, at the end of the day, to press into, begging to be railed by not just another person but the desktop, by

alien bodies. I don't *just* want to ERP as a trans man, seeking out other trans men. I want to be a giant cat man while doing it. I want my scene partner's character to want Cassius so badly that it's all he can think about — for this desire to be bound up in what makes Cassius grounded in the world. Sex characterizes Cassius in ways no other form of play can hope to achieve — in the throes of orgasm he can think self-consciously of who he is, how he's lied and cheated. At the same time, playing Cassius provides an outlet through which I can continually hack myself and my desires through.

Like subcutaneous injections of testosterone, like binding, like pumping one's cock, like cruising as a gay man, ERP functions as a "transitioning technology" (Hale 224). "When transgendered subjects participate in minority communities organized around radical sexual practice," Hale writes, "new and theoretically interesting configurations of sex, gender and sexuality arise" (223). Being Cassius — and investing in Cassius's appearance, in how he understands his own gender, in how other OCs react to his body and his gender expression — is a kind of performance. It is also an opportunity to reinscribe how my transfaggotry is inseparable from not only how and why I have sex, but how and why my transfaggotry acculturates the hobbies and cultural practices I have taken up. Meaning is generated through the ways in which my gender and sexuality alter my practice — but in turn, that selfsame practice alters how I negotiate or articulate who I am as a faggot. What results is a powerful feedback loop — a circuit.

Conclusion: Closing the Circuit

I am cautious of the relationship between my experience and its reception by the academy. As I have described throughout my thesis, trans historiography and trans studies leverages the experiences and bodies of trans scholars by way of extracting personal experience. Games studies does this as well, although of course its related affects are different.[23] What this tension does is that in order for my existence as a scholar to continue, I must often put myself in vulnerable positions cisgender and straight scholars do not. For example, they do not have to describe their doctor's visits. They do not have to read through historical reports by psychologists calling people like me attention-seekers and madwomen.[24] My identity as an ERPer is seemingly contentious, as well: I spent a lot of time thinking critically about how much I should be allowed to "expose" about the practices of the ERPer, forever afraid that saying too much may reveal a fault line that may get ERPers (or modders, or other terms of service rule-breakers) reported and banned. So perhaps it is better to describe a hobbyist-scholar's positionality within *both* frames as contentious. I am never not aware of my position as an academic when I am fucking someone online, thinking about how I can turn my hobby into scholarly practice — and that scares me. There is a tightrope we as scholars all seem to have to walk between the commodification of the self and our own academic interests.

As a result of my own attempts at resisting that selfsame commodification, much of my "lived experience" dictated throughout my thesis has been disembodied. This disembodiment, this charge of affect that feels like it has nowhere to go, must be resolved elsewhere, outside of both my ERPing self as well as my scholar self.

Erotics provide an alternate form of record. This is not to say that erotics or erotica are liberatory in and of itself; to do so would be as reductive as all the other narratives I earmarked as problematic in this thesis. Instead, erotics decentralize the narrative around the trans body while encoding it through ritual practice. The transfag stops being someone who was a girl and then is a man, or someone who was always a man. He starts being a receptacle for pleasure. Erotics become an archive in themselves, and record not only the ways we fuck, the ways in which we *write* and discuss how we fuck, or want to be fucked.

By that same token, what I am arguing here does not mean that erotics *create* futures, or even work towards future; but they archive affect in ways nothing else can. Bound up in the desire for a sex forest: community, love, intimacy, cooperation. Delany writes:

> The first direct sense of political power comes from the apprehension of massed bodies. … The myth said we, as isolated perverts, were only beings of desire, manifestations of the subject … But what this experience said was that there was a population … not of hundreds, not of thousands, but rather of millions of gay men, and that history had, actively and already, created for us whole galleries of institutions, good and bad, to accommodate our sex. (Delany 349)

The ways in which I write about ERP crosses over to the ways in which sex itself is encoded culturally for me. ERP or public sex *does* something — it imbues a space or a practice with affect that was not there before. The movie theater begins to play porn, men start to cruise in it — the theater becomes a locale for gay sex. *Final Fantasy XIV* starts as an MMO, becomes a chatroom when users play the game to socialize, becomes a sex game when players begin to role play erotically, becomes a practice through which trans men build and reinforce identity. These

spaces become *illegible* —or even purposefully *invisible*— to those who aren't "in the know." Erotica decrypts not only memory, but the particularized practices of these groups of players.

