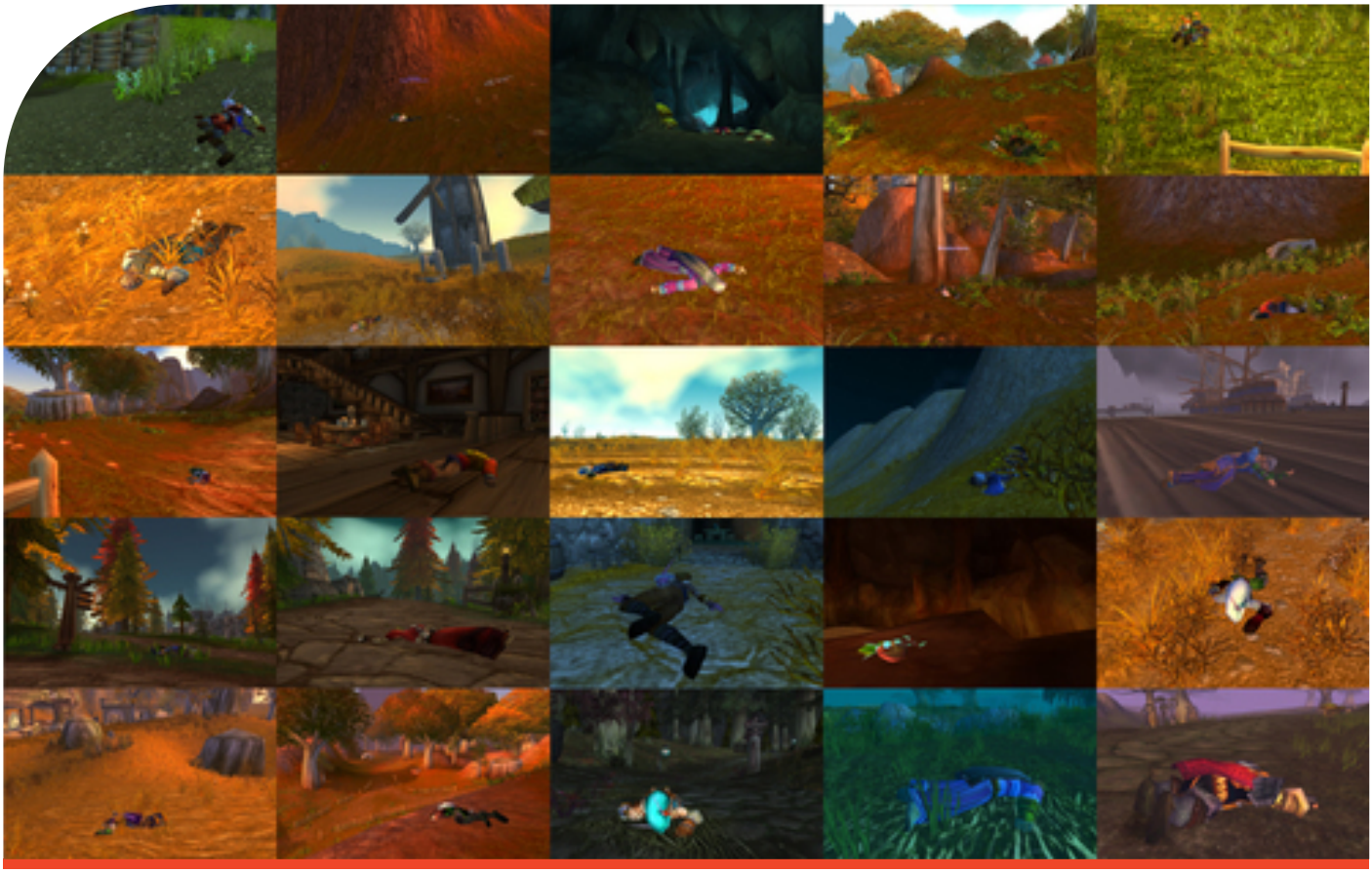


How to Break Up With a Videogame

Features

January 20, 2017

by Eron Rauch

What happens when you quit playing a game that's filled your free time and defined your entire social life?

I stopped playing *World of Warcraft* because my girlfriend, whom I had lived with in Santa Monica for five oceanside years, dumped me for another one of our guild members. Don't get me wrong, the breakup was a long time coming since our relationship had mostly been a tangle of drinking and arguing. We were young and didn't know much about life, so we had exhausted ourselves by mumbling about "love" and trying to make it work.

