Intimate Worlds: Reading for Intimate Affects in Contemporary Video Games

by

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Submitted to the Department of Comparative Media Studies on May 10, 2018 in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Comparative Media Studies

ABSTRACT

When we think of pleasures to be found in video games, we often talk about power, control, agency, and fun. But to center these pleasures is to privilege certain stories, players, actions and possibility spaces. This thesis uses the framework of intimacy to closely examine three games for their capacity to create pleasure in vulnerability, the loss of control, dependence on others, and precarity.

Drawing from Deleuzian affect theory and feminist, queer and posthuman theorists, I read for intimate affects in the formal, aesthetic, proprioceptive and structural elements of *Overwatch, The Last Guardian* and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.* Ultimately, I argue two points: that video games have a unique capacity to generate intimate affects, and that my games of choice push us to rethink our assumptions about what constitutes intimacy more broadly.

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Acknowledgements

I am so fortunate to have so many people to thank for these past two years. First among them is my advisor Eugenie Brinkema, who is so eloquent and so insightful that it sometimes defies belief. A close second to my reader Mikael Jakobsson, who has provided sharp critique and even sharper ginger ale. I am so very grateful to have such excellent mentorship.

Barely a day goes by that I don't brag about my time at the Game Lab, but in case they've forgotten, I am deeply grateful to Rik Eberhardt, Philip Tan, T.L. Taylor, Sara Verrilli, and everyone who has joined us to play games both good and bad each week. And my time at MIT would not have been what it was without Heather Hendershot, Mauricio Cordero, Nick Montfort, the Storytelling Spaces group – in particular Zachary Angles and Valentina Rosales – and the indefatigable Shannon Larkin. Thank you all. And to my brilliant, inspiring and occasionally (in the best way) terrifying cohort – Laurel Carney, Sonia Banaszczyk, Vicky Zeamer, Sara Rafsky, Aziria Rodríguez-Arce, Mariel Garcia-Montes, Aashka Dave, and Claudia Lo – go my unending gratitude and awe. I cannot wait to see what we get up to.

I could not have gotten here without the excellent mentorship of Thomas Lamarre and Kenneth Dean, who shepherded me along as a doe-eyed undergrad, or Ken Perlin at NYU, who survived me as a teenager and continues to listen intently to my wacky ideas.

My friends and family have been my guiding light in the dark and murky depths of thesis writing. To name a few: my creative collaborators, William Wu and Paul Geldart, who gave life to my own intimate worlds. Rosalind Chapman, who flew with me on many a late night Overwatch match. Andrew Tran, who talked me through my ideas before they made any semblance of sense. Maggie Haughey, Béatrixe Lalande, and Alex Dawson, my traveling companions to faraway imagined places that put my own work into stark relief. My feline companions – or, as Donna Haraway might put it, my research associates – Cole and Lucy. My father, Ted Myerscough. My mother, Judith Doyle, who helped this thesis grow over a hundred long conversations and a dozen academic debates. I love you all.

Critical work itself requires a certain intimacy; writing this thesis has in many ways been a process of learning how to be vulnerable. To all those people, animals, places and things who this past year have afforded me such vulnerability, thank you.

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Introduction

Overcome by enemies, my gaze darts to the air, and in a rush of motion as I fly towards my partner, my heartbeat quickens.

My giant companion takes a leap and lands on a platform, and it falls apart under its feet; my hands shake as I become suddenly aware of how small and how vulnerable I am.

I am startled suddenly from the quiet rhythms of piano music and a horse's hooves by the flapping of bird wings, just ahead.

When we think of pleasures to be found in video games, we often talk about power, control, agency, responsibility, and fun. But the experiences I described above – my own experiences playing *Overwatch, The Last Guardian,* and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, respectively – are not encompassed by those sensations. What framework is adequate to consider them?

This thesis uses the notion of intimacy to closely examine three games for their capacity to create pleasure in vulnerability, the loss of control, dependence on others, and precarity. Broadly, I ask: how can we apply affect-based formal analysis to video games? What vocabularies, systems of thought and theories might be useful? In approaching these questions, I hope to trace out a broadly applicable system for reading for affect in video games. I am also interested in the implications of discussing intimacy in particular. How can intimacy intervene in the study of video games and the affects they generate? How does intimacy account for moments of frustration, engagement, or disturbance that occur during gameplay? What is provocative about focusing on intimacy instead of more frequently-discussed sensations in games, like violence? Finally, how can examining games problematize notions of intimacy?

In answering these questions, I aim to provide a theoretical framework for thinking through intimacy more broadly, particularly as it pertains to the specificities and affordances of video games in the contemporary context. Ultimately, I argue that video games have the unique capacity to bear out intimate sensations and generate intimate affects through their worlds.

Fields, Theories and Interventions

I situate this thesis at the intersection of affect theory and video game studies. Fundamentally, I see this thesis as an intervention into both fields. For video game studies, I hope to elucidate one possible model for reading for the formal ways that video games render affects. I also hope to center a form of pleasure in games attached not to control, responsibility and agency but to the loss of control, dependence on others and vulnerability. Finally, I argue that video games have the unique capacity to engender intimate sensations. For affect theory, I hope to draw out from my objects of analysis a theory of intimacy that accounts at once for the sensations it creates and for the precarity with which it is so often entangled.

As Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg note in *The Affect Theory Reader*, there are multiple intersecting theories of affect (6). For my own work I am particularly interested in Deleuze and Guattari's locating of affect "in the midst of things and relations […] and, then, in the complex assemblages that come to compose bodies and worlds simultaneously" (Seigworth and Gregg 6). Similarly, Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg locate affect "in the capacities to act and be acted upon […] in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about,

between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves" (1).

This "in-between-ness" suggests that affects are inherently relational, in that they pass and circulate between bodies. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari, along similar lines, say of affect, "to the relations composing, decomposing, or modifying an individual there correspond intensities that affect it, augmenting or diminishing its power to act; these intensities come from external parts or from the individual's own parts" (256). In their discussion of the becoming-animal, they understand these relations as between the individual and the "machinic assemblage" (257) in which they are entangled. Using the example of a horse in the city, they consider the affects of a horse as existing within the context of this assemblage of relations: "having eyes blocked by blinders, having a bit and a bridle, being proud, having a big peepee-maker, pulling heavy loads," and so on.

This definition tracks well with video games, which themselves are relational assemblages defined by capacities. The relationship between the player-character of a video game and the world is defined by what that character can and can't do and by the proprioceptive and affective valences of how they do it. More broadly, relationships within the game-world between other characters, objects and enemies, and the extent to which these relationships affect the player, are also defined along these lines.

I also want to define what I mean by formal analysis in the context of video games. In *The Forms of the Affects,* Eugenie Brinkema calls for a return to reading for form as a way to get at the specificities of affects, at the particular ways they work over the bodies with which they come into contact. For Brinkema, "reading for form involves a slow, deep attention both to the usual suspects of close analysis that are so often ignored or reduced to

paraphrase in recent work on affect—montage, camera movement, mise-en-scène, color, sound—and to more ephemeral problematics such as duration, rhythm, absences, elisions, ruptures, gaps, and points of contradiction (ideological, aesthetic, structural, and formal)" (37). In *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, Aubrey Anable extends Brinkema's call to the realm of video games, understanding video games "not as containers of and for affects that float around between bodies and things but rather as media that have specific affective dimensions, legible in their images, algorithms, temporalies, and narratives, that can be interpreted and analyzed" (7). My own understanding of formal analysis hews closely to Brinkema's and Anable's: I read for colour, texture, sound, camera placement and movement[1] in my objects of analysis, as well as rhythm, duration, structure,[2] movement and temporality. In bringing the robust body of texts that deal with affect theory into the realm of video games scholarship, I hope to synthesize a mode of analysis of games that at once takes into account representation, temporality, sensation and player action.

Finally, I want to define my parameters for video games for the context of this thesis. The three case studies I have chosen for this thesis are all AAA games in three-dimensional worlds released on eighth generation consoles between 2016 and 2017. I acknowledge that these parameters are by no means representative of video games as a whole. Most significantly, they exclude mobile and independent games. I chose these case studies primarily because of the formal complexity they offer, but also because I am broadly interested in the perhaps unintentional and unexpected affects that mainstream and popular games can generate. I also hope that by closely examining the intricate ways that

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[1] To the extent, of course, that camera placement and movement are decided by the game's algorithms and not controlled by the player.
[2] Narrative structure, structures of movement and action, and also physical structure, as in the construction of the spaces the player moves through.

these games create intimate affects, I can highlight formal approaches useful for both AAA game developers and independent creators.

Agency, Responsibility, Intimacy

If one broad goal of this thesis is to trace out a method for the formal analysis of video games based in affect theory, another is to draw attention to pleasures in games that involve vulnerability, the loss of control, and reliance on others. In "Affect, Responsibility, and How Modes of Engagement Shape the Experience of Videogames," Kevin Veale links Janet Murray's and Gordon Calleja's discussions of agency in video games – which Murray defines as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices – with theories of responsibility to argue that "the modes of engagement that lead to a perception of affective responsibility are central to what makes the experience of playing videogames distinctive from other forms of storytelling media."

Veale, and the discourses on agency from which he draws, articulate an assumption common in popular discourses on games: that video game pleasure is linked to feeling powerful, consequential or impactful on the world of the game. It has become a cliché in advertisements for video games to boast that players' choices matter, that their actions have consequences. But to center responsibility and agency as *the* distinctive affective registers of video games is to privilege certain stories, players, actions and possibility spaces. By centering intimacy, I draw attention to desires and pleasures in games not linked to sensations of power, control or agency. Implicitly, then, I hope to privilege those players, stories and possibility spaces not accounted for by these existing paradigms. To this end, I align my work with queer theorists like Sara Ahmed, Aubrey Anable and Bonnie

Ruberg, feminist theorists including Kathleen Stewart and Lauren Berlant, and posthuman scholars like Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway.

Defining Intimacy

To pinpoint exactly what I mean when I discuss the pleasure to be found in losing control in a game,[3] I want to finally define what I mean by intimacy, and in doing so, to bring up the third intervention I hope to make in this thesis: a definition of intimacy that accounts for the ways it is formally rendered. Colloquially, intimacy refers to sexual or romantic relations between lovers; none of my case studies involve sexual content, nor am I interested in romantic narratives between characters. Intimacy is also often used – in both academic and colloquial contexts – as a catch-all, sometimes vacuous term to describe some sort of closeness. Intimacy can be deployed to refer to a broad swath of relations, from vulnerable moments with strangers to close friendships, from casual sexual encounters to the shared experience of death. Intimacy as a term is often made to bear the burden of standing in for those relations and modes of relating for which our vocabularies fall short. But what intimacy means precisely in these contexts is rarely unpacked. This, I argue, works exactly counter to the potential of intimacy as a concept. If intimacy is a way of naming modes of being and relating which fall outside the bounds of normative relational structures, then to use intimacy in this way is to do the opposite – to neglect to name, or to avoid naming, those very modes. In this thesis, then, I aim to trace out a specific

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[3] For some in game studies, this vocabulary might evoke the category of play coined by Roger Caillois in *Man, Play and Games* as ilinx, defined by vertigo and the temporary loss of bodily perception. Though I do read for disorienting and dizzying motion in this thesis, particularly in the first chapter, I understand the pleasure of losing control here more in terms of vulnerability and the reliance on others as opposed to a pleasurable bodily sensation.

definition of intimacy, and in doing so, to get at the potential of intimacy as a concept and as a way of being in the world. Departing from definitions that imagine intimacy in terms of personalized relationships with individuals, I also consider intimacy as an affect; by this I mean that intimacy is imbued in the relational or "machinic" assemblages discussed in the previous section.

The distinction in which relations take on affects, is a useful framework with which to understand intimacy. Colloquial and academic understandings of intimacy often consider intimate relationships as a particular type of relation between individuals, most often between two human individuals; I want to argue instead that such a relationship has taken on the affect of intimacy, and that other relations within the "machinic assemblages" Deleuze and Guattari outline have the capacity to take on intimate affects as well; indeed, any "intimate relationship" in the colloquial sense is also borne out through other relations within these assemblages (with objects, gifts, places, or other people). In the context of video games, this allows us to formally examine the forces a game world exerts on the player on a formal level – from the aesthetics of the world to the way characters move within it and with each other – as potentially containing intimate affects.

So what comprises an intimate affect? Here, it is useful to unpack the ways other scholars describe intimate relations, and draw from there the sets of sensations that intimacy seems to generate. Here, I draw from Lauren Berlant and Nancy Yousef. Berlant, in her introduction to "Intimacy: A Special Issue" of *Critical Inquiry*, draws attention to the tension between the private – communication "with the sparest of signs and gestures," with "the quality of eloquence and brevity" (281) – and the public – the ideal of "something shared" – at the heart of intimacy. Similarly, Nancy Yousef in *Romantic Intimacy* notes that

intimacy "crystallizes a tension between sharing and enclosing as opposed imaginations of relational possibilities" (15), considering it as referring "to what is closely held and personal and to what is deeply shared with others" (16). Indeed, the intimate relation seems to be caught in a moment between the private and the public: to *intimate* is to reveal a closely-held secret. But just as intimacy is connected to revealing, to nakedness, to the baring of secrets, it cannot be fully public, either. Berlant understands that "intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation" (282); as both authors note, intimacy can take place between strangers, lovers, or family, but within that relation it establishes a private space in which secrets can be revealed. Yousef describes this as "the phenomenal fact of proximity between persons – whether sustained over time, as in a familial relationship, or in the fleeting immediacy of an encounter with a stranger" (19). Intimacy as these authors discuss it can be figured, then, as a space between the public and private, felt as the sensation of closeness or proximity and of being seen or of revealing.

But this proximity is never certain; in fact, intimacy is defined by a sense of uncertainty. Berlant understands intimacy as deeply connected to desire and fantasy. She considers intimacy as involving "an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way" (281) and notes that "its potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity, making the very attachments deemed to buttress 'a life' seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability" (282). Indeed, "unstable closeness" seems an apt way to describe intimacy-as-relation: one may aspire for an intimate relation to last indefinitely, or to "turn out in a particular way," but one can never know for certain what the other will do with that

relation, or when they will decide to leave it. But this haunting, I argue, is part of what makes intimacy pleasurable: the precarity of the intimate forces a focus on and existence within the present, in the closeness that might disappear, but *for now*, lingers. This precarious temporality is another intimate sensation.

With these notions in mind, I understand intimate affects in terms of a precarious, synchronous orientation in the present, made pleasurable and terrifying by the sensation of nakedness or revealing of oneself. It is fragile; the threat of embarrassment or humiliation or disappointment lingers at its edges, so much so that it is sometimes more bearable to end the intimate moment than to remain. Intimacy can be cultivated, through gestures or sustained proximity; but one can find oneself thrown into intimacy as well.

The precarious, present-oriented aspects of intimacy will come up again and again in this thesis; as I argue, intimacy and precarity are deeply entangled. As such, any discussion of the precarious qualities of intimate affects must be aware of the political connotations of the term, which refer to increasing economic and ontological conditions of uncertainty under neoliberal power structures. To this end I draw from feminist theorists and posthuman scholars – Anna Tsing, Lauren Berlant, Kathleen Stewart, Donna Haraway – both to understand intimacy in the context of contemporary precarity and also to gesture towards the potential of intimacy in precarious times.

Intimacy can also take on different affective valences: the intimacy of an unexpected shared moment with a stranger is quite different from the intimacy of a morning spent with an old friend, but both feel intimate. In this thesis, I engage in my case studies with three different valences of intimacy. In the first chapter, I consider the strategic combination between Pharah and Mercy in *Overwatch* as an example of intimacy through synchronicity,

through shared patterns of movement and strategic flows. In the second chapter, I read *The Last Guardian* for intimacy through frustration, waiting, and the differently-limited capacities of bodies. Finally, in the third chapter, I understand *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* for the intimacy of overwhelmedness through escalating tension and interrupted rhythmic movement through and within space.

Literature Review

There has been much interest in the last decade on what affect theory has to offer to video game studies. However, there are only two books entirely and explicitly written on the subject of video games and affect: *Exploring Videogames with Deleuze and Guattari: Towards an Affective Theory of Form* by Ciara Cremin (published in 2016 by Routledge), which I will discuss as part of this review; and *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* by Aubrey Anable (published in Spring 2018 by the University of Minnesota Press). Rather, the majority of writing on this subject so far has taken the form of journal articles, book chapters and conference proceedings, and so I draw from all of these sources for this review.