There is so much more scholarship I can connect to my methodology: Stryker's note about polyvalent messaging within "Dungeon Intimacies," H Howitt's own assemblage in "How we fuck," to name two. I note this here because I think, rather than conclude by writing that there "is no scholarship" on the subjects I write about, I would rather conclude by positing that this work is by no means critically complete and comprehensive, and that is a *good* thing. The work I have set out to do cannot be completed in one go. While this conclusion is titled "Closing the Circuit," it is ultimately impossible to do so. The circuit loops, the constellation of nodes within an assemblage threads ever further outwards; and in doing so, practices and subjects become continually de- and reterritorialized.

In building this thesis, I aim to contribute to the already myriad approaches to how we as scholars discuss games, trans bodies, and micro-communities. Careful observation of practices of small sets of players (or trans people, or card-players, or stamp collectors) allow me to think about not just how we build these practices, but how to orient a subject *as well as myself* around a community of/at play. I was forced to consider my place within games studies, cultural studies, as well as trans studies as I wrote my thesis. I hope for more scholars, especially trans scholars, to straddle the lines of disciplines with me: to think small, and to think of the ways in which gender and practice emerge from the minor and the mundane.

Notes

[1] Whereas games like *World of Warcraft* have designated servers marked as RP, PvP, PvE, and so on, *FFXIV* notably does not do so. All server designations are community-driven. For example, when Balmung's server was labeled "congested," Mateus, one of the other servers within its "Data Center" (a collection of servers) was decided by the community to be the RP "overflow" server. Now that Mateus is nearly as full as Balmung is, the data center in its entirety is considered to be more RP-friendly than other data centers.

[2] See: Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* (1992), Camille Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth* (1992), Paul Booth's *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies* (2010) or *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age* (2015), Tracy L.M. Kennedy et. al.'s "Behind the Avatar: The Patterns, Practices, and Functions of Role Playing in MMOs" (2010).

[3] See (very much non-comprehensively): Mia Consalvo's *Cheating* (2007), TL Taylor's *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (2006).

[4] Among these scholars, Susan Stryker's "Dungeon Intimacies" (2008), Lou Sullivan's *We Both Laughed in Pleasure* (2019), Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw* (2016), and Jacob Hale's "Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies" (1997) stand out as tentative jumping-off points for a "foundation" of memoir or biographical trans writing inside and outside the academy.

[5]Given that *FFXIV* is a "live service" game and is continually updating not just the game experience but also the social experience, what the game may look like now may not be the same in even a year. For example, in the time that I started research on this project to final publication, *FFXIV* released social features which allow for users to travel between data centers (servers which were previously impassable), adventurer plates (which allow for a user to take a picture of their player avatar and customize a quasi-ID for social use), and further expanded player housing.

[6] I am gesturing towards Bo Ruberg's *The Queer Games Avant-Garde* (2020) and "After agency: The queer posthumanism of video games that cannot be played" (2022).

[7] Further reading on the misconceptions of the origin of the gay rights movement in New York city can be found in *When Brooklyn Was Queer: A History* (Ryan 2019)

[8] Wtakoh. "Can Someone Introduce Me to ERP in FFXIV?" *Reddit*, 27 Nov. 2022, www.reddit.com/r/ffxiv/comments/z6eupy/can_someone_introduce_me_to_erp_in_ffxiv/.

[9] n0rdic. "ERP in FFXIV: What Is It, and How Do I Get Started? A Guide." *Reddit*, 10 Sept. 2019, www.reddit.com/r/ShitpostXIV/comments/d2aiu6/erp_in_ffxiv_what_is_it_and_how_do_i_get_started/.

[10] PopotoPomi. "How the ERP Scene Is Slowly Driving Me Away from RP on FF14." *Reddit*, 12 July 2022, www.reddit.com/r/ffxiv/comments/vxd6ed/how_the_erp_scene_is_slowly_driving_me_away_from/.

[11] The target-of-target bar is an element on the player's HUD or heads-up-display which reveals who the target is looking at — an element usually reserved for seeing who an enemy is attacking, whether to ensure that they are attacking the correct target or to see who needs to be protected from harm.

