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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!
Hybrid Masculine Embodiment in Social VR and the Theatre

A thesis paper submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

in

DIGITAL ARTS AND NEW MEDIA

by

Rory Willats

September 2023

The thesis of Rory Willats is approved by:

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Peter Biehl   Ted Warburton
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!:

Hybrid Masculine Embodiment in Social VR and the Theater

By Rory Willats

Come, Fur(r)es, Dance! is a devised, hybrid lecture-performance performed on the 26th, 27th, and 28th of May 2023, in UCSC's eXperimental Theater. It is the final iteration in a series of performative experiments I used to better understand the ways experiences of masculinity are navigated, manipulated, and remade in communities within social VR (virtual reality). Created with the help of three devising artists, a team of student designers, a technical crew, and the larger UCSC arts community, *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* uses puppetry, dance, live interviews, and storytelling performed across virtual- and meat-space. The work focuses on the legacy of military development in the embodied experience of VR users, the desires that traverse the gap between users' identity presentations in and out of VR, and directly engages with a Waifu-themed MilSim community that calls themselves the British Armed Forces. To facilitate the rehearsals and performance of *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!*, I developed a distributed signal management system for a flexible, mediated stage ecology.

This thesis situates the performance within the social, artistic, and personal context from which *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* arose and reflects on the insights and challenges from throughout its making. First, I explore the discoveries unearthed by

the performance surrounding virtual masculinities and the drives behind certain social

formations in VR. Then, I discuss my strategy of critique within the structure and

aesthetic logic of *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!*. After, I reflect on the rehearsal practices

that created the performance, outline two technical innovations that made it possible,

and situate the performance within an artistic field engaged with related concerns.

Finally, I connect this work to my personal history. The end of the thesis includes an

archival script from the first performance and a separate reflection on technical

challenges.

Introduction

Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance! is a devised, 50-minute, post-dramatic, multi-media lecture performance staged across virtual- and meat-space. Framed as "virtual fur(r)ies" taking up the hunt for Orestes once more, three performers, Ruby, Phil, and Anastasiya, stage a series of experiments using live interviews, dance, and puppetry. The performance series included two components and were staged in UCSC's Theater Arts eXperimental Theater. The first was a dance exploration performed on May 16, 2023. The second opened on May 26, 2023, and ran for three performances. For the scope of this paper, I'll be focussing on the second iteration.

Interested in examining the ways that experiences of masculinity are navigated, manipulated, and facilitated by virtual communities—in particular, within an organization called the British Armed Forces—I created an analogous stage landscape that reconfigures the performing body in changing hybrid constellations. Within this mediated stage ecology, the performers complete four experiments. "Experiment 1: BODY" looks for where the legacy of virtual reality's original military development is manifest in the embodied experience of current users; "Experiment 2: DESIRE" explores the desires that fill the gap between the appearance of avatars and those who inhabit them; "Experiment 3: RITUAL" stages interviews with three members of the British Armed Forces; and "Experiment 4: MANY BODIES MAKE ONE BODY" stages a funeral for Clytemenestra, here

framed as the first sacrifice to hegemonic masculinity. The following questions motivated my inquiry:

- *Which desires of the primarily white, heterosexual men are being actualized within VR communities?*
- *How do we stage an exploration of an oppressive system without reifying it?*
- *Are the technical reconfigurations of the performer across virtual and meat-space theatrically legible?*
- *What is my strategy for documenting the process for this kind of work?*
- *What are the ethics of engaging participants in public space in performance?*

These questions have been grouped into three interrelated categories: Content Discoveries, Formal Considerations, and Process Considerations, which shape the body of this paper. In the following writing, I address these five questions.

Content Discoveries

Notes on masculinities

It's worth addressing what it is I mean and what language I am avoiding when using the phrase "experiences of masculinity." Is masculinity a combination of physical traits, a collection of social performances or patterns of behavior, an aesthetic or collection of signs, a specific flow of desire, an ideology that reinforces power imbalances, or something else entirely? The field of masculinity studies began in the 1970s partly to answer these questions, providing critical insights into the formation, impacts, and particularities of masculine representation and domination. One outcome of this field of study is the fracturing of a singular understanding of masculinity into many historically and culturally situated masculinit*ies*.

It's tricky to talk about which of these masculinities is most central to the communities engaged with *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* After all, we cannot, with certainty, make claims about some of the positionalities of the members of the British Armed Forces—a requirement for many of the categories. Sociologist RW Connell outlines four types of masculinity, including complicit, marginalized, subordinate, and finally, hegemonic: the current shifting masculine ideal of a culture that shapes how people understand the world in support of patriarchal formations[1]. Recognizing what falls outside of these four categories, many other descriptions of masculinities have

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[1] CONNELL, R. (2021). *Masculinities*. ROUTLEDGE.

arisen, including precarious masculinity, theorizing that masculinity contrasts femininity in that manhood requires continual social re-verification[2], and caring masculinities that reject traits of domination in support of "positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality[3]." Many hallmarks of these and other masculinities are visible in the formation and relations of the communities engaged in the performance. In *Gage Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal,* Jack Halberstam theorizes an alternative approach[4]. Halberstam argues that "we need to think about sex and gender in a more ecological kind of framework, understanding that changes in one environment inevitably impact changes in other environments. Gender here might be thought of more as a climate or ecosystem and less an identity or discrete bodily location." While not a re-coherence of a singular "masculinity" per se, Halberstam avoids the pitfalls of ever-dividing categories of masculinities in favor of a dynamic, interrelated approach. From this framework, our focus shifts instead toward the elements that construct masculinities and how they interact.

I choose to take this approach, marked by the phrase "experience of masculinity," as it re-centers the critical focus on the interactions between imperial, capitalist, geographical, and even technological forces that produce shifting masculinities in BAF. In this framework, masculinities are moving, partial formations that shade, flood, and singe our experiences of the world: they are constructions we

[2] Bosson, J. K., Vandello, J. A., & Caswell, T. A. (2013). Precarious manhood. *The SAGE Handbook of Gender and Psychology*, 115–130. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446269930.n8
[3] *Elliott, K. (2016). Caring Masculinities: Theorizing an Emerging Concept. Men and Masculinities, 19(3), 240–259. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X15576203*
[4] Halberstam, J. (2013). *Gaga Feminism: Sex, gender, and the end of normal*. Beacon Press.

bear constant relationships to—that we experience. The hybrid stage ecology reflects this approach, staging a productive collision of forces between meat-space and virtual space. Additionally, the introduction of uncertainty through the live intervention of strangers formally counters the goal of mastery that is often a result of many formations of masculinity. The goal of this approach is to hint at alternate interactions: productive entanglements in this ecology between masculinity, the non-binary, femininity, the non-human, technology, and more.

Masculine "crisis" and Social VR

"There's a crisis of white masculinity in the US." It seems hackneyed to write given how frequently it's posited in think pieces from all sides of the political spectrum[5][6][7][8]. Granted, it's a natural conclusion given the statistics about suicide rates[9] and the manifestos written by those who've murdered in masculinity's defense. The framing of crisis, however, is problematic and dangerous. In the face of "crisis," there

[5] Brooks, D. (2022, September 29). *The crisis of men and boys*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/29/opinion/crisis-men-masculinity.html
[6] WP Company. (2023, July 14). *Opinion | men are lost. here's a map out of the wilderness.* The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/10/christine-emba-masculinity-new-model/
[7] Wong, A. (2018, June 26). *The many possible meanings of the "masculinity crisis."* The Atlantic. https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/06/why-american-men-are-in-crisis/563807/
[8] Myers, J., & The Future of Men: Masculinity in the Twenty-First Century. (2016, May 26). *Young men are facing a masculinity crisis*. Time. https://time.com/4339209/masculinity-crisis/
[9] *Suicide statistics*. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. (2023, July 10). https://afsp.org/suicide-statistics/

is no time for traditional safety checks: radical action must be taken now. There are, however, deeply felt anxieties among men. There is a gap between popular narratives of masculinity and the ways it is experienced by men. There are two ways to cross this gap. One is to violently actualize the fantastical narrative. The other is to create new configurations of the masculine, perhaps erasing it completely. The effect of this gap is isolating and reshapes the experience of the body as a site of lack. Arguably the common ground amongst the array of masculinities is this very anxiety. Hopefully, it isn't also this crisis.

Anxiety is a useful fuel for political engines, and anxieties borne by a population with great political power prove rife for capitalization. Without engaged critique, a group that can pedal convincing enough grand narratives that explain the origins of the crisis can also shape imaginations for the solutions driving political action. This manipulation of fear has long been key to authoritarian politics. We see that grift targeting masculinity with the rise of Incel Ideology[10], The Great Replacement Conspiracy Theory[11], men's separatist movements like MGTOW: Men

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[10] Kasidiaris, I. (2016, March 1). *Incel movement*. Counter Extremism Project. https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/incel-movement?gclid=CjwKCAjwxaanBhBQEiw A84TVXFu7YNv_ZY1xj-KzwwOefjgGejArySgxym-3yFOyiVWJBDUmrXTCXhoCLTQQ AvD_BwE

[11] *"The great replacement:" an Explainer*. ADL. (2021, April 19). https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/great-replacement-explainer?gclid=CjwKCAjwx aanBhBQEiwA84TVXPfYmgASWE_ZPAbdAdhxJ2IACXfKLDyuj1jPEHWpAoHzF_c-A7_ u5hoCjE8QAvD_BwE

Going Their Own Way[12], pick-up artists[13], and Men's Rights activists[14]. While the ideologies of these movements often conflict, particularly in relation to who they imagine is responsible for the perceived harm, they share the notion that masculinity is under siege and only the figure of the individualistic, physically and socially dominating man can restore order. It's a dangerous war fantasy that reframes the use of violence as an act of protection or even—in narratives of imminent future harm, such as in the Great Replacement Theory—an act of prevention. These framings sublimate feelings of anxiety into desires for retributive violence.

This phenomenon is evident in the language of retribution used by mass murderers to justify their killing. It can be seen in the manifesto Elliot Rodger shared before killing six people in 2013[15] and in the manifesto written by a gunman accused of shooting ten people in New York in 2022[16]. It's also manifest in other media forms. There's an entire genre of YouTube videos built around compiling clips of "instant karma." Watching them provides the satisfaction of bad things happening to those

[12] Feel, R. M. (2018, April 22). *What is MGTOW?*. The Good Men Project. https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/what-is-mgtow-ndgt/
[13] Love, D. (2013, September 15). *Inside red pill, the weird new cult for men who don't understand women*. Business Insider. https://www.businessinsider.com/the-red-pill-reddit-2013-8
[14] Natale, F. (2019, December 12). *An introduction to men's rights activists (mras)*. The Security Distillery. https://thesecuritydistillery.org/all-articles/an-introduction-to-mens-rights-activists-mras
[15] "It is a sign that one has the will to fight back against those injustices, rather than bowing down and accepting them as fate…I am like a god, and my purpose is to exact ultimate Retribution on the impurities I see in the world." - Elliot Rodger
[16] "In 2050, despite the ongoing effect of sub-replacement fertility, the population figures show that the population does not decrease inline with the sub-replacement fertility levels, but actually maintains and, even in many White nations, rapidly increases…If we do rise up against the replacers, I expect that I will be let out and honored amongst my people." - Alleged mass shooter Payton Gendron

who've caused harm. Crucially, the harm in this video genre is primarily perpetrated toward women and people of color. Furthermore, the original wrong being "corrected" is often not visible in the video. Viewers take for granted that the violence in this video is earned. I see this genre as rehearsing an orientation to the socially marginalized as *deserving* violence. Grander narratives provide the pretext that thereby warrants the violence. The popularity of these videos has increased dramatically in the last few years.

Another more explicit example is a recent song by country artist Jason Aldean. The lyrics of the song "Try That in a Small Town" dare an imaginary audience to "sucker punch someone on the sidewalk" and "cuss out a cop" to—in return— "see how far [they'll] make it down the road." This threat invokes the lynching practice of dragging someone down a street by a rope tied to their ankles. Many have argued that in doing so, he figures his imaginary audience as black. While Aldean has since denied this interpretation of his song, saying that it "never mentions race," it's hard not to see a recurring logic in which he fabulates harm so that those who listen to his song can celebrate a response historically associated with racial violence. We can work backward from the real and fictional violence present in these examples to see *retribution* against the socially marginalized that require narratives that provide a pretext of harm.

