

PROOF

Part II

Subjects and Objects of Digital Cultures

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PROOF

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Affect, Fantasy and Digital Cultures

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Becoming deer

You are a deer. So are the other players. You meet each other in an endless forest on the internet. The setting is idyllic, the atmosphere peaceful. You communicate with one another through sounds and body language.

(Harvey and Samyn, n.d.).

The Endless Forest is a game, which seems to defy the logic of gaming, in fact is closer in spirit to what has been termed 'hyperliterature'. The website *Hyperliterature Exchange* defines this as literature which resists and subverts traditional linear narratives as well as positioning itself on the margins of print media: 'Literature which makes use of the computerised/digital medium in such a way that it cannot be reproduced in print – for example it employs animations, sound-effects, nonlinear structure, interactivity, or a combination of these' (Picot, n.d.).

The game belongs to a tradition of fantasy hyperfiction narratives which, as Jenny Sunden has argued, have been imagined as embodying postmodern ideas about 'the open text', intertextuality, and the agency of the reader who, participating interactively in the construction of online narratives, is liberated from the constraints of authorial intention (Sunden, 2008: 155). This notion of hypertext narrative as emancipator is taken up by the game's designers and fans. The game was created by Tale of Tales, a games development studio founded in 2002 by the Belgian artists Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn. Harvey and Samyn set out to create games for users who felt that mainstream gaming lacked 'enchantment' and 'emotional richness'. The game's

1 homepage claims that ‘Humans have a physical need for wonder and
2 poetry. It is our desire to carry on the tradition of telling and retelling
3 of tales old and new’ (Harvey and Samyn, n.d.). The game is explicitly
4 contrasted to the dystopian and violent fantasy worlds of other role-
5 playing games (RPGs): ‘Although not goal-oriented, there are several
6 activities that you can engage in. Nothing very demanding or violent.
7 Just fun things to do in a nice environment’ (ibid).

8 The game takes the form of a screensaver, which represents a scroll-
9 ing forest scene. The new player is represented by a fawn, a young deer
10 without antlers; the latter are awarded after one has been playing for
11 just over a month. Unlike other games, it lacks specific goals; in this
12 respect it is similar to other non-goal oriented and non-violent games
13 such as *The Sims* series. However, unlike *The Sims*, which uses its own
14 language, known as Simlish, *The Endless Forest* uses no language at all.
15 Players do not have the ability to chat, and the rules of movement and
16 interaction must be figured out intuitively by using keyboard shortcuts.
17 The only concession to language is that each character can choose to
18 give his or her avatar a name, which takes the form of a unique symbol
19 that appears above his or her deer on screen. Whilst each name is dif-
20 ferent, there appears to be no internal linguistic logic to the symbols.
21 What this lack of written language means is that players must learn to
22 communicate using their avatars’ body language. The deer have the
23 ability to run, jump, walk, sleep and swim, as well as to perform social
24 gestures such as bowing, bleating and rubbing against trees or other
25 objects. Whilst there are no humans in the game, some artefacts are
26 clearly made from stone, and there are graves in the forest. The need
27 to explain these phenomena led fan communities to name the mak-
28 ers of these objects ‘The Ones Who Came Before Us’. The forest hence
29 *both* draws on the imagery of pre-human pastoral *idyll* and is imagined
30 as posthuman; human culture is present but humans themselves are
31 imagined as in the past, as having left or died out.

32 Once in the forest, game play consists of interacting with other play-
33 ers and with ‘forest magic’; one learns that the deer appear to have their
34 own religion, so that praying to statues known familiarly as the ‘twin
35 gods’, for example, results in acquiring a magic pelt that conveys special
36 powers. Some functions, such as the ability to adorn one’s antlers with
37 candles or flowers, are enigmatic and apparently meaningless, so much
38 of the point of the game lies in the novelty of interacting with other
39 players in real time without using human language, as well as with
40 computer-generated forest creatures such as rabbits and crows. Out of
41 these seemingly random gestures arose, over time, a consensus about

1 the meaning of certain gestures, which originally could only be learned
2 in-game through trial and error. For example, a new player might learn
3 that a lowering and shaking of the head means 'don't come any closer',
4 only when he or she has encountered this movement several times
5 from established players who then run away if he or she continues to
6 approach.¹ This reliance on body language has driven some players to
7 withdraw in frustration, often focussing on the lack of naming: 'I would
8 like to play The Endless Forest, but when I try to name my deer, it won't
9 let me! I can't even ask about it on the website because I can't get an
10 account! What's wrong?' (DeviantArt, posted 1 February 2009).

