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AT THE CUSP OF EORZEAN ECHOES

Notes on the Use of Virtual Performance for Arts-Based Methodology

KEVIN MICHAEL A. DE GUZMAN

Abstract

As a queer approach to research, arts-based methodology (ABR)—the process of creatively representing any or all parts of a study—serves as a springboard to emancipate the data and/or its interpretation from the often-inartistic dimensions of research dissemination. In this research note, the performance ethnography *E/c/h/o* (2022-2023), as a product of ABR, is put through the looking-glass—revealing the posthuman dimensions that enveloped its conception. In this way, ABR is illustrated to intertwine two hybridized possibilities: (1) to artistically represent parts of a research with the goal of arriving at particularly relevant answers to specific sociological research questions and (2) to highlight the creative process of translating research into art as an epistemological undertaking in and of itself. In other words, *E/c/h/o* not only posits sociological findings about online interactions from the game world of *Final Fantasy XIV*, but also serves as a performance that underscores the autopoietic process of birthing a posthuman affective assemblage from the perspective of Popperian aesthetics.

This research narrative began with a refusal and ended with a small round of applause. The refusal manifested itself through a rejection letter of the initial pre-publication manuscript, while the small round of applause emanated from the three-dimensional phantom hands of the audience avatars from Eorzea, the virtual world of *Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV)*. Traversing the road from refusal to applause, this research note is about how I turned stone into gold, as if bearing Midas' touch—a blessing bestowed by Western arts-based research (ABR) scholars like Leavy and Bagley. Essentially, this research note not only recounts an arts-informed methodological approach to ethnographic data, but also aims to demonstrate how the arts can effectively turn sociological research inquiry into an affective (posthuman, ontoepistemological, and postphenomenological) practice with just one (aesthetic) touch.

Arts-based methodology (ABR) serves as the Midas touch to this research process. Arts-based research incorporates artistic production (e.g. performance, dance, autoethnography, painting, etc.) into any or all parts of research (Leavy 4). Through these techniques, research data are effectively transported to a plane of affective resonance that seeks both to inform and to inspire. Concomitantly, this method revolutionized the epistemic approach of modern research by injecting it with the aesthetic process at whatever state it may be found. For the most part, ABR equips the researcher with first-hand experience about the findings of the study, making him/her/them/xem more grounded, more involved, and more agglutinated to their distinct epistemic goals. In an anti-hegemonic sense, ABR interpolates as a queer response to the academic pursuit of knowledge that

tends to focus primarily on the harmony between theory and argument(s).

The stone: the data presentation of Manuscript Version 1. The first version of the manuscript was a recounting of observations in Eorzea, the virtual world of *Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV)*—a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) published by Square Enix. Boellstorff says that virtual worlds are sites for the ethnographic exploration of the human connections mediated by the new realities accorded by technological advancement (4). Thus, I began my ethnographic expedition into the social interactions of *FFXIV* inhabitants from the Atomos Server (more on this later).¹ Collecting my online observations mean keeping track of the same through fieldnotes coupled with screen-recordings of about 80+ hours of game footage, but my expedition appeared to be more colorful than my recollection. It was no Horace Miner, full of neologisms and critical thought (see *The Body Ritual among the Nacirema*); rather, its findings and data presentation were labeled bland and directionless by some journal reviewers. And so, I started from scratch; that meant revisiting and retelling the story from the ground up. Little did I know, I was about to make gold.

The gold: the data presentation of Manuscript Version 2. I translated the data into the universally known language of performance. *E/c/h/o* (2022-2023) is one of the first virtual ethnographic performances (if not *the* first) in *FFXIV* by a Filipino artist. It is an arts-based recollection of the ethnographic data which I have collected from the voices I overheard in Eorzea. In a sense, the performance poses as a critical posthuman production as it involved not only the movements of