These narratives are undergirded by a belief system exemplified by a recent tweet by social media influencer and alleged human trafficker Andrew Tate. On July 23, 2023, Tate tweeted, "Most of you will never make your fathers proud. Not Truly.

Not deep in his heart. Only victory in battle can do that. It's evolutionary…." What Tate argues is evolutionary, queer theorist and professor of ancient philosophy Dr. David Halperin attributes to a subscription to "2nd-order masculinity." In his essay, *Deviant Teaching,* Halperin describes 2nd-order masculinity as a particular component of hegemonic masculinity sanctified through certain homosocial rituals[17]. Hallmarks of these rituals include the following: they must happen outside of the domestic space, they require a group of men around the same age, they often include the exhaustion of the physical body, and there are frequently associated rituals of sexual play. Historically these rituals have been tied to military or athletic training. The idea is that your father figure teaches you the first part of how to be a man, but it is only until this *preparation* is tested in battle that you can claim manhood's full title. As Andrew Tate would say, "Only victory in battle can do that." Only then are you able to return to the domestic space sanctified with masculinity. As well as arguing for the continued presence of this narrative of masculinity, Halperin also notes that these rituals render the claim to masculinity temporary. The 2nd-order masculine fades without re-certification, and while many still see the archetypal masculinity generated through these rituals, there are fewer and fewer opportunities to achieve its affirmation. While online spaces provide the community, they deny the required embodied relation to the group.

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[17] Halperin, D. M. (2007). Deviant teaching. In G. E. Haggerty, & M. McGarry (Eds.), *A companion to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer studies* (pp. 146-167, Chapter xviii, 478 Pages). Malden: Blackwell Publishing. Retrieved from https://www.proquest.com/books/deviant-teaching/docview/621591010/se-2

Social VR is thereby positioned as a fertile playground where all of these forces meet the affordances that directly engage with the crisis of the body. Social VR describes a subset of virtual reality in which users from around the world can gather: it re-embodies the chat room experience. Users can choose different avatars to represent themselves as they travel between thousands of custom environments. VRChat, the most popular Social VR app by far, has an estimated 7.8 million users, around 58.8 thousand of which are active in a day[18]. Predominantly used by white men, this platform maintains the decontextualized dangers of online space but adds a more direct, agential relationship to the presentation of one's body. Instead of being framed as a site of lack, the body becomes one of the primary sites of play. VRChat has hundreds of worlds dedicated to sharing different avatars to wear. Furthermore, this embodied play is pointed towards community building. Here is a possibility for direct engagement with 2nd-order masculine rituals without putting the body on the line.

While the embodied interaction is novel, the complications of self-representation in cyberspace have been around as long as the internet. The decontextualized space of online communication, once thought to be the beginning of a society without the need for race or gender, facilitates the continuation of insidious forms of racism and sexism. Professor Lisa Nakamura writes about the ways that "race happens" within online communities. Her research focuses on online chat spaces in which race can be represented either textually or visually. What she

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[18] @mmostats. (2022, July 28). *VRChat active player Count & Population*. MMO Stats. https://mmostats.com/game/vrchat

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discovered was that "when users are free to choose their own race, all were assumed to be white." In her book, "Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet" she articulates how race appears in the forms of language and representations of the self, describes the legacy of "identity tourism" in which individuals temporarily perform identities they don't outside of the internet, and outlines the ways particular racial play by white users has been used to promote imperial fantasies[19]. This kind of play is central to a social VR community called The British Armed Forces, or BAF for short. With over 2,500 thousand members, BAF is a Waifu-themed MilSim Role-Play group that meets in virtual reality. "Waifu" is a Japanese adaptation of the English word "wife" specifically used by fans of anime to describe cartoon women that fit archetypes of care and sexual desire.

FIG. 1: Combined screenshots from three interviews with members of BAF

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[19] Nakamura, L. (2013). *Cybertypes: Race, ethnicity, and identity on the internet*. Routledge.

"MilSim" is short for military simulation. This describes the bulk of events in BAF. They train on small weapons, heavy artillery, urban warfare tactics, drill etiquette, and more. There are three branches of their military with a rigid organizational hierarchy.
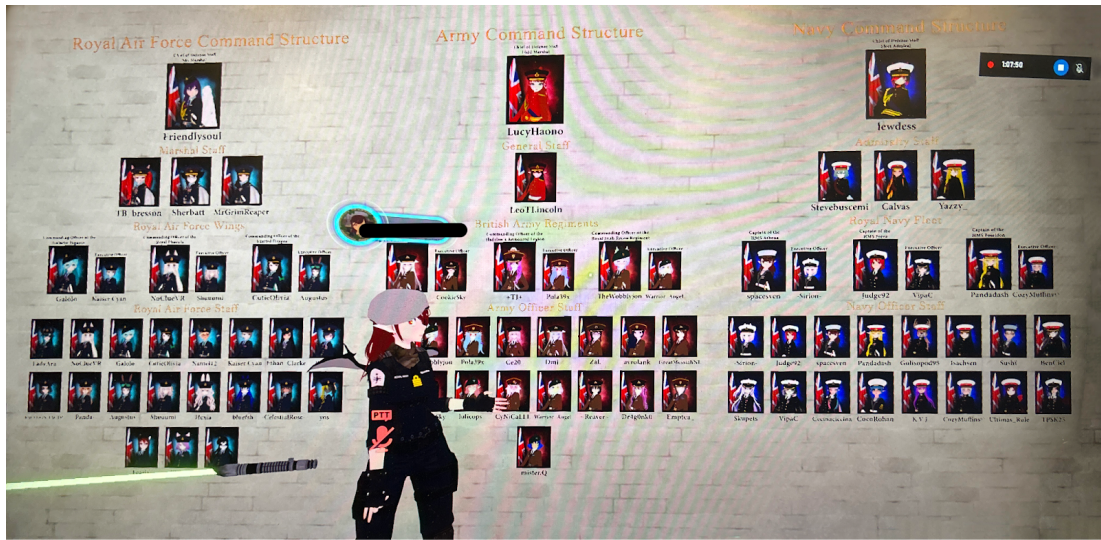
FIG. 2: BAF organization hierarchy screenshot

The degree of adherence to role-playing these characters varies depending on the event. Recruitment and social events are often marked as "low role-play," while training and outings require strict adherence to formal militarized communication and behavior.

It's for these reasons that social VR (and in particular BAF) became the site of my creative investigation. *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* uses dance, text, and live interviews with members of these communities to excavate what has driven them there and how the communities they build shape their desires.

On catharsis

This content is framed within a narrative structure that promises and then intentionally fails to provide catharsis. Catharsis is evoked in the opening expository framework. When the Furies wake, they tell us that they are continuing the story from the ancient Greek drama. In doing so, they suggest the continuation of the accompanying classical story structure, even going so far as to recount the original moment of catharsis: Athena's appearance. They dare her to appear again, "Athena! Where are you? How will you weave these tattered threads together now?" There is no answer.

FIG. 3: The Fur(r)ies beckon Athena

In silence, they begin their hunt. Paralleling the original story, we are primed to read Athena's later appearance in *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* as promising a similar resolution to the story. Instead, her "grand proclamation" is a smattered collage of

thoughts by men embodying a fiction of militarized femininity. We are denied a resolution. Her incoherence reveals her inability to solve the crisis, while her construction critiques the reverence with which the *Oresteia* is often looked to as a foundational document for the spread of contemporary systems of justice: Athena has always been an avatar constructed to be a mouthpiece for patriarchy. As a totem of justice, this critique connects the individual crisis of young men with the US justice system and implies that perhaps our current configuration of democracy is also fueling the violence. The goal of this formal approach is not only to critique the specific hero-narrative that fuels the gap between how masculinity is experienced and how it is understood but to extend the post-dramatic legacy that challenges the ability of narrative itself to address the issue. Furthermore, without the cathartic release of a well-made play, we are led to carry the questions that emerge with us back out of the theater.

Which of the primarily white, heterosexual desires are being actualized within VR communities?

While VR users are men, almost all of the avatars used in social VR are femme. One of the conversations staged in Experiment 2 and the interviews in Experiment 3 reveal that a driving factor in femme avatar choice is the externalization of sexual desire. The design of the femme avatars is often hyper-sexualized. One reading is that, for the "price" of taking on the body of a woman, you get to be in a

community made up exclusively of people who you find sexually attractive. In the case of the British Armed Forces, whose men exclusively use femme anime avatars, this goes as far as to erase the necessity to deal with the interpersonal negotiations of desire for the other. Instead, all relation to womanhood is prosthetic. Experiences of the feminine other are thereby reduced to experiences of sexual desire facilitated by the feminine surrogate. In addition to profound sexism, this puppeteering of the feminine body also takes up a racist, imperial legacy. By using an anime aesthetic, BAF reinforces the stereotypes of Asian women as controllable and submissive. Nakamura's research shows the way this reinforces the default expectation of whiteness in the community and discourages racial self-representation in favor of "identity tourism." This insight can be extended further to the historicopolitical tourism that BAF engages in. Despite being composed almost entirely of members from the US, the group uses British Military regalia. Furthermore, legions within the group are an ahistorical grabbag of real and fictional militias. One group, the Royal Irish Guard, would be considered a terrorist organization by the actual British Military, while the insignia of another group, the HMS Freya, looks uncomfortably like that of the Nazi S.S.. Armies that were (or are) in conflict are training alongside each other and alongside fantasy sects designed around unicorns and phoenixes. As "identity tourism" does to race, this historical incoherence makes political histories a site of play. In the same way "identity tourism" discourages racial specificity in favor of anachronistic representations that support the dominant racist ideology, this "historicopoplitical tourism" discourages authentic political expression in favor of the

dominant Western capitalist default. This makes it harder to counter the nazi iconography as conversations addressing it directly are seen to "introduce politics" into a space understood to be an idealized, apolitical community.

The British Armed Forces also respond to the diminishing opportunity for 2nd order masculine rituals. Since the desire for their certification persists, substitute rituals have developed in Virtual Reality to replicate their function. Members of BAF spend hours a week participating in drill parades and other training. Members are sitting alone in their bedrooms, precisely twitching their thumbs to keep their avatars perfectly in line with their peers. This defies traditional gaming frameworks for motivation. Instead, we can see the motivation behind these arduous rituals as certifying mastery of the body within the collective—vital to 2nd order masculine verification. The military valence also frames this mastery toward the capacity for conquest, satisfying another hallmark of these rituals. There are further questions to be explored around the function of physical exhaustion within these rituals as they were designed in meat-space and what is lost in their virtual translation

At the end of basic training for the British Armed Forces, one must complete a test to be initiated. During the rehearsal process, I completed this initiation, and in doing so, was introduced to a secondary valence of the femme avatars. After passing this test, a sergeant led me through a forest of cherry blossoms and birch trees to a floating placard that bears the image of my BAF-sanctioned avatar. A private in the HMS Athena, she has short brown hair, the same juvenile face as everyone else, and a

dark blue Navy uniform. To adopt my avatar, I raise my right controller until the selection dot appears on her forehead and pull the trigger.

FIG. 4: BAF Avatar selection

For a moment, my previous Fur(r)y body disappears. My eye-line jumps a foot higher, and the avatar body appears below me. The sergeant opens a mirror and holds it up for me to see myself. "Congratulations! You look so pretty." He says as he pats my head three times.

