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Amanda Rose Villarreal, Bella Poynton, Gaby Martineau

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***Valhalla*: Agency and Genre in Emergent Virtual Larp**

Amanda Rose Villarreal and Bella Poynton, with contributions from Gaby Martineau

When COVID-19 created barriers to sharing physical space, Otherworld Theatre and Moonrise Games created Valhalla, an emergent sci-fi larp performed using Zoom as an interactive platform. Three creators of Valhalla apply PAR methodology to interrogate the intended and unintended consequences of relocating larp performance online. We analyze the ways in which Zoom impacts players' agency in the performance; production management and facilitation of play; and genre verisimilitude. In this way, we establish a new nexus of ideas within and around larp performance, namely that mediatized larp can serve as a framework for a potentially more intimate, emotionally rich participant experience.

Keywords: *larp, science fiction, verisimilitude, gaze, zoom theatre*

Introduction: Larp, Liveness, and Performance

Live action role play, also known as larp,¹ is an underrepresented practice in theatre and performance studies scholarship. The genre evolved from performance practices around the world; larp has been traced to early forms of ritual and performance,² including war game traditions from the Euphrates valley in the third millennium BCE³ and other ritual, simulation, and historical reenactment practices.⁴ In *Rules of Play*, Salen and Zimmerman write that larp's codified guidelines tie this genre to modern role-playing games (RPGs);⁵ similarly, the Nordic larp scholar Markus Montola describes larp as RPGs "superimposed on the physical world."⁶

The *la* in larp stands for "live action"; thus, most people recognize the art form as happening in both the spatially and temporally congruent present. However, many performance studies scholars have argued against liveness as a phenomenon that occurs purely in-person. Chief among these is Philip Auslander, who examines the concepts of "live broadcasting," "live recording," and, most significant to this article, "internet liveness."⁷ Auslander describes "internet liveness" as a "sense of always being connected to other people, of continuous technologically mediated co-presence with others."⁸ In this way, live-streamed larps in which players improvise in technologically mediated co-presence is live performance. As much as it is tied

Amanda Rose Villarreal, Ph.D. is an intimacy choreographer, immersive performer, and Assistant Faculty of Theatre Education at California State Fullerton. Their research examines consent in unscripted interactions within immersive performance and larp.

Bella Poynton, MFA is a playwright, director, and Ph.D. candidate at the University at Buffalo, and Visiting Professor at Medaille College. Her research investigates robots, automata, and transhumanism in performance.

Gaby Martineau earned degrees in Theatre Management and Organizational Communication from Illinois State University. After working at Walt Disney World, Gaby now serves as Manager of Special Events at Otherworld Theatre in Chicago.

to co-presence and player connection, larp is also entwined with improvisation and gaming, being “built on the model of improvisational theatre and historical reenactment. The practice combines theatrical fantasy story-building with character-driven plots in a communally created narrative.”⁹ The co-presence, collaboration and co-creation that define larp remain present when larps relocate to digital platforms through the concept of internet liveness.

Despite its rich history, use of improvisation, and emergence through live in-character interactions, larp has remained underrepresented within theatre and performance studies literature, with few notable exceptions. Scott Magelssen analyzes immersive events in *Simming*, arguing that participatory performances yield embodied meaning-making, but refraining from ever using the term *larp*.¹⁰ In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet H. Murray explicitly highlights the relationship between larp and performance, stating that “role-playing games are theatrical in a nontraditional but thrilling way. Players are both actors and audience...and the events they portray often have the immediacy of personal experience.”¹¹ Murray describes these events happening “over a weekend at a vacation resort,” arguing that “the attraction lies in inviting the audience onto the stage, in the realm of illusion.”¹² During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, larps could no longer safely invite audiences onto physical stages.

When resorts and live performance events alike shuttered, theatre companies sought to create shared stages through online realms of illusion—often using Zoom. The authors of this article collaborated with artists at Otherworld Theater and Moonrise Games, developing *Valhalla* by combining theatre and gaming sensibilities and creating a larp experience that remains live but framed in a digital realm. The authors of this paper collaborated as non-player characters (NPCs), fueling dramaturgy and lore building, then rehearsing the facilitation of improvisation and game structures during March 2020, early in the pandemic. Collaboratively, the NPC cast developed the setting and mythology of *Valhalla*, creating mechanics that would shape the players’ dynamic experience of the unfolding narrative. The production’s website, which went live in April 2020, enticed audiences with the following call to action:

You are a Viken—an ancient race known for advanced sailing and navigational skills among the stars. You grew up at the rusty claustrophobic Freya Space Station, training for the day when it would be your turn to traverse the stars and make your way home. Now. It is time. You must complete The Grand Rite—the sacred tradition of the Viken people to traverse the Midgar Sector from the Freya Space Station to Valhalla—a colossal construct that serves as the shining capitol and center of diplomacy and commerce of the nine sectors, and where High King Harald leads his people to glory. But only the worthy make it to Valhalla.¹³

Ticket purchasers created characters, motives, and alignments, but would never gather in person to perform. *Valhalla* deviated from traditional larps in its migration to the Zoom platform, through which participants engaged in weekly three-hour improvised episodes, each person's performance shaping the story of seven ships' interplanetary journeys during the dawn of war.

Relocating larp online creates a chasm—a mediatized distancing effect—between player and game, as well as between individual players. Whereas players at in-person larps can leave a scene, initiate cross-conversation during a scene or secret conversations elsewhere, or even interact with props and scenery, participants in *Valhalla* have a limited vantage point through which to consume the emerging narrative; they can only see what other players present to them through Zoom's *Hollywood Squares* setup. *Valhalla* incorporates technology not only in its game mechanics, but in its world-building and lore, establishing itself as a science fiction larp. Players are limited to performing within the view of their webcam. Therefore, in analyzing *Valhalla*, we consider the impacts of this technological medium on players' agency within this performance, and we investigate technology's role in players' experiences of narratives and cognitive estrangement. We interrogate, as creators of *Valhalla*, both the intended and unintended consequences of relocating larp to the realms of mediatized interaction.

