DO CYBORGS DREAM OF THE PERFECT PUMP?: WARFRAME AND GENDER

By Timothy Welsh

Do Cyborgs Dream of the Perfect Pump?

During November 2014, Digital Extremes (DE) ran a charity promotion through their popular free-to-play game *Warframe* (2012) supporting the Movember Foundation. The Movember Foundation has gained some notoriety recently for asking supporters to grow a moustache during the month of November–hence Mo(ustache)-vember–in order to raise awareness for men's health issues. For DE's "Moframe," as they called it, players could adorn their in-game avatars with moustaches, with new and more elaborate versions unlocked as the promotion reached donation goals. To announce the event, publicize received donations, and showcase the unlockable moustaches, DE created a Moframe website featuring two playable avatars donning 'staches: Excalibur and Mag. While there is no surprise that Excalibur, the first warframe and posterchild of the game, appears on the site, Mag's presence is somewhat unexpected. The Mag avatar is assigned female, and yet the site shows her trying on an assortment of facial hair (see Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Moframe website featuring Mag

During the Moframe promotion, DE allowed female-assigned warframes as well as the male-assigned to put on the Movember moustaches. Of course, DE would not want to suggest that only frames marked as male could participate in Movember or that men's health is only a male issue. In fact, putting a moustache on Mag and other female-assigned frames highlights the obvious

and awkward bias of Movember itself. I point it out here because *Warframe*'s Movember promotion exemplifies the complexity and slipperiness of gender in *Warframe's* posthuman environment.

The discussion of gender in videogames has tended to focus on representation (Sarkeesian, 2014; Cassell and Jenkins, 2000). Though there is plenty to say about gendered tropes in *Warframe*, representational signifiers circulate through the game in unexpected ways. The game's customization options and narrative setting offer the possibility and flexibility to realize hybrid configurations that undermine established tropes through gameplay. And yet, these configurations are articulated through a persistent gender binary. What I want to suggest is that playing *Warframe* thus reflects or, rather, enacts the condition of its players, whose participation in digital culture allows play with and between gendered signifiers though never without the residual binary structure.

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My interest in gender in *Warframe* began with a somewhat obvious observation. Saryn, another of the playable warframes, despite not appearing to wear clothing of any kind, has on high-heel boots (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Promotional image for Saryn

Of course, pumps are not very practical attire for a space ninja. Female avatars adorning impractical clothing are not uncommon in videogames, though. Female armor variants, for instance, famously offer contradictorily little coverage. Putting female avatars into high heels is not uncommon either. What differentiates *Warframe*'s use here is that, within the context of the game's lore, not only is this styling choice impractical, it is nonsensical.

Saryn is one of the over twenty "warframes," or suits of wearable technology created by the Orokin as a last attempt to defeat the Sentinels. The story of *Warframe* is sparse, complicated, and subject to change with each game update, so I won't go too far into it here (1). The part that is interesting for this discussion is that the warframes could be worn and wielded only by Tenno, select humans who survived Orokin experimentation. Exactly how the Orokin made the Tenno is unclear: some kind of DNA manipulation involving a weaponized, nanotech virus called Technocyte created by the US during the Cold War. Likewise it isn't clear how the humans who became Tenno were changed. Numerous posts on the *Warframe* forums debate this topic, postulating, for example, that the Tenno are merely husks, their humanity burnt out by the virus, or that—my personal

favorite—all that remains from the Orokin experiments are beings of pure energy. What is clear, though, is that they are not human any more. Regardless of what specifically has happened to these former humans, the Tenno are literally and irreparably *post*-human.

Part of the reason it is unclear what happened to the Tenno–aside from the sparseness of the lore–is that players never *see* any. Through update 17.5, Tenno have never been represented on screen. Instead, *Warframe* characterizes its players as the Tenno, the ancient race of mutated humans awoken from cryo-sleep to operate warframes. In the first cut scene of the tutorial level, The Lotus, mentor of the Tenno, addresses the player, "You are a Tenno, and I will prepare you." This positioning extends to the game's marketing, developer videos, social media, and forums, all of which use "Tenno" to name the game's player base. Rather than taking on Tenno form as playable avatar, though, the player only ever interacts with the on-screen environment with a warframe. The game thus establishes a comparison between the fictional Tenno as operator of a warframe and the real player as operator of an avatar, indeed overlapping their positions.