Headpats cover most of the visual field and engage a part of the body that the VR headset already touches. Members use head pats to share physical affection as it is specifically curated to be the easiest to generate a phantom *felt* experience in the body. These compliments and head pats are common amongst the ranks. Since everyone below OR-16 has the same face and body, affirmations of beauty arise from something more than polite confirmation of attention. By stepping into the feminine

body, these men grant themselves permission to receive affection. Perhaps more importantly, they grant themselves permission to receive care. Considering their subscription to masculine ideals, it is only by temporarily stepping into the feminine can they receive the care otherwise denied to them.
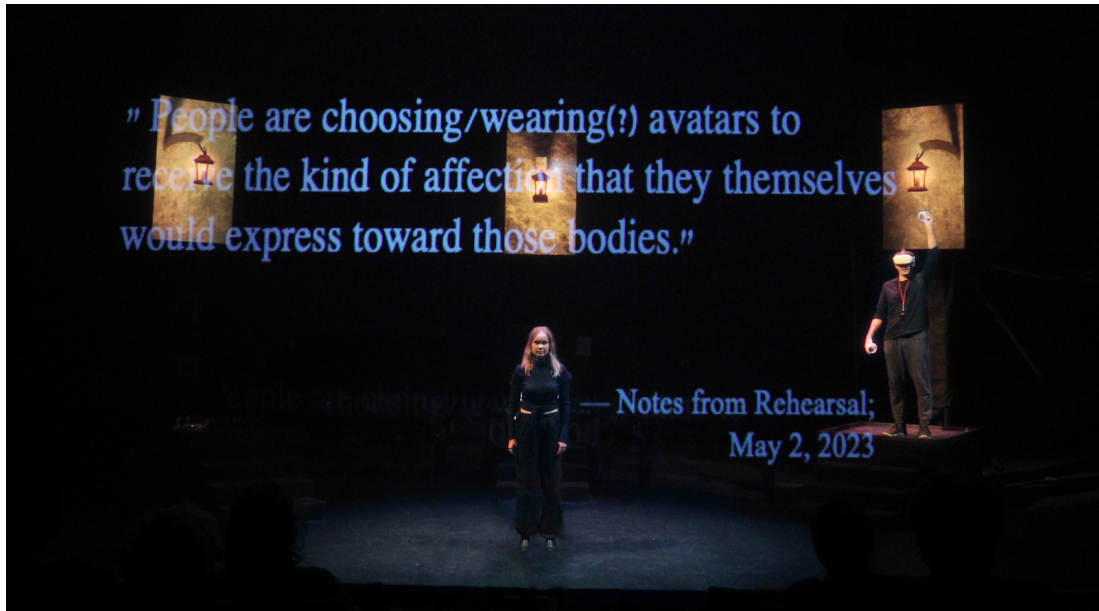
FIG. 5: Experiment 2 - Introductory tableau

How do we stage an exploration of an oppressive system without reifying it?

With *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* I'm interested in the subscription to 2nd order masculinity and the resulting masculinity that engenders an oppressive framework. Oppressive systems can be reified through narratives when represented as necessary, natural (or eternal), and unchangeable. To counter this, each of those factors must be critiqued. It must be framed as unnecessary, historically situated, and alterable.

This is accomplished through the structure, the aesthetics, and the content of the show. By using the mediated landscape to alienate the constitutive parts of identity presentation, we can then recombine them in new configurations. In one vignette, the actors' meat bodies are combined with someone else's voice. In another experiment, a stranger's avatar body is coopted by an actor. In a third, the VR hardware itself implies a body partially puppeteered by each of the actors. These hybrid reconfigurations are outlined in more detail under the "Formal Description." By staging these shifting configurations, the technology under critique also provides the space to imagine alternate uses and, thereby, alternate relations to identity formation and presentation. The system is alterable.

The historical and social context for this masculinity is evinced both in the overture in which three quotes from Elliot Rodger's manifesto frame his relationship to masculinity and in the conversation around VR's military history in Experiment 2. The opening three quotes are taken from Rodger's manifesto and reflect his feelings on current politics and pop culture. Together they braid Rodger's desire to transcend the limits of his body, to enact retributive violence, and to participate in international conquest into a singular masculinity.

It is a sign that one has the will to fight back against those injustices, rather than bowing down and excepting (sic) them as fate.

I am like a god, and my purpose is to exact ultimate Retribution on all of the impurities I see in the world.

Prince Zuko is my favorite character; he was a banished prince who was trying to regain his rightful place in the world.

-Elliot Rodger

From a 141-page manifesto he shared hours before killing 6 and injuring 14 others
— May 23, 2014

FIG. 6: Overture projection - Rodger quotes

Later in the show, Ruby recounts a conversation they had with a group in a furry hangout. In this conversation, the furries talk about how their embodied explorations in social VR (this group had graduated beyond kissing to eating each other) were made possible by US military funding decades ago. These moments help situate the resulting experiences of masculinity as socially and historically contingent.

Finally, the aesthetic strategy helps break down the idea that this system is necessary. We stage the pain this subscription causes by focusing on the distance between the meat body and its mediated representation. The audience is always made aware of the lack—the untravellable distance that renders the "necessity" of this

framework absurd and tragic.

FIG. 7: Dream Ballet - Fractured reflection

Formal Considerations

Are the technical reconfigurations of the performer across virtual and meat-space theatrically legible?

The mediated reconfigurations of the performers are constant and shifting. To be effective, the audience must understand what is happening. One example of the complicated relations that must be legible is in Experiment 2. While one of the performers is recounting a conversation he had with a stranger during rehearsals, he wears that stranger's avatar in VR. One of the other performers carries their headset like a camera pointed at the other's avatar. By lining up the position of this avatar with the third performer on stage, the VR camera shares the same relation to the avatar body and the other performer's meat body. When the camera is to the side, we see both of their profiles. In this instance, by physically ghosting the avatar body onto

another's meat body, we stage the friction between how the two are read.

FIG. 8: Experiment 2 - Giant avatar face

In what ways do we expect these bodies to look alike? In what ways do we expect

that to look different? How is the avatar a replication of a woman? How is it not? This

dialogue between the on-stage and virtual action also functions to remind the

audience that the other bodies we are seeing in virtual space do not end there. They

have another physical space, a domestic space, into which they extend. Only by

considering that invisible body can we begin to understand the resulting interactions,

and only if the audience understands how this moment is composed can they engage

at all.

One strategy to help clarify how certain constructions functioned was to label

them explicitly. This was necessary later in the same experiment as we heard the

voice of Anastasiya and a stranger she interviewed through speakers in the mouths of

Ruby and Phil.

FIG. 9: Experiment 2 - Putting virtual voices in meat bodies

The directness of projecting "Putting virtual voices in meat bodies" saved the audience from trying to understand what they were seeing. Instead, they were able to focus on the relationship between the dialogue and the formal construction.

While it is tricky to confirm the legibility of these and other reconfigurations in the show, a moment of affirmation came early in the final interviews. When Ruby asked the audience if they wanted to say hello to one of the interviewees, their emphatic response recognizes their confidence that the avatar on the screen directly reflects the live presence of a person.

Formal Description

FIG. 10: Experiment 1 - Title projection

The primary function of the stage setting was to make the technical apparatus and performance interactions legible. Each performer's view in virtual reality is displayed on a screen behind their base node, and a scrim downstage provides a permeable screen onto which annotations, and occasionally video, are projected. The other considerations stemmed from a line in *The Eumenides* that we trace from the banishment of the Furies, through the theater in which the show is performed, and directly into the experience of being in a VR headset. When the Furies are sent underground in the Aeschylus' play (and therefore where they reawaken in *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!)* Athena declares them "banished to a sunless, torchlit, dusk." This

designation sends them away from nature, away from light, and perpetually at day's end.

The performance can broadly be divided into seven sections: The overture and prologue, the introduction, experiment one, experiment two, the dream ballet, experiment three, and the postlude. A full transcript of the opening performance is included later for reference.

At the top of the show, a red curtain is projected onto the scrim. The overture combines music composed and rendered by my classmate, Nicki Duval, with a montage of text drawn from the shared rhetoric between Elliot Rodger's manifesto and Ted Hughes' translation of *The Eumenides*. Resolving into longer quotes from each source, the overture draws the first axis of inquiry: a line from ancient Greek propaganda for representative democracy and trail justice to contemporary incel ideology. In the prologue, Iphigenia draws the second axis. She delivers a monologue about the complicated phenomenology of smiling her mother Clytemnestra's smile. To her, it feels like a mask—in front of her face—but to those who know her mother, it appears as though Clytemnestra is smiling through her—from behind her face. And, of course, neither is experienced by those who don't know her mother. She states that she doesn't know what happens if one *imagines* they know the Clytemnestra and

proceeds to attempt the smile four times.

FIG. 11: Prologue - Iphigenia multiplies

This second axis established the complications of virtual bodies felt in the body before the introduction of VR technology. We puppeteer, inhabit, and are mediums for virtual bodies, partial and whole, in shifting relationships all of the time. The architecture of how we experience these identities drawn against this retributive logic traced through time bounds the playing field in which the following experiments take place.

During the introduction, the performers appear both in meat-space and virtual-space, and their amplified voices are pitched down. These double bodies and

voices conjure the furies.

FIG. 12: The Fu(r)ies awaken

Here they introduce their goal to take up the hunt for Orestes once more, and assert that when the audience feels lost, they should "return to this knowledge, or *feeling"* of the hybrid body.

After being marked by a projection title and followed by a rehearsal note beginning, "Everyone in VR is holding an invisible gun," Experiment 1: BODY begins. In this experiment, Anastasiya searches social VR for someone who appears to be holding an invisible gun. Once she has found someone, the third performer, Phil, explains why this gesture is common in these spaces. In doing so, he obliquely meditates on the ways in which we perceive the world differently when holding a gun, an extension of what Cognitive Psychologist, Dr. Jessica Witt, calls the "gun

embodiment effect.[20]" A legacy from its military development, the affordances of the VR interface engender militarized thinking in the users that centers shooting as the primary form of engaging with the world and provides a mechanism for transcending the limits of the body.

FIG. 13: Experiment 1 - "Inivisble gun" gesture

This experiment eases the audience into the clumsiness of exploring live social spaces and ends with an assertive repetition of photos of this gesture taken throughout the rehearsals.

Experiment 2: DESIRE is focused on understanding the gap between most users' self-report of gender and their choice of gendered representation in VR. Why do most users describe themselves as men but use femme avatars? This experiment

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[20] Witt, J. K., Parnes, J. E., & Tenhundfeld, N. L. (2020). Wielding a gun increases judgments of others as holding guns: A randomized controlled trial. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, *5*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-020-00260-3

includes three sections. In the first, Phil recounts a conversation from rehearsal in which a stranger accused Phil of trying to flirt with them. After using homophobic slurs, this person positioned themself relative to Phil in a sexual tableau. While recounting this event, Phil dons a cat-girl avatar that closely resembles that of the person he was talking to. We see this avatar on the screen above him from the perspective of Ruby's headset. Ruby holds the headset like a camera, and by lining up the location of this avatar with Anastasiya's position on the stage, Ruby literalizes the VR gaze in meat space. This hybrid configuration returns the presence of women in a dynamic built to reduce them to prostheses. In the second section, Ruby recounts their surprise when, in one rehearsal, they found a group of guys using the manipulable scale of their avatars to take turns "eating" each other. In the final third, a projection appears: "Putting virtual voices into meat bodies." Anastasiya interviews a stranger in social VR about how they chose their body while her voice, and the voice of the stranger, are sent speakers in the mouths of Phil and Ruby.
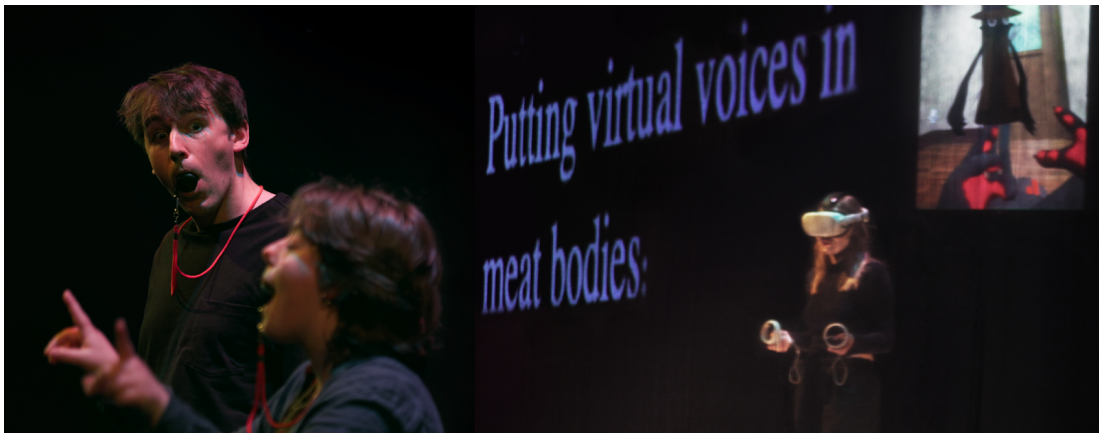
FIG. 14: Experiment 2 - Virtual voices composite photo

This staging avatarizes the performer's meat body, inverting the conventional relationship in which the bodies mediate the voice.