After a short visit through the dust storms of the Southwestern deserts to visit my dad, I returned to the flaking beige-painted apartment door. We had the talk, both a bit relieved, and thus ended

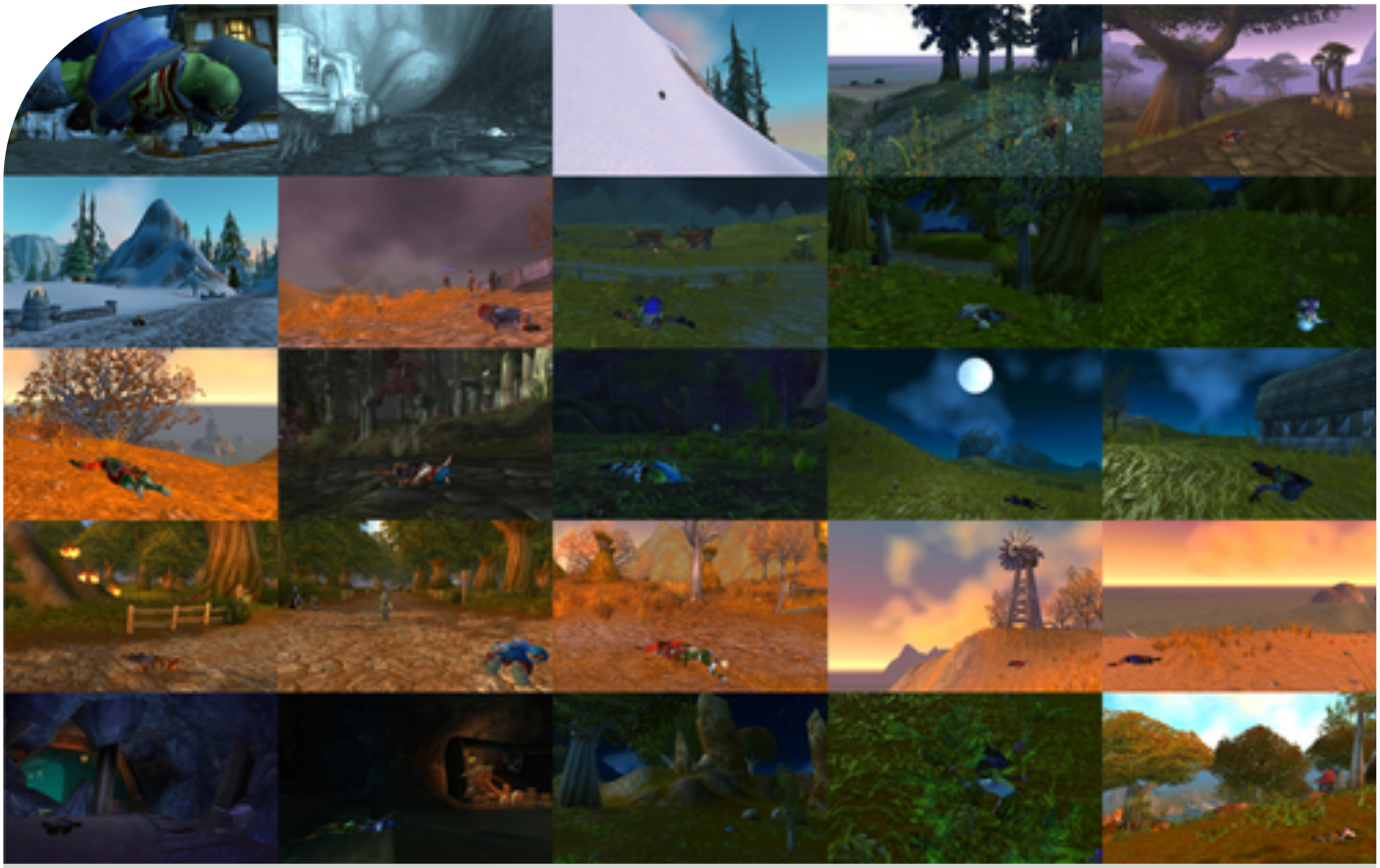
almost three years of my being a digital inhabitant of the misty fantasy realm of Azeroth.