On the other hand, there has been significant published work on video games, emotion and embodiment. To give only a few examples, the anthologies *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection*, edited by Jessica Enevold and Esther McCallum-Stewart, and *Rated M for Mature: Sex and Sexuality in Video Games*, edited by Matthew Wysocki and Evan Lauteria, all approach questions of intimacy, vulnerability and affection in video games,

largely through the lenses of representational analysis of romance and sex,[4] phenomenological close readings in relation to love and sexuality;[5] and ethnographic study of players who discuss these encounters.[6] The anthology *The Pleasures of Computer Gaming: Essays on Cultural History, Theory and Aesthetics*, edited by Melanie Smalwell and Jason Wilson, also approaches embodiment and different pleasures in games, but from a phenomenological perspective.[7] Finally, the anthology *Emotion in Games: Theory and Praxis,* edited by Kostas Karpouzis and Georgios Yannakakis, explores the affective potential of video games from the theoretical vantage points of affective computing, human-computer interaction and psychology. The papers in this text use as their starting point a definition of affect rooted in psychology that focuses on quantitatively or qualitatively measuring bodily reactions of players. I differentiate my work both by reading for affect in the forms of games and by understanding intimacy as an affect that permeates relations throughout the game world. Many other theorists[8] have taken a phenomenological approach, incorporating theories of cybernetics to consider video games as "the coming together of the player and the videogame in a cybernetic circuit of embodied pleasures" (Keogh 2014). These theories fall short, however, of accounting for affect; affect allows for a more nuanced reckoning with the nature of the relations that form and shift

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[4] See Chess, Kelly, Kahndaker-Kokoris and Sturrock in *Game Love*, and Hart, Glassie, Mills and Kice in *Rated M for Mature.*

[5] See articles by Youngblood and Krzywinska in *Rated M for Mature.*

[6] See Waern, Lamerichs and Brown in *Game Love*, and Trammell and Waldron, Wysocki, and Pozo in *Rated M for Mature.* Lamerichs in particular conducts an "affective analysis" of cosplayers of video games.

[7] See Smalwell and Wilson; Smalwell, Flynn, Kucklich; and Giddings and Kennedy in *The Pleasures of Computer Gaming.*

[8] See, for example: Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology* and "The Phenomenology of Video Games;" Galloway; Keogh; and Crick.

between the player and all elements of the machinic assemblage that comprises a video game.

It is pertinent here to note that assemblage has been used to discuss play both by Keogh and by T.L. Taylor in her article "The Assemblage of Play," in which she understands games as "lived object[s]" – as deeply interconnected with play practices, online spaces, game communities, and generic, social and cultural contexts (332). I use community voices and practices as jumping-off points for my analyses at key points. For example, my interest in the Pharah/Mercy combination in *Overwatch* was borne out of an interest in fan communities that read the two as a romantic pairing. Similarly, I took interest in *The Last Guardian*'s intimacy of frustration because of online discourses and debates over the game's intentionally frustrating aspects. That being said, I am primarily interested in this thesis in illuminating the formal capacities of video games to generate intimate affects; as such, I do not interview players or attempt to analyze others' experiences, but focus on examining the formal qualities of the games on which I focus.

I also understand my work on affect and video games in the context of, and in contrast with, design-oriented discourses on the sensation of gameplay, in particular the notion of game feel as discussed by designers including David Kanaga and Steve Swink, and by academics including Brendan Keogh and Douglas Wilson. Swink's book *Game Feel: A Game Designer's Guide to Virtual Sensation* provides a fascinating account from a design perspective of what Scott C. Richmond might call the "proprioceptive aesthetics" of video games.[9] Swink's consideration of game feel as "a powerful, gripping, tactile sensation that

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[9] 9 In *Cinema's Bodily Illusions: Flying, Floating, and Hallucinating,* Scott Richmond considers the cinema's capacity to affect the body's proprioceptive senses, which he calls

exists somewhere in the space between player and game" (xiii) is particularly resonant

with affect. However, Swink's limitation of game feel to the "real-time control of virtual

objects in a simulated space, with interactions emphasized by polish" (6), privileges

proprioception over aesthetic and narrative experience in the interests of providing

pragmatic advice to aspiring designers. It also suggests, through the notion of "polish" and

the related concept of "juice" often discussed alongside game feel, a qualitative model in

which adding more polish or juice can make a better game feel. In my analysis, I aim to read

aesthetics, mechanics, proprioception and narrative experience holistically, as synthesizing

to form different affects without particular attention to a qualitative evaluation of intimate

affects.[10]

Alexander Galloway's *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* is some of the earliest

work in game studies that makes reference to affect, though he does not discuss it at length.

Galloway theorizes games in terms of gamic action – discussing ambient animation loops in

Shenmue, he writes, "remove everything and there is still action, gently stirring rhythm of

life" (8). Though his comparison of this ambience to Deleuze's affect-image is useful, his

centering of action as the "pure uniqueness of video gaming" – the fear of which, he argues,

propels the remediation of cinematic conventions within games – denies the complex

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"proprioceptive aesthetics." He specifically gestures towards the potential of
proprioceptive aesthetics for video games, which is why I make reference to him here.

[10] It is also worth noting that game feel as a concept is also reminiscent of other terms in
game development and analysis, like playability and immersion, that have also been used
as (sometimes rather vacuous) qualitative evaluative models for a game's affective power. I
cite game feel in particular for two reasons: first, because it (Swink's work in particular)
has been cited by academics whose work I cite including Keogh and Anable; second,
because it uses vocabularies of proprioception, movement, temporality and feeling that are
particularly evocative of affect.

relationships between narratives, aesthetics and game mechanics, and downplays the importance of narratives at all.

I take similar issue with Cremin's *Exploring Video Games with Deleuze and Guattari*. Cremin's critical intervention is the close reading of Deleuze and Guattari in dialogue with video games from a formal, industrial and experiential perspective. This produces some fruitful discussions, such as Cremin's notion of the becoming-Mario as an extension of the becoming-animal, and her assertion that players and designers co-constitutively create affects as part of the play process. However, Cremin makes frequent claims to the ideal of a pure video game, stating that "a video game comprised only of binaries of yes/no, right/wrong, commands and expressions (one outcome or another); a game without magnitudes of intensity is not a video game" (24). She connects this purity to movement, asserting that "*Geometry Wars* is a pure distillation of the video game" (62). This serves to decenter the importance of representation in the composition of video games, which plays into a dichotomy between representation and mechanics that, I argue, impedes the holistic formal analysis of games. Games are experienced as complex assemblages of aesthetic, sonic, durational, structural, mechanical and proprioceptive elements; they should be analyzed as such.

Like Cremin, Aaron Trammell and Anne Gilbert, in their article "Extending Play to Critical Media Studies," use affect to approach the notion of play. Making reference to the frequent study of media effects in video game studies, the authors consider play as a set of dispositions in order to "[shift] the approach from a dialogue about effect to a conversation about affect. Instead of rehashing a series of arguments about how games, television, or movies cause their audiences to feel, do, or believe, this approach encourages us to

recognize the extent to which play produces affective worlds" (392-393). The authors use the term *disposition*, drawing from Foucault's *dispositif*, describe three modes of play that they then trace through discourses on gaming, players and community practices. Though a more comprehensive account of the term disposition would have perhaps made it more broadly applicable in this context, the authors' approach to play in terms of affect is novel. My work, however, moves away from discourses on what play is towards focusing on the close analysis of games for affect, on the intricate ways these games allow themselves to be played.

Along a similar vein, Kevin Veale, in his article "Affect, Responsibility, and How Modes of Engagement Shape the Experience of Videogames," understands responsibility as a mode of affective engagement that shapes players' experiences of video games. This is a useful framework to understand games – and discourses about games – that create feelings of agency, power and responsibility in the player. I contend in my work, however, that this feeling of responsibility is neither inherent to nor universal in games; by centering intimacy, I argue that in fact the loss of control and the sensation of vulnerability are pleasures central to many games, and call for games scholars to attend to intimate affects and others that deconstruct the notion of responsibility as inherent to games.

Eugénie Shinkle, in her article "Video Games, Emotions, and the Six Senses," her conference presentation "Feel It, Don't Think: The Significance of Affect in the Study of Digital Games," and her chapter "Corporealis Ergo Sum: Affective Response in Digital Games" in *Digital Gameplay: Essays on the Nexus of Digital Game and Gamer*, has done some of the earliest work on affect and video games. Though Shinkle uses the term affect, she primarily focuses on the phenomenological processes involved in gameplay, defining affect

as "synaesthetic, embodied perception. It is a full-body, multisensory experience, temporally and corporeally delocalized, incorporating emotions but not reducible to them. Affect [... refers to] those phenomenological aspects of interactivity that are difficult to describe or to model theoretically, but which nonetheless make a game come alive" ("Feel it" 3). While Shinkle approaches affect in terms of affective response and phenomenological analysis – suggesting, for example, that game designers create more affective responses in players by making them feel physical pain or discomfort through a game controller (5), I focus instead on the formal and structural components of games that render intimate affects.

In "No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt," Bonnie Ruberg argues that "a refusal to have fun represents, I believe, a rejection of the heteronormative status quo that takes place on the level of the body. In this way, no-fun games form a system of disruptive counter-affects that can productively bring into question the traditional goals of video games, those who play them, and pleasure more broadly" (110). They outline a taxonomy of sometimes-pleasurable, no-fun affective video game experiences in order to argue more broadly for the analysis of games "for their *affective* rhetoric: the language of the feelings they invoke, how they communicate emotions to their players, how designing affect is interwoven in the art of game design" (111). Ruberg's argument that "looking at games that go beyond fun creates new spaces for players, games, and queer worlds at the margins" (110) is compelling, and their expansive look at game design as well as play practices makes their conclusions broadly applicable across the field. However, in doing so, they decline to define what they mean by "affect," and sacrifice theoretical weight for expansive applicability. Additionally, their term

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"affective rhetoric" – itself a response to Ian Bogost's term "procedural rhetoric" – might constitute a useful paradigm shift in game studies were it focused on more, but Ruberg fails to unpack the contradictory etymologies and theoretical underpinnings behind the two terms. That being said, Ruberg's system of bad affects in games is a welcome shift from the long-standing centering of fun in game studies, and I reference their work extensively in the first chapter of this thesis.

Ronald Shaw and Barney Warf, in their article "Worlds of Affect: Virtual Geographies of Video Games," approach affect similarly from the field of human geography, evoking Nigel Thrift to "use affect […] to designate the precognitive, unconscious, and embodied reactions to on-screen representations" (1338). However, Shaw and Warf's insistence that representation and affect "are interrelated forces always doing work on the player" (1336) is resonant with my own work; in emphasizing the connection between affect and representation in games through the lens of spatiality, they open up space to read games for affect through the relations between representations, sensations, narrative structures, aesthetics and game mechanics.

Aubrey Anable's essay "Casual Games, Time Management and the Work of Affect" also provides a useful roadmap for my work. Anable mobilizes affect to analyze the popular mobile game *Diner Dash* in terms of temporality within the context of women's work in contemporary labour conditions. Drawing from Sianne Ngai and Lauren Berlant, Anable considers affect as "something that flows between people and alights on cultural objects," noting that:

> Affect is often described in terms of action—as the capacity to act and to be acted upon. As such, it evokes a cybernetic system of inputs and outputs. Video games compel us to act (and to be acted upon) through the procedures of their algorithmic structure, but video game action is also filtered through

representational practices. In a very basic sense, we make choices and push buttons in games because of how games structure our feelings about those choices and actions.

In her analysis, Anable incorporates the mobile phone hardware, narrative, structure and mechanics of *Diner Dash* to understand the complex relationship between the themes of work in the game, the working conditions of those who play the game, and the work players do in order to play the game. While Anable's work draws from feminist theories of the labour conditions of women more broadly, however, my work begins with questions of the formal properties intimacy can take, and my critical intervention – the consideration of intimacy as an affect worthy of analysis in video games – focuses explicitly on discourses about games rather than broader social and political discourses, though I gesture towards such questions in my consideration of queer intimacy, human/animal intimacy, and intimacy with/in/through worlds.

Anable's 2018 book *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect,* takes an approach perhaps most similar to mine; as mentioned above, I align myself with her call for formal analysis of video games that accounts for affect. Anable delves into the history of both video games and affect theory in order to draw out the common theme of cybernetics, which she uses to draw attention to the ways that certain theories of affect can "reinforce the same impasses they seek to redress" (4) between humans and machines. She notes that Deleuzian strains of affect theory, and Brian Massumi in particular, "cleave affect from subjectivity" (8) with language evocative of cybernetics and computation, by presenting affect as a network independent from the individual body. For Anable, "We can analyze form, read for affect, and hold on to the body at the same time. Video games require this" (9). This approach is provocative not only for video game studies but for affect theorists,

particularly Anable's warning to both groups to be aware of the historical roots of the theories of affect from which they draw. Anable's analyses, particularly her discussion of *Diner Dash,* parts of which are reproduced here from her chapter in *ADA,* carry out this dictum by considering the contexts in which people (usually women) play mobile games. She defines our haptic relationships with mobile devices as intimate, which she frames in terms of touch, proximity and sociality.

My work does not attend to bodies in such a way – not only do I not consider specific demographics and their associated bodily relations to games, but I also set aside discussions of platform specificity and physicality in my considerations of my case studies. On an overarching level I aim to trace out the formal structures that create intimate affects in the worlds of the games I study, and also to push on definitions of intimacy that focus on personalized feelings. As such, though I agree with Anable's assertion that it is possible to attend to form, consider affect and keep bodies in mind, I disagree that it is necessary.

I also understand Anable's critique that Deleuzian affect theories can serve to reify boundaries between human/machine, body/mind and so on. I specifically critique the way that Deleuze and Guattari understand human/animal boundaries in relationships in my second chapter, and I also draw significantly from feminist and queer theorists like Donna Haraway, Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant who consider assemblages and messy connections across such boundaries. That being said, I find Deleuze and Guattari's definition of affect that centers bodily capacities pertinent for discussions of video games, and their focus on movement and temporality opens up useful avenues of inquiry as well.

Chapter Structure

This thesis consists of three case studies, each one a single video game; in each chapter, I engage with different theoretical paradigms and terms in order to conduct a close formal analysis of the game in the context of a particular valence of intimacy. Each chapter also follows a different game genre; broader questions in each chapter about each mode of intimacy work in dialogue with these genres, so that my insights might be applicable to other games within that genre.

The first chapter focuses on the 2016 team-based multiplayer online first-person shooter *Overwatch*, developed by Blizzard. In *Overwatch*, players take control of heroes – characters with specific backstories and unique abilities – and fight in teams of six against other teams online. One of the most popular and powerful combinations in the game is that of rocket launching soldier Pharah and angelic healer Mercy. Almost immediately following the game's release, the pair accrued a large fan following that imagined them as a romantic couple. Despite a lack of interaction between the characters in in-game dialogue and official *Overwatch* media like comics and online videos, the Pharah/Mercy pairing (hereafter referred to as Pharmercy) has become one of the most popular among fans, and certainly the most popular queer pairing. This fan following seems to suggest that in-game synergy translates to romantic chemistry in players' minds. In this chapter, I draw from queer theories of affect in games to interrogate this connection by conducting a close reading of the actions, strategies and flows of movement inherent in playing as part of a Pharah/Mercy combination; I argue that these actions cultivate modes of affective engagement that implicate players in sensing an intimate relationship between the characters. Here, I consider through *Overwatch* the particular mode of intimacy created

when strategic synergies create a sense of synchronicity; I aim for this chapter to be broadly useful in discussions of the affective potential of competitive games, multiplayer games, and games that involve strategy and strategic combinations.

While the first chapter imagines intimacy as synchronistic, fast-paced and positive, the second chapter, which focuses on the 2016 single-player action-adventure game *The Last Guardian*, focuses on an intimacy born of frustration, sluggishness and loss of control. In *The Last Guardian*, the player controls a boy who traverses an abandoned, treacherous and vertical landscape. The boy must befriend a giant winged mammalian creature named Trico in order for both to survive; much of the game involves giving commands to Trico in order to navigate the dangerous landscape safely. However, Trico does not always respond to commands, and may respond incorrectly; sometimes, Trico becomes distracted, angry or afraid, and the player must contend with its emotions before they can proceed. The game received mixed reviews on release, with many complaints that the gameplay was too frustrating (Brightman). I read *The Last Guardian* for these moments of frustration, incapacity and waiting; I argue that this frustration is in fact an integral part of the intimacy that develops between the boy and Trico. Here, I gesture towards animal studies and post-human studies as frameworks for thinking about this relationship. Broadly, I consider *The Last Guardian* as an example of an intimacy that develops, and could only have developed, from the frustration and lack of control that turned so many players off of the game; I frame it also within the context of games that involve linear progression.

In my third chapter, I turn to *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* to consider an intimacy that involves an overwhelming set of interactions with space. In *Breath of the Wild*, the protagonist Link awakens in the midst of an apocalypse after a hundred years in

stasis, with no memory of his prior life. Link and the player explore the world of Hyrule,

recovering Link's memories and destroying an apocalyptic evil spirit in the process.