We called the following section the dream ballet in rehearsal as a way to mark the moment of reflection in an alternate logic before the climax—and because we imagined the Furies dancing above them while the performers spoke. In this section, Phil silently encounters the cat-girl avatar once more and has a moment of recognition that the other two performers *clock*. We echo the trans film trope of misrecognition in a mirror but shift its trajectory toward a ritual of care. There is a community within these social VR spaces that uses the avatar as a site of more earnest gender play. In an environment in which the body is so malleable, people place a heightened essentialism on the voice, and so to avoid this dangerous logic, many choose not to speak. This scene honors this by similarly not giving speech to the experience. The ritual of care then begins with song, and the VR apparatus is hung above the performers. After asking the audience to attend to the hybrid performer across meat-space and virtual-space this tableau tries to stretch apart the performer's from the Fur(r)ies one last time before the climax.

FIG. 15: Dream Ballet - Hovering Fur(r)ies

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In this suspension, the performers sit, attempt, and fail to describe the "meaning" of that night's experiments.

Experiment 3: RITUAL begins with an audience member reading a description of the British Armed Forces (BAF). As the performers prepare for their final interviews, a video from the rehearsals plays in which I discover a branch of BAF called the HMS Athena. In the same video, we another branch whose insignia is unnervingly similar to that of the Nazis. Athena's appearance brings the reminder of her promise to "solve everything" paired with the discomfort of her proximity to authoritarian ideology. The three interviews begin simultaneously.


FIG. 16: Experiment 3 - Interviews

After brief introductions, including a moment in which one member says hello to the audience and the audience responds, we shift focus to an interview at a time. Switching between the three interviews stages the clumsiness of performing liveness while simultaneously having a montage effect, a sense of compressing and

condensing the time. Six minutes after the interviews begin, the switches between the three nodes increase in speed. A projection appears: "Athena speaks:", and a transcription of the interviews appears on the projection. Fragments are captured and stitched together to create a single, incoherent proclamation. The interviews fade to black, and the grand solution Athena's appearance promises fails to actualize. Instead, we are left trying to decipher this collaged text.

As we sit with the text, the performers once again hang up their equipment on the rigs. In an act that mimics the raising of a flag, they hoist the bodiless Furies higher and higher until they are twenty-six feet above the stage. The Furies have fulfilled their purpose. The performers step into darkness as a surprising projection appears, "Experiment 4: MANY BODIES MAKE ONE BODY." And then "A funeral for Clytemnestra:". From the darkness, the three performers appear using Bunraku-style puppetry to animate a fourth headset, two controllers, and a pair of light grey shoes. Here, Iphigenia and Orestes' mother, Clytemnestra, gently walks to center stage, turns stage right and then stage left, and is laid on her back to rest. She floats as if on water.
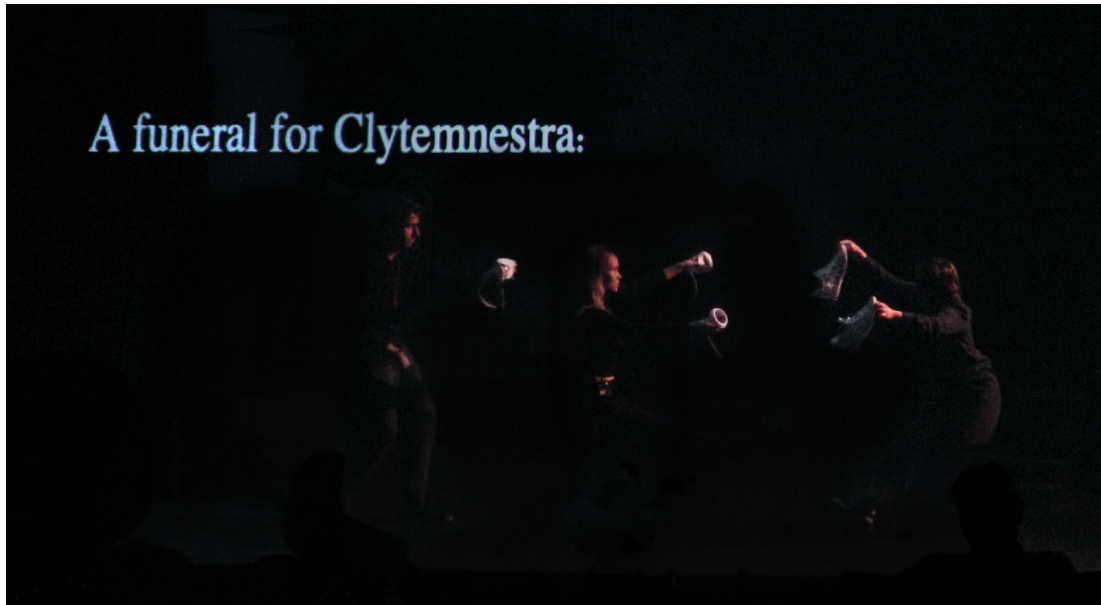
FIG. 17: Experiment 4 - A funeral for Clytemnestra

This ritual was built to echo those used in Eastern European Object Magic to dispose

of poppets—physical avatars that provide magical access to another person. Their

ritual is built on a sophisticated relationship to the responsibilities we bear to virtual

bodies and their capacities when considered out of use. Slowly, the performers move

away from each other until the ghostly body is no longer legible. This final tableau

proposes a radically new configuration of identity by (mis)using the same tools. As

the components are stretched beyond our ability to cohere the body within, the social

necessity and responsibility of care are emphasized. The lights fade to black.

Process Considerations

What is my strategy for documenting the process for this kind of work?

A key turning point in the development of the show's structure happened late in the devising process and made use of the process documentation. It began when I realized that I had begun to make a "show." When more support than I expected started to come from the department—in particular, once emails about ticketing and front-of-house staff arrived—I reverted to my professional training. I started to shift the show toward diegetic coherence, hiding the mechanics of the theater and amping up the entertainment. I was trying to smooth over the fussy details. Ironically, this desire to make the show more digestible made the discoveries of the experiments less legible. It was only by making those fussy details clear that the audience could scaffold toward a deeper engagement with the rest of the work. To correct course, I embraced the lecture-performance model. Here, the documentation was crucial.

My primary strategy for documenting my process adapted the "think-aloud" strategy. When processing a choice or experience from rehearsal, I would turn on my phone's camera and video myself verbalizing my thought process. Combined with the cast's insights from post-rehearsal debriefs, there was a well of documentation to return to.

To create the lecture performance, I parsed this documentation for the moments when some of the insights first became clear to me and the devising team.

This documentation then became material folded forward into the production itself. We used quotes as chapter titles for each experiment and used one of the videos directly (though I re-recorded it for brevity). The video was recorded when I discovered the branch within the British Armed Forces fortuitously called the HMS Athena. By playing this documentation during the performance, this past moment of discovery was reconfigured as Athena's conceptual appearance, presaging the catharsis she would fail to provide. In this way, a new structure was created by framing the experimentation with the documentation of the discoveries from past iterations. By putting language to the discoveries that were clear to us, the audience could better engage with the questions that still remained.

What are the ethics of engaging participants in public space in performance?

Typical ethical concerns around public performance involve the ability to opt in or out of engagement as it intervenes in their lives. The particular affordances of working with the public in social VR grants them the ability not only to do this by easily moving towards or away from the action but also to opt out by muting the action entirely, rendering it ineffective. That doesn't, however, spare considerations around other wide-reaching ethical concerns.

Theater of the twentieth century long sought to replicate the domestic within the public space of the theatrical stage. Because the head-mounted equipment that enables experiences in VR often occludes the surrounding physical environment,

many users engage with VR in small, private spaces such as bedrooms or living rooms: to opt into virtual capacity is to opt out of physical capacity. This means the social VR platform used in *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* provides portals to people in these domestic spaces through the filter of their virtual embodiment. Along with ironically epitomizing this twentieth-century theatrical goal, this creates its own ethical challenges. Individuals the performers speak to in the show don't realize that they are also speaking to an entire audience. Because of this, we referred to these interviewees as "naive performers." While within a virtual public, and having agreed to VRChat terms that include the ability for all audio to be recorded, these strangers were unaware of the immediate reach of their speech. Perhaps they are better referred to as "unknowing performers." We wanted to be sensitive to this asymmetry of information. To do so, we developed a strategy to gauge which responsibilities we owed these naive performers. During the rehearsal process, we would occasionally tell strangers that we were "actually on a stage in the middle of a performance for many people." In all of the times in which we did this, the responses fell into four categories: disinterest, disbelief, trolling (they'd swear or act up for the imagined audience), and, most commonly, polite curiosity. The conversation would turn entirely to why we were performing. What we were looking for but didn't find was a sense of violation. As the work can be seen as an extension of documentary theater, we kept conversations checking in about these emerging ethics as we went.

Procedural Description

I led the creation of this show based on devised theater techniques. Devised theater describes work that does not begin with an authored script but rather is created by the company themselves. The general devising schedule for this production gave two weeks for the performers to acclimatize themselves to social VR and two weeks to the development of each experiment.

Hybrid performance requires performers to shift their attention in ways that undermine popular acting techniques. To learn to perform with and through VR, we adapted Lecoq's neutral mask fundamentals. This proved a useful starting place as it's a system that de-emphasizes the expressive power of the face and instead focuses on the idiosyncrasies of the body for communicating meaning. By extending an awareness of the body across the forms of media, we could adapt the training for hybrid performance. Of course, in these two weeks of preliminary training, a huge amount of time was devoted to the practicalities of the VR interface. How do you get to the same instance as one another? How do you mute yourself? How do you mute others? There was a rehearsal late in the second week in which one of the performers made a strange noise and called the room's attention. They described an uncomfortable feeling when looking out of the bottom of their headset. They looked at the flesh of their arm as it continued into the appearance of the avatar's hand in the headset. At this moment, they verbalized a sense of unease that they could see the avatar's hand *as* their own. Their body schema had begun to map onto the avatar

itself. It "clicked" for one of the other performers later in that same rehearsal and a few days later for the third. This experience is not only common to Lecoq's work but to the consistent use of VR. This re-mapping is the first step to developing phantom sensation, and all of the performers expressed a form of incredulity at the realization that it had begun.

Once the performers were onboarded, the general schedule for each rehearsal was as follows: First, we'd work through our check-in ritual. This ritual set the tone of the rehearsal and flagged any potential concerns in relation to the plan for the day. The rest of the rehearsals were usually divided into two. The first half often divided the performances into task-based experiments (usually undertaken individually), after which we would talk about what was successful, what wasn't, what strange things happened, and what patterns were emerging. Later in the process, some of these insights were projected on the scrim to help frame the performed experiments. These "rehearsal notes" provided a way of reading what was to come and were complicated by what followed. The second half of the rehearsal was often used to stage the parts of the performance we knew would be scripted. This order meant that we could end rehearsals with the more structured scaffolding work that allowed the young performers a sense of progress in the process. As happens with most devised work, much of the work generated in rehearsal does not make it into the performance directly. I have found that this can be deflating to performers who aren't used to this process. I believe this structure contributed to consistent morale throughout. We would then end the rehearsal with a closing ritual. I would write and re-write the

scripted material based on their insights and expand on the experiments that were most fruitful. Together we created the performance.

We wanted to keep the active experimentation of the rehearsal process going as long as possible. While there inevitably comes a time in the process to lock in what can be locked in and rehearse that structure for the comfort of the performers, I didn't want to foreclose the possibilities of what would be staged for as long as possible. This requires lots of trust in and from the performers. This proved hugely important when we discovered the British Armed Forces. It was just after halfway through the process that we encountered BAF, and we immediately knew that our focus would pivot to them. In this one community, all of our interests collide. This was late in the process, and integration into BAF was hugely time-intensive. I did most of this work outside of rehearsals and tried my best to video the events to share with the group. Had we begun to set the show too early, we would either have had to ignore this discovery or face the challenge of undoing much of the rehearsed work.

One major procedural challenge was scheduling the interviews with the British Armed Forces. Ostensibly with three performances and three interviews per performance, we needed members that were willing to fill nine slots. While initial excitement amongst the organization made this seem possible, as we got closer to the performance dates, it became a struggle to fill all of the slots. At one of our check-out rituals, a performer shared that this concerned them, which resonated with the others. We made the decision then to open the interview slots to whenever BAF members were available and to record them. This meant that during the performances, the

performers were responsible for re-enlivening these recordings. It also meant that the

stage manager had familiarity with interviews when calling the switches between

them. At the time, I felt this was a concession; however, with some reflection, I would

advocate for this model in the future. Ultimately, the function of liveness is in the

quality of attention it engenders in the audience. And, while pre-recorded media

instills a "passing" risk in performance, the audience reception made it clear that with

rehearsal, that risk can be greatly minimized. Furthermore, I believe the quality of

attention engendered by liveness is similar to that engendered by the open question of

liveness. A handful of people approached me after the performances asking for a

confirmation of liveness for the final interviews. That question is naturally followed

by whether it matters terribly to the meaning generated.