my meat-space self through minimal movements like moving the mouse, clicking buttons, and typing on a keyboard, but also a series of motions caused by an automated string of code that inevitably translates into the movement, imputation, and expression of my meta-space self: Ji Changmin (named after main dancer from the K-pop group *The Boyz*). The theatrical production is composed of nine scenes set in the outer wilds of Eorzea, near the Aethernet crystals, where the players would be the unsuspecting audience for the virtual performance. The star of the show is the avatar himself, Ji Changmin. He poses as the *kawaii* (the Japanese word for “cute”) version of Hamlet, engaging mostly in a soliloquy with himself as the actor-vessel of all the performance’s characters, demarcated only by in-game costume changes that are permitted by the *FFXIV* instant-wardrobe-change feature. Each of the scenes from *E/c/h/o* (2022-2023), in fact, pertain to a compartmentalized gist of all the notable observations from Eorzea.² For example, sociolinguistic findings about the many different dialects used by and between players were summarized in ☆Scene 8: stan TwT 101!?!☆ (S8) through the Stan Twitter dialogue between two Gen Z users. Another scene depicts the unseen: the private messages between players, who speak mostly through in-game private chats. These private messages are represented in ☆Scene 3: This enchantment 2☆ (S3), as a multiplicity of ellipses that engulf the Eorzean atmosphere during two players’ (non-)conversation.³

The performance was staged in Eorzea from *FFXIV*, an MMORPG published by Square Enix. According to Salazar, the ontology of any MMORPG is manifested by gameplay that involves considerable social interaction, an overarching plot, simulation/interactive story elements, and

ludological design that emphasizes cooperation (1). In simpler words, MMORPGs are role-playing games with social interaction at their core. Progress in MMORPGs is demarcated, if not circumnavigated, by socialization, interaction, and intra-actions. In order to house over 40 million active players and facilitate smooth functioning of its RPG elements, MMORPGs often have different servers, which contain different instances of the same virtual world. Across all these instances, players from all around the world access data points that allow them to simultaneously interact, play, and converse with any player occupying the same server (or visiting one) in real time. Because these servers are separate and distinct, they have become sites where different cultures emerge. In *FFXIV*, a group of servers are also tied to a larger Data Center for which traveling between worlds is allowed. To reiterate, servers allow several instances of Eorzea to occur at several Data Centers from Japan, Oceania, North America, and Europe. Thus, a server populated by English speakers in Atomos, which belongs to the Elemental Data Center in Japan, is governed largely, though not absolutely, by Japanese customs and etiquette (that is, of course not to say that English speakers conform to this; the governance does not establish the status quo but simply a quasi-collective social imaginary). Hence, it is important to study different people, different servers, different data centers, among others.

Distinctively positioned from the historicity of other virtual worlds that are purely lore-based, the Eorzea of today is literally and figuratively a post-apocalyptic world. The first version of *FFXIV* in 2010, dubbed as Patch 1.0, was generally disliked by players because of its clunky controls, grotesque

game features, bugs, and graphical issues, among other reasons. Square Enix, the game developer, decided to overhaul its mechanics and overall feel by appointing Naoki Yoshida, or YoshiP, as the game director. His first task was to transform Eorzea Patch 1.0 into an essentially new game, so instead of simply changing it, he introduced destruction into the lore. Before the overturning of the whole Eorzea that we know of today (Patch. 2.0-present), YoshiP destroyed the whole world of Eorzea by having the Eorzean moon, Dalamud, fall upon the world, causing a massive apocalyptic wipe. In fact, Eorzea's demise is well-documented online, with Patch 1.0 players collectively witnessing Dalamud fall from the sky before the servers finally went offline; it was months before players were able to access the Eorzea we know today.

In the same way that the figurative yet actual calamity of Eorzea Patch 1.0 was instrumental to its rebirth into the rich world of Patch 6.0 onwards—the world that *FFXIV* players inhabit at present—the rejection of my first manuscript was instrumental to a phenomenological discovery of the critical flaw in my sociological analysis: I realized that I was epistemologically and ontologically disconnected from the subjects I had studied. Although I was a participant-observer, I was not the participants themselves; if I walked a mile in their shoes, I'd be more in-touch, expressive, and analytical of their experiences. Although the first manuscript was not necessarily destroyed by a falling moon, it was epistemologically destroyed by dissecting the data and retaining only what mattered to me. Like Eorzea itself, a new paper would arise out of the ashes and demise of a forgotten world. It is at this cusp that Barad's ontoepistemological insights bear

significance in understanding the transformation of the analytical part of the paper. According to Barad, an ontoepistemological point-of-view recognizes practices of knowing through being (185). Thus, addressing the gap between me and my research subjects necessitates embodying, if not performing, their lives. Such a postqualitative approach to performance ethnography using my own virtual body is emphasized by what Coetzee called embodied knowledge: a manner of knowing that uses the body as a site of movement, diagram, and collision towards the creation/discovery of something important; after all, without embodied knowing (i.e., proprioception), a body cannot be positioned in its environment, in much the same way that the positionalities of my research subjects must be triangulated back to the virtual world of Eorzea itself (1). To carefully position their bodies epistemologically, I realized that I had to perform as one of them, through them, with them, and for them.