This avatar within an avatar provides a convenient way to incorporate a core game mechanic into the game's narrative without fracturing the fictional world. The Tenno/players are not their warframes, but warframe operators. They may wear any one of the available frames in their inventory and thereby alter their abilities and playstyle to fit different situations, game modes, and party configurations (see Figure 3). The player, then, is not restricted to only one class of character for the entirety of the game, in contrast with the standard MMO, like *World of Warcraft* (2004), in which the player plays the entire game as a Night Elf Priest or must start fresh at the beginning with a brand new character (see Nardi, 2010). The player can and is encouraged– through the game's Mastery Rank system–to

acquire and rank up each and every available warframe. The warframe, then, is not the character, but a tool or weapon wielded by the Tenno/player.

Figure 3. Selecting a warframe from the Arsenal menu

The ability to collect and choose between warframes grants players a great deal of flexibility, allowing them to experiment with different loadouts for different mission types. Couched in a narrative of posthuman adaptability, switching between suits remains consistent with the game's story world as well. But, it also raises questions about identity performance and gender expression in the *Warframe* universe. Which brings me back to Saryn's high-heeled boots.

Saryn presents obviously as female and takes feminine pronouns in the game's codex. But, Saryn is a suit of armor, not the post-human being operating it. As far as I understand from the available lore through update 17.5, the Tenno are anatomically asexual and post-gender. The Saryn frame's womanly features do not correspond to the body-shape of its wearer. It seems reasonable to ask, then, not only why does Saryn have boots, but why does she even have breasts?

Even if we assume that the Tenno operating Saryn is or was at one point anatomically female, she can and does wear each of the

available warframes, regardless of shape or gender assignment. With no correspondence to the assignment of the operator and no functional effect on gameplay, Saryn's high-heels and anatomically female figure appear to be merely cosmetic, intended primarily to mark the frame as female, *Warframe's* version of Ms. Pacman's bow (see Sarkeesian 2014). We might consider, then, the Tenno/player's arsenal of playable warframes a collection of selectable, interchangeable gender performances.

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It is not difficult to look at Saryn's unnecessary high-heels and buxom body model and recognize that *Warframe* includes some problematic gender representations. On top of the boots, Saryn poisons her enemies, has a flower-themed design, wears a set of helmets that resemble hairstyles, and has the ability to shed her skin, making her, as the codex puts it, "very elusive." The weary critic might roll their eyes at frames such as Nyx, whose powers revolve around mind control, or Mirage, the slender harlequin in sexy posture, who creates illusions, sabotages equipment, and throws out an area-of-effect ability that can only be described as a disco ball (see Figure 4).
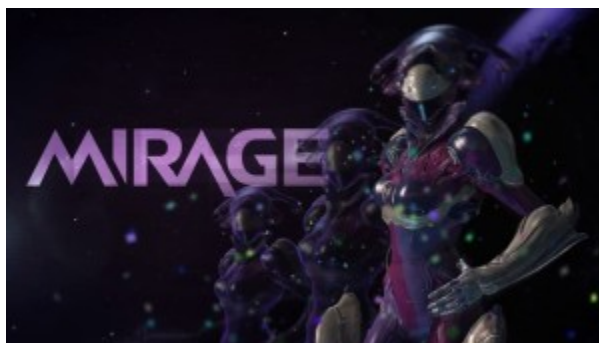

Figure 4. Promotional image for Mirage

Perhaps the most egregious frame design is Valkyr. According to her codex entry, "The original Valkyr was subject to cruel

experiments, leaving her scarred, angry and frighteningly adept at killing." This cat-suited, abuse victim channels her "feral rage" into a berserker playstyle buffeted by an ultimate ability called "Hysteria," in which she screams, produces claws, and becomes invincible for a duration. The *Warframe* community has dubbed this "PMS mode," simultaneously a sexist quip and insightful critique.

Male-gendered warframes also play on archetypes; however, their models have none of the cynicism of the female-assigned frames. Compare Saryn in high-heeled boots to Limbo, the slender magician, in a top hat. Male assigned frames include Rhino, the bulky tank, Vauban, the tactical engineer, Oberon, the hooved paladin, and Hydroid, the pirate. Because male is the assumed default category (Nakamura, 2002; Sarkeesian, 2013), these themes seem neutral, almost genderless. Yet, several of the types applied to female-assigned frames carry histories and meanings that are not easily neutralized.