The intimacies of my first two chapters are anchored to relationships between specific

characters, though I understand those relationships as becoming intimate through

aesthetics, mechanics, actions and engagements with the rest of the world. This third

chapter takes Link and the world itself as its central relationship, distributing intimacy

across space. I read *Breath of the Wild* for its numerous ways of overwhelming the player,

from combat to horseback riding. Drawing from theories of the sublime, disorientation and

optimism, I define *Breath of the Wild* as creating intimacy through overwhelmedness. I

frame this chapter within the context of open world games and games that involve

exploration.

   I conclude with two interventions: first, that video games in particular have the

capacity to create intimate affects; second, that intimacy as it has been defined by my case

studies is a way of contending with a precarious present. I consider these interventions in

the contexts of game design and of theoretical approaches to intimacy.

Chapter 1: I'm Taking Care of You: Pharmercy and the Intimacy of Synchronicity in
Overwatch

What is immediately clear playing Blizzard's team-based multiplayer online first-person shooter *Overwatch,* released in 2016, is the intricacy of the mechanical relationships between characters; playing as any one hero can be a completely different experience in the context of the rest of one's team. Even if one performs well individually on a poor team, *Overwatch* can quickly become frustrating and tiresome, and matches seem to take forever; conversely, when teams work well together and pick heroes that synergize with each other, something clicks, matches get easier, and the game becomes difficult to put down. What is it that creates this sensation? How can we attend to the formal ways in which this synergistic, positive affect is brought to bear on players of *Overwatch*? And how might we understand this as intimate?

One of the most immediately popular and powerful combinations when *Overwatch* was released was that of rocket launching soldier Pharah and angelic healer Mercy. Almost immediately following the game's release, the pair accrued a large fan following that shipped[11] them as a romantic couple. Despite a lack of interaction between the characters in in-game dialogue and official *Overwatch* media like comics and online videos, the Pharmercy pairing has become one of the most popular among fans, and certainly the most popular queer pairing. This fan following seems to suggest that in-game synergy translates to romantic chemistry in players' minds: the term Pharmercy is often used interchangeably

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[11] In online discourses and fan spaces, to *ship* two characters means to imagine and support the idea of them as a romantic pairing. *Ship* can also be a noun, as in "the Pharah/Mercy ship," which would refer to the Pharah/Mercy romantic pairing as imagined by fans.

to refer to the romantic and strategic pairings of the two characters.[12] Indeed, playing the game with this pairing in mind, strategic actions like healing or protecting the other character seem to evoke a sense of intimacy between Pharah and Mercy, complicating the questions inherent in reading for synergy and intimacy in *Overwatch*.

In this chapter, I conduct a close reading of the actions, movements and aesthetics inherent in playing as part of a Pharah/Mercy combo; I argue that these actions cultivate modes of affective engagement that implicate players in sensing an intimate relationship between the characters. I focus on each character in turn, considering the positioning, movement, and flows of gameplay involved in performing as part of this combination. I understand the Pharah/Mercy combination as creating an affect of intimacy through synchronicity. I then consider the queer implications of intimacy through synchronicity, pushing the taxonomy of no-fun affects in Bonnie Ruberg's "No Fun: The Queer Potential of Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt" to include intimacy and drawing from Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* and Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* to understand this intimacy in the context of queerness. Finally, I gesture towards the potential of intimacy through synchronicity for multiplayer games in particular to create space for queer intimacies by centering different ways of relating to other players and to the game.

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[12] In this chapter, I use "Pharmercy" to refer to the fan ship, and "Pharah/Mercy combination" or "Pharah/Mercy combo" to refer to the in-game strategic combination of Pharah and Mercy.

Mercy: Precarity and Proximity

Compared to the other Overwatch characters, playing as Mercy feels immediately delicate – perhaps vulnerable. This is first made clear to the player aesthetically: when Mercy is chosen in the hero select screen, rather than brandish her weapon like other heroes, she draws back her shoulders and spreads the mechanical wings on her back. The pose is elegant, the movements precise, subtle and deliberate – but it leaves her chest open and unprotected. Mercy's weapon, it seems to suggest, is her wings.

Indeed, playing as Mercy is often a process of flight. Mercy is defined by her ability to fly to teammates. While walking, she moves so slowly as to be easily run down by enemies, with quiet, graceful footsteps that suggest a small and barely detectable presence; when she flies to a teammate, she does so with a rush of sound, light and motion that only slow when she draws close to them, giving her a presence on the battlefield both to herself and to her teammates who need her help. This mobility enables her both to go where she is needed most and to escape threats quickly. But while other support heroes like Zenyatta, Moira and Ana can inflict damage and debuffs[13] to enemies in addition to healing the team, Mercy has no debuffing abilities, and her gun is comparatively weak; rather, effective Mercy players focus on healing teammates with her powerful healing ray, and on buffing them with her secondary fire when they are at full health or on the offensive. Playing as Mercy thus encourages attention and care: in order to know when to heal and when to buff, Mercy must watch and listen to her teammates closely and anticipate threats to them.

This also means that Mercy's movements are always directed towards helping teammates, and the ways she can move are likewise defined by them. Mercy must rely on

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[13] A debuff is an ability that imposes a negative effect on an enemy; for example, it might make enemies less powerful or more vulnerable to damage.

and trust her teammates to stay within flying distance of her; without a teammate to escape to, she is almost defenseless against enemies. Many Mercy players express frustration at teams that leave her alone and thus prone to being killed; trying to escape an enemy on your own and seeing your team just out of reach as your health runs out is arguably one of the most frustrating experiences of playing Mercy. In these moments, Mercy's movement feels hapless and sluggish. Even when teammates are nearby, Mercy's movement can stagnate if the whole team is clumped together, rendering her only able to fly within a small radius and limiting her vertical movement. In order to anticipate and respond to threats to herself and her team, Mercy should have a safe vantage point from which to see the arena, places to flee from enemy fire, and a wide breadth of space across which she can fly. However, she can only access these places with help from teammates. Here, there is a close connection between the sensation of movement as Mercy, Mercy's relationship to space, and Mercy's relationship to her teammates: Mercy's vulnerability to and dependence on her team translates to a precarious relationship to space in which her ability to move within and through it are contingent upon her team's coordination in support of her, coordination that can be difficult to attain for six players with limited communication.

Mercy does, however, have the ability to temporarily assert an independent relationship to space and movement. When she uses her ultimate ability, "Valkyrie," Mercy's wings grow larger and she gains the ability to fly upwards and heal, buff or fly to her team from much farther away. For the 20 seconds that the ability is active, Mercy's movement is not limited by her team; they are never far out of reach or sight, and she doesn't have to worry about being chased down by enemies as she heals them. It is worth noting here that in past iterations of the game, Mercy's ultimate ability allowed her to

resurrect all eliminated team members instead of flying independently. This was changed

after players complained that the ability created an incentive for Mercy not to heal her

team, a mechanic that, as *Overwatch* director Jeff Kaplan explained in a YouTube video

explaining the changes, was incongruous with Mercy's focus on healing.[14] It is notable that

Mercy's ability was changed to allow her freedom of movement. While other heroes'

ultimate abilities center around dealing damage to opponents or making the player and

their team temporarily stronger, Mercy's ultimate ability removes the limitations and

vulnerabilities of her movement; this speaks to the way that Mercy's vulnerability is born

out through the sensation of movement in play.

Pharah: Floating and Stillness

Aesthetically, there is a sort of symmetry between Pharah and Mercy; even in early

promotional art for the game, they are depicted as mirror images of one another (figure 1).

When Pharah is selected in the hero select screen, she salutes and draws back her

shoulders, and though she has no wings to spread, her posture is otherwise similar to

Mercy's: dignified, but vulnerable. But while Mercy's movement animations are graceful,

deliberate and flowing, Pharah's are fast and confident. Mercy rolls back her shoulder just

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[14] From "Developer Update | Hero Balance Updates | Overwatch," published on YouTube on
August 24th, 2017: "One of the problems we see with Mercy right now is there's a weird
behaviour that's encouraged by the core fundamental design of the hero, which is that if
you are a Mercy player and you're healing your team, and your ultimate is up [...] you have
this weird moment where you stop healing your team, you go into hiding, and you start to
tell your team, 'everybody die together! Die on the point! Die on the point, I have rez!' there
are people who might not be listening to you on your team who are yelling at you, 'why
aren't you healing?' [...] The team eventually wipes, and then Mercy swoops in, and does
her big resurrect. [...] We think it's wrong to tell a main healing character to go hide
somewhere and stop healing for a time."

slowly enough to suggest the kind of delicate vulnerability that she acts out through play; Pharah's pose, in contrast, is as fast and pointed as her rocket launching ability.

Figure 1: Pharah (back row, third from the left, in the blue armor) and Mercy (back row, fifth from the left, in the white coat with wings) almost mirror each other in this promotional artwork for Overwatch. Both hover off the ground and stand tall and straight, their bodies directly facing the viewer.

Pharah is a highly offensive hero characterized by her unique affinity for providing air support. She uses a jetpack and a slow-firing rocket launcher to hover in the air and fire high-impact shots at enemies; while skilled Pharah players can kill enemies with two direct shots, Pharah more often deals heavy damage to enemies without killing them, setting them up for kills by teammates on the ground. The sense of power enabled by Pharah's high vantage point is mitigated by her slow lateral movement and fragility: if Pharah is not careful she is easily shot down by focus fire or snipers, and as her rocket launchers only launch her upwards, she often cannot move laterally quickly enough to evade them. This means that in addition to relying on teammates on the ground to follow up on her airstrikes, Pharah must depend on healers to keep her healthy. Playing as Pharah is often a nerve-wracking experience: players must be brave enough to make quick and dangerous plays, and cautious enough to pull back from those engagements before she is killed. While

Mercy moves in a rhythm of hiding, flying, healing, and hiding again, Pharah moves in a similar, but offensively-inclined pattern: she shoots into the air, finds an angle of attack, fires off rockets, and returns to safe ground to regroup and heal. This constant push-pull rhythm, combined with the fact that Pharah must rely on her team to finish off her kills, can make Pharah seem powerless at times: just when hits start to feel impactful, she has to retreat to wherever her team's healer is or to a healing pack on the map, and hope that her teammates will finish what she started. During these retreats, especially when moving upwards serves no strategic purpose, Pharah's lateral movement becomes sluggish, and she becomes vulnerable to snipers and flankers looking to finish her off. Her ultimate ability, Barrage, serves as a temporary exaggeration of this tension: Pharah hovers in the air and barrages her opponents with a volley of rockets, rendering her at once extremely powerful and immobile (and thus vulnerable to counterattack). Here, as with Mercy, Pharah's movement and ability to impact the game are contingent on her team; with good team support, Pharah's movements are decisive and impactful, while with poor team support they can become sluggish and ineffective. This stands in contrast to other offensive characters who can play more independently.

Pharah/Mercy and the Mitigation of Affective Problematics

A Pharah/Mercy combination mitigates some of the affective risks inherent in playing as either character individually. Pharah's capacity for vertical movement means that she is often well-located as an escape for Mercy; Mercy can almost always find and fly to Pharah easily when the latter is in the air. This opens up movement for Mercy in a way other teammates cannot: via Pharah, Mercy is able to fly from teammate to teammate

without worrying about their positions relative to her, and as such, seeming sluggish or being run down are no longer a constant concern for her. This also means that Mercy's movement and access to space are no longer contingent on her team, but on Pharah alone. In this way, Pharah becomes an anchor for Mercy: it is often safer for her to stay close to Pharah because of the former's mobility, encouraging a sense that even if the player moves around the arena to heal others, she always returns to Pharah. In short, Pharah mitigates the problems of visibility and limited movement for Mercy, giving her a vantage point from which to survey the arena, a place to fly to when she is attacked, and a way to avoid depending on the rest of the team for protection (figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2: from their vantage point in the air, Mercy can heal Pharah, survey the arena below ...

Figure 3: ... and heal other teammates on the ground while avoiding enemy sightlines. Screenshots taken from the YouTube video "Pharmercy & Pro Moira" by user Eclyy.

Mercy, in turn, provides both healing and buffing for Pharah: the former allows her to sustain engagements more effectively, while the latter empowers her to act more independently from the rest of the team by following through on kills. The former allows her to sustain engagements more effectively. In this way, Mercy delimits Pharah's movement as well: with Mercy healing her, Pharah no longer has to retreat back to her team after initiating an engagement, and instead, she can traverse the map to find effective angles of attack with Mercy at her side. Mercy's buffing ability, meanwhile, empowers Pharah to act more independently from the rest of the team by following through on kills. With a Mercy helping her, Pharah no longer has to worry about feeling ineffective or dependent on her team; she can locate herself, move and make eliminations more independently. In this sense, as part of this combination Pharah becomes more secure, powerful and reliable, while Mercy becomes safer and more mobile.

Skilled Pharah/Mercy combinations communicate their location and movements so that they know when to push *together*, when to retreat *together* and when to regroup with the rest of their team. Skilled Pharah players locate themselves strategically so as to give Mercy an escape from encroaching enemies; effective Mercy players know when to return to Pharah, when to travel away from the rest of the team with her to find angles to flank or disrupt the enemies, and when to leave her alone. This creates a synchronous flow of gameplay that encourages both players to rely heavily on each other and to anticipate and nullify threats to each other.

One YouTube video, titled "Overwatch Pharmercy gameplay" and uploaded by YouTube user Dani, provides a useful example of this gameplay flow.[15][16] In it, the player, a Pharah, is on the defending team of an Egyptian-inspired map called the Temple of Anubis. On this arena, the attacking team must capture two points (A and B) by occupying each point uncontested for several seconds. In order to successfully defend, the defending team must prevent their opponents from capturing the points until the timer at the top of the screen runs out. This is generally done by holding a choke point – a bottleneck through which the attacking team must travel – and eliminating enemies who try to push through it. With Mercy just behind her, though, Pharah flies past the choke point into the open area just outside the enemy team's spawn camp (1:05). This leaves Pharah wide open to attack,

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[15] This video was published on May 27, 2017, meaning that the gameplay took place when Mercy's ultimate ability worked differently, prior to a recent update. In this earlier version, Mercy's ultimate ability resurrected all nearby teammates. In the current version, Mercy can resurrect a single teammate every thirty seconds, and again when she uses Valkyrie, the ultimate ability described in this thesis. The gameplay still holds up as a useful example of a Pharah/Mercy combination, as many of the strategies involving positioning and flanking are still used in the current version of the game.
[16] Following common practice among fans, I use female pronouns to refer to the players using Pharah and Mercy, regardless of what their own pronouns might be, because Pharah and Mercy the characters are both women.

but with Mercy constantly healing her, she is able to sustain the engagement and finish off her attackers after ducking briefly behind a wall (1:15, figures 4 and 5). When their enemies attempt to circle around them via a side door, Pharah and Mercy fly out right in front of the door and Pharah uses her ultimate ability and her rockets to stop their enemies from coming through while Mercy first buffs, and then heals her (2:10). Hearing that another enemy has made it to the capture point, they pull back to regroup with their team. Mercy is eliminated (2:30) and Pharah retreats to high ground near a health pack, where she remains until she can reconnect with her. They attempt to push back outwards towards the enemy spawn point, but their team is overrun by an enemy push, and after both Pharah and Mercy are eliminated, the first point is captured (4:45). Unlike the first point, though, the path to the second capture point involves a number of side roads and corridors rather than a single choke; Pharah and Mercy take advantage of these corridors to flank their opponents' new spawn point and to focus on one or two enemies at a time (7:15). This defense is successful: the enemy team is unable to successfully capture the second point.

Figure 4: While making a push (buffed by Mercy), Pharah is fired upon by an enemy Soldier: 76 ...

Figure 5: ... and ducks behind a wall as Mercy heals her, before re-engaging and taking him out. Note how Mercy's presence is formally rendered in two ways: by a health bar near the center of the screen (so that Pharah can see if Mercy loses health) and a translucent blue or yellow border (denoting either buffing or healing, respectively). Even though Pharah usually does not look at Mercy, Mercy's presence is always rendered at the peripheries as if surrounding her.

Notable is the way that Pharah and Mercy are separated from the rest of their team both by vertical space and by the positioning that it affords them; the pair often fly far away from the rest of the team to flank their opponents and defend particular angles of attack. They take circuitous routes through narrow corridors and bob up and down over cover.[17] Whether they use this distance to flank or to stay out of sight of snipers and covering fire, they always seem to be on their own. Mercy occasionally leaves Pharah to heal the rest of the team, but Pharah rarely has to worry about retreating or regrouping; rather, just as she is running low on health, Mercy appears next to her and heals her. In contrast, when Mercy is dead or separated from Pharah, Pharah must play much more cautiously, hiding near health packs and allowing teammates to finish off her kills.