The initial process of rewriting the story for the stage is concomitantly sidetracked by one particular limitation known to ABR: the perceivable inaccuracy of data presentation. To resolve this minor issue, I have worked closely to represent the data in a manner that cuts through all instances observed, even tangentially. In S8, I carefully selected words that are more frequently used than others to mimic the majority rule in weighing the options; thereafter, these words were strung together to form a plausible conversation between two individuals. Other than that, the trivial limitation of the difficulty of mounting the virtual stage was resolved due to the researcher's use of in-game Macros⁴ that automatically perform the action in sequential pattern with very few click triggers by the player, allowing the postphenomenological

attachments to ontoepistemologically traverse the realm of discovery.

Immensely informed by the insights of Bagley's performance ethnography and Leavy's holistic approach to ABR, I was able to liberate the Eorzean narratives of Manuscript 1 from the bleak prison in which they were caged. I was able to digitally perform the research subjects' grief, happiness, guilt, anger, and sadness in a profound and affective way through my online avatar—his three-dimensional Lalafell⁵ body acting as a “zone of contact” between the past and the present in a “parahistorical” tableau (Yambao 229; Sorensen 230). With a series of hybridization of automated movements through *FFXIV* emotes⁶ and text-based interaction through the Say⁷ and Yell⁸ features in the game, I was able to bring to the Eorzean inhabitants themselves the tenets of their online interactions—in other words, to return the echoes back into the virtual world from where they came.

The process of creative interpretation and the translation of the ethnographic data into a performance is described as a mode of discovery in and of itself.⁹ Echoing Karl Popper's “World 3 Thesis”—which proposes that products borne out of human ideas and the human mind are considered a part of World 3, and are partly autonomous from the mental and physical, with the capacity to affect both (Boyd 221)—Naraniecki argues that there is an inherent epistemological discovery in the creative process because, as Popper noted, the works of great artists were not products of technical proficiency but rather “the result of an intellective or intuitionist engagement with the ideas of the genre” (Naraniecki 273). In this case, I critically engaged with the data

by having an internally external dialogue with my non-human other—the posthuman subjectivity known as ‘I’ borne out of an autopoietic process of distributing fragments of my identity onto an online avatar (Wilde, 366; Arumpac, 113). One understands my real self as the researcher, and the Lalafell as the performance artist himself—two ontologically (in)distinct entities capable of engaging in a quasi-imaginary discourse about the objective data that they collected and how to artistically represent it (see Villacorta). Such a conversation reflects a collision—an intercourse—between the “objectivist” perspective and the subjectivist “myth of expression”—two terms which, in Kantian ethics and Popperian epistemology, are distinguishably positioned at opposite poles, generally incapable of interacting with each other (Naraniecki 265). Such post-collision unification owes to the anthropological facade of evolutionary epistemology, described as the parameter of life that adventurously seeks outward (and, in the creative process of *E/c/h/o*, inward). More emphatically, my surrender to the control of the posthuman subjectivity through my avatar, both in the performance and the creative process, is what Naraniecki called “transcendental intuition,” whereby the (art)work itself detaches, if not emancipates, from the artist himself/herself (270). The metaphysical aspect of such detachment is “a cosmos imposed upon chaos—in its tensions and harmonies inexhaustible even for its creator” (271). What I have discovered, in this process alone, is that the posthuman subjectivities that surround this process have breathed life into the performance itself—one that independently exists from me, as a researcher, and eventually materializes and manifests entirely at the hands of my non-human other.

Out of these epistemological dialogues, the performance's own life was born. According to Naraniecki, the products of the human mind, whether real or otherwise, have actual existence in World 3 (274). Unlike other Worlds, however, World 3 is discovered, and not merely made. In order to go beyond Popper's detestation of the computer and make sense of Naraniecki's aesthetics as it was applied to a virtual performance (for which a computer was used), the notion of what World 3 implies must be revitalized. Backes argues that the internet made it possible for World 3 to actualize immaterialities, or things which are essentially imprisoned in the metaphysical (278-279). From this, World 3 is discovered intermittently between states of being and is not connected through World 2 alone but, with the dawn of the internet, accessed from World 1 primarily. The subsistence of *E/c/h/o* in this newly discovered World 3 that occurs at the cusp of Eorzea materialized an affective assemblage, defined by Resser as a nonhuman being that amplifies the individual's power to affect and be affected (38). More closely, the performance affects its responsive virtual audience (having them respond to each scene) and at the same time is affected by all of the research findings that have been collected. Besides, due to the queer position of the performance ethnography as being situated in a virtual world played by a one-Lalafell performer, the performance resists the categorical hedonism of anthropocentric, heterosexist dimensions of performance, towards the recognition of the "myriad of flows, forces, metabolisms, [and] behaviours," hosted by the post-anthropocentric body (Vanouse 32).