For example, there is a warframe themed with each of the game's four base elemental damage types: Toxin (Saryn) and Heat (Ember) are female, while Cold (Frost) and Electricity (Volt) are male. Though equitably split so that both genders have equal elemental representation, the way they embody these properties are not equivalent. Applied to female-assigned frames, poison and heat carry sexual and sexualizing connotations that cold and electricity do not confer on the male-assigned frames.

Clearly, warframe designs make use of sexist female archetypes, ones that sadly appear all too often in videogames. The female-assigned frames may be merely suits of armor for posthuman operators and do not correspond to the sex assignment of the player's avatar; even so, they constitute composed performances of gender through their model designs, abilities, and theming. These performances carry over into gameplay. Playing as the female-marked Nyx involves controlling the battlefield by

mentally manipulating the opposition. Players using Valkyr invoke the trope of the hysterical woman every time they activate her ultimate ability. And, yet, these performances are not completely stable.

For instance, a player might apply mod cards to these troped frames that emphasize different abilities and uses. An alternative Nyx build focuses on her ultimate, which stores and releases incoming damage from both enemies and allies, making her a deadly damage dealer (The "WiseKrakr" in Games, 2015). Though less common, a Valkyr build based on her second and third abilities, which grant melee attack speed and an area of effect stun respectively, de-emphasizes her ultimate, changing her role from hysterical damage dealer to a utility crowd controller (GayGuyPlays, 2014). In short, players pick up, put down, and customize their frames for a variety of play modes and purposes. This variability in playstyle does not erase problematic tropes, nor does it prevent them from carrying into gameplay. It does, however, enable gendered compositions to be played differently.

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Lisa Nakamura (2002) cautions that when looking for the ways identity is configured in digital spaces, we can't attend only to "the content of the text," but must also consider the "forms" and unique aspects of the medium (p. 111). She describes how the affordances of digital media can result in "menu-driven identities," or the way race–and by extension other identity categories–is reduced to selectable list items. This practice, she notes, renders invisible mestiza identities, self-representations that fall between available options.

The determining factor in menu-driven reductivism, according to Nakamura, is whether the system can "describe something so complex as the 'multiple states' occupied by users whose

identities are hybrid to any extent" (p. 114). She references Donna Haraway's cyborg as one such "border creature, a human/ machine construct that challenges dichotomies of identity and carves out new hybrid spaces of being" (Nakamura, 2002, p. 113). The question for *Warframe*, then, is whether the posthuman, cyborg identity it confers on its players allows them to reconfigure their received menu-driven warframes into hybrid "border creatures."

The gender presentation of individual warframes does, to some extent, produce the kind of menu-driven reductivism Nakamura describes. Players select only one warframe for a mission, the individual frames each a kind of composed gender performance. Yet, the player's presence in *Warframe* is never limited to one performance for more than a single mission. Rather, it is distributed into the full complement of frames he or she has available. The Tenno/player is all warframes and none of them. In this sense, the player's interaction with the virtual environment of *Warframe* is fundamentally hybrid, in-between, as no single performance or play session encompasses the entirety of their in-game presence.

Furthermore, though players cannot change a frame's theming and abilities–when they select a frame for a mission they also carry its gender assignment and signifiers into battle–they can and do customize their warframes. Some customizations options are merely aesthetic, changing a frame's coloring, accessories, or animation packages, while others, such as the mod cards that enhance or diminish a frame's abilities and characteristics, have strategic, gameplay value. Thus, while the warframe designs include questionable gendered performances, they do not constitute a stable, in-game identity. The warframes, each an amalgamation of tropes and potential resistances, offer flexibility, adaptability, and customization to facilitate different playstyles, group roles, and self-representation.

Playing these gendered female frames well often results in undermining the tropes they invoke. Trinity, for example, is themed as a healer, support frame. With no offensive abilities, her design recalls tropes of female as non-aggressive caregiver. A well-modded Trinity, however, becomes the best tank in the game, an undying battery that powers her team's abilities through the highest level mission (see H3dsh0t, April 2015). Banshee, contrary to the image of the shrieking woman her name invokes, silences her team's movement and gunfire, uses sonar to covertly locate enemies, and massively buffs her team's damage output by highlighting enemy weak points (see H3dsh0t, January 2015). Saryn, too, when effectively modded by players, reconfigures the gendered trope of the femme fatale. Rather than covertly poisoning assassination targets, a standard build for Saryn turns her ultimate ability into an instantaneous toxic nuke. With her high armor and health statistics, players can modify her to be a completely viable tank as well (see CalypsoGaming, 2014).