11 For fans, though, the lack of human language and of the need for a
12 name is experienced as liberating, as constitutive of a subjectivity that
13 is grounded in affective relationships and which is imagined as better
14 than, as an escape or retreat from, late-capitalist culture with its persist-
15 ent tropes of violence, competition, individualism and alienation. Fans
16 speak repeatedly of love – for their own deer as well as others' and for
17 the forest itself – of escape, of relaxation and especially of peace. The
18 forest is seen as a peaceful place, a retreat not only from 'real life', but
19 also and more importantly from the vicissitudes of selfhood. And this
20 retreat, this sense of peace, is imagined not as a move forward (like
21 earlier utopian narratives of cyberspace that turned on the *Vorsprung*
22 *durch Technik* metanarratives of modernity, even as they spoke in glee-
23 ful terms of postmodern and fluid identities); but neither is it simply
24 an Eden-like desire to return (although it may involve nostalgia for a
25 real or imagined past, as we shall see). The idea of the idyll located in
26 the past should give us pause: after all, feminist scholars have written
27 eloquently of the limitations, indeed the violence, inherent in fantasies
28 of nostalgia and the assumed need for reassurance which is, above all,
29 a need of the privileged. Again, the idea of the idyll as a site of return
30 recalls the Christian idea of Eden, as a 'natural' state before the fall. But
31 I think the two are different. Unlike Eden, the very word 'idyll' has an
32 ambiguous history. Its literal Greek meaning is 'little pictures', small,
33 local stories of rural life as distinct from the grand heroic narratives of
34 war and conquest that make up classical mythology. Idylls – the very
35 name 'little stories' suggests a visual revisioning of the postmodern
36 notion of '*petits recits*' – define the limit between radicalism and escap-
37 ism. This boundary is a site of struggle: what gets to be seen as reality,
38 and what is 'merely' fantasy? Is fantasy simply an escape from reality,
39 and if not, what might it mean to pay attention to the reality of fanta-
40 sies, especially digital fantasies; to what they tell us about that which is
41 obscured and silenced within mass culture?

Fantasy and the 'real'

The idea of fantasies as 'just' escapism turns on a misreading of psychoanalysis, and particularly on the idea of fantasy as opposed to the real. The relationship between fantasy and reality is a subject of considerable debate in popular narratives of digital cultures, as well as in academic theory. From the very beginning, theories of cyberculture have focused on fantasy both in its technologically mediated guise, as the idea of the virtual, and in the sense that much earlier work in the field was concerned with the fantastic as genre. The Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) games that so preoccupied the first cyberculture theorists are explicitly fantastic, taking their lineage from the fantasy fictions of Tolkien, Lovecraft and William Gibson. In popular media accounts of online lives, the notion of the digital as an *escape* from reality underpins narratives about the compulsive and pleasurable nature of online experience that are endlessly repeated and recycled in the mainstream media, even as it struggles to adapt to the demands of the attention economy. The digital has become a site of struggle over what constitutes reality; the reality principle is what is at stake in the fears and hopes that are invested in digital cultures.

By deconstructing the opposition between the fantastic and the real, it is possible to see the digital as a space in which fantasies are performed and explored in a way that goes beyond simply expressing forbidden or repressed desires: instead, the digital reveals that 'reality' always materializes through the work of fantasy with which it is inextricably entwined. But this is not quite to claim that the digital is simply an extension of everyday (mediated) lives, that it tells us nothing new. Instead, I am arguing for a cautious return to the idea that digital cultures have the potential to allow for new forms of exploration, new fantasies: for what might be termed a strategic technocentrism. I will explore this claim in the second half of this chapter, where I examine the ways in which online role-player gaming operates as a site of fantasy. I examine how, by allowing participants to play with the notion of becoming nonhuman (a position ironically only made possible by advanced visual technologies, as well as with an intense engagement with the interface that might be termed posthuman), online gaming becomes a way of reanimating and thinking through the ways in which fantasies of the prelinguistic might be a focus of resistance. This analysis will hopefully cast earlier utopian narratives of the 'virtual' in a kinder light: in other words; that the digital fantastic need not entail a return to Eden, but instead it is through the ironic figuring of a digital idyll

1 which is, however, always deferred and unattainable, that new possibili-
2 ties and new ways of thinking through subjectivity might be explored
3 and become a source of hope.

4 For this reason, I argue that the notion of fantasy is more useful than
5 what Slavoj Žižek terms 'the all-pervasive topic of virtual reality'; 'the
6 virtual', for Žižek, is 'a rather miserable idea: that of imitating reality,
7 of reproducing its experience in an artificial medium' (2004); as such
8 it leaves the reality principle ('the actual') intact, as well as reproduc-
9 ing the violence and exploitation that exist in the material world.
10 Žižek argues that it is necessary to think in terms of 'the reality of the
11 virtual', to pay attention to the real effects and consequences of the
12 virtual (2004: 3). As Brian Massumi puts it, 'The medium of the digital
13 is possibility, not virtuality, and not even potential' (2002: 137). The
14 implications of deconstructing the virtual/actual binary are explored
15 by Luciana Parisi, in her work on nanodesign. Following Deleuze and
16 Guattari, Parisi argues that the body is a 'machinic ecology' composed
17 by 'intensive degrees of affinities ... rather than given categories' (2008:
18 288). These affinities, she argues '[a]re mental, social, technological,
19 biological, desiring, intuitive, and perceptual, and operate beneath (and
20 across) the macro-aggregations of positions such as gender, class, race,
21 as well as human, animal, and machine' (2008: 288).