As a raid leader, officer, and recruiter for an end-game guild, I played almost every night. But my commitment was always limited by the hours I spend on work and art. My ex played the game basically full time, and now the game was her main connection to her new long-distance boyfriend. So she got the game and the beach, while I got the record collection and a warehouse space beside the tagged-up concrete trench that is the Los Angeles River.

Breaking up, even if it is mutual, is always a painful process. It is suffused with a sense of grief that comes from severing many intimate connections between yourself and the rest of the world. This breakup was a doubly heavy loss for me since I also lost my deep connection to the people and places of *World of Warcraft*. That sprawling virtual community had defined the texture of my free time for years. At night, the missing icon on my computer's desktop echoed my groggy sadness at waking up curled next to an empty half of a bed.

When we broke up, it was at the height of *WoW* as a social phenomenon. Newspapers ran articles talking about it. The game was a punchline on late night television. South Park even famously did a parody episode.

Amid this media interest, many of us new online role-playing gamers became real-life friends with our fellow players. I met a huge group of guild members at BlizzCon. My guild leader slept in the back of my car after he underestimated the strength of the drinks at a tiki bar in East Hollywood. I even sold a big painting from one of my art shows to the recruiter for one of our server's best guilds.



ZOOM

Being video game and fantasy nerds, many of my close friends in town were dedicated *WoW* players as well. Like bizarro-world sports fans, the game was what we talked about over coffee, at dinner, and at the bar. After the breakup, though, whenever I went to a house party, I stood around awkwardly and fussed with the stereo in the living room while everyone laid on the grass and talked about upcoming patch changes for mages, new raids, and guild gossip.

World of Warcraft might have been the first game that was a big component of my life, but it was far from the last. After that I jumped into the deep end with *Team Fortress 2*. I probably have over 500 hours-played on the Demoman character alone. I've been playing *League of Legends* almost exclusively since open beta testing (besides for flings with *Guild Wars 2* and *Planetside 2*). I even went to see two of the World Championships in person. But just the other night I turned down an invite to play *League of Legends* to get in some games of *Overwatch*. This feels significant.

Throughout my time with each of these games I have moved homes, found and lost friends, struggled with art and work, and dealt with medical emergencies. All the while the games, with their people, their places, their textures and rhythms, were interwoven with daily existence.

In the first two decades of my lifetime, video game players typically had a relationship to games similar to the relationship that fans of novels, comics, movies, or albums had with their favorite works. Being a fan of video games meant you played a bunch of different titles. With the rise of online role-playing games and esports, however, there came a new type of player: one who, like me, plays basically only one game for a very long time. That game becomes something more like a complex social relationship. Playing the game means connecting yourself into its virtual, societal, and media worlds. A serial monogamous gamer, if you'd like.

This relationship won't be unfamiliar to sports fans, chess players, amateur musicians, or Society for Creative Anachronism participants. Nor is it entirely different from having a youthful fling as a fan of superhero comics, Magic: the Gathering, or death metal.

Though many Americans will likely exit a hobby or subculture at some point in their life, we still often have trouble making sense of that break. Indeed, when we talk about hobbies we identify moving on by the much more pejorative term, "quitting." And quitters never win. When discussing subcultures, American society often calls leaving those phantasmagoric realms "growing out of…", dismissing them as juvenile bad habits best forgotten, like biting our nails or picking our nose.

In a way, leaving behind a long relationship with a single video game is the worst of both of these worlds, all with a few very peculiar qualities that make them even more confusing experiences to try to weave into our past.

ZOOM

To start with, American society looks down at video games, especially these long-term immersive games, with little but incomprehension and disdain. Whether it is an MMO or an esport, these all-encompassing games seem like a waste of time. At least with chess you were getting smarter, or something. At least with a band you had some fun and met some people, or something. But spending thousands of hours running around as an elf? Think of how much real stuff you could have gotten done!

Even when I talk to my more traditional video gaming friends, the kind who still knock through a few dozen AAA and indie titles a year in their 40s, the first word I tend to hear when I tell people that I don't play *LoL* anymore is, "congratulations." When you tell friends you stopped playing *WoW* (after flying on the backs of dragons and conquering the most foul villains in the hardest raids) even your gamer friends hug you like you just broke free of a cult.

But amongst monogamous-style players, someone who leaves is treated with a combination of outrage and horror. Someone still invested in that—people you might have spent years playing with—could see your choice to leave as some unholy combination of treachery and suicide.