Even hysterical Valkyr can be played against type. In higher-level team play, for example, the Wolverine-like invulnerability granted by her ultimate ability makes her extremely useful for tasks that have the potential for extended exposure to enemy attacks, tasks like hacking consoles, activating life support, and reviving fallen teammates. Such support roles are not typically associated with being hysterical and, furthermore, would seem to contradict that characterization. Though gendered compositions like Valkyr's remain problematic, occasionally the requirements and opportunities of gameplay put players in position to enact them in unexpected ways and ways that can unsettle tropes.

Not all the warframe designs follow traditional gender stereotypes. Though dismissively called "Cowgirl" in the game's code prior to release, Mesa, the gunslinger frame, was introduced in promotional clips as a female Dirty Harry. Her slender body model features a modified duster jacket, cowboy boots with spurs, and a blindfold, which, her designer explained during

Warframe Devstream 41, she wears for a greater challenge (PlayWarframe, 2014, see Figure 5). Mag uses magnetic powers to disrupt enemy shields andcrush them like a trash compactor. Then there is Zephyr, a hybrid human/bird frame marked as female.
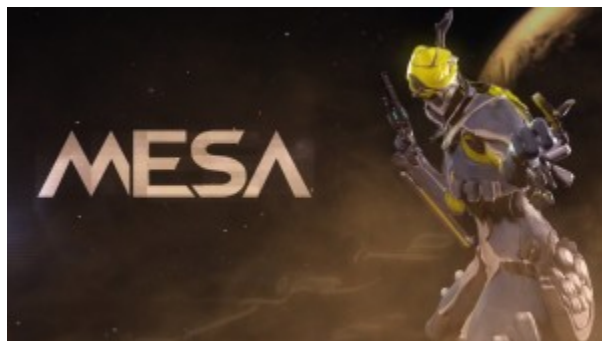

Figure 5. Promotional image for Mesa

In most circumstance, though, the creation of hybrids results from players manipulating customizable options. As Adrienne Shaw (2014) writes, the representation of marginalized groups in games typically "is placed in the hands of the players" (p. 35). For instance, a common way *Warframe* players play against type is by applying an animation set to a warframe of alternately declared gender. Each frame comes with three custom idle animations, which determine the frame's posture and behavior when not receiving player input. As of update 15, players could purchase an animation set with in-game currency, and unlock it for use with any frame. Two specific animation sets proved immediately popular. First, Mirage's "Noble" animation, in which she places a hand on her hip and blows a kiss. Once the option to apply this animation to other frames, players, such as popular *Warframe* YouTuber Quiette Shy, began experimenting with putting it on all frames, including those assigned male (see Figure 6). Before Quiette Shy's channel was terminated, the video has received over 45,000 views.

Figure 6. Quiette Shy, "WARFRAME – MIRAGE NOBLE ANIMATION SET ON ALL WARFRAMES" (2014).

Another popular animation set is Limbo's "Agile" animation. When applied to Limbo, the magician frame, he looks like a wizard prone to cast a spell. When applied to Rhino, however, the particular composition of the frame's lower torso–designed to resemble a rhinoceros' tale–protrudes upward. A long-standing joke within the community about Rhino's well-endowed character design is thereby exaggerated when enacting Limbo's animation. Playing off the unexpected result of combining frame and animation, Mogamu (2015), perhaps the most famous *Warframe* YouTuber, created a Valentine's Day video featuring a Rhino made up in a pink color scheme slowly gyrating with Limbo's "Agile" animation while romantic jazz plays in the background (see Figure 7). His playful video had nearly 43,000 views at time of writing.

Figure 7. Mogamu, "Happy Valen' Tenno" (2015)

In these examples, players use customizable options to upset and reconfigure gender performance of the designer's compositions. They demonstrate the possibility within *Warframe* to work within and against the established identity assignments to create new hybrids. This flexibility is not without cost, however.

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Warframe includes problematic representations of gender alongside ones that recalibrate gender expectations. In both cases, though, the specific embodiment of character model, statistics, abilities and appearance–the stealth Banshee, the victimized hysteric Valkyr, the tank-y buxom Saryn–are not configurable by the player. The frames, with their archetypical themes and gender assignments, thus constitute composed identity performances, which thereby have the capacity to reinforce gender stereotypes. This potential is undercut, to some degree, by the player's ability to take each composed persona on or off at will as well as customize them to reinforce or undermine their performance and presentation. These archetypes belong to the user's arsenal, enabling infinite and hybrid reconfigurations of their fluid in-game presence.