22 We need, she argues, to pay attention to the affective, abstract (or
23 virtual) relations through which bodies are constituted. Such relations,
24 she argues, are *machinic*. A machinic nature 'entails the viral contagion
25 between technology and biology' as well as a recognition that every
26 intra-action between bodies entails the potential for new mutations and
27 transformations which '[connect] actual worlds with a constellation of
28 virtual worlds' (2008: 288–9). In order to imagine bodies in this way,
29 Parisi argues, we need a radical new empiricism which attends to the
30 reality of 'abstract dimensions of affectivity' which structure reality: that
31 is, to the importance of 'virtuality, potentiality, capacities to become'
32 (ibid., 289). The work of revisioning of nature and the body involves a
33 rethinking of space and time, a radical break from a historical or genea-
34 logical view of nature which 'cannot account for the nonlinear revers-
35 ibility between cause and effects, where actual intra-actions are not in
36 royal isolation from virtual relationality' (ibid.). This new empiricism
37 resonates in Deleuze's notion of 'transcendental empiricism', which,
38 Žižek reminds us, involves an engagement with a field 'infinitely richer
39 than reality', indeed represents the 'infinite field of Virtualities out of
40 which reality is actualised' (2004: 4). The transcendental, here, consti-
41 tutes 'the a priori conditions of possibility of our own experience of

1 reality': by paradoxically uniting together the oppositional terms tran-
2 scendental and empirical, Žižek argues, Deleuze is gesturing to a 'field of
3 experience beyond (or, rather, beneath) the experience of constituted or
4 perceived reality' (ibid., 4–5): the field of fantasy. Here, I argue that by
5 reading through fantasy it is precisely possible to see digital experience
6 as a means of exploring what is possible.

7 In popular culture, the digital has been widely imagined as a simula-
8 tion through which one flees reality. This recalls Baudrillard's notion
9 that the simulacrum is misrecognized as false, in a panicked desire to
10 restore the comforting belief in reality. As he famously notes, the 'feign-
11 ing or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is
12 always clear, it is only masked' (1988: 168). The desire to make reality
13 claims results in a 'proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reali-
14 ty; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity' arising out of a
15 panicked response to simulation culture, characterized by an assumed
16 pre-simulation culture in which representations bear some relation to
17 a pre-existing reality which they either transparently reflect, or malign-
18 antly conceal (ibid.). The notion of an oppositional relation between
19 the real and the fantastic is implied in Freud's well-known formulation
20 that fantasy is necessary in that it allows us to 'continue to enjoy the
21 freedom from external compulsion that they have long since renounced
22 in reality', and further in his assertion that humanity 'cannot subsist on
23 the scanty satisfaction which they can extort from reality' (Freud 1989:
24 371–2). Fantasy is inherently human, so central to human culture that it
25 makes no sense to speak of an objective reality that exceeds it: as long as
26 we have been human, we have engaged in art, storytelling, daydreaming.
27 For Freud, all of these are a response to the human dilemma that one is
28 forced to alternate between 'remaining an animal of pleasure and being
29 once more a creature of reason' (1989: 372). Interestingly, Freud makes
30 an analogy between the work of fantasy, and that of creating reservations
31 or nature reserves in spaces where the changes wrought by modernity
32 have rendered the environment unrecognizable: 'A nature reserve pre-
33 serves its original state, which everywhere else has to our regret been sac-
34 rificed to necessity. Everything, including what is useless and even what
35 is noxious, can grow and proliferate there as it pleases' (ibid.).

36 The 'mental realm of fantasy', he concludes, 'is just such a reservation
37 withdrawn from the reality principle' (ibid.). The reality principle and
38 the pleasure principle are always in tension. Whilst the reality prin-
39 ciple demands that we continually strive for pleasure, albeit pleasure
40 which is always deferred, fantasy allows us to create a world in which
41 gratification is possible (ibid., 357).