These people could also see your choice to leave as screwing over your fellow players. I can still remember spending 50 or 60 hours redoing the same dungeon with our guild leaders trying to get a specific sword to drop for our main tank in *WoW*, only to have him leave the game permanently a few weeks later for family reasons. Items like that can't be transferred between characters, so our time was lost for good. That led to a guild-wide policy to never recruit players who had previously quit the game as a way to make sure that player couldn't come back.

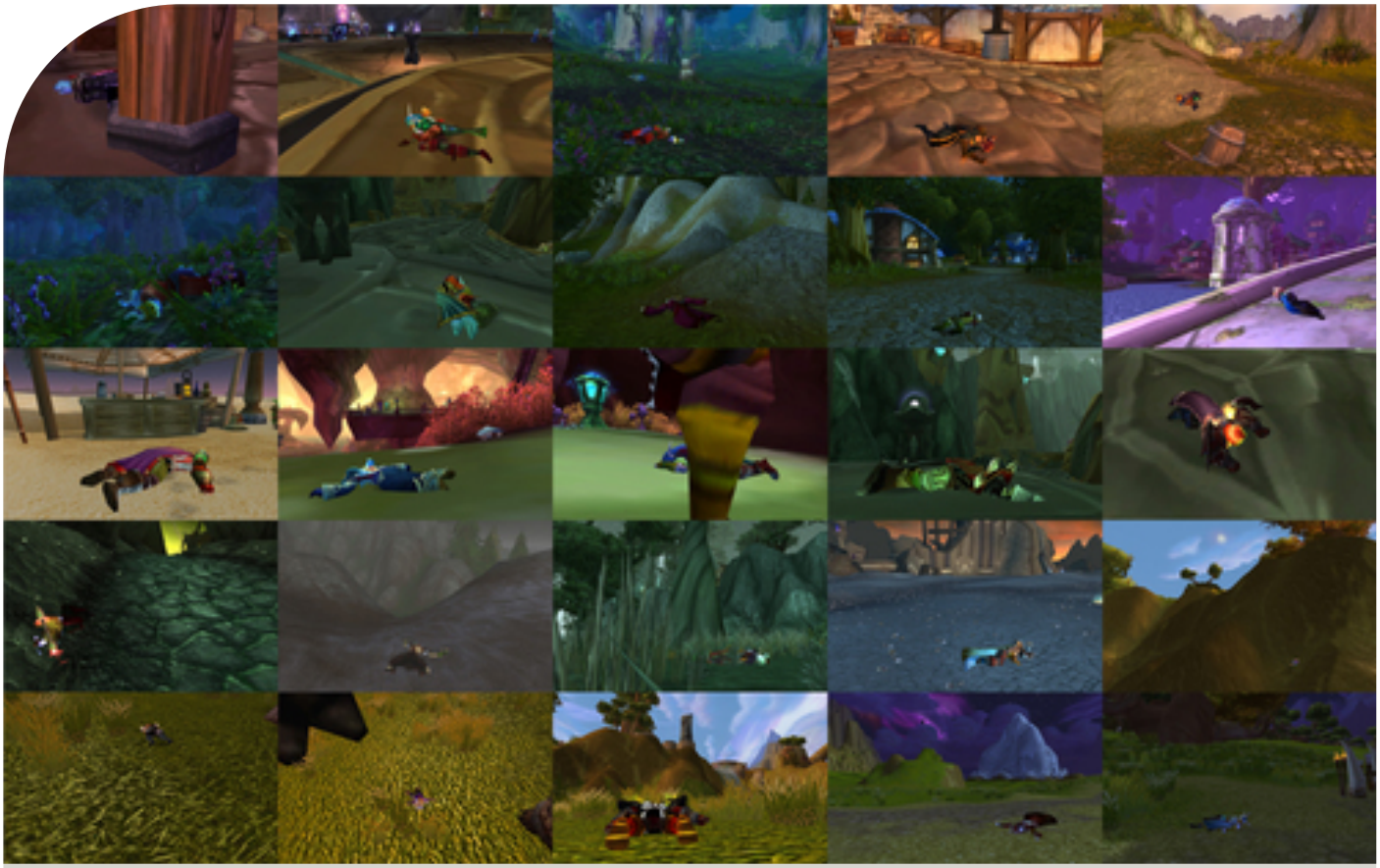
It would be challenging enough for any long-term fan merely to face a disdainful society and an angry ex-fandom, but the medium of video games presents some novel new issues for former fans to cope with.