And, yet, the units themselves carry with them their gendered significations. As in the examples above, Mirage's idle animation

undermines the hyper masculine presentation of the male frames only to the extent that it signifies as feminine. In this sense, the player's fluid presentation relies on the circulation of calcified gendered signifiers. This has the dual effect of naturalizing binary gender as well as decoupling gender from embodied experience. The flexibility of *Warframe*, thus, manages to "take all comers under the mantel of continuity and universalism," without challenging the categories (Galloway, 2005, p. 101). Even in its hybridity, *Warframe* remains situated under the binary tentpoles of male and female. This is perhaps most clearly articulated by the way the gender binary continues to structure a game that, at least narratively, invokes a post-gender future.

For instance, originally, DE considered having male and female versions of individual frames. Nyx, the mind-control frame, was first conceived as the female version of Excalibur. The visual similarity, even in the final design, is obvious (see Figures 8 and 9).

Figure 8. Digital Extremes concept art for female version of Excalibur, which eventually became Nyx

Figure 9. Excalibur (left), Nyx (right)

The requests for alternative sex versions of frames come up fairly often in the community forums. Granting players the option of choosing to gender a frame male or female would certainly open the possibility for new hybrid configurations. One could imagine a male Saryn, who would adopt her poisoned flower theming even if not her high-heels. At the same time, however, male and female versions reinforce a conception of gender as simply one setting, a togglable option.

This reductive treatment of gender experience is evidenced by the history of the Ash warframe. According to an early developer's diary, Ash was conceived as a female-assigned frame. The developers eventually changed their minds and released Ash in its current, male-marked form. For this reason, the community sometimes refers to Ash as transgender. Of course, the design decision to switch Ash from female to male was not intended to speak to a trans experience or identity. In fact, gameplay for Ash remained unaltered in the transition from female to male versions. It instead reveals that gender in

Warframe is an aesthetic choice, one not intended to address to identity as it influences a player's lived social life.

Switching Ash to male had the secondary effect of upsetting the numerical balance of male and female assigned frames in the game at the time. The original set of frames included three female-assigned frames–Trinity, Ember, Mag–and five male-assigned frames–Excalibur, Rhino, Loki, Volt, and the sex-swapping Ash. Since Update 6, the release of new frames has alternated between male-assigned and female-assigned frames, seeking to return to equal representation. The current count, after the release of Atlas, is thirteen male-assigned and twelve female-assigned.

Gender also structures the release schedule of the prime warframes. DE releases a prime version of an existing frame, redesigned with gold flourishes and some improved statistics, every two months or so with a predictable and unwavering pattern of two male frames followed by two female frames: Excalibur (m), Frost (m), Mag (f), Ember (f), Rhino (m), Loki (m), Nyx (f), Nova (f), Volt (m), and Ash (m). Following the pattern, the community accurately predicted the release of the last two, male-assigned primes. At time of writing, DE has just announced the next prime, the female support-frame, Trinity. Here, too, binary gender organizes this posthuman environment to the point of rigid numerical balance.

With this in mind, the gender presentation of some of the more progressive warframe designs looks a little different. Is there anything about Mesa, the cowgirl Dirty Harry, that is meaningfully female? Was Zephyr, the bird frame, assigned female in order to meet a quota (see Figure 10)? Even if that were the case, to what degree does her female assignment participate meaningfully in a hybrid identity? Does Mag's moustache complicate gender or flatten it?

Figure 10. Promotional image for Zephyr

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The way the gender binary continues to structure hybridity is exemplified in the recently released Equinox (see Figure 11). The warframe profile for video for Equinox describes her as a "deadly duality, divided into complimentary halves, gleaning the slip between day and night" (PlayWarframe, 2015). As such, Equinox can, with her first ability, switch, mid-mission, between a day aspect, which presents as male, and a night aspect, which presents as female. Each aspect has its own set of themed powers, thereby, granting Equinox seven abilities, split into three sets of binary skills.

Figure 11. Equinox, day aspect (left), combined form (middle), and night aspect (right)

Equinox is thus fundamentally hybrid, a warframe designed to swap genders to strategic advantage repeatedly throughout a mission. Despite this flexibility, Equinox operates within composed, binary gender performances. The theming of each aspect participates in traditional gender tropes; the male day aspect grants offensive abilities, while the female night aspect offers supportive abilities. Further, while in mission, Equinox must take on one of these gendered presentations and cannot remain in the combined form she takes on while on her ship, in a clan dojo, or public relay station. In other words, Equinox must transition out of the combined, hybrid form and resolve to one side of the binary to participate in a mission. Finally, DE_ Adam (2015), one of the game's developers, confirmed on the forums that Equinox is "in fact a she, but she also has a masculine form." By pegging this gender-swapping frame to a stable gender position, DE achieved, at the time, perfect gender balance with twelve male frames and, counting Equinox, twelve female frames.