1 Compare this passage to the digital communities I discuss above.
 2 Although it is limited as a game and is no longer being developed due
 3 to lack of funding, *The Endless Forest* has generated its own distributed
 4 network of fans, spawning an official fan forum, videos on YouTube
 5 of players' experiences, and a great deal of fan art on the art website
 6 deviantART, consisting both of imagery from the game, fan-created
 7 videos and Flash movies, and analogue artworks ranging from painting
 8 to deer-inspired comics (DeviantArt). There appears to be a considerable
 9 intersection between *The Endless Forest* fandom and the 'furry fandom'
 10 or 'furry genre', the online subculture in which participants create
 11 personae which are wholly or part nonhuman animal and which has
 12 generated a whole genre of anthropomorphic fantasy literature and art,
 13 including nonhuman fetish artwork known as furotica. Cervine groups
 14 proliferate online, including the LiveJournal (fan fiction) community
 15 Endeering, another RPG Shadows of FearDorcha; the DeviantART groups
 16 Bambi Addicts and Divine Cervine; and a community hub website,
 17 A Doemain of Our Own. Offline, furies hold fan conventions, some
 18 attending in 'fursuit' or animal drag and speaking only in body lan-
 19 guage. These performances have been widely ridiculed both online and
 20 offline, yet they illustrate the ways in which fantasy allows new ways of
 21 being, new identities and communities, to materialize.

22 This is very different from the more popular view of fantasy as unreal
 23 and inauthentic. In particular, media commentary on digital cultures and
 24 gaming often involves a misreading of Freud. One example is an editorial
 25 by the writer and activist Paul Vallely, published in the British *Independent*
 26 newspaper, linking the popularity of war games such as the newly released
 27 *Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2* to North American militarism and impe-
 28 rialism. Citing the Cuban state-controlled media's angry response to the
 29 game, in which players must try to assassinate Fidel Castro on the eve of
 30 the Bay of Pigs crisis, Vallely argues that such games 'not only heighten
 31 diplomatic tension by glorifying assassination; [but] also stimulate 'socio-
 32 pathic attitudes in North American children and adolescents' (2010).

33 Such violent games are contrasted with the harmless 'play' suggested
 34 by Freud's notion of fantasy which Vallely argues is 'helpful ... because
 35 it offers an escape from the choices and tensions of reality. It is more
 36 than the suspension of disbelief that art requires' (ibid.). It both pro-
 37 vides liberation and an escape from the constraints of reality, and allows
 38 us to negotiate that reality: 'The point of fantasy – whether it involves
 39 elves or animals behaving like humans do – is that a child returns to
 40 everyday reality with new insights about acts, consequences and impli-
 41 cations which have been learned in the course of the story' (ibid.)

1 A game, he writes, is 'a place in which he can behave irresponsibly
2 without real consequences. It is a fantasy world in which an individual
3 can test aims or desires that are unsafe in everyday life' (ibid.). The prob-
4 lem with violent games such as *Call of Duty* is that they have become
5 a mere escape: instead of a learning process in which one is engaged,
6 albeit unconsciously, in a labour of self-improvement, these games are
7 'simply an escape from quotidian reality' and therefore dangerous. The
8 danger is that 'imagination, like language, can be corrupted, coarsened
9 or cheapened' (ibid.).

10 I am not concerned, here, with the content of the game *Call of Duty*;
11 I quote this passage at length because it exemplifies media responses
12 to gaming, and to digital culture more generally, not only in its rather
13 dystopian tone (the piece assures us that gaming is on the rise, leading
14 to an inevitable degradation of popular culture), but in its interpretation
15 of Freud's work to suggest that fantasy represents a (pathologized) escape
16 from the real. This is all the more ironic given that such games precisely
17 turn on heroic metanarratives of masculinity and nation that do not
18 seem very far removed from the structuring narratives of the American
19 national fantasy. One is left wondering whether such games, far from
20 producing sociopathic detachment from social norms, might equally
21 play a more conservative role in normalizing the violence of US foreign
22 policy (certainly it can only be a matter of time until we see *Call of Duty*:
23 *The Killing of Bin Laden*). The more important problem with Valley's
24 arguments is that they fail to grasp Freud's implicit argument that fantasy
25 is *not* opposed to reality; indeed, Freud suggests that the constraints of
26 reality render fantasy so essential, so necessary, that the reality principle
27 itself is no longer tenable. Fantasy *is* reality, and vice versa. In this, fan-
28 tasy is analogous with dreams, which, as Sara Ahmed demonstrates, are
29 'phantasmagoria' that inextricably intertwine with waking life (Ahmed,
30 1999: 52). As LaPlanche and Pontalis show, Freud's use of the term 'fan-
31 tasy' precludes any simple opposition between the imaginary and the real
32 (LaPlanche and Pontalis, 1986). Instead, through the notion of psychical
33 reality, Freud implies both that the relationship between the fantastic and
34 the material is unstable and undecided, and that the two are inseparably
35 intertwined (Freud cited in LaPlanche and Pontalis, 1986: 7–9). Instead,
36 they describe how the term 'psychical reality' was coined by Freud, in
37 an attempt precisely to think through the relationship between material
38 reality, and the world of imagination, and as a direct challenge to the idea
39 that the two are necessarily in opposition (1986: 6).