This article argues that the features and characteristics of the digital larping environment created for *Valhalla* do not hinder player experience, but instead support gameplay and storytelling. We argue that Zoom supports the performance by increasing players' agentic power over the way they are seen, facilitating behind-the-scenes communication among non-player characters (NPCs) during the production, as well as heightening the plausibility of science fiction tropes that might be unbelievable in an in-person environment. Our research is driven by Performance as Research (PAR) methodology, emphasizing knowledge gained through embodied participation in performance. Our experiences creating and performing in *Valhalla* fuel our analysis, "facilitating transfer across artistic, scholarly, and scientific inquiries"¹⁴ as we analyze the communication practices in this production. This article's authors participated in *Valhalla* as NPCs, driving the dramaturgical process of developing the narrative framework, performing characters, and facilitating improvisation throughout the game. These experiences fuel our analysis of the ways in which relocating larp to Zoom interacts with player agency, behind-the-scenes communication, and genre in *Valhalla*, bringing emergent larp into the growing body of work on COVID-19-era transmediated performance.

Framing the Male Gaze

Resituating larp onto computer screens removes players' agency to move, to observe from different vantage points; therefore, we turn to cinema studies, feminist game studies, and discourse on framing bodies for mediatized consumption in our analysis of *Valhalla* and player agency. Introduced by Laura Mulvey in "Visual

Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the male gaze is the artistic subjugation of women’s bodies.¹⁵ This practice uses cinematic techniques to highlight a woman’s body onscreen, prioritizing sexual objectification to satisfy the normalized desires of the presumptively cishetero male audience and preventing even female characters with narrative agency from having agency over their own bodies. Mulvey writes that the camera is an “invisible guest”; the voyeurism of the camera, the eye of the invisible, cisgender, heterosexual, white male audience, is nonconsensual by nature.¹⁶ The “guest” is unseen. The character is unaware that she is being watched; her lack of awareness strips her of the agency to either consent to, or withdraw from, the gaze. By highlighting the male gaze, Mulvey calls upon her audience to become informed creators and consumers willing to “highlight the way film has depended on voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms”¹⁷ in order to dismantle these practices, freeing women from a passive, objectified role in cinema.

While gaming theorists have moved away from the psychoanalysis with which Mulvey engaged in establishing her cinematic theory, her calls to action have echoed recently throughout the field of gaming studies. Opening *Gaming Representation* by asking “where is this field’s Laura Mulvey moment?”¹⁸ Jennifer Malkowski and Andrea Russworm speak from the intersection of feminist studies, African American studies, and queer studies as they call the gaming industry “less willing, overall, than other media industries to pursue meaningful diversity or refrain from egregious stereotyping,” highlighting the surprisingly “sparse academic scholarship that addresses either the medium’s long history of failures in this area or its sparks of progress that have appeared more recently.”¹⁹ Although they call for a “Mulvey moment,” the concept of the male gaze becomes troubled as it moves in application from cinema to gaming.²⁰ Agency differentials emerge when comparing these two forms. Watching a movie, the audience’s gaze is fixed by the cinematographer’s framing. However, while a game’s design, interactive mechanics, and cinematics inform gaze, the player controlling the character’s actions maintains some level of autonomy. Stephanie Jennings applies bell hooks’s concept of the oppositional gaze to the male gaze in gaming, theorizing a feminine gaze in “Women Agents and Double-Agents”:

I propose a theory that views gazing in video games as a constellation of practices and perceptions that crisscross and fluctuate when players engage with games and identify with particular subject positions and characters. Feminine gaze is one such instance of gazing as a praxis that players can take on and learn as they play. It is a strategy of subject construction, a process of identification where character construction and player-selfhood tangle, a way of looking.²¹

The concept of a feminine gaze that players can adopt and learn from through gameplay in an act of identity construction applies particularly well to larp spaces, where characters may have backstories, but are truly developed through unscripted interactions among players. In this way, larp becomes a kind of haven for the creation of feminine gaze through its constant “tangl[ing]” of character “positioning,” “construction,” and “player selfhood.”²² However, when players interact entirely through Zoom, character construction and player-selfhood tangle not only with one another in a way of looking that is a gamic gaze, but with the cinematic gaze of a fixed camera. The aforementioned discussions of gaze hinge upon the audience’s role and the character’s lack of agency. Gaze is specifically crafted in scripted cinematography and, to an extent, fully designed video games, where *characters* have little power, but *players* can control the gaze to an extent.

In larp, however, characters are not designed in unchangeable code; rather, character emerges through players’ embodied interactions. Larp invites players and characters to share agency and shape narrative outcomes; each player’s agency not only impacts the story as it unfolds but determines the manner with which they gaze upon one another. For example, many *Valhalla* players used personalized backgrounds during games. Although these backgrounds were not uniform among crewmembers, which disrupted suspension of disbelief that characters were in the same diegetic place, the backgrounds became a manifestation of each character’s personality, role, and even duties as the narrative progressed.

Gaby Reflects on Male Gaze in *Valhalla*:

Though the technical elements were a fantastic part of what made online LARPing unique and fun, one of the most important distinctions I took away from this experience was the near complete lack of the male-gaze. Completing an entire story arc within a small video box on your computer screen changes everything. When only your face is visible to everyone, what does it matter whether you have breasts or not? When you have the agency as a player and NPC to turn off your camera at any time, or privately message any one of the team, there is a freedom in that. In the first and second chapters of *Valhalla*, there were folx that identified as she/hers, he/his, they/them and more, but never once did I witness an awkward moment between crewmates, captains, or villains. The name listed onscreen was the name they were called throughout the game. There was no pressure to conform to any specific archetype, because the world was built from scratch and completely customizable. Want to be an alien race? Go for it. Want to be a human woman? Great! Want to be somewhere in between? Even better. The diversity of the races only made the world more vast and vivid.