The first is narrative totality. When you are sports fan, or a chess player, you are still yourself, existing in your world. But in most of these long-term video games, they are deeply immersive, where you play as a character within an increasingly dense fictional universe. Even in esports, where real players sit in real seats in real stadiums, their online handles are still what are sewn on their team jerseys.

Leaving one of these realms for another is a bit like stopping reading an ongoing series of novels mid-way. At any point someone who is still a fan will always be ready to jump in and dismiss your experience because they have more current data. You are always inside the game, on borrowed time, but the game is never inside you. The stories are designed to churn forever, and trying to figure out what to do with the fragment you experienced is difficult.

Second, there is also a difference in the way we physically interact with video games. They are essentially experienced in private, while sitting at a computer. If I take an hour-long hike, I know how to explain what I did on that hike to a random friend. But if I walk from one side of Azeroth to another, also about an hour back in the day, it is much harder to know what I'm supposed to tell someone else who doesn't or hasn't played *WoW*.

Trying to explain what you "did" in these digital wildernesses feels like it is lacking precedence. Telling a story about what you accomplished feels like recounting some curious combination of baseball statistics and your internal mental experience while reading a book.



ZOOM

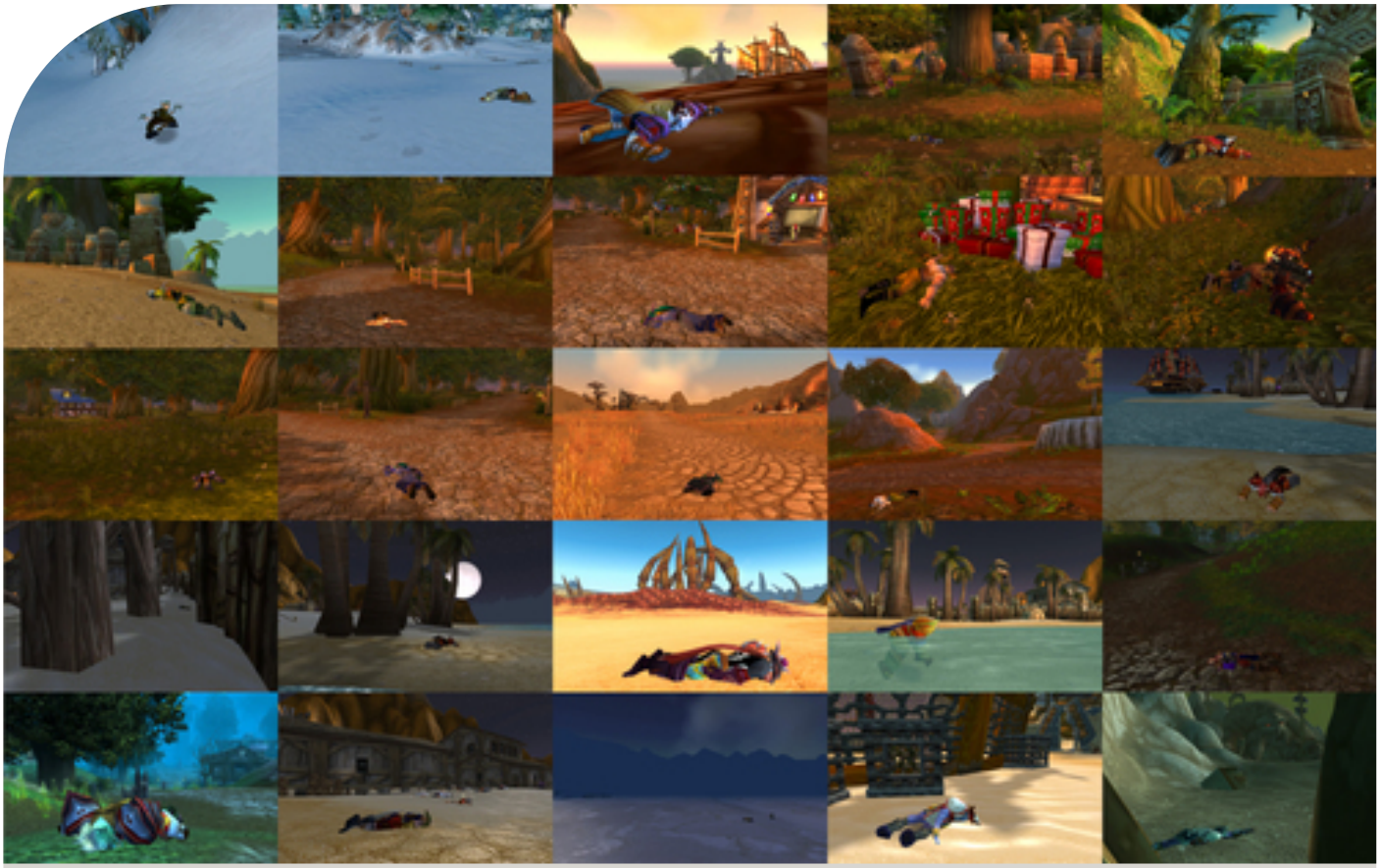
Finally, there is something perhaps more problematic going on with games compared to most hobbies given that these spaces are so driven by a consumer relationship and so tightly controlled from their publishers and developers. Being a monogamous gamer and a Renn Faire nerd are different because stakes are just so much larger for video games in terms of investment and audience size. As a fan playing *League of Legends* or *World of Warcraft* you are one amongst millions upon millions of simultaneous players around the world producing billions of dollars of annual revenue.