40 It is this intertwining of fantasy and reality, particularly as it has
41 been interpreted by feminist literary theorists that concerns me here.

1 As Lucie Armitt claims, psychoanalysis is of value to feminist theory
 2 precisely because it recognizes that fantasy is not separate from 'real'
 3 life, but rather that it is through fantasy that the conditions of real life
 4 materialize. Psychoanalytic critics maintain that 'fantasy ... is central to
 5 all fictional work' since it 'fuels our dreams, our phobias and therefore
 6 our narrative fictions' (Armitt, 1996: 1). This approach is used to great-
 7 est effect in the feminist literary scholar Rosemary Jackson's 1981 study,
 8 *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion*. Some of these ideas seem to pave the
 9 way for later writings on 'cyberculture'. Jackson's project is to reclaim
 10 fantasy writing from its marginal status as 'genre fiction', exploring its
 11 position as (she argues) an inherently subversive fictional mode. Fantasy
 12 is 'produced within, and determined by, social context' and cannot be
 13 understood in isolation from the cultural parameters within which it
 14 is produced; 'the literary fantastic is never "free"' (Jackson 1981: 3). Its
 15 function is, not simply to reproduce the dominant culture's vision of
 16 reality, but rather to engage with the taboo and forbidden within that
 17 society: as an extension of Bakhtin's *menippea*, '[i]t tells of descents into
 18 underworlds of brothels, prisons, orgies, graves; it has no fear of the
 19 criminal, erotic, mad, or dead' (ibid., 15). From this position it is able
 20 to disrupt and subvert these definitions. According to Jackson, the need
 21 for such subversive literature is founded in the need to compensate for a
 22 lack resulting from cultural constraints. Thus fantasy is a literature that
 23 allows for the expression of desire, and this expression takes two forms:
 24 it can tell of desire, or expel it 'when this desire is a disturbing element'
 25 (ibid., 3–4). Fantasy seems to resist definition: indeed, the value of the
 26 term itself seems to reside precisely in this resistance to easy summariza-
 27 tion, in what she calls its 'free-floating and escapist qualities' (ibid., 1).
 28 Jackson focuses on the fantastic in literature and film, but her argument
 29 is equally helpful as a means of thinking through the embeddedness
 30 of fantasizing and daydreaming in everyday life, as well as the ways in
 31 which these practices continue to be performed and explored in digi-
 32 tal cultures; her provisional definition of fantasy as those stories that
 33 '[attempt] to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints'
 34 would seem to apply equally to games which enable players to enact
 35 scenarios that would be impossible in offline life (ibid., 3).

36 For Jackson, the relationship between fantasy and reality is recon-
 37 figured further in the literature of the fantastic. Following Tsvetan
 38 Todorov, Jackson traces the genealogy of the fantastic from eighteenth-
 39 century Gothic literature to modernism as a move from the marvellous
 40 through the 'purely fantastic' to the uncanny (1981: 24–5). The marvel-
 41 lous, or purely supernatural, depends on the audience's belief in purely

1 superstitious and magical explanations: thus, for Todorov, the shift
 2 from the marvellous to the uncanny emerges out of a wider shift from
 3 a supernatural or religious paradigm to one of rationalism and empiri-
 4 cism depending on natural explanations (cited in Jackson, 1981: 24–5).
 5 This shift is resolved in the uncanny, which ‘explains all strangeness
 6 as generated by unconscious forces’ (1981: 25). In Todorov’s schema,
 7 fantasy is a third term: it ‘opens onto a region which has no name and
 8 no rational explanation for its existence’ and events which are ‘beyond
 9 interpretation’ by natural *or* supernatural means (ibid.). Fantasy is
 10 radically liminal: it both refers to events, which cannot be explained
 11 by either side of the supernatural/natural binary, and also itself defies
 12 interpretation and definition. As Irene Bessiere summarizes, fantastic
 13 narrative is ‘a transcription of the imaginary experience of the limits
 14 of reason’, which represents ‘that which cannot *be*, either in a natural
 15 or supernatural economy’ (cited in Jackson, 1981: 25). Fantasy ‘hollows
 16 out the real world, making it strange, without providing any explana-
 17 tion for the strangeness’ (ibid.). For Jackson, it is no coincidence that
 18 fantasy emerges at the very moment that reason and realism began to
 19 dominate nineteenth-century culture and fiction. Fantasy ‘interrogates’
 20 realism, and in doing so subjects the very notion of an intelligible ‘real
 21 world’ to ‘dissolution, disrepair, disintegration, derangement, dilapida-
 22 tion, sliding away, emptying’ (ibid.). It gives utterance to the structuring
 23 absences left by that which repressed in the dominant order, as if real-
 24 ism had given rise to ‘its own opposite, its unrecognizable reflection’
 25 (ibid.). Fantasy – in life, as well as in fiction – is the unsayable, the
 26 unspeakable, speaking back to realism. It embraces unspoken stories,
 27 such as daydreams, as well as literary (or online) texts: that is, it allows
 28 us to recognize the ways in which affect is produced and experienced
 29 through texts, of accounting for the ways in which affect precedes the
 30 text itself and is instrumental in its production. Fantasy can be seen as
 31 an escape, not in the sense of escaping-from (the ‘real world’) as Valley
 32 suggests, but as an escape-into or engagement-with (the text). Crucially,
 33 fantasy is a mode of reality which encompasses desires that are obscured
 34 in ‘real life’, which is why feminist scholars such as Jackson have read
 35 the fantastic as a site of subversion, transgression and resistance.
 36 These concepts, of great interest to feminist literary theory in the
 37 late twentieth century, have been somewhat lost, both in scholarly
 38 accounts of digital culture and in media studies more broadly, for two
 39 reasons. First, as a result of the rejection of technocentrism that fol-
 40 lowed from early cyberculture theory and its rush to proclaim digital
 41 space as a new Eden; and second, the shift to ‘media studies 2.0’, which