In a way, the posthuman process of this art production decentralized art from the human (me)

and steered it towards a critical subsistence that is non-human, technological, and rhizomatic, i.e., the posthuman "I." More closely, the performance text itself acts as an affective assemblage of its own, one which necessitates its own agency that resists the humanistic, hegemonic, and egalitarian desires of art (Hulme 62; Winkenweder 288; McDonald 38). As affective assemblages capable of affecting (an audience) and being affected (by the audience response and the artist's own posthuman experiences), the performance resonated across Eorzea to a multitude of diverse audiences from different races, cultures, and subcultures.

These affective resonances across both performer and audience mirror a postphenomenological effect on the mental and (meta)physical world, a condition which solidifies *E/c/h/o* as subsisting in World 3 (i.e., between states of ontoepistemological significance). According to O'Brien, Ihde's postphenomenological philosophy of technology, about how "experience is formed in interactive spaces through the gestures and behaviours of bodily movement," allows humans to extend/reduce their human body (120, 135). Furthermore, this extension allows human-technology relationships to act as sites for transference to occur, enacting the phenomenology to move beyond just being, to metaphysically being one in a shared performance of the virtual body that co-creates a new kind of experience (i.e., in this context, the ontoepistemological discovery of the subject's experience) (O'Brien 129). Simply put, the phenomenological pertains to lived experience of a human, while the postphenomenological pertains to (un)lived experience of a posthuman. In this regard, the (meta)physical effects of this ontoepistemologically postphenomenological discovery is felt through the

introduction of the *E/c/h/o*'s World 3 existence and its effect on how the audience interacted and co-created the performance itself, while the mental effects postphenomenologically allowed the researcher to perform in their shoes and develop a better understanding not just of their virtual social interactions but also on how to mount a virtual performance ethnography as an embodied knowledge-making practice. In other words, *E/c/h/o*'s extension of Popper's World 3 Hypothesis to virtual performance procures a postphenomenological experience for the performer, the audience, and the performance itself.

Such is highlighted by the Deleuzoguattarian element of *E/c/h/o* (2022-2023), whereby Scenes 1 to 9 are not performed in the chronological order that they were enacted, but rather in a slew of orderly randomness to illustrate that interactions in virtual worlds reflect a continuum—a cogent whole whose parts independently occur in their own (un)stable growth. The randomization of which occurs only at the whims, the apparent choices, of the posthuman subjectivity of Ji Changmin.

Because of the non-human motif of my avatar in performing *E/c/h/o*¹⁰ the virtual conditions of the live show were able to position the performance at the metaphysical entanglement between the real and the unreal, between human agency and posthuman subjectivity, and between the “I” and the “Other” (Wilde 367; Resser 48). Disrupting, if not dismantling, the alienating effect of conflating virtual and actual reality, this performance traversed the liminal space located in the midst of truth and untruth—of which transcendental gender identities and autonomous sounds may be found (Bertens,

91; Annette, 167). *E/c/h/o*, much like RESBAK's (Respond and Break the Silence Against the Killings) regenerative network of engagements, continues to tread a life of its own; however, it proves resistant not to the State apparatuses that seek to eliminate perceived threats, but rather to the humanistic dimensions of the art of performance—traditionally relying on the human body as the medium—that homogenize Anthropocentric agency; a point from which departure is imminent, if not essential, to achieve the non-humanistic, non-binarized, and non-essentialist futures that we desire (Arumpac 127; Brisini and Simmons 192; Chu 134).

Although this research note was more interested in highlighting the emancipatory and cataclysmic process of ABR by exploring the theoretical dimensions of the art production of *E/c/h/o*, it is important to underscore the manner by which the observations were written, or translated, for performance. The findings of the study imply that the off-game contexts of the players themselves permeate through the screen and envelop the identity of their posthuman subjectivities. This thesis of the research note served as a springboard that propelled further research into the self in a virtual space towards a poststructural postphenomenology.