The Agentic Gaze

The feminine gaze, as proposed by Jennings, “is not located exclusively in game design, but in the performance of play as a player’s subjectivity intermingles and collides with a video game’s representational structures, and as the player takes playful action within the game system.”²³ Echoing the feminine gaze, the game design of *Valhalla* and the mechanisms through which play was meant to unfold did not determine the gaze of any participant for this game. Rather, players’ world-building decisions and costume, set, and prop design choices collided and intermingled with the representational structure of presenting others with a small, boxed-in image from a fixed vantage point, personally crafted to communicate the player’s character and fit the player’s individual comfort level. By experimenting with Zoom, part of the game system for *Valhalla*, my subjectivity collided with the game’s representational structures, and—knowing that others would view me in a square determined by the scope of my camera—I was able to determine the gaze for myself. In *Valhalla*, individuals controlled the vantage and framing of the gaze through which others viewed them. Each individual, therefore, remained a subject, rather than an object, in the way that they were framed. Amanda Rose Villarreal proposes that this creates a new gaze—an *agentic gaze*—in which each player has equal ability to determine how they will be viewed.²⁴ The agentic gaze is defined by balance among a community, in which each player maintains subjectivity through self-determined framing onscreen.

Amanda Rose on Discovering Átta:

I spent two weeks fretting over my NPC costume, afraid that when larp culture merged with the anonymity of online interactions, I would have even less agency to avoid ogling. I settled on a shimmery space-silver mock turtleneck, a black armored chest piece, a pastel wig, and my comfiest yoga pants, since I would be seated and unseen below the torso. Once I had determined my costume, I began crafting my setting. I experimented with Zoom backgrounds. None of them seemed suitable for Átta, the Oracle of the Yngve Regency Starship. As the ship’s Artificial Intelligence (AI) interface, I didn’t feel like Átta should appear to be in a room, in an escape pod, or on the bridge of a starship. So, I crafted my own digital background using an image of a nebula. After finishing the background, I experimented. By adjusting the lighting in my office and relocating my desk lamp, I realized that not only could Átta appear in front of an image of space; I could make her appear as a floating face among the stars on other players’ screens, perfect for the AI interface of a starship navigating interplanetary travel. I was entirely in control of how other players saw me; I could even adjust how *much* of me others would see. In a full turtleneck, all that emerged from the digital backdrop was my face. In a crewneck, my neck made an appearance. If I wore a tank top, I could choose to reveal my collarbones.

I opted for a comfortable crewneck, feeling confident that the way my countenance faded into the deep blues of space gave off the “AI of a spaceship” vibe I wanted to create, while maximizing my comfort and revealing only exactly as much of my body as I wanted. For the first time in over a decade of larping, I felt entirely in control of how others would perceive me—as a player, and as Átta.²⁵

The framing through which others viewed Átta was self-determined, maintaining the player’s subjectivity through her crafting of the agentic gaze. Rather than a cinematic dialectic between viewer and viewed as in Mulvey’s male gaze and adding to the video game dialectic between viewer and avatar (or the collision of game structure and player’s subjectivity), a player’s use of the agentic gaze illustrates the dialectic created through the performance of their character within the emerging narrative of *Valhalla*—namely, a dialectic between equally agentic players. In other words, no character is ever able to occupy more of the visual backdrop than any other character. In this way, spatial focus—or each character’s likelihood to assume a central role of any particular scene—becomes equal.

While physical appearance and vocal prowess remain significant aspects of identity and character development, their influence is equalized by the constant democratization of the playing screen. According to James S. Martin, Christian A. Vaccaro, D. Alex Heckert, and Robert Heasley, gender plays a significant part in the way importance and magnitude of roles are often allocated in larp situations. “Men are given structural preference in leadership positions, their characters are venerated, and their costumes and weapons are more valued,”²⁶ the authors claim, further offering that “women, in contrast, are more typically relegated to subordinate positions within the group, have few character choices, and are expected to follow rules that ultimately defer to men...In many ways, for women to gain epic glory, their best choice was to dress, act, and prove that they can fight as men.”²⁷ The use of Zoom as a performance space throughout *Valhalla* assisted in leveling such gender-driven bias by offering no partiality to those who might exploit physical size, prowess, attractiveness, or even vocal volume. Even the advantage of flashy costumes or props is partially equalized by standard laptop camera quality. Thus, the most effective way to emerge within *Valhalla* as a fully realized player was through constant engagement with other players and continued creative contributions to the narrative.

The agentic gaze does not apply only to players who crafted framing for character-driven purposes; some players used the agentic gaze to establish a personal sense of comfort and safety. Agata, a scientist in season 1 of *Valhalla*, was created and performed by Laura, who says that during *Valhalla* she “just felt comfortable,”²⁸ due largely to agentic framing. Agata was the genetic engineer who invented foods such as the “potato-steak”—potatoes containing the protein

content and flavor of beef—to sustain the starving population aboard the Freya space station. Laura created framing fueled by Agata’s scientific characteristics, helping her forget her own self-consciousness. Placing her iPad flat on a table underneath a magnifying lens on a flexible stand that she owned for sewing, Laura crafted a gaze that expressed Agata’s scientific nature to other characters in a glance, reinforcing her personality, rather than her physical form.

Laura towered over her iPad; Agata appeared strong, imposing. At times, Agata was seen entirely through the magnifying lens, distorted. As she moved, the angle of her camera led her to appear looming further above us, as though we were constantly under Agata’s scientific scrutiny. Twice, Laura leaned towards her iPad, appearing as though Agata was looking her audience in the eye. Laura states that she “didn’t even realize” she was doing so.²⁹ This subconscious movement—the swiping away of the magnifying lens to look into the camera of her iPad—illustrates comfort while playing. Asked why she was no longer cautious, Laura responded: “I guess I forgot to worry...because I was so into the story.”³⁰ While some larpers aim to hide, others find joy in being watched, reveling in the preparation for the game—the process of choosing a costume, makeup, hairstyle, as well as getting dressed and developing a character voice, posture, personality traits and behavior patterns. For some, the labor of becoming one’s character is one of the most exciting and satisfying aspects of larp.