Another YouTube video, titled "Pharmercy & Pro Moira" and uploaded by Eclyy, shows another Pharah/Mercy combination, this time from the perspective of the Mercy on an attacking team on the Hollywood map.[18] On this map, the attacking team must first take a capture point and then escort a vehicle – called the payload – across the map. Once again, Pharah and Mercy navigate corridors and pathways to flank opponents. From Mercy's perspective, though, a certain precarity becomes clear. For example, as the team captures the first point, Mercy flies ahead with Pharah to counter several oncoming enemies. Pharah flies off on her own and Mercy is at first unable to fly to her; she runs through a building and into an oncoming Genji before she can see Pharah again. The moment when Mercy faces Genji is fraught with anxiety; the sound and rush of motion that comes when she flies

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[17] In chapter two, I consider the intimacy of inefficient but necessary co-navigation in more detail in the case of *The Last Guardian.*

[18] This video was published on November 26th, 2017, and depicts gameplay from after the recent update to Mercy's ultimate ability.

to Pharah are almost like a sigh of relief (2:14). As Pharah flies into enemy fire, Mercy alternates between hiding behind cover and looking up frantically in search of Pharah, waiting for her to be within range to fly to and making sure she doesn't urgently need healing (2:26). As she flies next to Pharah she looks back down at her team to make sure they are healthy as well (2:33). This movement pattern repeats several times throughout the video; Mercy is always looking and darting between Pharah and the rest of the team, using Pharah as a booster to evade enemies and gain visibility, and above all, always moving. There is a special and temporal precarity about the whole video, as if Mercy is always running away from something that is just behind her, while her teammates are always in dire need of her help. In the midst of this, finding Pharah in the air and getting to her provides a split-second of relief and clarity; when Mercy dies and respawns without Pharah at the midpoint of the match, she jumps up and down and darts between teammates, glancing upwards for Pharah until the latter returns from the spawn point and she can join her in the air. Here, death – which renders the player a spectator of the game for ten seconds before they respawn at a designated point – creates a temporary anxious distance that also has the effect of confining Mercy to the ground.

The demarcation and separation of space and time by Pharah and Mercy figure prominently in both videos. The corridors, corners and flanks they occupy *together* become temporarily safe refuges from their enemies, from which they can watch their team and plan their next move. In this sense, airspace is only for Pharah and Mercy, creating the sense that they as a pair are isolated from the rest of the match. This isolation is realized temporally as well: the moment Mercy reaches Pharah in the air and heals her is a moment of safety for both, a moment when Mercy doesn't have to run away and when Pharah can

prepare to finish off their enemies. This moment is necessarily precarious: it is marked as such by the shaky, floating way the pair drift towards the ground, unable to fly indefinitely, just as their space in the air is quickly made unsafe by enemy fire. But it is precisely within this tension where the Pharah/Mercy combination becomes intimate: between constant threats and moments of respite, between being isolated in space and exposed to the enemy, Pharah finds stability in Mercy's presence, and Mercy finds comfort in Pharah's. In the midst of tense fighting, Pharah and Mercy find each other in the air, and the air – and that moment – brim with intimacy.

Intimacy, Synchronicity, Queerness

I understand this as the intimacy of synchronicity. Previously in this chapter, I have used the word "flow" to describe the rhythms of gameplay actions and movements inherent in a Pharah/Mercy combination. Here, I nod towards, but distance myself from, the "flow" of flow theory, a state of "complete absorption" (Nakamura and Czikszentmihalyi 89) in an activity characterized by "intense and focused concentration," an orientation in the present, and the "loss of reflective self-consciousness" (90). It is useful here to demarcate these gameplay rhythms as specifically oriented in the present, but my "flow" is not centered on self-control, mastery and the autotelic self as much as on the loss of unified control that comes with relying on the other player. Synchronicity, then, denotes a form of flowing-with characterized by a present-oriented absorption in the rhythms of gameplay that is always precarious, always in danger of falling out of step.

In "No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt," Bonnie Ruberg argues for the queerness of pleasurable gameplay

experiences that are not fun. Defining queerness as "about being different and desiring differently" (113), Ruberg mobilizes Jack Halberstam's discussions of masochism and kink as "systems of counter-normative desires that, like the no-fun play experience, reject standard understandings of pleasure and create new possibility spaces for queer experience" (114) in order to read no-fun games as queer on the levels of design, play practices and discourse. Ruberg defines six possible affective categories of no-fun games: disappointing, annoying, boring, alarming, sad, and hurtful.

I want to expand this system to include intimacy. As discussed in the previous chapter, intimacy is uncomfortable; it edges on disappointment, embarrassment and pain, to the extent that it can be easier to opt out of an intimate encounter than to remain within it. In the case of Pharah and Mercy, this edging makes itself felt in Mercy's sluggish grounded moments away from Pharah; in the cautious, hit-and-run combat style that Pharah must employ when Mercy is separated from her; in the precarity with which the pair fly together in the air, at once a mobile vantage point and a space that leaves them exposed and vulnerable to enemy fire. A Pharah/Mercy pairing can quickly become painful, too: when Pharah dies in enemy territory, for example, it often makes more sense strategically for Mercy to eliminate herself by flying off the map than to remain. And there is a poignant desperation that occurs when Mercy flies to Pharah to heal her, only to be caught and killed in crossfire in the process.

Further, when communication breaks down,[19] or when the pair fall out of their synchronized rhythm, the Pharah/Mercy combination can become fragile and even futile.

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[19] It should be noted here that *Overwatch* players can communicate via voice chat, though many choose not to in order to avoid harassment and toxicity. The nuances of voice chat are difficult to read here since they are so contingent on individual players, but the efficacy

When Pharah fails to adequately protect her, Mercy becomes stranded and isolated in space, away from the rest of her team and frighteningly dependent on Pharah for mobility; in my own negative play experiences, I found myself glancing constantly upwards, hoping to see Pharah in the air and finding her either hidden behind buildings or too far away to fly to. Meanwhile, playing as Pharah without a reliable Mercy becomes frustrating as expected heals and damage boosts don't come at the right time, leaving Pharah vulnerable to enemy attacks and surviving opponents.

Moreover, even a successful Pharah/Mercy combination involves negative affects lingering at the edges in the form of the rest of the team. In the video by Dany, Pharah and Mercy drift together increasingly far from the control point, leaving their team behind as they fly into isolated corridors and vantage points. Their positioning means that it is not feasible for Mercy to return to the team to heal them, nor can Pharah easily coordinate with the other offensive characters to assist on each other's kills. This is not uncommon when a Pharah/Mercy combination is part of a team: their communication and synchronicity with each other trumps their interactions with the other four team members, leaving them at the edges – affectively, but also in terms of their physical positioning – of their intimacy.

Rather than push these experiences to the margins or read them as necessary hurdles towards the pleasurable experience of winning a match, I argue that these negative sensations are integral aspects of the Pharah/Mercy combination insofar as they always linger at the edges of play. In this way, intimacy is not precisely a no-fun affect, but it isn't exactly fun, either; it is an uneasy alliance of positive and negative affects, a kind of

with which Pharah and Mercy players use the voice chat to communicate can make a significant difference to their success as a team.

synchronicity between negative and positive that here is borne out through the constant threat of negative sensations.

This edging can be seen as a form of pleasure disconnected from fun or its promise. Jack Halberstam gestures towards the queer potential of taking pleasure in failure, arguing that within the context of heteronormative social expectations, "the queer becomes the failure logic. In a homophobic logic, the queer fails to be straight, literally;" therefore, to "refuse the game" by accepting failure, "that acceptance in failure, that investment in failure, that excitement about failure, is the queer art of failure" (202). In a discussion with Jesper Juul and Bonnie Ruberg at the 2013 *Queerness and Games* Conference, he noted the connection between this queerness as refusal to take part in heteronormative goal- or success-oriented paradigms, and the way that the pleasures of disorientation in games are "connected […] to distinctly other forms of pleasure, not just goal-oriented, pleasure-filled, success-oriented pleasure. In fact, it might deliver you to a place of desolation or being lost, but we pursue it nonetheless" (205). Indeed, the disorienting flight patterns and fragile dependencies of the Pharah/Mercy combination often lead not to success-oriented pleasure, but to failure: even if one match is successful, subsequent matches often devolve into losses against increasingly difficult opponents.

In *Queer Phenomenology,* Sara Ahmed also formulates queerness in terms of disorientation, writing that in comparison to the "straight" lines of heterosexual orientation, "queer orientations might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world 'slantwise' allow other objects to come into view. A queer orientation might be one that does not overcome what is "off line," and hence acts out of line with others" (84). Ahmed describes the way her own phenomenological experiences as queer have made her

body extend "less easily into space," forcing her to "hesitate, as I notice what is in front of me." This hesitation has changed her "bodily relation to the world, and has even given the world a new shape" (78). But while a queer orientation creates phenomenological problems for Ahmed, it also carries a certain potential within the "everyday negotiation" of "inhabiting the queer slant": "In such loving and living we learn to feel the oblique in the slant of its slant as another kind of gift. We would not aim to overcome the disorientation of the queer moment, but instead inhabit the intensity of its moment" (84).

She describes moments of disorientation in terms resonant to the Pharah/Mercy combination, as "bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground. [...] The body might be reoriented if the hand that reaches out finds something to steady an action. Or the hand might reach out and find nothing, and might grasp instead the indeterminacy of air. The body in losing its support might then be lost, undone, thrown" (133). Once again she returns to the notion of inhabiting the present, describing such moments as ones "in which you lose one perspective, but the 'loss' itself is not empty or waiting; it is an object, thick with presence."

Pharah and Mercy, too, operate within a constant negotiation of positive and negative affects, an affective cycle of disorientation and reorientation in vertical space and in rhythm. As with Ahmed, this forces one not to overcome disorientation, but to inhabit its intensity, as precarious as it is. Ultimately, "the point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do—whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope" (133). Perhaps for fans – for whom the affective power of the Pharah/Mercy combination makes speculating on a romance between the two extremely resonant – these moments offer such

hope. Pharah and Mercy's intimacy – an intimacy that edges on negativity, a synchronicity that always threatens to fall out of step – creates, in Ruberg's words, "new possibility spaces for queer experience" (114) based both in an affective valence resonant with queer experiences and in the depiction of an intimacy between two women.

The Collaborative Survival of Pharah and Mercy

What, then, do the Pharah/Mercy combination and the Pharmercy pairing say about multiplayer online games more broadly? Here, I return to the notion of precarity. I have used the term precarity in this chapter so far to describe the fragile, edging quality of the intimacy of synchronicity, the way one is always aware, even as they inhabit the intense moments of disorientation and reorientation in space and time that comprise a Pharah/Mercy combination, that pain, frustration and anxiety linger just a moment away. But precarity is also a term I use with an eye towards the political connotations it carries as a contemporary ontological condition of uncertainty.

Delineating the relationship between the sensing of precarious intimacy in online multiplayer games, and precarity as a social, economic and ontological condition brought on by neoliberal capitalism, is not within the purview of this thesis. However, there is something to be said here about the potential of the precarious, synchronous present of a Pharah/Mercy combination. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Tsing describes precarity as "life without the promise of stability," as "the condition of trouble without end" (2), but also as "a state of acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others" (29). Tsing tracks the commerce and ecology of matsutake mushrooms in order to conceive of a path towards "collaborative survival in precarious times" (2); for Tsing, looking at precarity

through the case of the matsutake mushroom "makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible" (20). This experience of indeterminacy occurs in part through messy, contaminated collaborations and unpredictable encounters; here, Tsing draws out a complex, entangled relationship between collaboration, survival, vulnerability and precarity. What happens when we view the Pharah/Mercy combination – or collaboration, or encounter – through Tsing's schema? If Pharah/Mercy is an experience of intimacy through precarious synchronicity, isn't it also, like the matsutake mushroom, a kind of collaborative survival through an encounter with precarity?

In "Finding the Queerness in Games," Colleen Macklin posits that games carry the unique – and uniquely queer – potential to, quoting José Muñoz, create space for players to "dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" (Muñoz qtd. Macklin 251). Perhaps, then, the disorienting, synchronous intimacy of Pharah/Mercy allows for an enacting of a precarious, collaborative, queer way of being in the world.

It might be tempting to assume, particularly in online multiplayer games, that disorientation and failure and their accompanying negative affects should be minimized in favour of the positive sensations that come with victory and mastery over opponents. But the intimacy of Pharah and Mercy is defined by a negotiation between positive and negative affects – its pleasures of synchronicity are to be found not only in safety and strength, but in uncertainty and vulnerability. This suggests a potential in online multiplayer games to be not only sites for competition, but for forms of "collaborative survival in precarious times" (Tsing 2) that create space for an "acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others" (Tsing 29). Understanding the queer potential of this vulnerability

has the potential to elucidate other intimacies, other indeterminacies, other survivals. In the next chapter, we turn to *The Last Guardian* to consider another form of survival, one in which, rather than lingering at the edges of play and in moments of failure, negative sensations themselves come to create and define a different sort of intimacy: an intimacy defined by frustration.

Chapter 2: The Monster Has Kind Eyes: The Intimacy of Frustration in *The Last Guardian*

In chapter 1, I considered the Pharah/Mercy combination in *Overwatch* in terms of an intimacy defined by synchronous bursts of free-flying movement. While the intimacy of synchronicity always edged on negativity – and in doing so, problematized the distinction between positive and negative affects – the Pharah/Mercy combo, when it works well, moves fluidly and powerfully. But what happens when even in the most intimate moments, movement is still frustrating? What happens when intimacy is defined not by the capacity for movement, but by the inability to move exactly right, by the constant renegotiation of and reorientation within movement and space? In short, how might we theorize an intimacy defined not by synchronicity but by frustration?

The Last Guardian is a 2016 single-player adventure game that closely follows the relationship between an unnamed young boy and a giant gryphon-like creature, referred to as Trico,[20] as they navigate the ruins of an ancient, apparently technologically-advanced civilization. The player controls the boy, who is small and weak – he is incapable of fighting any of the ghostly suits of armor that he and Trico encounter throughout the game, and he often cannot physically traverse the massive, vertical ruins in which the game takes place without falling or stumbling. Meanwhile, Trico, who accompanies the boy, protects him from danger and is essentially impervious to harm, able to withstand and recover from great falls, spear wounds and fights with other creatures; however, Trico is vulnerable to

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[20] In *The Last Guardian,* "Trico" refers both to the species and to the individual: the opening credits label a drawing of the species as "Trico" along other drawings of animals, mythological and otherwise, labeled with their Latin Binominal nomenclature; additionally, at one point in the game the boy describes another creature of the same species as "another Trico."

hunger, distraction, fear and to the lingering effects of traumas it has apparently suffered at the hands of something in the place where the boy finds it. The boy and Trico, neither fully able to traverse the space they find themselves in, must work together to locate food, overcome obstacles and defeat enemies.

The Last Guardian was developed by Team ICO, a Japanese game studio known for focusing on character relationships through mechanics; as games writer Mark Brown put it in his YouTube video essay on the subject, "there's *ICO*, which is about forging a friendship with a girl; next came *Shadow of the Colossus,* which is about toppling giant mythological beasts; and now there's *The Last Guardian*, which cleverly rounds out this triptych by being a game about forging a friendship with a giant mythological beast." Critical and audience responses to the game were mixed: though the game was praised for its map design, graphics and for the emotional resonance of the bond between the boy and Trico, many critics took issue with the game's controls, particularly as they pertain to Trico. Philip Kollar for Polygon writes, "if the main character annoys because he moves exactly as you'd expect a little boy to, then Trico annoys because it acts exactly as you'd expect a cat to act. […] It makes for a realistic depiction of my favorite house pet, but it's terrible gameplay." Kollar's criticism encapsulates an issue expressed by many players online: Trico does not always respond in the way that one expects or wants, and this is deeply frustrating. This is made doubly so by the game's structure, in which the player can often do nothing but call out to Trico and wait for it to understand and follow their commands – sometimes for long stretches of time. Other critics have praised the game for this exact point, however: writing for TIME Magazine, Matt Peckham notes that "Impatient players may balk at the way Trico sometimes ignores them, or how much time can pass before he'll act in accord with their

wishes. That would be a mistake and a misreading. The game's contemplative sequences are as meaningful and essential as its fast and furious ones."[21] This rather polarized reception speaks to a broader tension in video games culture with the idea of losing control, of being patient and accommodating, of having to wait; *The Last Guardian* exposes and complicates these notions by framing them in the context of a human-animal relationship. Here we return to intimacy: what is intimate, and what is revealed about intimacy, by a frustrating encounter with an animal defined by helplessness and waiting?