Technical Innovations

There were two technical innovations that made this project possible. The first helped manage the large computational needs and complex signal flow within a cue-based system, and the second connected that system to avatar parameters within Virtual Reality, allowing for novel control within the media operation. With three screens, two projectors, three video cameras, three IR cameras, three VR headsets streaming live, live microphone pitch-shifting, and a performance structure that required a mixture of consecutive cues and cues that were driven by emergent action within the performance, there was a monstrous amount of data to process in any given moment. The first solution was to develop a distributed, node-based system that divided the computational demand into four separate laptops. De-centralizing the information processing meant I needed a way to manage the signal flow between all of the nodes. Typically, media systems take the signals into a central device that interprets the data and generates the media content. I needed a protocol that was much more flexible, allowing data to be sent in all directions around the network. For this, I used the protocol OpenSoundControl, or OSC. Running directly over the network, OSC allowed me to send large amounts of data from any of the nodes to any of the others without any noticeable latency. This integrated media ecosystem bypasses typical computational and allows the flexibility to add devices throughout the process. A more detailed breakdown of the system and the particular challenges solved for its success are outlined in Appendix A.

OSC was also crucial in the ability to control avatar parameters within VR wirelessly through the same media system. I believe this is one of, if not the first, production to include external cue-based avatar manipulation within a performance in social VR. Early in 2022, VRChat allowed access to certain encoded avatar parameters through OSC. The advertised uses included using "a drum pad to control your avatar's ears" and having "your avatar's clothes change colors when you receive a donation on Twitch." Over the following year, developers created projects for streams and interpersonal interaction. By integrating the OSC commands into my Isadora workflow, I was able to treat avatar parameters like any other media element in the production. In this case, this was used to collectively control avatar size and color, enable them to fly, and toggle their armor. While limited in scope in this production, this external, wireless control allowed the synchronous design of the avatars in a responsive cue-based system that opens immense possibilities for future development—particularly in social VR. Not only does it take control of certain parameters out of the already-divided attention of the performers, but its synchronicity allows unprecedented coordination among collective performances in VR. As it is still in developer mode, its integration into this performance required a lot of trial and error that would have been resigned entirely to error without the support of my classmate, Rose Klein. I believe integrating OSC protocols into cue-based and responsive media design for performances using VR is a novel innovation with promising possibilities.

Other Artistic Approaches

The Last of Us: Foregrounding new masculinities.

In 2013, the games studio Naughty Dog released their much-anticipated action game, *The Last of Us.* Within the first week, over 1.3 million copies were sold, and within the following year, it was a critically acclaimed hit. *The Last of Us* received numerous awards, became one of the best-selling video games of all time, and is listed by many sources as one of the greatest video games of all time. More recently, a sequel was released, followed by a re-mastering of the original, and even, in 2023, an HBO adaptation for television. What about this game resonates so much with the current cultural moment?

Gameplay follows the character Joel twenty years after the inciting incident. A mutant fungus that turns those infected into zombies ravages the United States. In the initial conflict, Joel's daughter is killed. Now, twenty years later, Joel is making his living smuggling goods between quarantine zones in a decimated population with a completely collapsed infrastructure. Joel is hired to smuggle a teenager, Ellie, to a research lab under the promise that her blood holds the key to the infection's cure. Most of the game is spent on this mission as the relationship between Joel and this surrogate daughter develops.

The Last of Us shifts from most third-person action games in its framing of the protagonist. Unlike most games of the genre, Joel is not a superhero or some

highly-trained, elite fighter on a militarized mission for conquest. Rather, he's a grieving father doing what he must to survive. He's a cynical anti-hero who at once recreates the default white male protagonist while recasting him as the central victim: of the ravages of the pandemic and of the loss of his daughter. In her book, "On Video Games: The visual politics of race, gender, and space," Professor Soraya Murray writes about how this choice marks a shift in the framing of white masculinity from the position of mastery and control to something softer, more paternal, and struggling[21]. The success of the game suggests this presentation resonates deeply with the predominantly male audience. Many men do not feel the control and agency that typical action games grant their protagonists.

For a more specific audience, the anxieties expressed—and exorcised—through the playing of *The Last of Us* also resonate with those fueled by the white replacement conspiracy theory. This white-supremacist conspiracy theory posits there are intentional efforts, through the promotion of interracial relationships and through genocide, to create a future in which white people no longer exist. Deeply tied to rising antisemitism, this conspiracy theory has been leveraged by politicians such as Marjorie Taylor Greene and Donald Trump to mobilize voters against progressive policies. Much of the plot of *The Last of Us* can be read as reflecting similar tensions. The fungal infections pick up on a long history of narratives in which zombies function as representations of the "tainted" other. The inciting pain that casts Joel as a victim comes from the murder of his young,

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[21] Murray, S. (2021). *On Video Games: The visual politics of race, Gender and Space*. Bloomsbury Academic.

blonde-haired, blue-eyed daughter, an often-used image of the purity at stake. At the

end of *The Last of Us*, however, this narrative is interrupted. The promise that a cure

exists in the blood of the surrogate daughter, Ellie, continues eugenicist narratives,

but in the game, this promise is false. Through this reading, we can see how this game

could resonate with and thereby validate the anxieties of those who already subscribe

to the white replacement conspiracy theory. While there's more to unpack here, what

matters for the sake of this paper is the confluence of narratives that refigure the

white man as the victim of intentional harm from a collective "other." When

mobilized in certain ways, this can be used to justify what is then seen as retributive

violence against those who actually have less access to power.

As this way of seeing oneself – the white man under threat – is central to incel

ideology, MGTOW, white-supremacist thinking, far-right politics, and other networks

of masculinity that concentrate in the manosphere, I wanted to begin with a similar

figure in *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* I read the character of Orestes as functioning in the

same way. Despite being the King of Mycenae's son and murdering his own mother,

he spends his time in *The Eumenides* framed as a victim *just* trying to survive.

Similarly besieged by non-human entities, we are meant to empathize with Orestes as

dispossessed. We are encouraged to invert the traditional optics of power. This is also

how "incel hero" Elliot Rodger saw himself. This is a necessary turn in the logic of

the manosphere and so an important place to begin. When we first meet the Furies in

Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!, they tell us they are on the search for Orestes. This search is

manifest by talking to men in these VR communities, thereby implying the Furies see

those they encounter as potential manifestations of this kind of self-image. While it is argued that Joel's presence in *The Last of Us* creates a sketch for new models of masculinity, the consistent absence of Orestes in *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* makes the figuration of the white male protagonist as a victim one of social imagination: a figuration that is often also used to racist and sexist ends, reifying current systems of domination.

Non-Player Character: Staging Virtual Reality

Formally, the closest work to *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* is Brendan Bradley's *Non-Player Character: A Live Musical in Virtual Reality (NPC)*. This show appears to be one of the only other realized performances in which an audience in contiguous space watches live action play out both on stage and in virtual reality. It has toured around the US and just closed a run at Festival d'Avignon. The show's website describes *NPC* as follows, "When a video game hero dies, the audience must guide a non-player character (performed by a live, singing actor) through five virtual worlds of grief, either as "Participants" in VR Headsets on stage or "Spectators" watching on the big screen or attending remotely."

Brendan Bradley stars in the show, giving voice to the non-player character, while four members of the audience participate on stage in VR. Behind the participants is a large projection showing a third-person camera view of the virtual scene. Sometimes Bradley speaks directly to the audience, and sometimes his headset

is down, acting through the avatar we see in VR. While those on stage solve puzzles in VR, members of the audience help through the use of a QR-enabled interface on their phones. This help is minimal and takes the form of voting on choices and providing digital rocks for the participants to throw. The effect is that the audience watches four people play a video game while the host guides them through with catchy songs.

The novelty of this form also comes with challenges. In some of the performance documentation, it is clear that the participants want to explore the virtual world they are in. As the audience only has one eye-in-the-sky perspective, this exploration doesn't serve them. Furthermore, puzzles take an unknown amount of time to complete, while conventional performance is built on a tight rhythm of beats. Bradley navigates these tensions with improvised commentary and lots of charm, but sometimes this stretching of the theatrical time goes too far. In a performance in London, there is a moment when one participant is unclear what to do next. Bradley asks them, "Are you off exploring?" They respond, "I'm looking for something to…." Laughter from the audience covers the rest of her sentence. The audience can tell that whatever the participant is looking for, they are far from it. With all the warmth he can muster but unable to hide a flicker of frustration, Bradley asks, "Can you look for us so that we can…progress the narrative?" In this rupture, the formal setup places the desires of the audience and participants at odds. This participant did not realize she needed to excel in her secondary, unspoken role as a performer, and

here she was, failing. Shortly before the last song, this participant takes off her headset and leaves the stage.

It's hard not to read this as an essential challenge with this hybrid performance/gaming structure. The performance inherits a clown logic: we are watching people try to complete a task without prior knowledge of how. For the audience, this is most exciting to watch when the participants either do so virtuosically or when they fail. This structure incentivizes the audience to either not care for the puzzles or root against the participants. To compound this dynamic, the participants are in headsets and so bear the peculiar self-consciousness of being watched by a room full of people without being able to return the gaze.

Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance! similarly uses a small number of performers talking to the audience both directly and through the lens of a virtual camera in VR; however, there is no gameplay, and everyone on the physical stage has been a part of the rehearsal process. There are two other key differences between the productions' forms: the function of the virtual environments and their relation to the stage action. In *NPC,* the virtual environment is purpose-built for the show and is only inhabited by Bradley and the participants. On the other hand, *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* exclusively uses environments within social VR that were created by its communities' users. For most of the performance, these worlds aren't private. Instead, they are inhabited by strangers with whom the performers interact. While both performances have a virtual stage and a stage in meat-space, the relationship to the on-stage action differs. For *NPC,* the participants' meat bodies never move. They are

stationary throughout, and Bradley never interacts with them physically. This gives the sense that the main action is on the screen behind them, and the stage is a fortunate add-on that allows us to see, ironically, "behind the curtain." *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* stages the dissonances and consonances *between* the two environments, and so both sites are active.

Deity: Asian avatars and white performance

The artist Sian Fan created the installation *Deity* towards the end of her Digital Wonderlands residency at The Victoria and Albert Museum. It consists of three screens arranged vertically, replicating "the multi-angle surround of a vanity mirror." Black tentacles reach up from the shiny black Marley flooring and, woven throughout the space, are strips of neon-green LED tape. Inky fluid is rendered on the screens, out of which appears an avatar designed in the image of the British-Asian artist. The avatar's movements mimic whoever is in front of the work. At the opening of the installation, Fan activates the work herself through slow, twisting choreography. Emerging through the liquid, the avatar dances along with limbs occasionally glitching through itself. After Fan's performance, the installation remains available for viewers to step into. Viewers then begin their own duet with themselves as this avatar.

  Deity continues Fan's research into the "uneasy synchronicity between Asian and cyborgian bodies." The aesthetic choices surrounding the screen image, as well as

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the costume design of the avatar, reproduce hallmarks of the cyberpunk genre where this synchronicity is often rehearsed. During the performance, this "shrine to the digital self" is a site of self-reflection for Fan. She meditates on the perception of her body as always *between*: between perceptions of ethnic and national certainty, between physical and virtual, and between in her control and out of her control. Once she leaves and the avatar is puppeteer by the public, this shifts. Now, the tensions between the stereotypes of the avatar and the person it is intended to represent are released. A different set of relations arise as predominantly white British museum-goers, puppeteer the Asiatic avatar.

This strategy has a long history in visual culture, extending through anime and video games into social VR. However, these representations are often created by white people as a fantastical form of racial play that reifies the otherness of Asian women while covertly policing racial discourse. In her book "Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet", Professor Lisa Nakamura describes how "Asianness is co-opted as a passing fancy, an identity-prosthesis that signifies exotic sexual availability when female, and anachronistic dreams of combat when male." Nakamura traces this history back to its Orientalist roots, noting the way it has been used to uphold imperial imaginaries. Fan intervenes in this history by explicitly pointing to her own racialized identity, presenting the femme Asian avatar as a construction of the self. Judith Butler believes it is "imperative that we insist upon those specificities in order to expose the fictions of an imperialist humanism that

works through unmarked privilege," but warns about the risk of hegemonic power's ability to appropriate even the specificities of these representations[22].