Accordingly the marketing and user-retention strategies involved are so much more savvy and weaponized than in most hobbies. For each game, thousands of people have spent many years trying to make sure you want to play, want to keep playing, and will keep forking out money to do so. They have meeting after meeting, often before the game has even started production, honing transaction models, retention strategies, marketing synergy, brand strategy, target demographics, and licensing agreements. One glance at the End User License Agreement establishes the utter and complete control and ownership that the company has of the game, its ideas, your character, and every tiny element you interact with.

Yes, the designers often love games and want to make a compelling project, but the reality is that the bottom line that matters most.

To the companies, people who no longer play a given game are simply indicators that they might have problems with the game or marketing which should be solved. Those players never should have left. They should be brought back in. Or maybe advertised to for a new product that would better meet their needs.

Specifically, this leads to one really challenging and unique element that separates monogamous gaming from most hobbies: the incredible speed and inevitability of breaking up with any video game. Unlike painting or chess, which can be practiced from adolescence to old age, video games are commercial products where a shelf-life of even ten years would be considered success beyond the wildest dreams of its publisher and developer.



ZOOM

No matter how much I love *Overwatch*, how many friends I geek out about it with right now, I know there will be a day when, like *LoL* before it, I move on. Maybe your girlfriend dumps you, maybe your friends all pressure you to switch games, maybe your job means you can't invest enough time, maybe the designers decide to sunset the game to promote a sequel, or maybe

the company goes bankrupt. Regardless of the cause, monogamous gaming relationships inevitably end in a break-up.

"Break Up Songs" is a genre of music filled with millions of musicians publicly mulling over pain, emptiness, and loss. But to return to video games, what then should I call my formerly intimate but long-severed relationship to *World of Warcraft*? My ex-game? Would all of this imply I am cheating on *League of Legends* when I play *Overwatch* after I get home from the bar tonight? These questions might seem ridiculous, but no more ridiculously inaccurate than equating that one month where I played through *Dragon Quest 8* in my free evenings by myself with my many years playing *League of Legends* with hundreds of real and virtual friends.

Many of us monogamous gamers struggle to express the richness of the experiences contained within the arc of our games. In a lot of ways, what I think I'm talking about is imagination. We accept some hobbies, even in their past tense, because we have shared cultural stories that lets us imagine what someone who used to do those things might have learned from their time doing them. But we are only beginning to have those stories for video games, and have almost none of those shared imaginative cues for these much more complex monogamous gaming relationships.