In this chapter, I read *The Last Guardian* for the intimacy of frustration. I argue that the intimate relationship between the boy and Trico could not have come about without the moments of frustration, slowness and the inability to move properly. While *Overwatch* conceives of intimacy as presenting a solution to the problem of limited movement – while always threatening its return – *The Last Guardian* understands intimacy as *always* frustrating, never quite liberating or powerful, as a negotiation that is never quite resolved. But, *The Last Guardian* suggests, perhaps the negotiation itself is pleasurable, not for the promise of eventually winning or working past the frustration or being able to move properly, but for the vulnerability that comes with the process of negotiating in the first place. First, I leverage Harold Schweizer's theory of waiting as well as Spinoza's affect theory in order to create a theoretical framework for understanding frustration. With this framework in mind, I examine the forms of Trico and the boy for their differing and yet supplementary frustrations, read for the ways the two must move together through the highly vertical environment in which they find themselves, and how this verticality

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[21] Peckham uses male gender pronouns to refer to Trico, but there is no physical indication or description in the game of Trico's gender; this essay uses *it*, both to denote this gender neutrality and to distinguish Trico from the boy, who uses *he* pronouns.

modulates the forms of frustration with which they must contend. Finally, returning to the notion of waiting, I read the communication between Trico and the boy, and the waiting it entails, to understand the temporal qualities of *The Last Guardian's* frustrations. In my conclusion, I gesture towards Donna Haraway's notions of companion species and the oddkin to describe the complex intimacy that takes place between the boy, Trico and the player.

Theorizing Frustration

In order to understand the meaning and significance of the intimacy of frustration in *The Last Guardian*, we must first define what we mean by frustration. *Frustration* and *frustrate* come from the Latin term *frustra,* which means "without effect, to no purpose, without cause, uselessly, in vain, [or] for nothing" (Lewis and Short). Frustration is thus connected both to the incapacity to affect things and to a lack of purpose or teleology – to act *for nothing* is at once to act with no cause and with no effect. We will return later to the notion of acting without cause when I examine space and verticality in *The Last Guardian;* for now, frustration's relationship to the capacity to affect things also brings us back to Spinoza's foundational definition of affect as "the modifications of the body whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished, aided or constrained, and also the ideas of such modification" (III). Spinoza endeavors to "consider human actions and desires in exactly the same manner, as though I were concerned with lines, planes, and solids," and so he is deeply concerned in his descriptions with the concrete ways affects alter the capacity of a body to act. Though this reading of affect strictly in terms of the increase or decrease of bodily capacities has been complicated by more recent scholarship, it is useful

as a framework through which to understand frustration. With this notion of affect in mind, I consider frustration as an encounter with the inability of one's body to affect other bodies or be affected, a duration that forces one to stay with that inability.

Here, I draw from Harold Schweizer's *On Waiting,* in which he unpacks the notion of waiting through Henri Bergson's notion of duration. For Shweitzer, while waiting, "the time that is felt and consciously endured seems slow, thick, opaque, unlike the transparent, inconspicuous time in which we accomplish our tasks and meet our appointments" (16); he describes these moments as perceptions of enduring which, "because they are intimate, are vexingly uncomfortable" (18), causing the waiter to fidget, pace, complain and consult their watch. But waiting also opens up the waiter to the potential to perceive duration, if only for a moment – and "it is in this fleeting moment that the waiter is conscious of her intimate existential duration, of her having lingered in time, of time having lingered in her. Her realization of her duration is as momentary and tenuous as the dreamer's remembrance of his dream" (20). It is interesting that Schweizer uses the word *intimate* to refer to these moments of waiting that become encounters with duration. Indeed, the intimate moment as discussed in the introduction to this thesis bears significant similarities with Schweizer's waiting: they are both tenuous and precarious, uncomfortable and sometimes unbearable. Likewise, just as frustration is an encounter with the body's incapacities, waiting is an encounter with the body's duration, with the body's existence in time and therefore its finitude. As we will see, in *The Last Guardian* frustration and waiting often come together, when the boy and player, unable to affect the world on their own, must wait for Trico to act for them. Frustration itself is connected to waiting through this finitude; in waiting, one

becomes aware that their bodies are lodged in time just as they are lodged in space by the inability to move through it.

It is with this definition of frustration that we can begin to consider the forms of the boy and Trico: if frustration is located in the inability of a body, then we must begin by understanding how exactly Trico's and the boy's bodies frustrate, in what ways they are useless.

The Boy: Controllable Helplessness

From the first moments of *The Last Guardian,* the unnamed boy controlled by the player seems not to fit in in the world of the game. For one, this is manifested aesthetically. In contrast with the dark blues and greens of the cavern in which he wakes up, his clothes are creamy white and orange. While the world around him is thick with the textures of decay – rust, worn stones, moss and grass – the boy's skin and hair are smooth and glossy. Though the world has already marked him both physically and mentally – he stumbles drearily in his first moments, his body covered in tattoos apparently given to him here – he stands out from it. Even his face seems out of place: while the rest of the world is rendered with a photorealistic aesthetic, his large, round eyes and small nose are reminiscent of Japanese *anime.* This sense of not fitting in is similarly rendered by the clumsy way the boy moves through the game space: even when he falls only a short distance he crumples to the ground; when he pulls levers or pushes on objects, he can only do so with great difficulty; when he jumps for distant ledges, he is often only barely able to grasp them. Even when he climbs atop Trico's back, the beast's movements startle him, topple him over and yank him around. When he and Trico encounter enemies in the form of possessed suits of armor that

guard the ruins, the boy can do little but push at them ineffectually; they harm him by grabbing him and dragging him towards a door, which causes a game over if walked through. In their grip it is all the player can do to mash buttons on the controller as the boy flails around, which sometimes – though not often – frees him from them before they get to the door. The enemies, in turn, can shoot runes at the boy, which stun and daze him. When he is hurt or waking up from having fainted, the player's inputs at first only stir his body or cause him to move very slowly; in fact, the boy faints numerous times throughout the game regardless of what the player does. In short, the boy is defined by an extremely limited capacity to affect the world around him.

More colloquially, the website TVTropes – a publicly-editable encyclopedia similar to Wikipedia which organizes popular media in terms of common tropes – describes several moments in the game in terms of "Controllable Helplessness." The website describes this trope as "a point at which you can be captured or restrained, and not able to move around, but you can still control your character. This might mean being able to wriggle around in your bonds, walk around in your prison cell, what have you, until you either die or are rescued." In one clear example of this, the boy becomes trapped in a round cage; the player can control the boy and roll the cage around an area delimited by impassable ledges, but cannot open the cage or get out of the area until Trico returns over a minute later. The sense of powerless urgency created by this controllable helplessness is amplified by the reason why the boy is in the cage in the first place: he closed himself inside in order to escape another Trico creature who was hunting him, who has left for the moment but may return later.

Though TVTropes uses Controllable Helplessness to refer to specific gameplay instances within *The Last Guardian*, the term is an apt description for the boy's affects in general. There is almost always only one way to escape a bad situation or one path through a space in which the boy can fit; these paths often involve desperate scrambling over decaying platforms, patient waiting for Trico to understand where to go next, or sheer luck. Occasionally, even when the player and the boy do everything right, the boy may miss a ledge or fail to grasp Trico properly, resulting in a game over as he falls off a cliff to his death. This is perhaps due to sluggish and sometimes unresponsive controls, which itself only amplifies frustration for the player: the game's inconsistent controls mirror the boy's inconsistent helplessness, creating a sense of limited affect for both character and player.

Trico: Uncontrollable Affect

In contrast to the boy's inability to affect the world around him, Trico is defined by immense affective power that thwarts the promise of purposeful movement. Its stomps, jumps and leaps invariably destroy the ruins through which it moves with the boy, felling entire structures, creating passages and making others impassable. This goes for the boy as well: though it makes attempts to move without harming the boy, Trico often accidentally knocks him over as it moves past him or approaches him. When Trico jumps with the boy on its back, his body jostles violently around to the extent that even the character model cannot keep up: numerous times when jumping I witnessed the boy's body spin around in a way that should have broken his arms. That Trico is so powerful as to cause the boy's body to glitch speaks to its enormous capacity to affect the game world.

Trico's affects extend even to the camera, which frequently focuses on its movements while often being unable to capture its body in its entirety. In one scene, the boy must coax Trico into a pool of water with food; as the boy looks for the food, the camera gravitates towards Trico's body above the water as it prepares to jump and finds itself unable to. When Trico finally jumps in, it makes such waves in the pool that the boy is knocked off his feet and into the water, jostling the camera as well. While the boy is defined by his inability to affect the world of the game, Trico is unable to move through the game space *without* affecting it; further, its affects are so powerful that they exceed the limitations of the game's mechanics and camera.

Here, two distinct forms of frustration become clear: first, the frustration rendered by the boy's inability to affect the world; second, the frustration rendered by the inability of the game system to contain Trico's affects. This second form of frustration is also created via the boy's relationship with Trico's body: indeed, the boy's interactions with Trico are defined by the constant attempt and ultimate inability to contend with its form.

Trico and Form

The Last Guardian makes one thing immediately clear: its concern with Trico's form. The game's opening credits pan and fade over several pen-and-ink drawings of animals from insects, birds of prey, bats, dogs and cats to mythical animals: unicorns, gryphons, dragons and phoenixes. The final image is of Trico itself (fig. 1).

Stylistically, the images evoke a lineage of animal studies drawings that were at once observational and speculative. One reference is the Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer, famous at his time for his drawings of animals. Dürer's woodcut drawing *The Rhinoceros*

(fig. 2), based on an anonymous sketch and second-hand account of a rhinoceros brought to Lisbon from India in 1515, became for Europeans the definitive image of a Rhinoceros until well into the 18th century, despite the fact that Dürer had never seen a rhinoceros before (Valsamas). The detailed textures and focus on line lend the image an air of authenticity, but many of these details, like the spiral horn on the rhinoceros's back and the armor-esque quality of its skin, were inaccurate.

The drawings also evoke the illustrations in the works of Charles Darwin, such as those by T.W. Wood. In a series of drawings for Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Wood focuses on the bodily and facial expressions of animals in particular emotional states as a complement to Darwin's observations and discussions of the ways emotions are expressed across species.[22]

Both referents serve as testaments to the verisimilitude of an animal body through a concern with the specific textures and lines of its form. Further, the introductory sequence begins with images of animals whose forms, gestures and behaviors we find familiar – bees swarming around a nest, a bird preparing to fly, a cat in an aggressive stance – and transitions to increasingly fantastical animals, creating a throughline of behavior and form between animals with which we are familiar and upon which we must speculate. For example, by the time we see Trico's face, we also see in its smooth, long shape and large, dark eyes echoes of the faces of the dog, cat, goat, and gryphon.

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[22] See in particular figures 9, *Cat, Savage, and Prepared to Fight;* 10, *Cat in an Affectionate Frame of Mind*; and 15, *Cat Terrified at a Dog,* in The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animal.

Figure 6: the pen-and-ink sketch of Trico featured during the opening credits of *The Last Guardian.*

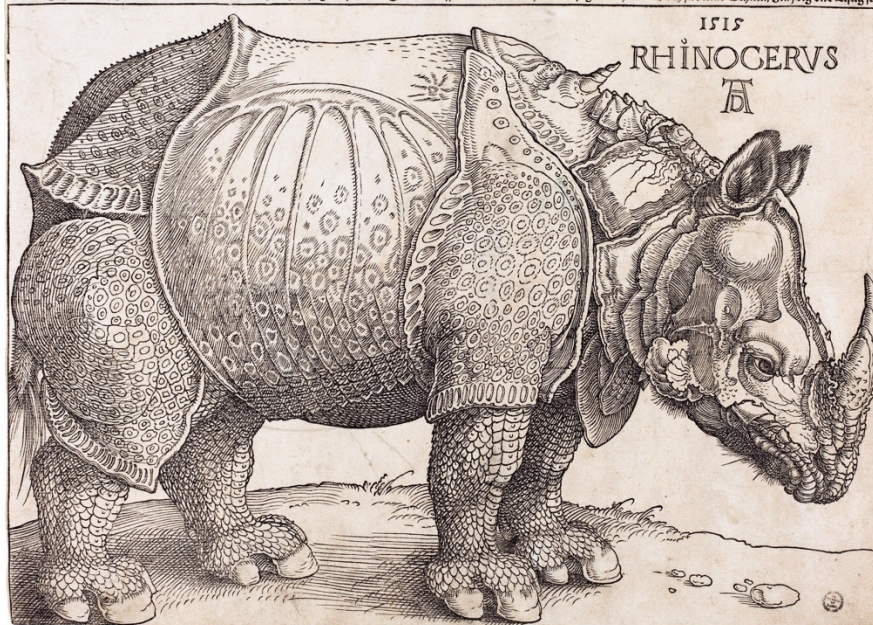*Figure 7: The Rhinoceros* by Albrecht Dürer, 1515.

This is the first image we see of Trico in the game proper; in this way, we are introduced to Trico's body as an amalgamation of formal properties that is at once alien and familiar. It is interesting, then, that *The Last Guardian*'s mechanics center around consideration of Trico's form and behavior. Climbing to a place out of the boy's reach, for

instance, involves recognizing Trico's relative height, finding a way to climb its body, and finding a stable vantage point on its back from which to jump off. Other maneuvers require climbing up and down Trico's long tail, waiting for it to jump up on its hind legs to examine something and then climbing its body, or jumping down onto the safety of its body from great heights. Even the act of climbing Trico itself creates a certain familiarity with the textures of its feathers and fur. By moving up and down Trico's body over the course of the game, the player traces out the contours of its form in a way reminiscent of the attention to form in the pen-and-ink drawings; attention to form, empathy and spatial awareness become deeply entangled. Throughout these explorations, the camera is often unable to show Trico's form in its entirety; the player, through control of the camera, is inculcated in the usually-futile process of trying to fit Trico in to the frame. At the same time, the player attempts to communicate with Trico; the boy pets its fur, calls out to it, and looks up at it. In response, Trico looks back down at the boy and makes eye contact with it; there are many moments throughout the game when the boy and Trico stand still and look at each other, though there is no way for the player to capture this gaze with the camera.

Moments like these encapsulate the intimacy of frustration of *The Last Guardian:* an intimacy defined by a constant, often-futile negotiation, a push-pull that is never resolved but that nonetheless becomes intimate. This intimacy becomes mapped onto space as Trico and the boy struggle to move through the game's ruined world.

Scale, Verticality, and Progression

The first real introduction to the spatiality of *The Last Guardian* happens about an hour into the game, when Trico and the boy emerge for the first time from a cave. Trico

runs out ahead of the boy into an open area from the mouth of the cave, and in one of the game's few cutscenes, the camera tilts upwards from behind Trico to reveal a tower so tall that it disappears into the sky. The camera cuts to a long shot of Trico, now dwarfed by the incredible verticality of the space and distressed at its inability to fly to the top of the tower. Even when the camera returns to the boy's control, the tower is so tall that there is no angle from which you can see the top. The ruins the player traverses over the course of the game are similar: they are impossibly tall, too large for either Trico or the boy to traverse, decrepit, and seemingly purposeless, with extended passageways that lead nowhere and infinitely high ceilings.

The Last Guardian is a linear game; there is little exploration involved beyond discovering how to progress to the next area. This is complicated, however, by the way that the space is experienced as linear because of the limited capacity of Trico's and the boy's bodies to move through it. This is rendered in a few ways. For one, locations recur throughout the game – the tower Trico and the boy see in the above scene reappears in the distance at several points later on and ultimately becomes their final destination in the game. Other areas, like a long bridge or an open landing area, can be seen in the distance before Trico and the boy get to them. The pair never finds a map of the space, however, and they spend most of the game inside caves or buildings; as a result, the player never becomes familiar enough with the space to understand its topography. Like the camera's inability to capture the space in its entirety, this adds to the sense of the space being too large and too tall for the pair to comprehend. Along a similar vein, there are some locations to which Trico and the boy physically return; however, invariably they are unable to move through them in the same way they could have before, and must find a different path that

wasn't available the first time around. This has the effect of giving a glimpse into the potentiality of the space limited by Trico and the boy's bodies; when circumstances convene (via a collapsed building or fallen rock) so that they can move through the space in different ways, new places open up to them that hint at other paths they are so far unable to follow. On that note, there are a number of pathways throughout the game that Trico and the boy simply can't follow, either because they are blocked off or because they are too large or too small for the pair to move through. The cutscene at the bottom of the tower at the beginning of the game serves as a microcosm of the space's logic more generally: it serves as a constant reminder of the things Trico and the boy can't do, the places they can't go. The result of this is a sense of desperation combined with a hyper-awareness of both the boy's and Trico's bodies – the player is constantly made to look at the space in terms of how they might fit (or fail to fit) through it.