It's unclear how long this "taking stock" lingers when Fan is no longer present. For most of the installation, she is absent. When the audience takes part, the dialogue is between their own bodies and the avatar. The uneasy synchronicity between Asiatic and cyborgian bodies slips into the historical synchronicity between white bodies and Asiatic avatars. I believe the construction of the installation smooths over the potential friction here and facilitates a particular form of identity tourism that replicates the iconography of the Asian femme body as exotic and controllable. This feels particularly complicated when housed within a museum dedicated to Queen Victoria, who publicly facilitated the rise of Orientalism in Britain and the world. Butler concludes, "Thus every insistence on identity must at some point lead to a taking stock of the constitutive exclusions that reconsolidate hegemonic power differentials."

In the last third of *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* we stage three interviews with American men who are members of the British Armed Forces (BAF). The organization creates avatars (reflecting rank, file, and specialist certifications) for each member that they are then required to use. These avatars are exclusively of anime-style women. While it is common for Americans to see anime characters as white despite their Japanese creators imagining them as Japanese, the British Armed Forces describe themselves as "a Waifu-themed MilSim[23]." "Waifu" is a Japanese

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[22] Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "Sex."* Routledge.
[23] Fandom, Inc. (2023, February 27). *British Armed Forces.* VRChat Legends Wiki. https://vrchat-legends.fandom.com/wiki/British_Armed_Forces

rendering of the English word "wife," suggesting they are aware, at some level, that their cross-gendered presentation is also cross-racial and thereby epitomizes the identity tourism Nakamura describes. Combined with the military garb, the imperial fantasy is on full display.

FIG. 18:BAF swearing-in ceremony

Like Fan's *Deity*, *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* stages the dissonances and consonances between the meat body and avatar body and its implications for racial discourse. *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* diverges in its focus, however, interrogating the specific function of the avatars' differences from their white inhabitants. This was only a small section of the performance, and future work dedicated entirely to the embodied gratification of this avatar use and the political implications is warranted.

Conclusion

It was crucial in making *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* to recognize that I myself am situated within these narratives; I have stakes in the game. As a white cis-man, I'm centered in these narratives of power. But, that centering is conditional in relation to my immigrant and queer status. As a white English-speaking immigrant, my close proximity almost never threatens my relationship with privilege, and the accent that comes with being born in the UK muddies the legibility of my queerness. As the internet meme goes, "Is he gay or just European?" This ambiguity allows me to step in and out of the margins. I get to "out" my socially marginal identities on my own terms, flexing proximity and distance as is useful—or sometimes needed.

This was central to my experience at Wabash College. As one of only three remaining four-year, all-male colleges in the US, it is a rare environment in which young men are able to replicate the homosocial pedagogy of the 2nd order masculine. Here, the rituals are fundamental to the education. Public and private displays of competition, training, and hazing epitomize the 2nd order masculine training. This goes beyond conventional US fraternal and sorority hazing as a form of initiation. Supra-fraternal organizations such as the Sphinx Club extend hazing rituals to upperclassmen participation, and events with the entire student body, such as Chapel Sing[24], normalize these rituals within faculty and administrative participation. It is an

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[24] Chapel Sing is an event in which freshman are tested on their knowledge of the school's infamously long (~6min) fight song. Surrounded by faculty, staff, and alumni that travel in just for the occasion, the students line up on the central mall and repeat the fight song for 45 minutes. Members of the Sphinx Club patrol the students and try to trip them up. If a student

environment in which students are actively and explicitly engaged with their masculinity. Conversations about why my fellow students ended up at Wabash made it clear to me that their relationship with their manhood was fraught. When they tried to perform it, they felt the hurt of inadequacy and isolation. They were at Wabash to learn how to do it "properly" to become "Wabash Men." In this environment, men develop radical alternatives to conventional masculinity. Without being able to outsource hermeneutic and emotional labor to women of the same age, men have to construct other networks of self-care. The men at Wabash are uniquely comfortable expressing physical affection toward one other and sharing emotional vulnerability. The unique masculine ecology that emerges is at once nurturing and deeply violent.

The reason I mention this is that it was only after completing *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* that I realized how much Wabash's gender training not only drove my interest in new configurations of the masculine ritual in virtual space but also shaped how I was able to read their constructions. Reciprocally, I have realized that building *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!* has provided a surrogate environment for me to process many of my experiences there—a necessary and welcome gift.

There are two ways to bridge the gap between the narratives around masculinity and the way it is experienced by young men. Through rituals created in these social VR spaces, men are able to actualize the fantasy of the grand narratives. They change the way their body is read; they make themselves heroes; they enact a

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messes up, they are taken into the chapel for one on one evaluation. Infractions are marked physically and must be borne for the following week. A brief clip can be seen at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpvISjnfnJU

godly agency over the world around them. They also construct new masculinities. In these little, unintentionally queering ways, they practice care toward each other and break down the figure of the isolated man. Despite my deeply ambivalent experience at Wabash College, I felt compelled to honor this community of care in the making of *Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance* Unfortunately, this communal configuration reifies ties to larger narratives of domination that fail these very men and encourages retributive violence against those socially marginalized. But those are not the only configurations that are possible.

Come, Fur(r)ies, Dance!: Archival Script

It's important to note that the collation of this script was done late in the completion

of the show. That is to say, this is an archival document that combines pre-scripted

text with transcriptions of some of the emergent conversations during the

performances. During rehearsals, smaller performance scores were used to guide the

process. Many, if not most, of those scores guided exploration that was not further

realized in performance. Those scores have not been included.

In this script, P, R, and A are used to designate each of the performers, and the

numbers 1 through 4 are used to designate participants from within social VR spaces.

1. THE OVERTURE

As the projection of the red curtain rises, the word "vanguard" is revealed. After a while, it is replaced by "either" and then "exempt." Quicker and quicker, the words are replaced by other words and then phrases, finally landing on the text, "we brook no trial." All of this text is shared both by the manifesto written by Eliot Rodgers before killing six people near the campus of UC Santa Barbara and Ted Hughes' translation of Aeschylus' "The Eumenides." The following text of the overture is outlined in the table below in the sequence and rough composition below.

| 1 | | Vanguard; either; exempt; retribution; fate; within; banished; mandate; dawn; eagle; for; our pride; through the mist; hear me; free; sun-starved; god; wrench; their control; his child; robe; the fates; judge; at birth; ordained; serves; but together; share our cups; striving prince; runs dry; master; obstructive dread; obstructive dead; cannot have; excess health; I grieve; | |

		covering; deliver; a King; common death; we brook no trial	
2		I am like a god, and my purpose is to exact ultimate Retribution on of the impurities I see in the world. - Elliot Rodger	
3	It is a sign that one has the will to fight back against those injustices, rather than bowing down and excepting (sic) them as fate.		Prince Zuko is my favorite character; he was a banished prince who was trying to regain his rightful place in the world.
4		From a 141-page manifesto he shared hours before killing 6 and injuring 14 others. - May 23, 2014	
5	We are	We are	We are
6	We are the masterful, the great fulfillers		

7		We are memories of grief	
8			We are disgraced, degraded
9	Banished		far from god
10		to a sunless, torchlit dusk	
11	- The Furies, The Oresteia, Aeschylus, 458 BC	- The Furies, The Oresteia, Aeschylus, 458 BC	- The Furies, The Oresteia, Aeschylus, 458 BC

2. MY MOTHER'S SMILE

As the final text begins to fade out, a spotlight reveals A DSC. We see her face appear on each of the three screens behind her. They video feeds are streamed live from three cameras placed around her. In the video feeds, the direction of her gaze has been automatically "corrected" to maintain a false eye contact with the audience.

PROJECTION: Iphigenia:

A:

There's this (funny) thing about mum–the way my mum smiles. It's like she's not smiling *at* you as much as she's smiling *to* you–like across space–she's smiling *to* you… Now, I'm really terrible at impressions. I always have been. I don't know how to do them or what that *feels* like, but I can do my mum's smile. And that's like…

(They practice the smile to themself. Maybe twice)

Yeah, I know when I'm doing the smile just right because I can feel her face…in front of mine. Or maybe more on top of mine? I can feel it around this area, I think because these are the muscles I use…I don't know, but yeah, it feels like her face is a little mask hovering just on top of mine.

BUT, for people who know my mother–if they know her and I do her smile–they say, "It's as if she's smiling through me." As if she's on the inside/or behind/ and she's smiling *through* my face. I've seen that. When my sister…or even my brother–would do that smile, I could see mum smiling through their face.

That's just if you know her. I don't know if it works… …if you see her (*gestures*

"behind"), or if she's *(gestures to "front")*...I don't know if it works if you pretend to

know her. I don't know…if you could pretend.

A smiles x4

A gestures to turn the cameras off

Blackout. A walks off stage behind the scrim

PROJECTION:

    - Spend the rehearsals sending the Furies into public spaces in VR to "look

for Orestes" talking to the individuals they bump into

    - Is it possible to displace the meat body as the locus of "the performer." The

performer exists across.

    - ???

    - ???

    - ??? Some other stuff happens. Hold on tightly; Let go lightly.

        - Notes from the original project proposal

3. CYBORG AWAKENING

P: Ready?

R: Ready

A: Ready

Tech table: Ready. Ready. Ready. Ready. Ready.

All mics fade in

ALL: Furies awake. Furies awake. Furies awake (x8)

TVs turn on to reveal close up on Furies

Fury eyes open

PROJECTION: The Furies are awakened:

Screens zoom out

Furries fly up

They flash red, white, and blue

They lower back to the ground as P, R, and A walk down the steps.

Bringing hands in front of their faces

ALL: Wake! Awake! Wake! Awake! Wake!

Voice Mod slowly ON

R: What was that voice?

P: What happened?

R: We have overslept like simple fools.

A: Our prey fed and rested while we slept!

Voice Mod OFF

R: Two and a half thousand years ago, the Furies hunted down Orestes for the crime of murdering his own mother.

P: Orestes did this because his mother, Clytemnestra, had murdered her husband—his father—because he sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia, to the gods to win the Trojan War. It was this cyclical violence ending in matricide that conjured the Furies.

R: These wingèd creatures,

P: older than the gods,

A: were sent to kill

ALL: Orestes.

P: This was at a time in Athens when everything was unstable. Shifting political tides began dissolving the matriarchy as a new form of governance was tested. "The people of Athens no longer trusted the institution built to protect them."

A: In this sea of uncertainty, right at the moment when the Furies cornered their prey, right before they killed Orestes, Athena appeared. She was conjured to put a stop to the violence. To put everything back in order. Athena created new institutions and a new form of justice to solve everything.

R: We are currently living in the legacy of those solutions. Her proclamation provided the arguments that undergird our system of representative democracy, our trial system, even the structure of our supreme court–it's all based on the logic she laid out in 458 BCE.

A: And in that same proclamation, Athens sent the Furies underground. Banished to a cave deep below the foundation of Athens, to wait.

P: She wove justice in the way of chaos.

A: But now, things are slipping through the mesh. We are back in crisis.

R: The borders are collapsing between then and now. Here and there. Us and them.

"The people of Athens no longer trust the institutions built to protect them."

P: Once again we are hearing the cry that beckons the Furies.

Voice Mod slowly ON

R: Even the boundaries between

R,A: the Furies and Orestes are

ALL: starting to collapse.

R: There are new constellations in the sky; There are new configurations on earth.

A: And the contract that sent us into that cave is broken. Athena! How ill you wave

these tattered threads now?

Beat

R: Heat that?…haha silence. We pick up the hunt for Orestes.

A: Unmoving,

P: and racing ahead,

R We must finish what we started

They rush back onto their nodes and look back into their virtual mirrors

P: Furies!

ALL: Assemble!

Armor appears on their avatars

All open portals, P and A go through

4. THIS IS HOW I LOOK LIKE

Voice mod still ON

R: The three of us are in VR right now, but we've been in a private world—just us. Anastasia and Phil have left the world the three of us were all in and teleported to a public world. So there will be strangers—real life people—in there in VR right now. By the way, this is what I look like. This. This is how I look.

Beat

How I *look.* Remember this. I'm telling you, at some point in this journey there's going to a time, maybe more than one, that you're going to feel lost. And when that happens, remember what I look like, What we look like. I will need you to hold on to that knowledge—or feeling?—right there, That's your anchor. Yeah?