1 sees psychoanalytic and semiotic readings of texts as obsolete, replac-
2 ing these ways of thinking about digital media with an interest in the
3 embeddedness of media in everyday life, and to what technologies could
4 *do*. As David Gauntlett claims, 'semiotic analysis and psychoanalytic
5 approaches were all about saying that something had a hidden cause
6 or meaning, but you couldn't prove it, so it became embarrassing'
7 (Gauntlett, 2004). It is interesting that this shift is imagined in terms
8 of embarrassment, of a sobering-up period in which theorists (like the
9 villagers in Patrick Susskind's fantastic novel *Perfume* after their final,
10 orgiastic act of cannibalism) come to regret their earlier overenthusiasm
11 and drift away, looking at their shoes: back to 'reality'. The very notion
12 of 'cyberculture theory' (and of psychoanalysis) is seen in affectively
13 charged terms, as a carnivalesque moment whose remembering brings
14 feelings of shame. This shame results partly from the unmediated cel-
15 ebration of academic privilege suggested by some semiotic readings,
16 which assumed that texts contained ideological meanings, invisible to
17 the masses, which could only be decoded by the enlightened.

18 But psychoanalytic concepts need not be used in a way that repro-
19 duces such a relation of privilege; instead, we could see digital perform-
20 ances as an extension of the work of daydreaming. A psychoanalytic
21 reading then becomes not a question of 'reading too much into' online
22 texts, but a means of being attentive to the ways in which those texts
23 are *already* engaged in a critique of 'reality'. In the game I discuss above,
24 such a critique emerges out of the technological and social develop-
25 ments of Web 2.0: a move to the prelinguistic becomes possible not
26 only as a result of interactivity, but also a shift to visuality whose tem-
27 porality is ambiguous, since it could be seen both in terms of a shift to a
28 wider ocularcentrism and also, crucially, comes to stand in for a move to
29 a time *before* language. In the next section, I want to think through the
30 ways in which the psychoanalytic concept of the prelinguistic might
31 allow us to think through the ambiguous temporality of digital idylls
32 which are neither Utopias that aspire to a 'better' future nor Edens that
33 hark back to an authentic and unbesmirched past, but a space in which
34 new relationships, feelings and intimacies become possible.

35 36 **Fantasy, the nonhuman and the prelinguistic**

37
38 I want to conclude by returning to *The Endless Forest* as a media arte-
39 fact which exemplifies the ways in which digital fantasies trouble the
40 dyadic construction of real and unreal. It is useful, here, to think about
41 the cultural meanings attached to animals, and to deer in particular.

1 As Donna Haraway notes, 'queering has the job of undoing "normal"
2 categories, and none is more critical than the human/nonhuman sort-
3 ing operation' (Haraway, 2008: xxiv). The notion of trans is important
4 in the feminist turn to the nonhuman; as Myra Hird points out, trans-
5 sex as a phenomenon is not merely an effect of human culture; recently,
6 feminist theorists have turned to nonhuman examples to shed light
7 on questions of human sex, gender and embodiment (2006: 36). For
8 Hird, the myriad trans formations found in 'nature' challenge human
9 assumptions about binary gender, but also about the nature/culture
10 binary itself (Hird, 2006). It is for this reason that I have chosen to focus
11 on fantasies of becoming nonhuman in this chapter. I have argued
12 that the digital fantastic opens up a carnivalesque desire to escape the
13 law, albeit one which is inevitably inscribed with the melancholia of
14 foreclosure. What better illustration of this, then, than the fantasy of
15 returning to a literally pre-human state before language?