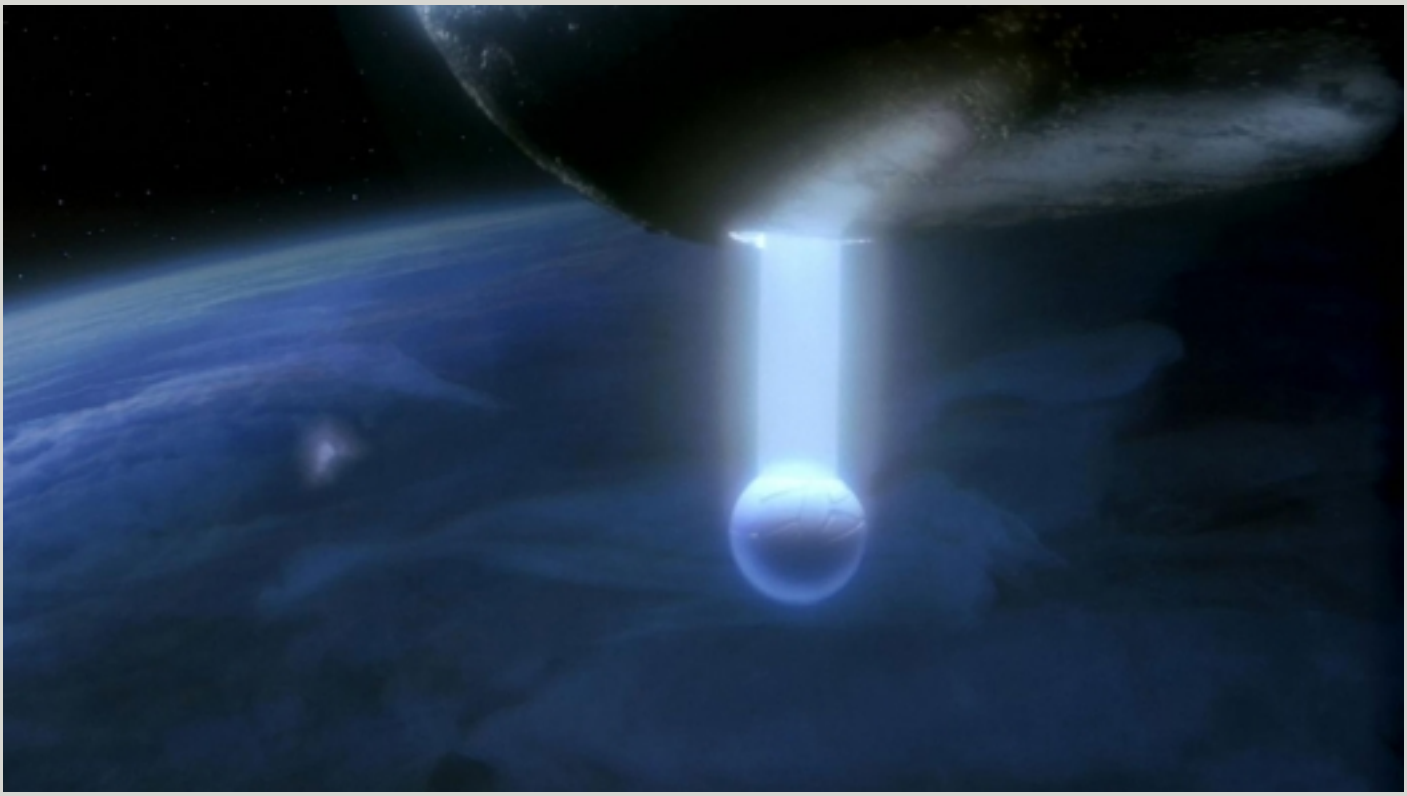
These gaps in our language and these places where we have yet to construct shared stories are the exact places where we have the most to discover and learn. To own our future, we need to be able to share what we've learned, what we've lost, how we've been wounded, and how we've been inspired, even if it has been immersed in video games. That is, we need writing and the arts now more than ever so we can start to share the ways we each discover the past and future are connected through the present.

As my cat sleeps under my chair and I log in to *Overwatch* after working all day, I sometimes wonder if my gnome warlock is still causing havoc, cackling away on some craggy cliff lit by green flames. There is no way for me to know. I ended up giving my *World of Warcraft* character to my ex- when she moved out of state to live with her boyfriend. Something felt wrong having my character just vanish into some archive drive at a server farm in the suburbs. But that's not my story anymore.

#

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

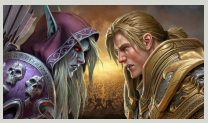
RELATED READING



The Search for Whales

Best Game Soundtracks of August 2018

Custom controllers: From art to accessibility



Battle for Azeroth: What to know if you're getting back into World of Warcraft

Playtesting the CIA's training games

READ MORE FEATURES

ZAM

SIGN UP NOW

Featured Sites

Wowhead
Lolking
TF2Outpost
DayZDB
Hearthhead

Database Sites

Wowhead
Lolking

Addon Sites

MMOUI
WowInterface
ESOUI

About