At the same time, the differing negative abilities of Trico and the boy to fit through space draws positive attention to distance and scale at several points throughout the game. There are several points when the boy must separate from Trico in order to open a pathway for it to follow him (either by opening a door or destroying a glass eye); whenever the boy leaves Trico alone, Trico's howls and whines echo off the walls and cliffs, reminding the player of its absence and of the vast scale of the space. The act of closing the distance after opening these paths is often given particular attention. In one section, the pair must cross a crumbling old wooden bridge that extends down into a chasm so deep it is impossible to see the bottom. With the boy's guidance, Trico eventually jumps across a gap too wide for the boy to cross. As it lands on the bridge across the gap, the bridge falls down enough that the boy just might be able to make the distance, with Trico waiting on the

other side. As he boy jumps, time slows and the sound of the boy's leap transitions into a processed, almost metallic *whoosh*, and the camera follows the boy from above as he freefalls towards the chasm. Trico's head appears from the top of the frame and it catches him in its mouth, and as they make contact, time speeds up again and the *whoosh* is cut off by Trico's grunting breaths. As Trico lifts the boy to a safe place on the bridge, he shakes and squirms in its mouth, the player powerless to do anything else until it puts him down; in contrast to the jump, at this moment the game is utterly silent.

This moment and others like it emphasize the tight connection in *The Last Guardian* between the limitations of Trico's and the boy's bodies, vertical space, and temporality. From the exaggerated verticality of the bridge, to the difference in scale between Trico and the boy emphasized by the camera angles, to the slowing of time itself as the boy leaps across the gap, the entire section is anchored around this moment of extended precarity, a moment that emphasizes the boy's inability to cross the gap on his own.[23] This begs the question: if the spatial architecture of the game was designed to create these painfully long moments of precarity – moments which, if the player jumps just a little too early or late, can end in the boy falling to his death – then what relationship does *The Last Guardian* articulate between frustration and time?

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[23] It is interesting to note that it is possible, if the player doesn't execute the jump correctly, for Trico to fail to catch the boy, resulting in a Game Over and forcing the player to restart from an earlier checkpoint and attempt the jump again. This serves to extend the precarious moment even longer and accentuates the sensation of frustration and incapacity.

Temporality and Communication: Two Kinds of Waiting

We might divide *The Last Guardian* into two kinds of long moments. The first is of a type mentioned above: moments of a distance being closed that are bloated by slow motion, exaggerated sound and vertical space. The second type of moment, which takes up perhaps the majority of the game, is waiting.

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, one source of frustration on the part of reviewers and audiences of the game was that Trico doesn't always listen to the player's commands. Throughout the game, the player often relies on Trico to jump, climb, walk or stand at particular points in order to access the next area. The player can call out to Trico or use one of several commands, which the boy acts out in exaggerated fashion, to encourage Trico towards certain places. The commands are never precisely defined, but they are mapped to the same buttons that the player uses to control the boy to perform certain actions – namely, to jump, hit, grab and crouch – and to an extent they encourage Trico to respond by doing the same thing. However, the commands are extremely unreliable. Sometimes Trico fails to understand them; sometimes, it appears not to listen or to be reluctant to follow the directive; other times, commands that should encourage Trico to do one thing instead inspire it to do another. In practice, the player and the boy end up waiting for Trico more often than not. Returning to Schweizer, these moments become "slow, thick, opaque" (16), compelling the player to fidget and pace, to move around so as to occupy the time. Several times during my own play experience, frustrated at Trico's failure to respond to my command, I began cycling through all the commands one after the other, and the sight of the boy haplessly flailing his arms and yelling to Trico became rather

comical.[24] Of course, compounding this frustration at waiting for Trico is the frustration of the boy's body's inability to act on its own. With the boy's constant fumbles, falls and struggles in mind, his exaggerated, ultimately purposeless movement becomes an encapsulation of *The Last Guardian's* spatial and temporal frustrations.

These long moments of waiting are punctuated by interactions with Trico that emphasize the boy's and Trico's vulnerability. In one scene, Trico and the boy approach a large, glowing room resembling a massive, Trico-sized cage. Trico is extremely reluctant to jump down into the cage from a platform above, and when the boy finally manages to coax it down, Trico is taken over by a mechanical crystalline object in the cage and becomes hostile towards the boy. No matter what the boy does or how long he avoids it, Trico will catch up to him and eat him. Impatience from so much time waiting gives way to total vulnerability, and the familiarity of Trico's form created through haptic engagement becomes suddenly horrifying as that massive form is leveraged against the boy's tiny body.

Here, what could be read as payoff to hours of waiting is simply another form of frustration. Like the distance-closing moments described earlier, this frustration is marked by formal intensity that is extended too long, though in this case the extension is created by the player attempting in vain to avoid Trico long enough to survive. Given these structural and formal similarities, we might denote two forms of frustration in *The Last Guardian*: the frustration of waiting, and the frustration of something awaited happening (figure 3).

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[24] This structure is evocative of the meta-affects Sianne Ngai discusses in *Ugly Feelings.*

Category	Frustration of waiting	Frustration of happening
Temporality	A long moment or indeterminate amount of time	A short, finite moment formally bloated by slow motion or shocking difference from that which preceded it
Formal intensity	Formal lack (silence, relative flatness)	Formal intensity (loud music/sound, exaggerated verticality)
Movement	Frustrated movement – either stillness or repetitive, hapless motions	Sudden movement – fast (but not fast enough?) (jumping, running)
Space	Inability of the body marked by distance (I am so far from where I need to be and I can't close the distance)	Inability of the body marked by proximity (am I close enough? Am I fast enough?)

Figure 8: a diagram denoting the two forms of frustration in The Last Guardian.

Intimacy and the Animal

I have written at length in this chapter about the many frustrations of *The Last Guardian*, but as of yet we have only seen intimacy come in at the margins. The bloated moments of closing the distance between the boy and Trico were evocative of the intimate sensations described in the introduction to this thesis: the precarity of the moment of the jump, the vulnerability to Trico's actions and to the vertical space, and the present-oriented temporal focus at the moment of contact with Trico's form all evoke intimacy. But what is intimate about the extended moments of inability described above, or the genuine horror created by the (fulfilled, several times) potential of Trico to eat the boy? Here, I must finally ask a deceptively simple question that, like intimacy, has lingered in the margins of our

frustrations until now: how do we define the specific relationship between the boy and Trico?

Earlier in this thesis, I used Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the becoming-animal as a cornerstone in my definition of affect. Indeed, the way that the becoming-animal imagines the horse purely in terms of its affects, and therefore understands affects as relational with and within broader assemblages, is quite useful. But here, I want to return to the becoming-animal to articulate why it is insufficient, and perhaps even detrimental, to my understanding of Trico and human-animal interactions in *The Last Guardian.* Deleuze and Guattari delineate three forms of animals: Oedipal animals, State animals and demonic animals. The first encompasses individual animals and family pets, which Deleuze and Guattari view with disdain as "the only kind of animal psychoanalysis understands, the better to discover a daddy, a mommy, a little brother behind them" (240). The second sees animals as purely literary or symbolic forms. The third, the demonic animal, they argue is the only animal with whom it is possible to have a becoming-animal; but the anomalous, demonic animal with whom this takes place "is neither an individual nor a species; it has only affects, it has neither familiar or subjectified feelings, nor specific or significant characteristics" (244). Deleuze and Guattari seem to see no potential in becomings with animals with their own subjectivities – in their words, "anyone who likes cats or dogs is a fool" (240) and to understand the anomalous, demonic animal as an individual would be to "equate it with the family animal or pet, the Oedipalized animal as psychoanalysis sees it" (244). So their consideration of animals and affect, while useful for a definition of affect

more generally, insists on separating animals from their capacity to look back or respond to humans.[25]

And yet *The Last Guardian* insists on Trico's subjectivity. So many of its formal details and gestures throughout the game – its careful steps when you're underfoot so as not to crush you, its anxious glance backwards as you climb tenuously onto its back before a jump, the slight incline of its head as you stand on its back and pet it – draw attention to its capacity to respond to and care for the boy. Even the fact that the player must wait – sometimes for quite a while – for Trico to respond to commands has the effect of forcing the player to accommodate to its needs and wants. And the haptic process of learning Trico's form is also a process of watching its responses – in the long moments it takes to climb up to Trico's head, with nothing else to do the player notices Trico's body reacting to the boy's movements. When the boy stops to look at Trico, Trico sometimes leans down to get a pat on the head, and in these moments when its face fills the frame, its form is more comprehensible, even if only for a moment.

Collective Incapacities

There is one moment in particular that could be called a becoming-animal if the term weren't so weighed down by its bias against animal individuality. Towards the end of the game, the pair encounter a second cage apparatus, and once again Trico becomes hostile and eats the boy. When Trico wakes up having regurgitated the boy, who is unconscious beside him, in a long, slow and silent scene, it nudges him, paws at him, picks

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[25] Here I make reference to Derrida's seminal work on animals, "And Say the Animal Responded?" and "The Animal that Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," in which he engages in a thorough deconstruction of a history of philosophy that – he argues – refused to see animals as capable of looking at and responding to humans.

him up and puts him in the sunlight, and finally drops him in a puddle of water in an attempt to wake him up. The long, drawn-out quality of the scene and the way it opens on a close-up of the boy's face (reminiscent of earlier scenes in which the boy was awoken by player input) encourage the player to attempt to wake (the boy) up using their game controller; but their input is futile until the boy is finally awoken by the water. Though the player does not control it directly, Trico and the player become aligned in their efforts to awaken the boy, in their similar inabilities to do so and therefore their similar frustrations. In my own play experience I found this moment deeply upsetting. After playing for hours and finding only frustration in the boy's limited capacity to move, this new frustration of suddenly being unable to move at all expanded into a profound vulnerability that I experienced at once from my own subject position, from the boy's, and from Trico's. In light of Trico's – and at the same time my own – quiet, desperate response to the boy's unconsciousness, I found an intimacy in our collective incapacities.

Donna Haraway allows us a way forward here in her discussions of companion species and oddkin. In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway uses the term "companion species" not to refer only to companion animals (ie. domesticates), but to denote "less of a category than a pointer to an ongoing 'becoming with'" (17). Gesturing towards Derrida, Haraway draws from the etymologies of *companion species* to locate the notion of the companion species in seeing and response. For Haraway, "species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect. That is the play of companion species learning to pay attention" (19). Haraway elaborates on this in *Staying With The Trouble: Keeping Kin in the Cthulhucene,* in which she contends with climate change and environmental destruction by calling for a practice of "learning to

stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (2). Haraway locates staying with the trouble in "a thick present […] not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (1). Finally, "staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations, in hot compost piles. We become-with each other or not at all" (4). Haraway, with the terms "companion species" and "oddkin" traces out a model of "being-with" and "becoming-with" marked by a temporality stubbornly and decisively oriented in a present that is thick, slow, difficult and even painful. This is reminiscent of the intimacy of frustration: it is in the too-long, too-tall, sometimes unbearable durations of waiting and experiences of inability that make up *The Last Guardian* where moments of profound vulnerability and intimacy can be found.

The Last Guardian is a deeply intimate, deeply frustrating process of being-with and becoming-with articulated through the troubling companion species relationship between Trico and the boy. It is rare for a game to force its players to stay with the incapacities of their characters' bodies; so many linear adventure games allow the player to overcome these incapacities by leveling up, acquiring weapons, or gaining the ability to move in new and more efficient ways. *The Last Guardian* does eventually allow for a new form of movement: at the end of the game, in order to save the boy's life, Trico spreads its once-injured wings and flies with him in its mouth. It is not a coincidence that this happens just as the game ends, and also just before Trico and the boy part ways: *The Last Guardian* is not about the promise of powerful movement, but about the intimacy of moving imperfectly. What other intimacies might result from games that force their players to be with

imperfection, as vulnerable and as intolerable as that can be? In the next chapter, we will

keep this question in mind as we consider an intimacy with space itself – and with the

vulnerabilities, frustrations and introspections that such a spatial relation entails – in *The*

Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.

Chapter 3: The Path That Lies Ahead: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and the Intimacy of Overwhelmedness

Bringing the critical framework of intimacy that we've developed so far to bear on *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, two problematics emerge that will define our discussion of the game. The first is that the intimacy of *Breath of the Wild*, unlike *Overwatch* and *The Last Guardian*, is not connected to another individual character with whom the player interacts directly. Though intimacy as we have read for it so far has been expressed through engagements with space, time, objects and forms of movement, those engagements were always in relation with another individual body: a human-controlled character in *Overwatch* or a computer-controlled companion in *The Last Guardian.* Though the intimacy of *Breath of the Wild* operates through some of the same formal mechanisms, it is not anchored to an individual body, but distributed throughout and with(in) the world of the game.

The second problematic is one of structure and scope: *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* is a massive game. To an extent this is a problem endemic of video game analysis, but it is particularly difficult for *Breath of the Wild*, which is not only a long game (the website howlongtobeat.com, which lists average completion times for games based on poll data, averages 45.5 hours for the main story alone and 88 hours for the main story "+ extras") but extremely varied in the number of things the player can do in the game world ("The Legend"). One could easily write an essay entirely about the aesthetic and affective properties of animal photography or cooking, both entirely optional and deeply enjoyable activities in which one can partake in Hyrule. *Breath of the Wild* is also full of synchronicities and frustrations: there are precarious pleasures to be found in taming

horses and swimming with Zora,[26] and cascading incapacities in Link's vulnerabilities, the ways that enemies' attacks knock him around, paralyze him, freeze him, and leave him gasping for air. The extent of *Breath of the Wild*'s pleasures make it overwhelming as an object of critical concern, just as playing the game itself can become overwhelming. It only makes sense, then, that we turn in this chapter to the intimacy of being overwhelmed. There is something intimate about having to contend with the vastness of a world, with all of the things one can and can't do within it, and with one's own inability to comprehend it in toto. This incomprehensibility also, to an extent, elides my capacity for critical engagement, especially in the context of a single thesis chapter; but perhaps there is also something intimate in that attempt.

And so there are two interconnected sets of questions we approach in this chapter. First, what happens to intimacy when it is no longer anchored to the movements and temporalities of another individual, but becomes distributed across space? How is this form of intimacy different from the previous forms we have discussed, and what similarities does it bear out? How might this distributed intimacy prompt us to re-examine the previous chapters? Second: what is intimate about being overwhelmed? How does overwhelmedness manifest itself formally, through movement, space, and temporality? How does overwhelmedness come into contact with synchronicity and frustration? What does it mean to contend with overwhelmedness, and what are the implications of this,

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[26] The Zora are a race of humanoid, amphibious fish-like creatures with whom Link interacts. In one scene, Link teams up with the prince of the Zora, Sidon, and rides on his back through the water. Sidon's constant verbal encouragement and support of Link, and the way they move and interact so synchronously together, has prompted a large fandom that ships them as a couple. The intimacy of synchronicity between Link and Sidon is not within the purview of this thesis, but it is an essay I would be very interested in reading.

particularly in the contexts of precarity and staying with the trouble discussed in previous chapters?

Released in 2017, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* is the nineteenth game in the *Legend of Zelda* franchise of action-adventure fantasy games. The player controls Link, a young knight who awakens in Hyrule at the beginning of the game from a hundred-year slumber with no memories. It is soon revealed that Link was once the bodyguard of the eponymous Princess Zelda, who put him in a sort of stasis after a failed attempt to thwart Calamity Ganon, an apocalyptic force of darkness that now engulfs Hyrule Castle and threatens to destroy the world, held back only by Zelda herself; Link is tasked with defeating Ganon, rescuing Zelda and restoring peace to Hyrule. In a departure from previous titles, *Breath of the Wild* is almost entirely non-linear and open in structure; though the player is encouraged to seek out allies and power-ups before challenging Ganon, they may travel directly from the first area in the game to Hyrule Castle to fight him. This openness extends to the way the player can approach combat: they can collect equipment and power-ups to brute force their way through hostile areas, use mechanically complex tricks and flourishes, or avoid combat altogether by taking circuitous routes and sneaking past enemies. Solutions to puzzles are similarly open-ended, as is exploration: there are almost no gated-off areas or linear paths, meaning that players' movements through the world are only limited by Link's limited energetic capacity. For this openness it has been almost universally praised; in particular, reviewers and players noted the intricacy of the

world,[27] and in this respect it has been positively compared with other open world games.[28]

But what, precisely, is unique about Hyrule in *Breath of the Wild?* It seems insufficient to point to the wide-open quality of the world – or even to the design flourishes that populate it – given the proliferation of less successful open world games on the market. In this chapter, I will argue that the world of *Breath of the Wild* is intimate; in doing so, I will push on the definitions of intimacy that we have developed throughout the thesis so far.