16 In popular culture, the most visible human/nonhuman trans figure
17 is the werewolf, whose violent transformation from human to animal
18 is often held to embody the expression of an innate animal nature,
19 which has been repressed; werewolves are queer monsters (Bernhardt-
20 House, 2008: 179). The werewolf queers the boundaries of the human
21 by (forcibly) reminding us that the human is always-already animal.
22 Here, though, I examine a new, less violent and more ambiguous
23 hybrid subject; the human/deer amalgam sometimes known as cervine
24 or cervid. By tracking cervine imaginaries across multiple spaces of
25 performance, I want to suggest that the cervid queers the human/
26 nonhuman binary through practices of nonhuman cross-dressing and
27 performance, and that, by parodying the notion of *either* being 'fully
28 human' or becoming/returning to the animal, these practices perform
29 the anxiety and melancholia at stake in anthropocentrism.

30 What does it mean to 'become deer'? I think the longing to become
31 deer, always imagined as a *partial* becoming, might tell us about the way
32 in which the boundaries of the human are constructed and maintained
33 through fantasy. The deer is a significant animal in this regard, since
34 humans and deer share a complex history. Historically, deer are both
35 food and property; the killing of deer has always been regulated in law
36 and through social taboos. To kill a deer is to become outlaw. Deer attract
37 both violence and protection; they are objects onto which humanity
38 projects both its violent fantasies, and its desire to nurture and protect
39 (Hastings, 1996; Adams and Donovan, 1999). Hence the 'Bambi effect', a
40 term that describes an anthropomorphic and sentimentalized protective
41 instinct which prevents humans wanting to kill or consume animals

1 that possess human-like and childlike traits. The Bambi effect becomes
 2 naturalized through, say, narratives of evolutionary psychology, which
 3 suggest that humans have a natural caring impulse towards large-eyed,
 4 baby-like creatures. As with *The Endless Forest* fandom in which deer
 5 become objects of innocent love, the Bambi affect speaks powerfully
 6 to the interconnections between private emotion and public politics.
 7 As Angela Hawk notes, such Disneyfied representations of nonhuman
 8 animals embody 'a sense of fantasy and safety that was both psycho-
 9 logically comforting to parents with "atomic anxiety"' (Hawk, 2004: 7).
 10 In the emotionally charged image of ourselves caring for big-eyed,
 11 innocent deer, humanity sees itself in a more flattering light in relation
 12 to nature; not as an agent of mass destruction, but as a caring protec-
 13 tor who is defined by an attachment based in love and pity. Hence,
 14 whilst it is possible, at a stretch, to imagine the lachrymose response of
 15 human audiences to the fate of Bambi's mother as a sign of melancholic
 16 mourning for our lost animal state, the Bambi effect ultimately works to
 17 reinstate the boundary between human and nonhuman.

18 While they undeniably inspire strong emotional attachment, I think
 19 digital cervids reconfigure the relationship between the human and the
 20 nonhuman in potentially more radical ways than the mawkish mass-
 21 media fantasy of the 'inner child' embodied by the Bambi effect. Instead,
 22 they exemplify the promise of Web 2.0 which – in its reimagining of the
 23 Web as a visual and universal space – involves a reinstating of a more
 24 immediate visual language of intimacy and connection. *The Endless*
 25 *Forest*, with its narrative of putting off language and returning to the for-
 26 est, entails a fantasy of returning *as a species* to a prelinguistic state before
 27 the accession of 'the human' from 'the animal' that is assumed to follow
 28 from the evolution of the capacity for language. It is the ultimate impos-
 29 sibility of this desire – the inevitability of returning to a 'demanding
 30 [and] violent' linguistic and the social order underpinning the utopian
 31 intent of the game's designers. This nostalgia for a state of being-animal
 32 is entwined with the longing for the prelinguistic. This desire to return
 33 to a state before language, exemplified by the infant's intense connection
 34 to its mother, has long been a trope in feminist fantasy (Kristeva, 1982).
 35 For example in Angela Carter's reimagining of *Beauty and the Beast*, the
 36 trope of becoming-animal, of discovering the fur *beneath* the skin, stands
 37 in for a return to the maternal semiotic (Carter, 1993). In her analysis of
 38 dystopian and utopian feminist fantasies, Ildney Cavalcanti notes that
 39 a common utopian strategy in feminist fantasy is the 'radical escape
 40 from (verbal) language itself'. Cavalcanti cites Carter's argument that '...
 41 language is power, life, and the instrument of culture, the instrument