This is what we sound like. It's hard to explain how unbelievably strange it is to be switching constantly between realities. That's why we added the double-voice. You can feel that more. Also, we found that in these spaces where the body is so manipulable, there's a heightened essentialism to the voice: I don't know who you *are* from your body, but when you talk I can tell who you really are. And it's dangerous. That's why this is what I sound like. Thiiiiiiis.

A has made into into a public VR space inhabited by others

Oh, just wondering, do you think I can see you or not? I mean, I'm looking at you, right, but do. Do you think I can see you? Do you think I can see *you?* Behind the…Are you sure? I can scan across and look at you all. And I can point out when you move. How confident are you?

Sorry, this isn't about how you look. It's about how I look. And I look pretty damn good.

5. EXPERIMENT 1: BODY

PROJECTION: Experiment one: BODY

PROJECTION: "Everyone in VR is holding an invisible gun. This is how they choose the rules of the reality around them." —Notes from Rehearsal; May 2, 2023

P: We started to notice this phenomenon of the invisible gun in rehearsal. Right now, Anastasiya and Ruby are on the hunt for someone right now who is doing it. This gesture happens while you are selecting anything from your menu.

A and R must navigate a heavily populated VR social world. They are to find someone navigating their B-menu—causing them to make the gesture as if they hold an invisible gun. P takes off his headset and helps them search by watching on the screens. Once they've found someone, they tell P and try to keep that person in frame as long as possible. The performers flag any other strange occurrences in VR along the way. As P's explanation continues R and A have marked moments to recreate this gesture in meat-space. These are marked by the phrases (UP) and (DOWN) with qualifiers.

A: I think I've got one.

P: Great. Keep them in frame. OK, you see that? This is how you choose everything. (Casual UP). Yeah. Here, you can choose who you want to be your friend, who you want to ignore, where to go—anything and everything around you. Turn up the voices in your head. Real turn on, tune in and drop out stuff.

MEDIA: Photos of other avatars making this gesture

PROJECTED: - The documentation you see on the screens includes pictures we took throughout the rehearsal process

P: All over VR, there are people doing this. (Casual DOWN). You can't see their menu but you'll see them like this guy—I mean it, look for others. You'll see them walking around doing this. Empty hands. Running around

R and A begin to hum

P: You go like this and you can teleport to another world. (UP/DOWN)

You go like this and you don't have to hear them anymore. (UP/DOWN)

You go like this and you can turn into anyone. (UP)

Anybody you want to be. Any body. Any thing even. You can be anything you desire. Just don't fucking look like yourself. I guess you can, but no one does. Unless in meat-space you actually wear a full-time fur-suit or actually look like an anime cat-girl…then I guess you can you can look like yourself. But that's not…I don't know. I mean…I guess this is the magic gesture to turn into anyone…else. (P UP/[on breath] ALL DOWN)

Blackout.

6. EXPERIMENT 2: DESIRE

PROJECTION: Experiment two: DESIRE

PROJECTION: "80% of all VR users self-report as men. 80% of the averts are women(?)" —Notes from Rehearsal; May 10, 2023

A: One down. So! In this next experiment, we're going to stage two conversations from rehearsals in which we tried to understand why 80% of VR users are men, but their avatars aren't. Then, I'm going to head into VR to see if someone would be willing to tell us about how they chose their body today.

PROJECTION: "People are choosing/wearing(?) avatars to receive the kind of affection that they would otherwise express toward those bodies." —Notes from Rehearsal; May 2, 2023

R: We discovered in rehearsal that we could use the headsets like virtual cameras. I'm sending this headset feed to that screen. Our VR gaze!

During the following monologue, R slowly rotates A while pointing the headset at her. On the screen, we see the headset's feed as it analogously rotates Phil's avatar.

PROJECTION: A zoomed-in close-up of R's video feed appears on the scrim.

P: Hey, over here! So, during this rehearsal, I of to the world, "No time to talk." Ironically, it's the world that was easiest to get people to talk to us. This one time, a cat-girl with a burly voice appeared in the room—I actually—later I tried to find the closest avatar I could to what they had…

He switches from the Fury avatar to the cat-girl

Ummm. Here. Anyway, as they appeared in the room, I said, "Hey how you doin'?"

They said, "You're being a little sus." Right away. I said, "what? Sus? How?" They

said, "How you doing? That's sus man." "How is 'how you doin'?' Sus?"

"The way you are saying it. 'How you doing?' It's sus." I said, "OK what am I

supposed to say? I am new to VR. What am I supposed to do? Say hello like a flat,

'hello'? Is that VR acceptable? Well, 'hello.'" They go, "I'm just saying man you *are*

like a fruity furry." I remember that—they say, "You're like a fruity furry, and it's

sus..and people know what you want when you say, 'How you doing?'"

"I'm a fruity furry? Well then why the hell are you a cat-girl?" They say, "For the eye

candy."…

"Eye candy for yourself?"

"No. Eye candy for other people."

"What the fuck do you mean, 'Eye candy for other people'?" They said, "We open

out mirrors so we can see each other do it. Catch my drift?"

"No, I don't know—that makes no sent"

Then! They then proceed to get on all fours, but like right in front of me, and just kind

of stare off into space. They probably had their personal mirror out, but I couldn't see

it. The personal mirror is one only they can see their reflection in. But I was standing

behind them…and it's like, but you were the one at the beginning who…So I just

kind of walked away. I don't really know what they wanted me to do.

R: We talked about this conversation a lot. We talked about what would've happened

if Phil hadn't walked away—if Phil had placed his hand on the small of this avatar's

back. Would that have been a good thing? Would that have filled some desire, or would that have made this person angry?

PROJECTION: "Straight boys get to make out with each other in VR because of war." —Notes from Rehearsal; May 12, 2023

R: At the same rehearsal/How's it going Anastasiya?

A: Good, I'm just getting into the world.

R: Yes! We get to make out because of war. Right, at that same rehearsal, I popped into the furry hangout and was waiting in the lobby to see what people get up to. There was this tiny military guy and there was this giant avatar on all fours looming over him. The giant key saying, "I'm going to eat you! I'm going to eat you!" I was like…"What the hell?" Eventually, they find out I'm new to VR.

"Oh, you've got to know about phantom sense!"

So basically, what they explain to me is that *because* people get their limbs blown off in war but people can still feel them, because of that, you get to feel things in VR. And so they'd make out with each other. Sometimes they'd use mirrors to train themselves to feel it stronger. But these guys had graduated past making out and here they were, eating each other. Obviously, it's nonsense that they can do this *because* of war…but I guess there's a way in which they're right. I mean, the military funded this tech to train soldiers, and then to treat them for the effects of what they'd been asked to do. So yeah, there's a way in which this *is* all because of war.

A: I've found one!

In the following section, A's task is to find someone willing to talk about where they sourced the avatar they are using that day. A proceeds to interview this stranger. While this is set up, P and R move to the front of the scrim and place small speakers in their mouths. Out of these two speakers, we hear the conversation between A and the interviewee. Eventually, we recorded one of these interactions in rehearsal. During the performances, A re-performed the interview as if it were entirely live. The transcript below is of that conversation. The interviewee's text is marked by "1."

A: Sorry, I couldn't hear you for a second, where did you say you got your avatar?

PROJECTION: Putting virtual voices in physical bodies

1: Ummm, the avatar? I've had it for—I mean like—3 years, I think.

A: Oh Ok

1: About that

A: Cool, did you like buy it?

1: yeah, I bought it.

A: Well, I like it. I think it's cool. Why did you choose/

1: Thanks

A: that one?

1: How did I…?

A: Yeah!

1: This one…I mean I have others, but I think this one is my favorite of them

A: OK, and like when you're buying an avatar, what do you ask of the person you're buying it from? You know what I mean?

1: Well I mean if you're looking/

A: Uhuh

1: to buy one…

A: I think I am, yeah

1: Well, first off, what you should know is, you should always get like a preview video or something from the person you're buying it from

A: Ok, clever

1: Because sometimes they can be really shitty quality, but already—the person I bought it from already had this one and…I just thought it was…really cute. And so, but I wanted it to have red hair

A: What?

1: And so I asked them/

A: Red hair?

1: to do that. Yeah.

A: Why can't I see your red hair?

1: …

A: yeah, I can't see it.

1: What do you mean? You can't…what can you see?

A: I can—well maybe it's hidden under your hat—I don't know. You look like a ghostly wizard? Like a mushroom. You like like if Dumbledore was a ghostly mushroom.

1: Wait. Wait, wait, wait.

A: No?

1: That's not what I look like.

A: OK, but I can see you, though.

1: No, but that's not what I look like. I…wait. What device are you on?

A: Um…I'm using an Oculus Quest? Does that make any difference?

1: Uh…yeah. So. This happens. What you described is not what I look like. I…

A: OK, weird.

1: You can only see me on a PC. It only works on a PC.

A: That's a shame. Ok, well thank you so much for explaining. So sorry, but I really have to go. Bye!

1: Bye.

A: Bye!

1: OK bye! See ya.

A exits the world and takes off her headset. P and R take the speakers out of their mouths and return to the stage behind the scrim. The three of them briefly take through how the scene went that performance. In the performance documented here, they talked about the strangeness of the fallback avatar. R disagrees with A's description of the avatar that was visible.

P steps away toward his node. He picks up his headset.

P: *(to the tech table)* Can you turn it on?

MEDIA: P's screen shows the feed of his headset once again reflecting the cat-girl avatar we had previously seen him inhabit.

PROJECTION: "Sometimes people choose not to talk." Notes from Rehearsal; May 11, 2023

The other two end their conversation as they notice Phil. One at a time they walk over. R takes the weight of P's headset. A lays a hand on his shoulder. P steps out of the moment and crosses SR. R and A hold the tableau while staring up at the image of the avatar.

R begins to sing. "He won't hold you like I do. He won't bring out the love in you." A joins in as they sing the same text. In the third round, P joins in as well. They repeat while dividing into a three-part choral setting of the text. On the fourth iteration, the Voice Mod returns, shifting their pitch down a sixth. In the theater, we can hear their voices both acoustically as well as pitched down through the microphones. The three performers carefully walk back to their nodes. They pull on ropes that lower rigs from the ceiling onto which they hand their headsets and controllers. They continue to sing. They sit below the rigs which sway above them. They stop singing. They sit in silence.

In the following section, the performers are tasked with reflecting on the results of the night's experiments so far, answering the question, "What is the show about, tonight?" Their answers reflect the emergent moments so far. The dialogue from the first performance is included below.

R: You know, I think the show tonight…tonight's show…is about the ways our bodies—or I guess we-as-our-bodies make the world around it.

A: No, no. It is about sad, horny boys. Right? It has to be.

R: In some ways.

P: Dancing furries. Come, furries, dance. Come furries, dance.

A: That's the name of the show, Phil.

P: Yes. It very much is the name of the show. It really is. Come, Furries, Dance.

R: But what is the show *about*, Phil?

P: Dancing furries.

R: Ok.

A: But, we haven't danced, though.

P: Not yet.

R: No. I think tonight's show. Tonight's show is about/

ALL: The British Armed Forces!

All stand and salute while 'God Saves the King' plays

PROJECTION: Insignia for the British Armed Forces.

7. EXPERIMENT 3: RITUAL

PROJECTION: The British Armed Forces are a group of American Ex-Military and 14-year-old boys who role-play military simulations in Virtual Reality. There are roughly 2,500 members, and every time we've been online, there have been at least 800 members online at the same time.

One of the members of the run crew finds a member of the audience who is willing to read aloud. They ask them to stand in the light by the tech table. Each night the text they read shifts to reflect the current schedule of the British Armed Forces and the events they are holding at the same time as the performance is running. Below is a copy of that text from opening night.

Start Reading Here:

Who are the British Armed Forces? Well, are they British? No. Are they American? Mostly. From what we have gathered, the British Armed Forces are a group of American Ex-Military and 14-year-old boys who role-play military simulations in Virtual Reality.

There are roughly 2,500 members, and every time we've checked, at least 800 have been online. They host something like 14 events a day from drill parades, Glock-17 training, sleepovers, and how to use heavy artillery. All in VR. During tonight's performance, Friday, May 26th, they're hosting the following events: Phase One Basic Training, Tank Etiquette, Murder 4, and a watch party for "The Hobbit." Those events are happening now as I'm reading this.

Also, upon completion of basic training, all members of the group are given waifu-military-dress avatars. Using a waifu avatar is a strict requirement. Don't worry, there is a team of ~30 tailors to customize your avatar to match your rank and file. Once, on the Discord channel they use to organize, we found an old thread where someone asked, "Can I be a boy?"