Drawing from Emily Brady's and Eugenie Shinkle's notions of the sublime and Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology,* in this chapter I read for the intimacy of overwhelmedness in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.* I begin by outlining a theory of overwhelmedness as a building, accumulative tension rendered through movement in space and an overabundance of affects, creating sensations of smallness, vulnerability and anxiety in ways reminiscent of the sublime. I read for the different forms of overwhelmedness in *Breath of the Wild* rendered through the modes of movement and action the game affords. I then return to intimacy and ask what about being overwhelmed is intimate, and how it becomes so in *Breath of the Wild.* Finally, I read the intimacy of overwhelmedness, and the particular way that this intimacy is rendered through space, in the context of the notions of precarity and staying with the trouble discussed in previous chapters.

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[27] See, for example, online reviews by Otero, Oxford, and Carter.
[28] See, for example, articles by Ckurab and Burch.

A Note on Zelda

Perhaps one way to avoid the problem of examining intimacy through space in *Breath of the Wild* would be to consider it as anchored to Princess Zelda, often read by fans and implied in-game as Link's love interest. Zelda is physically absent for almost the entirety of the game, but Hyrule is populated with traces of her presence: Link can travel to different locations marked as photographs in his Sheikah slate,[29] triggering memories of life with the Princess before Calamity Ganon appeared. Other characters with whom Link interacts make reference to Zelda as well, and she sometimes speaks to Link from afar to warn him of danger. Given these constant reminders of their relationship and Zelda's continuing presence as she protects Hyrule from Calamity Ganon and awaits Link's rescue of her, it is easy to imagine Zelda as the anchor for intimate sensations. I argue, though, that this focus sidesteps the more nuanced intimate sensations that define the way the player is encouraged to engage with space. The time Link and the player spend riding horses through fields at sunset; the precarious calm of a night spent cooking at a fire; the long and tactical process of climbing a mountain to get a view of the land below: these moments have little to do with Zelda, and yet their intimacy must be accounted for. Processes of remembering become imbricated in this intimacy, as we will see; but in order to allow for a clearer picture of how intimacy operates in *Breath of the Wild*, I do not connect it to Zelda the same way I connected it to the relationships between Pharah and Mercy in *Overwatch* and the boy and Trico in *The Last Guardian.*

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[29] A device reminiscent of a tablet computer – or, notably, the Nintendo Switch and Wii U Gamepad consoles on which *Breath of the Wild* is played – that Link uses to interface with the world, take photographs and locate himself in a map of Hyrule.

Theorizing Overwhelmedness: Not Quite Sublime

What do I mean when I say that *Breath of the Wild* is defined by an affect of

overwhelmedness? In order to understand the many forms of being overwhelmed in

Breath of the Wild, I want to draw, and ultimately distinguish myself, from the notion of the

sublime. In *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics and Nature*, Emily Brady,

drawing from Kant, describes the sublime as an encounter with "natural objects or

phenomena having qualities of great height or vastness or tremendous power which cause

an intense emotional response characterized by feelings of being overwhelmed and

somewhat anxious, though ultimately an experience that feels exciting and pleasurable"

(6). In "Video Games and the Technological Sublime," Eugenie Shinkle notes that "it was not

sensible forms or 'things of nature' in themselves which were the source of sublime affect,

but the sensation of the *failure* of the imagination to grasp such things in their entirety. […]

Sublime affect was a means of testing subjective boundaries, of exploring and affirming the

limits of the human self and its relationship to nature." She further considers the sublime

for Kant as "a process, hybrid by nature, and incorporating a number of different emotional

registers" beginning with "a loss of human agency, as the subject feels itself overpowered

by a greater force" that gives way to a reassertion of "the subject's freedom from causal

determination and its conformity with moral law." Similarly, Brady notes that the failure of

the subject's imaginative capacities "gives way to a feeling or an awareness of the existence

of reason. It is in this opening out toward reason that we experience positive feeling, as we

discover ourselves, after all, adequate to the task. Reason can cope with such magnitudes

where the senses (and imagination) cannot" (158). We might understand the sublime, then,

as an encounter with unimaginable vastness or power that creates sensations of vulnerability, smallness and anxiety, but ultimately reaffirms – or, in Brady's words, uplifts – the subject.

There are several aspects of the sublime that I find useful for understanding the affect of overwhelmedness in *Breath of the Wild*. The affective structure of the sublime encounter: the sense of awe imposed by scale and the vulnerability and anxiety that this awe creates are both aspects of overwhelmedness. But the sublime also departs from the affect I examine in *Breath of the Wild* in a number of important ways. Firstly, the temporal structure of the sublime in which the subject suddenly finds themselves "overpowered by a greater force" (Shinkle), though useful to talk about particularly powerful individual moments, does not capture the way that *Breath of the Wild* is made up of thousands of smaller encounters that become overwhelming not in their individual power, but in their multiplicity. I also take issue with the way that the negative sensations of the sublime are ultimately resolved by the intervention of reason or "a sense of self as uplifted or elevated" (Brady 159). The overwhelming quality of *Breath of the Wild* is defined in part by the persistence of the sensations of anxiety and smallness it creates; as we will see, one does not overcome being overwhelmed in *Breath of the Wild* but learns to contend with it and stay with it. So in contrast with the sublime, I define overwhelmedness as a series of encounters that, in their multiplicity, create a sense of accumulating tension, anxiety and smallness. Overwhelmedness can dissipate for a time, for example, in a moment of calm, and it can be evaded or postponed, but it cannot be fully resolved; rather, it must be contended with until it subsides.

Here, it is useful to return to the Deleuzian notion of the "machinic assemblage" discussed in the introduction to this thesis. Discussing the becoming-animal, Deleuze and Guattari define affects as attached "to the relations composing, decomposing, or modifying an individual" (256); affects are intensities that augment or diminish one's power to act in the context of these relational networks, which they describe as "machinic assemblages" (257). If we understand an affect as a capacity to affect or be affected attached to a particular relation, then we might define overwhelmedness as an encounter with an overabundance of affects, as an awareness of the scale of the assemblage within which the player as Link is entangled. This encounter comes into being through forms of movement and action, but also through the accumulation of these forms in itself. In this way, different encounters with this assemblage, and different forms of accumulation and dissipation, create different forms of overwhelmedness.

Rising Tensions: Overwhelmedness as Accumulation

Many flows of gameplay in *Breath of the Wild* are defined by slowly accumulating tensions that are only ever resolved precariously; this is perhaps the clearest form of overwhelmedness. Similarly to the intimacy of frustration, this building tension stages an encounter with the incapacities of the body, as it becomes increasingly clear how many ways Link can be affected, and how limited his capacities to affect things are, the longer the tension builds. However, unlike the intimacy of frustration, this tension builds over the course of many different small interactions and relations, rather than in long moments of waiting punctuated by precarious, expanding moments. Take, for example, combat, which often involves numerous small enemies rather than a single challenging opponent. During

one particularly long nighttime journey, I found myself passing through a steep, damp cave, its rocky ceilings cracking to let in the rain and moonlight. As I walked through the cave I noticed several Lightning Keeses[30] hanging from the ceiling. Using my bow and what few arrows I had, I picked off two or three before the rest noticed me; but when I ran out of arrows and took a moment to switch to a spear, a Keese managed to hit me, shocking me into dropping it. The spear rolled down the hill of the cave, so I equipped a shorter sword and ran down the hill to get it; but the limited range of the sword meant that I was unable to stop another Keese before it hit me as well, shocking me into dropping the sword, which rolled down the hill to join the spear and left me nearly defenseless. Now with low health, limited healing supplies and no more disposable weapons, I decided to cut my losses and run away; in doing so, however, I depleted my stamina wheel,[31] leaving me exhausted and dangerously close to another nest of monsters.

This scene, rather typical of combat in *Breath of the Wild,* does not involve a single especially dangerous moment, but rather several moments of escalation, including when I ran out of arrows, when I dropped my spear, when I dropped my sword, and when I ran out of stamina while running away from the cave. It was also marked by aesthetic tensions: the confined space of the cave limited my options for escape and forced the camera closer inwards towards Link, creating a vague sense of claustrophobia, while the openings above me let in rain and lightning, which not only resulted in white noise and visual activity but

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[30] A Keese is a small, frail, bat-like monster often found in caves in Hyrule. Lightning Keeses are imbued with electrical energy, meaning they shock whoever they touch, temporarily paralyzing them and forcing them to drop a weapon.
[31] The stamina wheel is a circular bar that symbolizes Link's physical energy. It is depleted through sprinting, climbing, swimming or engaging in otherwise physically taxing activities; when it runs out, Link stops what he is doing for several seconds to catch his breath.

also created puddles on the floor that made me more vulnerable to electric shock. Each relation here – Link and the puddles, the camera and Link, the Keeses and Link, Link and his weapons, and so on – became imbued with tension until I was so overwhelmed by the ways in which I was vulnerable that I was forced to run away (a process that was itself precarious).

As the player explores the world, solves puzzles, accumulates items and increases Link's maximum health and stamina, the overwhelming combat situation described above becomes less common, though it is never impossible; even when equipped with the strongest armour and weapons and a long health bar, Link is prone to being overwhelmed by an unlucky combination of enemies and unexpected complications. With this accumulation, though, comes another form of overwhelmedness in the management of inventory items. Even if he upgrades his inventory, Link is able to hold very few weapons at once; since weapons are often situational (like a torch that is useless in direct combat but useful to light dark passages, or a hammer that is unwieldy against fast enemies but powerful against slower ones and for breaking rocks), collecting weapons forces the player to choose which situations to prepare for. Complicating this is the fact that weapons are breakable, and that neither the player nor Link can tell when a weapon will break until it has nearly broken; in this way, the accumulation of items becomes a process of selecting between and for precarious and unpredictable situations, of being confronted by the many potential ways Link can precariously interact with the world.

This form of overwhelmedness as an encounter with Link's affects can be found more broadly as well, in the many ways Link can interact with the world and watch other things in the world interact. Discourses about *Breath of the Wild* online point to the sheer

number of things one can do in the world as a source of joy, excitement and pleasure in the game.[32] One IGN article titled "100 Little Things in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* That Will Blow Your Mind" notes, for example, that Koroks[33] produce a unique sound when you drop a rock on their head, that steam rises off of flaming weapons while it rains, or that when rolled down hills, snowballs accumulate snow and become larger. I have noticed a similar trend in personal experiences: during one conversation I had with friends, when asked about why they enjoyed the game, they were unable to articulate a broader aspect of the game that they liked (like the controls or the story), but instead began listing off the things they could do in quick succession, from exploring dungeons and shrines to cooking meals to climbing to animal photography. Even the attempt to explain these sources of pleasure seemed to overwhelm them, and their words began to fail them. I articulated this same overwhelmedness earlier in this chapter from a critical perspective, but it exerts a certain force during gameplay as well. Running through a field during a lightning storm, I am shocked to find that my equipped metal items conduct electricity, making me vulnerable to lightning; I laugh when, left alone for a moment, my horse plucks an apple from a shrine and eats it; watching a deer through the lens of my camera, I watch as it lies down in a secluded spot of sunlight to relax.

In her discussion of the technological sublime, Eugenie Shinkle considers glitches, hardware crashes and other technological failures as moments of a sort of sublimity in which "the subject experiences a momentary glimpse of technology as an inhuman other;" this technological other is so opaque, however, that it "demonstrates neither awesome

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[32] For example, see articles by Oxford and Davis.
[33] Koroks are forest spirits who appear throughout Hyrule to offer Link rewards in return for solving simple puzzles.

power nor infinite magnitude. Here, the process of sublime experience is emptied of the transcendence that the term originally comprised," instead creating frustration, which Shinkle defines as "an emotional state that is born out of the tedium of the everyday" which draws attention to the video game as a mass-produced consumer object. This mode of overwhelmedness in *Breath of the Wild* evokes Shinkle's technological sublime in that it becomes an encounter not only with the world of Hyrule, but with the technological system with which the player interfaces; but rather than glimpsing the "inhuman other" of technology through tedium, frustration and a lack of affect, the player experiences it as an accumulation of affects. Small details accumulate and offer glimpses into the vastness of the machinic assemblage in which Link and the player are entangled, creating a tension that arrests articulation.

Another overwhelming tension is rendered through one of the ways Link most often interacts with the space: climbing. *Breath of the Wild* is fairly unique among open-world games in that Link can scale almost any mountain or structure in the game, limited only by his stamina wheel, which depletes as he climbs. Climbing offers a formal microcosm of the structure of building tension. While climbing, Link moves slowly and repetitively, and the player's capacity to move the camera becomes limited by the mountain or cliff, meaning they cannot as easily see his face (figure 1). Instead, the player can angle the camera to get a glimpse of the scale of the heights Link is climbing by looking either upwards or downwards (figure 2). Ever-present in the frame is the stamina wheel as it empties bit by bit every time Link reaches an arm or a leg to the next foothold. As Link approaches the edge of the cliff and his stamina wheel approaches emptiness, the player can either jump, giving Link a burst of movement at the expense of extra stamina and at risk of running out

and falling, or continue at pace, forcing the player to wait as Link climbs and tension rises.[34]

There are, of course, two possible outcomes to climbing: either Link makes it to the top or

he doesn't. The latter option involves its own tensions as Link lets go of the cliff side, falls

and lands; if he lands on a flat surface he hits the ground immediately and takes significant

damage, while if he lands on an incline he rolls as he lands, and the player, unable to control

his movement, must watch and wait again as he slowly loses health the farther he rolls.

Figure 9: the closest I could manage to capturing Link's face as he climbs. As the player moves the camera closer to his face, his body fades from view as the camera apparently passes through him.

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[34] This is evocative of the structure of waiting in *The Last Guardian*, though it is interesting that here the player waits for Link (who they can control) instead of Trico (who they can't). Similarly, just as the camera in *The Last Guardian* was often unable to capture Trico's full body, it is difficult to get a good shot of Link's body and face as he climbs – but compared to Trico and the boy's constant frustrations, Link's are confined to these precise moments.

Figure 10: angling the camera from below, we get a sense of how much farther we have to climb. Note the stamina wheel slowly depleting.

The second option offers a different solution to the problem of overwhelming tension in *Breath of the Wild.* The world of Hyrule is made up of rolling hills and mountains that crack into sheer cliffs, all blanketed in a hazy, almost pastel-esque colourscape; so when Link scales a mountain, after finishing his climb with a couple of quick steps he almost always finds himself at the edge of an impressive vista (figure 3). This reveal plays into the building tensions of the climb: as the player climbs higher they can see more and more sky over the edge of the cliff, until they reach the top and see the view in its entirety. Just as the tension built up from scaling the cliff is dissipated, it is replaced by an overwhelming sensation reminiscent of the sublime: an encounter with the magnitude of the world. Climbing the mountain itself allows for the avoidance of other tensions – for example, one can often avoid combat with enemies by climbing around their camps – but it also creates the tensions inherent in a sublime encounter.

Figure 11: At the end of the climb awaits this view of Kakariko village and, in the distance, Hyrule Castle.

It is interesting, then, that the method that *Breath of the Wild* presents to contend

with this tension is the paraglider, a thick cloth Link uses as a sort of parachute to glide

across the land. This is a precarious way to dissipate the tension of the climb: the

paraglider's capacities are limited by Link's stamina, meaning that the player often must

repeatedly fold and unfold the paraglider, falling in fits and starts, in order to reach the

ground safely. But this use of the paraglider also draws attention to a different form of

overwhelmedness, one defined not by accumulating tensions but by a flow or rhythm that

is constantly disturbed.

Overwhelmedness as a Rhythm Disrupted

We see this structure of rhythms and flows that are always interrupted at other

times throughout *Breath of the Wild* as well. One of the clearest examples of this is

horseback riding. Hyrule is lined with winding paths through its fields and along the sides

of its mountains; when Link rides his horse along these paths, the horse will automatically

follow them without any input from Link or the player. If Link rides without any

interruptions for long enough, a quiet piano theme begins to play in the background,

reminiscent of the rhythm of a galloping horse. The clopping of the horse's hooves along

the path, the repetitive piano music and the horse's automatic following of the path

threaten to lull Link and the player into an ambient daze. But what few moments of calm

Link and the player experience here are disrupted: along the path sit a small flock of

herons, who, as Link and his horse draw close, scamper and fly away in a burst of feathers

and cawing. Or maybe a monster crosses the road and notices Link as he rides toward it,

threatening conflict that could harm the horse; or perhaps, suddenly and without warning,

the path gives way to a cliff, cutting short the movement and the piano music and

potentially putting Link and his horse in danger. As soon as the rhythms of horse, rider and

path come into harmony, they are lost, and Link must find his way back to the path and to

the lost rhythm. Link's rhythms are overwhelmed by these constant disruptions. If this

structure occurred only once, it might be more apt to describe it as shock or disruption; but

rhythms are constantly under threat in *Breath of the Wild*, and it is this constantly-

repeating disruptive process – the fact that *whenever* Link and the player find a rhythm, it

is interrupted – makes it a form of overwhelmedness.