1 of domination and liberation' (Carter cited in Cavalcanti, 1999: 152).
 2 As she points out, 'Linguistic control and the enforcement of strict
 3 linguistic normativity symbolically stand in for other forms of social
 4 (ideological, political, institutional) control' (1999: 152). The enchanted
 5 forest can hence be read in terms of Helen Cixous' envisioning of femi-
 6 nist utopia through the desire for a 'primeval' space (Morrissey, 2004:
 7 13). A refusal of verbal language hence becomes the means of resisting
 8 a 'dystopic linguistic order' (and this notion of course has resonances
 9 with the feminine strategy of silence as resistance, as exemplified by
 10 Freud's Dora). In becoming a (feminized, non-speaking) deer, as well as
 11 in returning to the forest, that primeval fairytale space of anxiety and
 12 desire, the role-player positions herself outside the linguistic order. The
 13 irony in this utopian vision, of course, lies in the fact that this desire
 14 to escape language can only be articulated through storytelling, that
 15 is, through language, as Cavalcanti points out (Cavalcanti, 1999: 155).
 16 The utopian desire to escape language is hence always deferred, never
 17 complete. This impossibility is, I think, what is at stake in cervid iden-
 18 tity. In creating a half-human, half-deer self, players are not attempting
 19 to fully 'pass' or to fully transform into the animal other, as werewolves
 20 do. Cervid subjectivity is haunted by the necessity of constructing
 21 one's identity through language and through technology; the end-
 22 less forest is always a virtual forest, a fantasy space, which embodies
 23 a sense that, in constructing the category of 'human', something is
 24 irrevocably lost.

25 This sense of the limitations of the human is embodied in a final
 26 sighting of online deer: the expression 'teal deer'. This term is related to
 27 'leet' or 'leetspeak' (meaning 'elite'), the language used by hackers and
 28 online gamers, which uses numerical and ASCII characters instead of
 29 letters to produce writing that is unintelligible to outsiders. Hence 'leet'
 30 itself becomes l33t, a newbie is a n00b, porn is pr)n and so on. These
 31 terms variously used to evade internet searches (for example protecting
 32 fan fiction communities from being associated with sexually explicit
 33 material, hence avoiding unwanted traffic), pass forbidden material
 34 through email firewalls, and fool content filters. 'Teal deer' is a voicing
 35 of the acronym 'tl;dr', short for 'too long, didn't read'. It (either as an
 36 acronym, or as an actual image of a teal deer) is used to respond to posts
 37 that are perceived to be too long, dense, or tortuous to read comfortably
 38 onscreen. Teal deer jokes abound in *The Endless Forest* forums, with fans
 39 apologizing for 'turning into a teal deer' when they speak for too long.
 40 Exchanges containing many teal deer are known as 'herds'.
 41

1 The boundary between idealized nonhuman to teal deer – from non-
2 linguistic and nonhuman avatar to overly analytical human subject – is
3 hence defined through the excessive use of language. Whilst cervids
4 dream of returning to a state of innocence before language, humanity
5 is never capable of fully becoming-deer. Doomed to leave the forest and
6 to return to a linguistic order largely unintelligible to our companion
7 species, humanity – whether in discussing RPG experiences on bulletin
8 boards, or by producing academic critique – can produce only herds of
9 teal deer (this chapter is a teal deer).

10 Fantasies of becoming-deer hence represent a frustrated desire to step
11 back from the destructiveness and violence perpetrated by humanity:
12 such a fantasy need not represent a mere comforting escape (indeed, it
13 cannot since it is always inscribed with the inevitability of its own fail-
14 ure, being embedded in both language and capital). We need to think of
15 fantasy, not simply as an academic theory that can be applied to digital
16 cultures, but as a way of accounting for the performative construction
17 of identities and communities that is already happening in digital
18 space, as well as of the strong undercurrent of horror that runs through
19 popular discourses of the digital as a site of threat. Because it gives us a
20 theory of the limit, fantasy interrogates the ways in which fantastic and
21 imaginary, as well as the material, conditions of existence are explored
22 and illuminated in digital space, as well as accounting for the ways in
23 which the digital is (still) figured as marginal. Whilst it is true that the
24 emergence of blogging cultures and online activism present a very dif-
25 ferent online landscape from that imagined by early utopian theorists –
26 one more explicitly embedded in offline experience – digital space is
27 still richly inscribed with fantastic narratives of desire which precisely
28 reveal the imaginative and emotional life that is denied and repressed,
29 though always present, in ‘real life’. The fear of the digital is centred on
30 the notion of fantasy, of inexpressible and inappropriate *desires*, which
31 are imagined as capable of being enacted in digital space. Through an
32 encounter with the digital nonhuman, it might be possible to rethink
33 the digital as a site of hope.

Notes

1. Some of the ‘language’ of the game has been itemized by Haru, a member of the fan community (Haru, n.d.). However, the author notes that all language in the game is subjective, and that while one character might use certain gestures to mean particular things, there is no guarantee that these are necessarily being ‘read’ by others in the way he or she intended.

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