Gaby on Larp Preparation:

Getting ready for a LARP is a bit like getting ready for the prom or homecoming. There’s electricity in the air, you can feel it. Something about laying out the perfectly planned outfit and donning a wig and makeup makes the heart flutter with excitement. This is what drew me to LARPing in the first place, that energy. The final product is worth every penny spent, every failed makeup trial, every insecure thought. Because once the look is finished, once you “become” your character, there is no looking back...Being in a room with like-minded people who worked just as hard as you did to create their character gives me butterflies every time. It’s what brings players back, everyone is looking for an escape or somewhere to be who they want to be and not what the world deems fit.

Any type of play, when done in conjunction with collaborators, “can be understood as a project of self-realization, a project humans share with other creatures who play.”³¹ However, often overlooked is the process of preparation as an essential component of play. Larp preparation echoes the long history of actors’ psychological and somatic preparation for performance; significant character development often emerges from this design process. Dani Snyder-

Young claims that “enthusiastic players may sew their own costumes or purchase elaborate attire, but most assemble an outfit with thrift-store finds and duct-tape accessories.”³² *Valhalla* players demonstrated this enthusiasm for constructing character appearance, but online play impacted the larp preparation process and results. The following example discusses the use of technology as an accidental means of exploring character development; Bella reflects on the complexities of preparing for larp in a virtual setting.

Bella on Preparation for Digital Games:

As a first time larper, I had no idea that preparation was such a pivotal part of larp. Quickly, it became clear that players were going all-out with costumes, hair, makeup, props, and even backgrounds. While I was originally looking forward to these physical alterations, a major issue presented itself: my computer did not have the necessary specifications to incorporate backgrounds on Zoom. This challenge required me to identify substitute methods for creating the visual basis of my supercomputer character; ultimately, I experienced the agentic gaze not through choice, or as a means of having agency over my physical appearance, but out of technological necessity.

I selected a background similar to the iconic cascading green code used in *The Matrix* films. Because I was playing a supercomputer, my plan was to use this background as a way of grounding Absalon in a virtual world as opposed to the “real” world inhabited by more human-like characters. With the background as a grounding mechanism, I then intended to augment my physical appearance in accordance with the Norse styles of hair, dress, and makeup being implemented by many other players. Unfortunately, because my computer’s technical specifications were not sufficient, the background image projected onto my square within the Zoom platform was an inversion of the intended code imagery. By this, I mean that the streaming code appeared not behind me, but instead, all over my face, in the pupils of my eyes, inside my mouth, and on my skin.

I initially rejected this inverted imagery for no other reason than an ingrained presumption that I needed to appear more traditionally appealing; of course, this thinking results from male gaze enculturation, the experience of internalizing, over decades, ingested media in which such positioning was communicated as crucial to a feminine identity. The heteronormative, sexualized undertones that go along with physically priming for a performance are very much at work in larp. It wasn’t until the *Valhalla* gamemaster commented on how imaginative it was to have the code inscribed on my body, rather than as a background, that I began to see the mishap in a new way. I decided to push this conceit further and chose to show very little of my body throughout the game. I framed myself as a bust, a digital floating head, using my long dark hair (upon which code was overlaid) to frame my face. The

rest of my body was tangential to my function as a character and my otherworldly appearance was, in many ways, more aesthetically and narratively evocative. Thus, it became beneficial to have an option for framing myself outside the traditional heteronormative male gaze, and through a gaze driven by personal agency.

My situation allowed for more visual variation and innovation regarding my character's development than would have occurred if I were presented with the option to traditionally frame myself. If *Valhalla* had been an in-person larp, there would not have been as many options for subverting a traditional gaze. Thus, the way my character ultimately appeared in the game materialized only *because* of the technology involved and the seeming limitations of the square Zoom screen. In an in-person larp, a player would have agency over their own physical appearance in terms of costume, makeup, and props; however, they generally do not have control over their surroundings. Often, the *mise-en-scene* contributes to the appeal of live-action larp itself—happening in forests, castles, or old warehouses—yet, the necessity of holding *Valhalla* online presented a situation in which players were not only able to claim more agency over physical appearance, but also able to frame and arrange their surroundings to suit their own personal and character driven needs. In this way, my aged computer forced a reimagination of the possibilities introduced within the context of a completely digital larp environment. I was able to frame myself not only as an AI character who lived within a digital realm but was also able to physically illustrate that I was code itself—the imagery etched upon my body.

While my experience creating a character in *Valhalla* was not necessarily born out of needing more control over my physical appearance for purposes of maintaining power based on gender, sexuality, or physical prowess, I did want control over the appearance of my character for the purposes of comfort, narrative function, and to differentiate myself from human characters. Thus, agentic gaze not only creates an opportunity for dismantling social and gender power imbalances, but also for meeting each players' desires and needs in order to increase accessibility, comfort, and personal preference.

Online Technologies and Expanded Suspension of Disbelief in Larp

While the first half of this article explored Zoom's impact upon player agency, challenging the traditional heteronormative male gaze as the predominant lens by of gaming and mediatized performance, it should be mentioned that *Valhalla* was not specifically crafted as a feminist larp. The game was not purposefully centered on feminist issues; however, due to the prevalence of women and nonbinary characters in diegetic leadership roles, players' improvisation often introduced anti-patriarchal narratives.

Valhalla provided opportunities for the exploration of feminist themes in the same way that its medium of presentation, Zoom, created opportunities to amplify

science fiction tropes. This notion of communication's medium generating meaning is not new; Marshall MacLuhan articulates this in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. MacLuhan argues that "the medium is the message," claiming that a medium by which media is communicated is of primary interest, not merely the content expressed.³³ He further articulates that "the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions."³⁴ Similarly, Zoom as medium has not changed the content that might have been presented if *Valhalla* was an in-person larp, but has in fact increased its relative technological verisimilitude, in concert with mainstream science fiction content from both film and literature.