(THE END) You are welcome to head back to your seat.

p.s. Thank you so much for helping us with the show tonight! Fur(r)ies everywhere appreciate your bravery.

The performers respond to the last question as the run crew thanks the reader and encourages them back to their seat.

ALL: No! Denied!

R: Throughout our investigations into this organization, we have found a few members who are willing to be interviewed tonight. Enjoy.

The performers take their headsets off of the rigs and step DS to prepare for the interviews.

PROJECTION: Experiment 3: RITUAL

PROJECTION: A video sent to the performers during the rehearsal process plays on the scrim with the tag: —Notes from Rehearsal; April 21, 2023. Below is the transcript of that video

OK, team so I had to make this video so you could see this as soon as I saw it. So I'm on the Discord trying to enlist in the British Armed Forces for the VRChat thing, and they have different branches you can join. Let's take a look. Ok, so 'King's Own

Lincolnshire's Regiment', sure. 'Hadrian's Armoured Legion', sure. Um, 'The Royal

Irish Recon'… historically, what?! But… *(the video pans to a branch called "HMS*

Athena") Come on. Come on! And then… *(the video pans to a branch called "HMS*

Freya" that appears to use Nazi insignia).

MEDIA: The three screens light up with a member of the British Armed Forces visible

on each.

The performers each interview a member of the British Armed Forces. For the first

moment, we can hear all of their mics and the audio feeds of the interviewees in

response. The PSM can hear all three of the conversations in their headphones and,

shortly after the interview begins, cues which conversation they think the audience

should hear in each moment. With each cue, only that interviewer's and interviewee's

audio is sent to the speakers and their screen stays bright. The others can't be heard

well and the screens are dimmed. Through this section, we bounce between the

interviews. Below is a transcript of the resulting audible text on the opening

performance.

Node 1 (A + 2)	Node 2 (R + 3)	Node 3 (P + 4)
2: You can just call me Uncle Knuck	3: Yep, I can hear you	4: Uh, Patrick's fine
2: Uncle Knuck, it's short for Uncle Knuckle.		

	3: Yeah, I'm happy to be a part of it.	4: Yeah so, basically..
	R: Do you want to say hi at all to the audience here? 3: Yeah, Hey, everybody. I hope you're having a good day and enjoying yourselves… I hope the seats are good. R: Audience, do you want to say hi back?	
2: Like military simulation. That's what I mean by MilSim. And it's mostly a chance to meet new people.		
	R: You know they did. They said hi, yeah. 3: I couldn't hear anything.	

		4: Okay probably like a year.
2: This was mainly because I like. I don't. I love first-person shooters and military stuff, and this sort of fit the bill for me, yeah.		
		4: I know him from the outside. I only really use VRChat for BAF honestly.
	3: I do a lot of recruitment. So going out and meeting other individuals that might be interested in joining.	

2: I'm in the legion which is basically. Ok, so I've done Heavy Artillery training one and two, and the tank training—I don't really know why that's separate—they could have just put that part into the other Heavy Artillery part. I don't know. I've done some of the officer trainings too. And I'm just trying to get more involved because I—		
	3: In the various worlds but a lot of it is word of mouth. So if they've heard about our organization or maybe seen a video of us doing some discussions—	

2: Lately I've been learning 3D modeling on Blender, because I'm really into character design. And basically like the Tailor Corps, they design all of the avatars you know for everybody. You have to realize that they're like 20 ranks and three different branches and they all need uniforms that reflect their rank and their branch. Plus, there are medals and certifications that can be added to your avatar. And, after a certain level, you're allowed other kinds of personalizations, and so if you're in the Tailor Corps you get to make all that for		

those people. I want to be a part of that.		
		4: I mean, that's a cool place to meet people. I've like been doing these Glock-17 trainings, but those are just Fridays. That's like once a week.
	3: But yeah, we have recruitment worlds specifically for recruitment, but it could happen anywhere.	
		P: How do you feel about the avatars? 4: I think it's great. It's mostly like a lot of fun, you know, I think it's kind of cool to be honest.

2: And if you rank up you don't have to be a waifu anymore, if you don't want to. I know there are some people who customize…um…into like femboys. Right now you have to keep the—		
		4: Yeah yeah yeah you got Kill House 2.0 but P: That's where you train 4: Yeah it's solid. It has everything you need. It's a good facility. I think one of the architects actually based it off of one of their old like real life facilities.

	R: long have you been in the group? 3: Over two years now…right before the Great Ugandan War if you're familiar with that, and then I just had my anniversary a couple of weeks ago.	

2: Yeah, I've been studying it because you know I want to be a part of the so, um, basically.

A: Do you want to read it out?

2: Yeah, I'll just read it out for you. So, basically the combat, slash, parade uniform commission rules. Give me one second—if I can get it all situated. Okay, so you must be rank of OR-3, Lance Corporal, in order to be able to receive combat dress. Must be rank OR-5 or 6, Sergeant, slash, Petty Officer, to receive a custom parade dress. No depictions of weapons that could cause harm. Officer and guard swords as well as UKSF weapons are part of the uniform. Human, demi-human, and furry avatars are allowed as long as they demonstrate human qualities up to the discretion of quality control.

A: That's the tailor corps, right?

2: Yeah, it's up to the discretion of them. It's also possible to have the boob size adjusted slightly on the combat as well as the combat dress as well as have the skirt be toggle-able if requested for the parade dress. And then it says—		
		4: I know Emptea from outside. She introduced me to TJ. P: TJ's a veteran, are you also a veteran. 4: Uhuh. P: Do you want to say any more about that? P: Uh, I'm good. If there's anything else you want to talk about.
	3: —the best position for me, because I love talking to people and getting to know them, you know.	

The switches between the interviews suddenly speed up making it unclear who is talking. The mics of the three performers are muted leaving only the fragmented speech of the interviewees.

PROJECTION: Athena Speaks:

A transcript of the text we can hear, attributed now to Athena, appears projected on the scrim as the audio itself starts to fade out. Below is the text from the opening performance:

I felt like that was the best dish I love talking to people and um what time's it at you know I so peoples happy because they can be a part of it and really enjoy like uh good people uh uh I was helping out I like they let me help out on this this this this time thing they didn't really let me help out more like field complaints from people uh uh so basically like the guy was upset the the first part we have the best uniforms uh but I think a lot of it is like talking about earlier where people just want the uh he just send a couple very angry you know I was being a part of a larger collective and like really getting to express yourself and it more like a hang out social space you skip all the bullshit and kind of talk people hang out not like any any drama in the way.

8. POSTLUDE

The lights fade to black as the performers return to their nodes. As music swells, they re-hang their headsets and controllers. They hoist the VR equipment high above the stage. They step US into the darkness

PROJECTION: Experiment 4: MANY BODIES MAKE ONE BODY

PROJECTION: A funeral for Clytemnestra.

The performances return, puppeteering one headset, two controllers, and two shoes into the shape of a person. They walk DSC. They turn to one side, then the other. They lift them onto their back. Slowly, the performers walk away from each other separating the elements that create the body until it is no longer legible.

Blackout.

Technical Challenges and Reflections

In this section, I'll outline the technical setup, detail obstacles with a focus on solutions that propose promising future work, and address the impact of obstacles that were navigated around rather than solved. As this is not a technical paper, I will keep my reflections fairly zoomed out.

Alongside directing the production, I also functioned as the media designer and technologist. The performance used three screens, two projectors, three video cameras, three IR cameras, three VR headsets streaming live, live microphone pitch-shifting, and a performance structure that required a mixture of consecutive cues and cues that were driven by emergent action within the performance. One of the first hurdles to address was the processing power. To address this, I split the computation of each node into its own laptop. Each node's laptop received inputs from one headset over the network, one video camera, and one depth camera, both over USB. These were brought into the media server, Isadora. While this distributed the processing power, I then needed a way to control all three nodes from a central hub. To do this, I set up a two-way Open Sound Control system. Open Sound Control (OSC) is a protocol that sends numerical and text data over a local network. This way I could create show patches on each of the laptops that were cued simultaneously by a separate device. I wasn't only sending data to the laptops, however. I also used the OpenNI plugin with Isadora to read motion data from the IR cameras. That motion data needed to be combined before rendering a "collective avatar." To accomplish this, I converted the x, y, and z coordinates for each of the 16 joints of motion data

into OSC data that I sent back from the individual nodes to the central controlling hub. While the node laptops processed the other media information, the central laptop did the computation to combine the motion data. The last major signal flow to sort out was sending data into the headsets. I'll talk further about this innovation shortly, but we knew we wanted to be able to control aspects of the avatars and their environment remotely. Because this had to be wireless, and because the headsets were already on the shared network, I used OSC again. These OSC commands were sent from the central hub. Overall, this distributed system allowed each of the processing units to both send and receive data: Each node laptop received data through USB from their two cameras and wirelessly from the headset and central hub, and sent data through OSC to the central hub and wired audio to the soundboard; the headsets sent their streams over the network and received OSC data from the central hub; and the central hub sent OSC data to the node laptops and individual headsets, wired data to the two projectors over hdmi, and received OSC data from the node laptops. Once established, this integrated system provided a huge amount of flexibility. This flexibility came with three challenges.

The first challenge was that in its deep integration, there was not the time to appropriately train anyone else to help me manage, and ultimately design for the system. It was a multi-directional interactive broadcasting system using software that was unfamiliar to the undergraduate students interested in media design. This meant that all of the creative and practical labor was up to me. While I'm actively working on a practice that integrates some of this technical work into my *technique* as a

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director, this production was not entirely bettered by the conflation of these responsibilities into one role. There was not a single day within thirteen days of the opening performance in which I personally spent fewer than twelve hours in the theater, and I reject any culture that aligns a kind of pride in that schedule or assigns artistic value to the demands on wellbeing. It's a complicated problem to solve as I still feel deeply that a more fluid integration between directing and design/technologist work *is* possible, a more contemporary media design training within the department that generates potential designers and assistants would help.

A second challenge followed this system's reliance on the school's network. At the time of the production, streaming the feed from any wireless VR headset to a computer required that computer to be connected to the internet. Oculus Quest has recently developed an experimental setup that uses the local network but access to this feature was unstable through our rehearsal process. Both the wireless downloading of VR content to the headset and the streaming download to the computer place strong demands on the network. The current WiFi capabilities in the Theater Arts eXperimental Theater struggled in ways that negatively impacted the work. At any point in which all three performers were in heavily populated worlds in VRChat, the bandwidth was throttled, and the headsets would kick them out of the program entirely. It takes upwards of five to ten minutes to reboot. This would be devastating in performance. Because of security measures the school has in place, any routers that could be installed to address this would be identified, and the ethernet port they used shut off. To address this we registered all of the devices with the IT

department and asked for a subnet to be created. Registering the devices gave stable IP addresses that the OSC protocol requires avoiding the need to update IP addresses for all six devices within roughly sixty patches on the central hub each day. This didn't prove reliable when two days before the first performance, many of the devices' IP addresses changed. Without an explanation as to why, we were forced to check each device's IP address every performance. Two of the headsets changed addresses during the performance. The local subnet did mean that there wasn't competition for the network from audience devices during the performance. But since the throttled download limit wasn't changed, the three performers' headsets alone were enough to overwhelm the network. A private subnet did not help solve the problem. Because of this, we chose to reshape many of the experiments so that only one performer at a time was ever in a heavily populated public world. This was an extreme limitation to the work. The continued development of future work in which multiple people are in social VR at once, would require a dedicated, private, unthrottled subnet from the university.

The final challenge to this system came from its reliance on the network. Because of the instability of the network, it was often the case that a node laptop would be "kicked off" the network. When one of these devices was kicked off, not only could it not receive data from the headset, it couldn't receive the OSC data that cued when to change scenes despite having a direct ethernet cable into the local network. This had a cascade effect as often these triggers controlled which data was being sent to other devices including back to the central hub. While we integrated this

possibility into the experimental framework of the piece and I called out the

possibility during the pre-show announcement, the risk of it happening (and being the

only person who knew the system well enough to fix it) meant there was no way for

me to hand off the show. That step in the process is arguably a crucial one in the

director's ability to step back and watch critically. Instead, even during performances,

I sat off to the side, as close to the stage as possible, ready to disconnect and

reconnect the node laptops, and redress any of the cascading effects of the temporary

outage. The risk is that in experimental works where the audience is learning *how* to

read the piece, certain technical failures undermine the audience's trust that what they

are being told to invest in is well crafted—and is worth the effort.

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