[12] A comprehensive list of plugins can be found here: https://xivplugins.com/dalamud-plugins. Nearly all plugins compatible with Dalamud — the application through which plugins are accessible in-game are hosted on github. The plugin in question, "Expanded Search Info" can be found here: https://git.anna.lgbt/ascclemens/ExpandedSearchInfo

[13] The main hub for modding character models in-game is xivmodarchive.com/, although due to the site's moderation practices (or lack thereof) many modders host their mods in their own discords. Cassius's mods are by and large created by Hrothgar and Roegadyn model modder Raykie, and his mods are cross-posted between xivmodarchive and his own discord server here: https://discord.gg/K8hkxPp. I consider the NSFW modding scene and the kind of ERP I discuss here distinct from one another because there is not necessarily a relation between someone wanting to give their character a penis and nipples and

someone who is actively seeking out ERP partners. Of course there is crossover (seeing as I am someone who *does* want to both modify my player avatar and ERP), but as I have stated throughout this thesis, much of the "meat" of ERP happens exterior to the avatar, through text. There is space here to expand further on the NSFW modding scene — the use of Google Drive as NSFW mod hosting, the branching Discord servers, how modders sustain themselves by being commissioned to change assets, how body norms are replicated by these NSFW mods (while there are trans mods, Raykie's HR3 body, for example, does not call it a trans male or FtM mod but instead a "Vagina Mod").

[14]A common phrase in *FFXIV* player circles is that "glamour is the true endgame." See Adam Arter's article in *RPG Fan* for further player/community context.

[15] There is space here to open the constellation further — to discuss the ways in which other modes of "role play" like tabletop games further complicate how we discuss ERP as a "text." See Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983) for how the social and the narrative are important to those practices as well.

[16] See endnote 5, as well as the Glamour Dresser (https://www.glamourdresser.com/)

[17] Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997) and Souvik Mukherjee's *Video Games and Storytelling* (2015) are both exemplary texts which trace the origins of narratives within games through MUDs and MOOs.

[18] I tend to frame both yaoi and slash practices — or at least how they've been received in academia — together. This is not an unprecedented move. Suzuki's "Pornography or Therapy?" draws from the same chapter of Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* that I cite from.

[19] While not about trans men, Harold Garfinkel's "Passing and the Managed Achievement of Sex Status in an "Intersexed" Person" demonstrates the medical establishment's shifting definitions of gender. When a woman presents herself as a woman, albeit with "male genitals" who claims to have spontaneously become a woman when she hit puberty — a medical condition the team eventually came to describe as "testicular feminization syndrome." Because she was attractive, convincing, and sympathetic, the medical team decided that she should have a genital transformation. But eight years after Garfinkel's initial study, he describes in one of the appendices that she was, in reality, taking synthetic female hormones and lied to the doctors about her intersex condition in order to transition. Again, the narrative of *who* is allowed to transition is called to question and demonstrates that lying is in a trans person's best interests if their goal is to expedite their transition with as little friction possible.

[20] A pair of examples include: Erebones's "King's Gambit" https://archiveofourown.org/works/21056516/chapters/50089202 and eviscerates's "being lost in you is the best place" https://archiveofourown.org/works/46095787 (and, of course, the rest of both of these authors' published works). One can also search "t4t" adjoined by their ship name of choice and more often than not find a given work written by a trans fic author. I have, in the interest of demonstrating that I am not the sole practitioner of this practice, not included my own fanfiction as examples — but all the same, I am also a fic writer who "transes" ships.

[21] There are hundreds of anti-trans bills currently active in the United States. The New York Times responded to a letter from hundreds of contributors (criticizing their coverage of these bills and other trans-focused news as transphobic) with hostile mentions of how journalists require freedom of speech.

[22] From *Textual Poachers*: "the lovers' personal interest in each other's minds, not only each other's bodies, the tenderness, the refusal to rush into a relationship, the exclusive commitment to one another … The focus [of slash] is often on sensuality … rather than on penetration and ejaculation. … The characters lie in each others' arms, cuddling, in the warm afterglow of sex or by the day's first light, exchanging affectionate intimacies" (197)

[23] T.L. Taylor's *Play Between Worlds* is the most immediate example I can think of.

[24] This is facetious. Scholars of colour, even cis women, have to trawl through scholarly detritus all the same.

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