The medium of Zoom not only helped improve relative verisimilitude of science fiction content but also delivered content that might have otherwise never been experienced during 2020. Otherworld Theater's artistic director and *Valhalla* game master Tiffany Keane Shaefer suggests that "*Valhalla* was created because I was trying to...help a community trapped within their homes feel a sense of exploration. Sci-Fi lended itself to the genre because of the digital medium."³⁵ Shaefer admits that "fantasy [larps] are far more prominent" in the United States, then notes that this gap may be due to difficulties in "trying to find a suitable [science fiction-inspired] location."³⁶ In this way, the science fiction genre serves a twofold purpose for *Valhalla* players: ameliorating the scarcity of science fiction larps, and using the very platform on which the game is presented to heighten the degree of verisimilitude experienced by each player.

Amanda Rose on Zoom as Larp Platform

As larpers, we interact with one another, crafting a narrative as we conspire. Conspire: *con*, in Latin meaning "with," and *spirare*, meaning "to breathe," but also indicating spirit.

Larpers unite in spirit, breathing together not only in physical proximity but inhaling the game's pre-established lore, metabolizing this input in conjunction with our own characters, and exhaling additions to the story, bringing life to a narrative that, without our conspiratorial action, would remain spiritless: game mechanics and outlines not yet brought to life.

I was afraid this wouldn't happen during *Valhalla*. I found myself logging in for our first game, trepidatious that the platform's limitations would leave our capacity to breathe life into the narrative severely abated. At first, our interactions were indeed somewhat diminished; no cross-conversations could occur, as Zoom seemingly randomly selected one person's audio to push through to my speakers. I could see players attempting to interject as Captain Des, the other NPC aboard the

Yngve, monologued during that first game. I had already established that Åtta was somewhat distrustful of their new captain, so I interjected and asked other players their thoughts, attempting to open the door to collaborative storytelling. While the players debated what course of action, they thought our crew should take, I sent a private message to my fellow NPC via Facebook Messenger, out of character, fueled by my experience teaching via Zoom: “DUDE. Hang time is your friend. Let silence invite them to contribute. Count to five between each thought to leave time for lag, in case they want to respond.”

Participating in *Valhalla* as non-player characters (NPCs), we guided players through narrative events and facilitated opportunities for improvisation. Dani Snyder-Young defines NPCs as “interactive actors, provid[ing] obstacles for the participants to overcome.”³⁷ Larps like *Valhalla*, sometimes called “theatre-style” larps, are not played with the objective of winning, but rather, for the purpose of giving players the chance to “play their characters.”¹⁹ The emergent nature of *Valhalla* presented questions regarding narrative continuity: What if questions are asked that NPCs have no answers for? At what point should answers be invented? What if these narrative inventions do not align with things other NPCs say? These questions address some of the larger conceptual and temporal issues within larp as explored by J. Toumas Harviainen in “Time and Temporality in Live-Action Role-Playing”:

Asynchronous time may arise from elements such as breaks for mechanics. It may also come from players’ information gaps that need answers, from unintended off-game disturbances, and so forth. Whereas in a tabletop role-playing session the roll of dice is an acceptable break that everyone may observe, rock-paper-scissors in a hundred-player Vampire larp or a point-based melee in a fantasy game of thousands will cause time to twist itself.³⁸

While Harviainen’s article discusses issues that arise during in-person larps, similar concerns emerged during *Valhalla* due to the technology being used—Zoom—as the primary game platform.³⁹ Unstable Wi-Fi, learning curves regarding features such as screen or audio sharing, and device memory all became crucial. Although such issues could be eradicated by larping together in space, this option was impossible given the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, while Zoom-as-performance-space aligns with the science fiction genre of *Valhalla*, it was also the reason for several accessibility, temporal, and suspension issues. However, while online platforms presented dependability issues, there were also clear advantages to this method of playing, in that players could communicate with each other

across several platforms at once. Simultaneous communication across platforms is commonplace for smartphone users; we interact with others through Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter, but rarely do we have conversations with the *same* individual on all those platforms concurrently while also actively planning and improvising a performance in the present. In the following examples, we discuss how temporality, continuity, and multi-platform conversations augmented *Valhalla's* larping experience.

Gaby on Using Multi-Platform Digital Larp:

Acting as an NPC in a digital larp versus a physical larp is a completely different experience. There is a certain expectation when being an NPC in a regular LARP; being present in the room, being completely knowledgeable about the lore, and dressing appropriate to your character are some of the clearest distinctions. However, when LARPing online, these expectations become easier to achieve and sometimes even more effective in an online setting. For example, each ship in chapter one had its own computer, serving as a memory bank for lore as well as a travel guide through space. As an NPC captain, I was able to communicate privately and quickly with my computer about anything we would encounter. These side conversations took place on adjacent platforms (primarily through Facebook chat) while the game was going on. Because of the agency allotted each player, no other player knew if or when these side conversations were happening. The agency to ask anything and get an answer without delay was a very interesting distinction from physical LARP. Additionally, the NPCs had constant contact with the Lady Listener, or Game Master. This allowed for easy transitions and decision-making ability during the game, and the ability to clarify game mechanics almost instantly! Indeed, it was a very new and wondrous world to pioneer, and we weren't even scratching the surface.

While multi-platform communication might be newer to larp, Murray discusses how private conversations have been used in multiuser dungeon games (MUDs) such as *World of Warcraft* or *EverQuest* since the inception of the genre in the 1980s. She asserts that “one key to functioning in a MUD is the ability to flip back and forth between player and character,”⁴⁰ further articulating that

The most common conventions regulate the privacy of the dialogue: players can establish separate rooms, which function as private stages, or they can use the “whisper” command to one another, so that their conversation cannot be heard by others in the same room...The privacy conventions allow the players to

decide how much of their role playing they want to share with the general group.⁴¹

While MUD communication is primarily written, *Valhalla* participants used embodied performance to interact in character. NPCs, however, needed to communicate privately, outside of the diegetic narrative. Zoom does not facilitate private inter-breakout room group chats, so the NPC ensemble could not orchestrate performances via Zoom. While MUDs had features specifically tailored to the idea of privacy for the purpose of world-building, *Valhalla* larpers innovatively used several platforms simultaneously to achieve the communication they needed. As Zoom continues to be used for larp and gaming activity, perhaps such features will be incorporated.