In S8, the use of Stan Twitter dialect typically endemic to K-pop-related exchanges on text-based platforms were transformatively practiced, and casually used, by certain *FFXIV* players through their avatars. This scene was forged from 12 datasets screen recorded from several *FFXIV* dungeon instances where K-pop fans exclusively talked in said dialect. These data were supplemented by Say/Yell/Tell conversations personally sent to the author and

observed from Savage Raids involving the use of the Stan Twitter slang. Instead of simply performing verbatim all recorded instances, I isolated the notable words correlatively and regularly used at an integral point of 67% frequency or higher as the dialogue for S8. The end result was S8 depicting an exchange that amalgamates a conversation using the most frequently used words. Note here, however, that the data was not pre-analyzed before the performance translation; the dataset was initially rewritten as a script. Only after it was performed did I manage to commit to embodied knowledge and truly understand what I had observed and how I translated it by ontoepistemologically reflecting and postphenomenologically experiencing said occurrences. In effect, the sociological findings were felt, embodied, transgressed, and discovered only post-performance (and a bit of it during) by tracing the senses of my virtually-tied body.

Noteworthy to discuss also, in brief, is one of the sociological findings that emanate from the study. Using S8 as the same example, I recognized through the performance of S8 that speaking in Stan dialect mimics a manner of “bleeding” which Celia Pearce identified as the blurring between the real and the digital identity facilitated by a ludisphere—a virtual gameworld (221). Aptly, my identity bleeds through Ji Changmin in Eorzea, the virtual ludisphere which we inhabit. From this observation one understands that the distribution of one’s identity onto an *FFXIV* avatar carries with it a socio-cultural background that becomes the basis of many of the avatar’s in-game discursive practices of communicating.

Through the tracing of how the stone of Manuscript Version 1 has been crystallized into the gold of

Manuscript Version 2, this research note encourages scholars to consider traversing the yellow brick road to Emerald City in order to meet the Wizard of Oz—of taking the colorful, vibrant, artistic direction to epistemic inquiry in their search for the “truth.”¹¹ Likewise, in this research note, a virtual performance entitled *E/c/h/o* (2022-2023) was demonstrated to be a critical mode of epistemic investigation as to the findings about social interactions in a virtual world, in particular, the manner by which socio-cultural predispositions bleed through online avatars—aesthetically (r)evoked from the performance itself. In addition, the creative process was underscored as a mode of discovery in and of itself—especially with regard to the posthuman elements of virtual performance production. Truly, ABR can equip researchers with a multi-layered, multi-sensorial, and multi-faceted approach to epistemological inquest and also provide them with a critical lens to intermingle inquiries about the creative process as well. Such is possible only if they willingly surrender themselves to the whims of holistic and queer approaches to research, and, in particular, to pay attention to the non-human voices that envelop their research (or artistic) process.

Notes:

¹ The specific site for my study is Atomos, part of the Elemental Data Center from Japan, in which several Filipino guilds (to one of which I belong) have created virtual diasporic communities where they can communicate and share bonds.

² A more comprehensive breakdown of each scene is elaborated in Manuscript Version 2, currently in the process of consideration/evaluation under a reputable academic journal.

³ A video copy of the performance may be privately shared to curious researchers by emailing a request to my personal email kevdg15@gmail.com

⁴ This is an *FFXIV* feature that allows the execution of several actions in succession to automate movement, gestures, costume changes, among others.

⁵ This is a small and tiny race from *FFXIV* that is more similar to a child-like hobbit with *kawaii* feature.

⁶ A type of in-game pre-selected avatar movement in *FFXIV* executed through the use of slash “/” before the emote or simply the click of a hotbar button

⁷ A textual communication received by *FFXIV* players within a few ‘yalms’

⁸ A textual communication received by *FFXIV* players within a greater scope than “Say”

⁹ Apart from merely focusing on the analytic dimensions of sociological thought it produces

¹⁰ See images of the performance here: <https://medium.com/@kevdg15/e-c-ho-2022-14ad925f7fb5>; Please email the author for limited access to the virtual performance viewed from performer’s perspective at kevdg15@gmail.com.

¹¹ I speak here of the truth with a small ‘t’ which is the temporary, mitigated version of truth, as opposed to ‘Truth’ with a capital ‘T’ which denotes the infallibility and non-paradoxical sustenance of that which is *true for all time* (Gardner, 82). After all, the Wizard of Oz is not a ‘real’ wizard.

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