Despite all that, despite all the ways a gender binary structures the frame's design, playing Equinox and playing her well means playing between. It requires modding her in such a way as to support both sets of abilities. It requires knowing, not only when to switch between aspects, but how to use one to set up the other. It is an intensely interactive experience, as one switches from one aspect to the other, casts an ability, then switches back to cast another. Responding to enemy movements as well as those of their teammates requires Equinox players to balance buffs, debuffs, disables, heals, and damage. Though Equinox's design forces her into one aspect at a time, the player's awareness and presence never fall solely to one side or the other. It hovers between, applying one aspect while considering when to apply the other, flowing across the battlefield and incorporating friend and foe.

Playing Equinox is the distillation of playing *Warframe* into a

single, hybrid character. Here, as elsewhere in the game, it falls to the player to find fluidity within the structure by playing with intention and creativity.

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I began this inquiry by asking why Saryn wears high-heels. The simple answer is that they indicate that she is female. Without such gendered signifiers, all frames would default male. By presenting an arsenal of powersuits with declared gender assignments, DE tries to offer a diverse set of in-game avatars, despite the fact that these gender declarations seem wholly irrelevant within the game's narrative conceit and have no effect on gameplay. In effect, however, the assignment of the frames conflates sex with gender presentation, invoking both though it neither represents nor speaks to gendered experience or positionality. Gender is injected into and circulates within this fictional posthuman world as a set of free-floating signifiers. This might be the reason that, despite the supposedly post-gender framework, *Warframe* frequently falls back on such established, normative tropes, like high heels.

Shaw (2014) observes that gender representation in videogames often tells us more about a developer's market assumptions than about gender as a modality of life experience. Given their rigid commitment to numerical balance, their tendency to swap assignments without changing gameplay, their reliance on clichéd gender signifiers, it would be tempting to see DE's treatment of gender in *Warframe* as simply another case of Ms. Pacman or as reducing gender to an aesthetic or customization option. Yet, something more is going on here, for playing *Warframe* is itself an experience of gender within contemporary wired culture.

In the forum post "THIS WHOLE DISCUSSION ABOUT WARFRAME GENDERS AND THEIR IDENTITY…MY 2

CENTS," Shehriazad (2015) suggests a way to understand why the warframes are sexed despite their nonhuman operators: "So I think that in the end… Warframes are our 'residual self image'. They help the Tenno cope with their horrible situation of no longer being the human being they once were." "Residual self-image" is a reference to *The Matrix* (1999); a phrase used to explain why Neo has clothes on and looks human when appearing in a computer simulation. Invoking it here, the original poster claims that gender and sexuality hold over as humans transition to their posthuman future. Whether this is accurate for *Warframe* lore or not, this formulation highlights what I find so interesting about gender and sexuality in *Warframe* and why playing with these amalgamations of gendered signifiers might have more to say about identity in today's digital culture than it first appears.

Replying to Shehriazad's post, Sziklamester remarks that he wishes that there were male and female versions of every frame because, "I like personalize myself with the male frames because I am also male and harder to personalize myself as girl because I am not a girl." In the context of the game and its posthuman themes, this is a fascinating, even ironic, sentiment. The poster feels restricted by DE's design choice, unable to express a continuous gender experience between online and offline contexts. From another perspective, we might say he still feels a residual self-image of unified maleness even as the digital culture in which he participates–by, for example, playing videogames like *Warframe*–imposes fragmentations and hybridity.

Perhaps this is the trade off, a strategic evacuation of gender in order to gain the fluidity within a residual binary. Channeling Fredric Jameson, Galloway (2005) observes that protocological flexibility sacrifices the history that hurts. Games offer us configurable and customizable traits that can get picked up and put down to advantage, but often only by detaching from "daily activity," as Donna Haraway (1991) puts it, where identity is lived

(p. 180). Haraway urges aspiring cyborgs to "consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment. Gender might not be global identity after all, even if it has profound historical breadth and depth." As *Warframe* seems to suggest, however, the residual images of this profound history continue to structure even the horrible new hybrid configurations of our posthuman future.

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