Amanda Rose on Multi-Platform Communication:

At the end of the first game, players aboard the Yngve debriefed, out of character. Three agreed that the technology constrained their capacity to contribute. In this way, Zoom's tendency to only allow one person to be heard at any given moment suppressed our ability to breathe life into the story together. To improve each player's experience, we made a plan. We determined that side conversations that would occur naturally in shared-space larping would relocate to Zoom's chat feature, and secret side conversations—the ones in which a player might pull another person aside or into a corner to conspire quietly—would occur via Facebook Messenger.

In the next game, I engaged with six private chats: individual characters interacted with Åtta to ask questions about the world, Åtta liaised with the crews of other ships to arrange meetings and secure alliances, and Åtta assisted our ship's engineer in cracking a code in that character's "private quarters." All this occurred simultaneously via Messenger, which we used as the game mechanic for performing what was diegetically private communication with the Yngve crew over their "comms."

These examples articulate how overlapping conversations during gameplay often became chaotic on a monaural platform such as Zoom, which only allows one speaker to be heard at a time. When these platforms function, they offer an expanded sense of communication and availability between players through multiple platforms; however, when they fail to function, players become entirely disconnected. The technology created a situation in which availability fluctuated from one extreme to the other within a matter of seconds. In-person larp experiences lack the potential for simultaneous speaking across platforms, while the genre

limitations and the circumstances of fantasy-driven larps do not offer the ability to use smartphones, iPads, or laptops during gameplay for continuity reasons. As a science fiction larp, however, *Valhalla* did not have these limitations.

Technical Difficulties: Blending Genre, Fueling Narrative

The term *science fiction* was first used by author William Wilson in *A Little Earnest Book upon a Great Old Subject* to describe situations “in which the revealed truths of Science may be...interwoven with a pleasing story.”⁴² In this way, *Valhalla* was situated well within the genre, offering opportunities to interrogate how science fiction itself is in conversation with virtual larp. In what ways do the science fictional and technological aspects of *Valhalla* enhance, complicate, or disarrange the foundational aspects of larp, and how does technology augment an art form so deeply rooted in “historical fantasy and renaissance settings?”⁴³ The science fictional genre of *Valhalla* invites the use of digital technology, and through embracing science fiction as a mode of storytelling, allows difficulties and malfunctions during gameplay to be seamlessly woven into the game’s narrative. Moreover, *Valhalla*’s genre and narrative devices work alongside the technology of the game platform to encourage an expanded sense of verisimilitude during the game.

Larp in the United States often engages with historical fiction and fantasy genres; in fact, many definitions of this performance practice involve the fantastic. Samantha Eddy’s definition highlights a longing for the fantastic within the art form:

The worlds of live action role play (LARP) are complex spaces of collaborative and imaginative interaction...They are embodied in meticulous fashion through settings, interactions, costumes, language, props, makeup, etc....This robust embodiment is a part of a communal effort in which the participants work as a whole to transport themselves to fictional lands. As they collectively pursue this activity, live action role players (LARPer) are continually negotiating everyday life and a fantastic escape: a foot in both worlds.⁴⁴

Milspaw and Evans similarly establish larp’s genealogy in the fantasy genre: “In the mid-1970s a crucial change occurred. Players began to create fantasy scenarios, set in magic worlds peopled by magicians and monsters that drew primarily on J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.”⁴⁵ Despite larp’s roots in the fantasy genre and its function as a fantastical escape from the isolation of COVID-19 quarantine, *Valhalla* was not a fantasy-driven larp. Instead, it was steeped in science fiction rhetoric and narrative tropes. The storyline centered on starships competitively navigating the galaxy and the crews, captains, and AI that lived within

them. While the game drew foundational terminology from Norse mythology, the mechanics of the narrative were science fictional. The ships themselves, and their AI supercomputers, became the “novum” of the game: “A kind of hypothetical innovation that has been introduced to the narrative of the world, and changes the world so drastically, that it is clearly no longer our own.”⁴⁶ When novums are based in science and technology, the resulting narrative becomes science fictional. Although scholars do not agree on one definition of the genre, Carl Freedman’s *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* describes science fiction as being:

Determine[d] by the dialectic between estrangement and cognition. The first term refers to the creation of an alternative fictional world that, by refusing to take our mundane environment for granted, implicitly or explicitly performs an estranging critical interrogation of the later. But the *critical* character of the interrogation is guaranteed by the operation of cognition, which enables the science-fictional text to account rationally for its imagined world. If the dialectic is flattened out to mere cognition, then the result is “realistic” or mundane citation, which can cognitively account for its imaginings, but performs no estrangement; if the dialectic is flattened out to mere estrangement...the result is fantasy, which estranges or appears to estrange, but in an irrationalist, theoretically illegitimate way.⁴⁷

Valhalla does neither of these things. It declines to flatten the narrative’s dialectic to merely cognition or estrangement, instead creating a conversation between both aspects, resulting in a give-and-take between scientific cognition and fictional estrangement. Freedman goes on to complicate Darko Suvin’s theory of cognitive estrangement by establishing the cognition effect—an expansion of cognitive estrangement—which suggests that “the crucial issue for generic discrimination is not any epistemological judgement external to the text itself or the rationality or irrationality of the latter’s imaginings, but rather...the attitude of the text itself to the kind of estrangement being performed.”⁴⁸ Freedman proceeds, explaining how this distinction works in practice:

The Lord of the Rings is understood as fantasy and *Out of the Silent Planet*...as science fiction: not because it would necessarily be less rational to believe in hobbits and orcs than in planetary angels and Merlin redivivus, but because of the formal stances adopted by the texts themselves. Tolkien’s trilogy proclaims in its very letter a noncognitive disjunction from the mundane world... while Lewis’s trilogy considers that principles it regards as

cognitively valid cannot exclude events like the action fictionally portrayed from occurring within the author's actual environment. Lewis, accordingly, produces a cognition effect, while Tolkien quite deliberately does not.⁴⁹

Like *Out of the Silent Planet*, many of *Valhalla*'s novums may be cognitively plausible from a scientific standpoint. However, *Valhalla* is unique in that it blends fantasy and science fiction elements, not only for the sake of storytelling but also to allow players means for explaining away particular limitations created by distance; the game combines elements of each genre, not by design, but because of the virtual platform's limitations. In this way, the "attitude" of *Valhalla* is one of scientific cognition in terms of the game's content (or text), while also allowing for fantastical estrangement in a form that effectively accounts for technological discrepancies.