This structure of interrupted rhythms is reminiscent of the intimacy of

synchronicity discussed in chapter 1 – as with the Pharah/Mercy combination, this mode of

overwhelmedness involves rhythms that are always under threat. But unlike Pharah and

Mercy, these rhythms are not created through precarious, vulnerable co-operative action

with another individual, but through interactions with space. The smooth, precarious flows

of horseback riding and paragliding are disrupted not by falling out of step with another

individual, but by the sudden interventions of location-specific creatures and geographic features carved into the space itself. Unlike Pharah and Mercy, who stay in step or fall apart depending on the capacities of those playing them, it is as if the world in *Breath of the Wild* evades attempts to fall into rhythms with it.

Creating Rhythms

What can be done about these constant disruptions? Though it is possible to exploit the game's physics engine to a certain degree, the player cannot avoid them – they can only evade them for a time, and contend with them when they appear. And just like paragliding is at once a precarious rhythm and a way to contend with the overwhelming process of climbing, the repetition of small actions and cutscenes becomes a way to contend with *Breath of the Wild's* overwhelming assemblage.

For a game in which there is so much to do, *Breath of the Wild* is surprisingly repetitive. In one two-hour gameplay session, for example, I found myself cooking by a fire pit for nearly twenty minutes. Cooking a single dish takes about a minute: the player opens their inventory, selects up to five food items to hold at once, closes their inventory, and throws them into the fire pit. Then, Link hums and the player watches as a brief jingle plays and the food items bounce and dance around in the pan, culminating in a whistling sound as the food jumps upwards in a puff of smoke; Link makes a satisfied noise as the completed dish is added into their inventory. As with climbing, the player can fill the time by moving the camera around, in this case to get a better look at the food or at Link's face. The sounds – the rustling noises that punctuate the player's movements through the inventory menu, the rhythmic drumming song as the food cooks, Link's excited noises, the

music that plays when the dish is finished – create a pleasantly repetitive rhythm. Link's movements and expressions become similarly calming, and I find myself angling the camera slightly differently with each dish, testing out different shots and perspectives on Link's face, the food, and the area around us. Even when I have more than enough cooked food in my inventory, I am taken with the rhythms of cooking and continue until I am almost out of ingredients. Presented with a vast world to explore, overwhelming in its capacities, it is interesting that I am compelled to spend so long at the cooking pot. I find myself similarly drawn to the rhythms of gathering food items, rhythms structured by mushrooms, apples and eggs strewn about the land, bursts of sprinting up trees and across grassland to get to them, and the ringing sound that plays when I pick something up.

Each of these sequences lasts a matter of seconds, but in aggregate they make up the majority of my play experience; as I approach an enemy camp or get back on my horse, I find I am more prepared for the ways these things will overwhelm me. Creating rhythms becomes a way to contend with the constant threat of their disruption, and in the face of *Breath of the Wild*'s overwhelming assemblage of things that can be done to Link, repetition anchors the player to something familiar that might help them weather the sensation of being overwhelmed.

Two Intimacies: Being Overwhelmed and Contending with it

So far, we have explored two forms of overwhelmedness in *Breath of the Wild* – the building tension and the disrupted rhythm – and a form of contending with being overwhelmed by repeating small actions and cutscenes (figure 4). But where do we locate intimacy in this system of overwhelmedness? Is it being overwhelmed that is intimate, or is

it intimate to contend with overwhelmedness? I argue that both experiences of overwhelmedness – the overwhelming accumulation itself *and* the process of dealing with it – are intimate. Here, I turn to Lauren Berlant, Henri Lefebvre, and Sara Ahmed to understand what it means to be overwhelmed and to contend with it, particularly in the spatial mode that *Breath of the Wild* maps out.

	Overwhelmedness in building tensions	**Overwhelmedness in disrupted rhythms**	**Creating rhythms as contending with overwhelmedness**
In-game actions	Combat; climbing; inventory management; meta-critical overwhelmedness	Paragliding; horseback riding;	Shrine cutscenes; cooking; item collection (as process)
Beginning	Small problems or affects interact with one another	A rhythm is found via movement through space	A single, purposeful action
Continuation	Affects accumulate and become unmanageable	The rhythm is disrupted and temporarily ended	The action is repeated in a slightly different way
Culmination	Tension is temporarily diffused (by death, flight, pause or victory)	The rhythm and its disruption are repeated	The action is repeated until its repetition becomes rhythmic
Affective Valence	Building anxiety; frustration through bodily incapacity	Repetitive shock; constant discomfort; inability to synchronize	Respite; comfort in expected reactions; inhabitation

Figure 12: a table depicting forms of overwhelmedness, and of contending with such, in Breath of the Wild.

To be overwhelmed in *Breath of the Wild* is to be faced – either through a slow, progressive build-up or in repeated disruptions – with the sheer abundance of one's affects. This is reminiscent of the sublime, in which an encounter with scale and power, often of spaces, creates a sharp and sometimes painful awareness of one's smallness and finitude in comparison. Overwhelmedness too is often staged through a relation to space. In the midst

of combat, the space Link occupies becomes too full of complications: the cave is full of electric bats and slopes that make him lose his weapons when hit. Moving through new spaces stages encounters with new ways Link can be affected by the world, such that exploring too much space at once overwhelms the player with new affects and vulnerabilities. Flying or riding across a field opens up the potential for a way of moving through space, only for that potential to be foreclosed by constant interruptions. What does it mean to encounter finitude and smallness in this explicitly spatial way?

Sara Ahmed, in *Queer Phenomenology*, uses the term "orientation" to lay out a relationship between bodies and space that is useful here. In Ahmed's schema, space "does not contain the body as if the body were 'in it.' Rather bodies are submerged, such that they become the space they inhabit; in taking up space, bodies move through space and are affected by the 'where' of that movement" (29). This description of a becoming with/in space is evocative of becoming overwhelmed, in which Link's body is affected, disrupted and increasingly weighted by relations with the space he and the player inhabit. For Ahmed, orientation is a process of "making the strange familiar through the extension of bodies into space," which necessarily involves the body becoming the space it inhabits; disorientation "occurs when that extension fails." But disorientation is also, as she points out, "a way of describing the feelings that gather when we lose our sense of who it is that we are."[35] In this way, disorientation is a loss of oneself experienced through a loss of one's relationship to space. One becomes unable to extend into and become with/in space, and this unmoors them from it, just as being overwhelmed arrests action and articulation. But being overwhelmed also enables an awareness of the extent of one's vulnerabilities; as

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[35] The Kindle e-book version of this text did not list page numbers for these quotations, but they are in the introduction of the book.

opposed to disorientation, which is experienced as a loss of the self, overwhelmedness is an encounter with all that the self is in terms of space. In that way, to be overwhelmed is a radical process of reorientation in space according to one's vulnerabilities. Having sprinted out of the cave, I turn back to look at what I'm escaping from; as Link catches his breath, the scale of our capacities in the assemblage of Link-Keese-lightning-sword-spear-bow-arrows-cave (and so on) becomes clear – I come to know our place better, though this perhaps only makes itself felt as caution and an attentiveness to more circuitous routes. Calming my horse after it rears back from a cliffside, recognizing how close we came to toppling over the edge, I find myself able to re-enter our rhythmic cantering more quickly next time.

If the intimacy of being overwhelmed is located in the moment when one is reoriented in their vulnerabilities, then the intimacy of contending with overwhelmedness is the intimacy of finding rhythms that make those vulnerabilities more livable. In *Rhythmanalysis*, Henri Lefebvre uses the term "dressage" to define, as Lauren Berlant summarizes, "the mode of enacting life through habituated gestures that stretch the present out so that enjoyment is possible" (*Cruel* 63). For Lefebvre, dressage is a process of breaking oneself in to social systems through repetition, but here, I evoke the term to understand the ways that rhythmic, repeated actions can create a habitable orientation in the present. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant draws out a theory of optimism to understand how people "find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on" (8) in a politically, socially and economically precarious present moment which "increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another" (7). Discussing presence in Gregg Bordowitz's autobiographical film *Habit,* Berlant posits that

"whatever one might say about history and memory tumbles together into an ordinariness that has not quite been achieved, nor rested in, but that comforts, somehow, because the camera keeps going into the familiar/unfamiliar spaces of the ongoing, drive-through present, marked by its jerky rhythm" (63). This structure of a present created by rhythms that never quite settle is crucial for Berlant as a method to "live on in unstable and shattered ordinaries" (93). It is quite similar to the process of contending with overwhelmedness in *Breath of the Wild*, in the jerky rhythms of angling the camera while one cooks dish after dish or the familiar unfamiliarity of collecting vegetables in an unexplored jungle. The structure that Berlant outlines of precarious comfort and tension between familiarity and unfamiliarity is evocative of intimacy as well: the precarity of Hyrule's assemblage means that these rhythms can never be quite settled in, but for a long moment before confronting the next enemy or moving on to the next place, they can be lingered in, and somehow, they provide comfort in their drive-through presentness.

Reflecting on Intimacies Past

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild's intimacy once again draws us back to the question of staying with troubling things, of learning to tarry with precarity. But while *Overwatch* and *The Last Guardian* taught us, through their intimacies, how to remain in a difficult, precarious present with another individual, *Breath of the Wild* has mapped out a method for inhabiting precarious space that becomes intimate just as it withdraws from the possibility of a consistent rhythm. Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* is concerned with what it means to manage living in precarious conditions, and finds solace in how "thinking about life during lived time, everyone is figuring out the terms and genres for valuing *living*.

No one imagines having expertise enough to have mastered the situation—just a commitment to cultivating better intuitive skills for moving around this extended, extensive time and space where the crisis of the present meets multiple crises of presence" (59). Open world games, through their vast potential for new, unexpected and perhaps overwhelming interactions with space, carry the possibility for "genres for valuing *living*" – for imagining ways of becoming intimate with spaces that, like the precarious spaces in which we find ourselves, withhold the promise of a predictable life. Rather than a space to be conquered or mastered, Hyrule is an intimate world where finding a way of living in unstable rhythms, as precarious as they are, is enough.

Conclusion

Over the course of this thesis I have traced out the contours of three modes of intimacy. We have seen how intimacy can take the form of a synchronous flow through vertical space that edges on negativity, the deep frustration and profound vulnerability of constantly contending with different incapacities, and an overwhelming, insurmountable encounter with space and rhythm. In the process intimacy has come to mean not a difficult-to-define interpersonal relationship or a vague collection of interior feelings, but a set of formal qualities – aesthetic elements, forms of movement, temporalities, rhythms, and structures – that create sensations of vulnerability, the loss of control, and messy but necessary dependencies on others. With this intimacy in mind, I would like to conclude with two points.

First: the modes of intimacy that we have looked at are uniquely suited to, and only fully realizable in, video games. The synchronicity born from strategic movement and action, the frustration of constantly failing (or just managing) to act, and the overwhelmedness that builds through thousands of small interactions and brief moments – these intimacies could not have been rendered without the strange assemblage of shifting aesthetic forms, processual interactions within virtual spaces, and malleable but cohesive structural formations that video games afford. At the same time, each mode of intimacy was created through entirely different combinations of these elements, and though I read each through the lens of intimacy, they each bore a unique affective valence. The capacities I have outlined of these games to create intimate affects suggests that there are other unrealized potential intimacies to be found through the mediatic affordances of video games. What might an intimacy of grief look like, for example, or an intimacy of resistance?

What formal qualities might these intimacies take and what interactions would they involve? How would they differ from the intimacies of my case studies, and in what ways would they be similar? Taking seriously the pleasures to be found in intimate affects, as unpleasant as they can be – might allow for the creation of new games with other modes of intimacy: new intimate worlds. It might also allow for new readings of games through the lens of intimacy. Intimacy as a theoretical framework has a lot to offer to massively multiplayer online games, for example, or to virtual reality and augmented reality games. Over the course of this thesis intimacy has become a theoretical framework to discuss the affective qualities of processual interactions and forms, and I look forward to seeing this framework used in other contexts and with other worlds in mind.

Second: intimacy, as read through the three games I have discussed, has become a way of contending with a precarious present. I have focused in this thesis on the ways that intimate affects are created through different forms of precarity. I understand precarity as at once "the condition of trouble without end" (Tsing 2) and "a state of acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others" (Tsing 29). At the same time, precarity has taken on different forms throughout this thesis. In chapter 1, queerness became a form of precarity rendered through disorientation, constant failure and tenuous encounters with synchronic rhythm; in chapter 2, human-animal relations took on a different sort of precarity defined by different bodily incapacities; in chapter 3, relating to the world itself became precarious through overwhelming, building tensions. These precarities were rendered in the formal qualities of the games I studied, but are also resonant with the precarities of queer, human-animal and human-land relationships in the contemporary moment, and with the ontological condition of precarity in late Capitalism defined by theorists like Lauren Berlant

and Kathleen Stewart. Stewart in particular uses prosaic writing to "[hone] attention to the way that a thing like precarity starts to take form as a composition, a recognition, a sensibility, some collection of materialities or laws or movements" (*Precarity* 518), drawing a connection between the contemporary specificity of precarity and precarity as a set of formal qualities that generate affects. Stewart posits that "precarity, written as an emergent form, can raise the question of how to approach ordinary tactile composition, everyday worldings that matter in many ways beyond their status as representations or objects of moralizing" (519). Similarly to how Stewart theorizes precarity through form as a way to get at the ways it resonates with contemporary conditions, I am interested in the ways that the forms of intimacy we have discussed resonate with contemporary conditions of precarity, while also generating intimate affects independent of those conditions. It is in this context that I understand the potential of intimacy.

Faced with constant, unending trouble, uncertainty and vulnerability, what can we do to make it livable? In all three case studies, intimacy became a way of contending with different forms of precarity, a way of making them livable. The authors I have read have all discussed the notion of finding ways to deal with and live within the intensity of a thick, difficult present. For Donna Haraway this is "learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (2) by becoming-with others "in unexpected collaborations and combinations" (4); for Lauren Berlant this process is connected to genre, in which, in the face of an ongoing crisis in which the story structures we have built to sustain ourselves are no longer sufficient, and "in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on" (*Cruel* 8). I specifically chose games that pose questions about different, non-

normative modes of relation – I am not only interested in intimacy, but in intimacies anchored to queer partners, to animals, to the land and objects, because these intimacies speak to forms of precarity that demand contention. I am also interested in intimacies found in negative affects: not only in comfort, safety or success but in failure, frustration and disorientation. Intimacy necessarily involves messy, difficult, disorienting interdependencies and indeterminacies. It is often uncomfortable, sometimes unpleasant and rarely fun. But it also outlines ways of living on, of staying with the trouble, and finding unexpected connections and potentialities in the process.

So what does it mean to contend with the present? In *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart presents a series of short vignettes as a way to think about the circulation of affect through ordinary moments in contemporary life. She concludes this series by discussing the "unfinished quality of the ordinary," which see sees as "not so much a deficiency as a resource, like a fog of immanent forces still moving even though so much has already happened and there seems to be plenty that's set in stone" (283). For Stewart, "this is no utopia. Not a challenge to be achieved or an ideal to be realized, but a mode of attunement, a continuous responding to something not quite already given and yet somehow happening." The intimacies of *Overwatch, The Last Guardian* and *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* are likewise unfinished: even as they end they are never quite resolved, lingering as the sensations of rhythms falling out of step, the continuing incapacities of bodies or the dissipation of an overwhelmedness sure to return. Stewart also reads this attunement as "speculative and concrete," as something that "doesn't mean to come to a finish. It wants to spread out into too many possible scenes with too many real links between them" (284). In this way, it is at once considerate of the future and oriented in the

present, in which "simple things take time, intensity, and ingenuity. Some things have to be sidestepped. Or solutions have to be invented. There are deadening frustrations but there's also a central, palpable pleasure in the state of trying. An impulse toward potentiality" (286-7). Like Stewart, I struggle with finding a conclusion for an affect that does not end but lingers and shifts and in doing so creates both uncertainties and possibilities, and which helps us contend with a constant uncertainty from which it seems there is no possibility of escape. There is a certain tension, then, in suggesting – as I have above – that taking seriously a reading of intimacy affords the creation of new intimate worlds. Indeed, intimacy does not create avenues for escape from this profound uncertainty – rather, it forces us to live with it, take time within it and sense out its exact properties. But perhaps intimate worlds also allow for the mode of speculation Stewart outlines. Perhaps, in creating a "palpable pleasure in the state of trying" – to connect, or to affect, or to fly together – intimacy makes space for a kind of indeterminacy that affords new possibilities in uncertain times.

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