Although Freedman's cognition effect was intended for reflecting on dialectics between readers and science fiction literature, its expansion into the realm of larp is useful when considering the complex interplay between gaming, technology, and genre. The cognition effect highlights science and technology as the major elements of estrangement used to articulate a reader's dialectic with the text. In a virtual larp, interaction with digital technology—whether successful or not—can likewise be seen as a method of engaging with the emerging narrative. A tertiary component—the technology used to participate—joins the dialectic, creating a co-performance between players, narrative, and the platform itself. Within the game, this manifests in several ways; for example, because each player is in a spatially different location, physical interactions normally performed physically in real time can no longer take place. The following examples address instances in which the technology altered, enhanced, or limited diegetic experiences, with players reporting deepened or overlapping dialectics between *Valhalla*'s science fictional genre and the technology itself.

Amanda Rose on Genre and Technology in *Valhalla*

While playing Åtta, I was called the "Oracle"; Åtta was an Artificial Intelligence interface programmed to serve the needs of the Yngve Starship's crew. Therefore, as a player, I was almost always engaged in the synchronous conversation occurring aboard the Yngve; Åtta often needed to interject, correct the captain, quell arguments or dangerous propositions (such as sending a crewmember out of the airlock, proposed by another, agitated crewmember), or simply answer questions and provide information.

Simultaneously, I was acting as a stage manager; arranging meetings between ships, playing sound and video cues during battles and major plot events, relaying information to NPCs and characters. I also completed simultaneous dramaturgy; I

contacted the game master during play to ensure that plot developments emerging through the interactions of the Yngve crew tracked with the foundational lore of *Valhalla*, and with actions being taken aboard other ships.

When we invented new foods and players determined that they had discovered new cures to diseases, I added these developments to the lore of the game so that players, NPCs, and characters in other ships could add to the narrative concepts that players aboard my ship were creating (soon, the potato-steak, an idea improvised by a player aboard our ship, was known to be the favorite food of prominent characters who had never even interacted with our crew). I was able to do all of this without breaking character, through the use of Facebook Messenger and Zoom chat, without ever pausing my “in-person” performance.

Bella on Science Fiction as a Means of Expanding Verisimilitude

Example 1:

On the Laeknir medical transport, every crew member was a medical worker; likewise, the ship captain and AI supercomputer were both medical doctors. Throughout the game, the Laeknir crew—having all taken an oath to help those in need—would periodically bring characters from other starships onboard if they were in need of medical attention. Thus, when characters contacted the Laeknir for help, the crew had to convey healing or medical attention in order for the narrative to function. One of the side narratives of the story had to do with water contamination, and an antidote only available on the Laeknir. With these narrative elements in place, and because players were not sharing physical space, there could be no role-playing of medical procedures or healing rituals; the NPCs had to come up with an action to substitute for role-played medical care. As a player, this dilemma was a reminder that although we were in the midst of a science fiction game, not everything the players did would be scientifically plausible, or easily accepted as part of a science-based narrative. Gary Alan Fine’s book *Shared Fantasy Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983), discusses this shared suspension of disbelief, stating,

Since these games involve fantasy—content divorced from everyday experience—it might be assumed that anything is possible within a cultural system. Since fantasy is the free play of a creative imagination, the limits of fantasy should be as broad as the limits of one’s mind. This is not the case, as each fantasy world is a fairly tight transformation by the players of their mundane, shared realities. While players can, in theory, create anything, they in fact create only those things that are engrossing

and emotionally satisfying. Fantasy is constrained by the social expectations of players and of their world.³³

For these reasons, the Laeknir NPCs spent rehearsal time brainstorming tactics for indicating medical processes in a way that would be “engrossing and emotionally satisfying” within a game where no players were in the same physical space.³⁴ During gameplay, the crew invented a series of movements and gestures that would stand in for medicine administered, calling on liminal and spiritual practices of holistic medicine as a way of representing the appropriate science fictional aspects necessary to fulfil the game’s genre and platform. The players embedded this method into the language of the game, and because of the limitations of our online platform, their suspension of disbelief had to expand to include these gestures and movements as a legitimate offering of medical aid.

Example 2:

Experiencing real-world computer issues such as platform freezing, Wi-Fi disturbances, or video sharing delays were common during *Valhalla*. My own personal computer had difficulty running Zoom, the larp website (used to access lore), Dropbox, and Messenger all at the same time. Thus, I would often experience moments of lag both in private chats with the NPC playing the Laeknir captain, as well as on Zoom itself. My character, Absalon, would name the cause of these delays within the narrative as “photon storms,” “internal system glitches,” or “communication difficulties” between ships. These phrases became a part of the mythos of the game. While other players knew these phrases were code for experiencing tech issues, they also complemented the situation in terms of form and content.

These examples articulate instances in which *Valhalla* players embraced technological problems as part of the narrative. Firmly situated within the science fiction genre, *Valhalla* presented an environment where these challenges could be seamlessly woven into the narrative progression. As such, the use of science and technology as a means of “minimiz[ing] reality”⁵⁰ in larp as opposed to using other fantastical elements is effective for the intended effect of inspiring awe, wonder, and escape.

Virtual larp’s constantly shifting dialectic between technology and narrative may require an enhanced dedication to the suspension of disbelief. The sometimes incongruent interplay between technological demands and the more fantastical narrative elements of the story require a new level of tolerance and acceptance for all components and participants of the game: nonworking backgrounds, spotty Wi-Fi, the lack of communal space, and the impossibility of physical touch all need

to not only be tolerated but entwined into the story. Yet more leniency regarding the suspension of disbelief seemed to alleviate much player anxiety, fueling player agency in contributing to world-building and narrative formation. Within the framework of such a dialectic, these challenges can be viewed as part of the emerging narrative, as opposed to unintended errors. As such, the genre of *Valhalla* and its enhanced player agency are both constructive augmentations of the larp experience; these emerging virtual elements further expand in-game verisimilitude and player mediation over appearance and surroundings, successfully integrating these developments into the form of the narrative itself.

Notes

1. The majority of extant larp scholarship has been spearheaded by Nordic larp scholars. We are adopting the linguistic practices established in existing larp theory and analysis, rather than imposing the capitalized form (LARP or L.A.R.P.) more colloquially used in the United States upon existing scholarly discourse. We have chosen to follow the lead of the scholars of larp in the Nordic countries, who utilize *larp* as a word in its own right—used both a noun and as a verb, similarly to the usage of “run”—rather than as an acronym. See Eirik Fatland, “Knutepunkt and Nordic Live Role-Playing: A Crash Course,” in *Dissecting Larp: Collected Papers for Knutepunkt 2005* (Grimshel Trykkeri AS, NO: Knutepunkt, 2005), 12.
2. Sarah Hoover, David W. Simkins, Sebastian Deterding, David Meldman, and Amanda Brown, “Performance Studies and Role-Playing Games,” in *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 213–26.
3. Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989), 8.
4. J. Harviainen, et al., “Live-Action Role-Playing Games,” in *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 87–106; Hoover et al., “Performance Studies and Role-Playing Games,” in *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 213–226.
5. Katie Salen Tekinbas and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).
6. Markus Montola, “The Invisible Rules of Role Playing,” *International Journal of Role Playing* 1, no. 1 (2008): 22–36.
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10. Scott Magelssen, *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014). Kindle.
11. Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 46.
12. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 47.
13. NoPro Newswire, “Valhalla: A Sci-Fi Viking Online Larp,” No Proscenium, April 22, 2020, <https://noprosceum.com/valhalla-a-sci-fi-viking-online-larp-ab168c45f02>.
14. Annette Arlander, Bruce Barton, Melanie Dreyer-Lude, and Ben Spatz, eds., *Performance as Research*, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017).
15. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>.
16. Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 26.
17. Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 27.
18. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, “Introduction: Identity, Representation, and Video Game Studies beyond the Politics of the Image,” in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 1.

19. Malkowski and Russworm, "Introduction," 2.
20. Several gaming studies scholars have written extensively on the male gaze in video game design, including: Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, "Introduction: Identity, Representation, and Video Game Studies beyond the Politics of the Image," in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Amanda Phillips in *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2020; and Robert Mejia and Barbara LeSavoy. "The Sexual Politics of Video Game Graphics." In *Feminism in Play*, edited by Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen, 1st ed. 2018 edition. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
21. Stephanie C. Jennings, "Women Agents and Double-Agents: Theorizing Feminine Gaze in Video Games," in *Feminism in Play*, ed. Kishonna L. Gray, Gerald Voorhees, and Emma Vossen, 1st ed. (Cham, Germany: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 240.
22. Jennings, "Women Agents and Double-Agents," 240.
23. Jennings, "Women Agents and Double-Agents," 241.
24. Amanda Rose Hartley Villarreal, "Unscripted Intimacies: Negotiating Consent in Gamified Performance." (PhD Dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder, 2021), 53.
25. For a more thorough discussion of the ways in which multiple players and NPCs developed their characters through experimentation with Zoom, see: Villarreal, "Unscripted Intimacies," 189-195.
26. James S. Martin, Christian A. Vaccaro, D. Alex Heckert, and Robert Heasley, "Epic Glory and Manhood Acts in Fantasy Role-Playing: Dagorhir as a Case Study," *Journal of Men's Studies* 23, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 309, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1060826515601355>.
27. Martin et al., "Epic Glory and Manhood Acts in Fantasy Role-Playing."
28. Villarreal, "Unscripted Intimacies," 194.
29. Villarreal, "Unscripted Intimacies," 195.
30. Villarreal, "Unscripted Intimacies," 195.
31. Thomas S. Henricks, "Play as Self-Realization: Towards a General Theory of Play," *American Journal of Play* 6, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 190.
32. Dani Snyder-Young, "Warriors, Wizards, and Clerics: Heroic Identity Construction in Live Action Role Playing Games," in *Play, Performance and Identity: How Institutions Structure Ludic Spaces*, ed. Matt Omasta and Drew Chappell (New York: Routledge, 2015), 24.
33. Marshall MacLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1964), 1.
34. MacLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1.
35. Tiffany Keane Schaefer, interview with Bella Poynton, May 29, 2021. Zoom.
36. Schaefer, interview.
37. Snyder-Young, "Warriors, Wizards, and Clerics," 23.
38. Harviainen et al., "Live-Action Role-Playing Games," 18.
39. While Zoom was used as the primary game platform for *Valhalla* part 1 (episodes 1–5), it should be noted that for *Valhalla* season 2 (episodes 6–10), a different platform called Gather was used for episodes in which more characters gathered in larger spaces. When players were on their nation ships, as in season 1, the Zoom platform was used. This article focuses largely on season 1; therefore, our analysis focuses on the use of Zoom.
40. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 112.
41. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 118.
42. Quoted in H. Bruce Franklin, "Science Fiction: The Early History," 2018, <https://www.hbrucefranklin.com/articles/history-of-science-fiction/>.
43. David Simkins, *The Arts of LARP: Design Literacy, Learning and Community in Live-Action Role Play* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2014).
44. Samantha Eddy, "More Than a Game: Racecraft and the Adaptation of 'Race' in Live Action Role Play," *Humanities* 9, no. 124 (2020): 2.
45. Milspaw and Evans, "Variations on Vampires."
46. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphosis of Science Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 70.
47. Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 16–17.
48. Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, 18.
49. Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, 23.
50. Eddy, "More Than a Game," 2.