

Kreativno pisanje i identitet

Vuković, Nardi

Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2022

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Split, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Split / Sveučilište u Splitu, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:172:229127>

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-07-11**

Repository / Repozitorij:

[Repository of Faculty of humanities and social sciences](#)



Sveučilište u Splitu
Filozofski fakultet
Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost

Nardi Vuković
Kreativno pisanje i identitet

Diplomski rad

Split, 2022

University of Split
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of English Language and Literature

Creative writing and identity

MA Thesis

Student:

Nardi Vuković

Supervisor:

Simon John Ryle, Assist. Prof.

Split, 2022

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Literature

Summary

Sažetak

1. Introduction

Even before writing this thesis, the idea of exploring identity through creative writing was an intriguing one. Of course, most creative writing in general explores identity in various ways, but it often either takes the standard lens of a *bildungsroman*, or it does not explore what identity is in enough depth. My intention through this thesis is to do the exact opposite – to explore minority identity(/ies) through a story that I have written. The first part of this paper is going to be devoted to what creative writing and identity mean by their definitions and contemplating what those definitions mean. The second part is going to cover the glossary as a way to prepare the reader for the subsequent story because there are a lot of story-relevant terms, either slang or technical ones, that the reader might not be aware of. The third part is the main body of work of this paper, the story *Mirror / Screen / Mirror*, through which the themes of this paper are going to be explored. At the end of this thesis, I've laid out my conclusion in a concise manner.

2. A critical introduction to creative writing and identity

2.1 . What are creative writing and identity?

To start off, I wish to ask the most basic and one of the most crucial questions related to this thesis – that is, what is *writing*? The website *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* gives us several definitions, such as:

“the activity of writing, in contrast to reading, speaking, etc.; the activity of writing books, articles, etc., especially as a job; the activity of writing books, articles, etc., especially as a job; words that have been written or painted on something; the particular way in which somebody forms letters when they write;” (Writing Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com)

The definitions given tell us that writing is considered an *act*, yet a basic one. Forming letters in writing is theoretically something any one person could do. That, however, does not clear up what one actually does with writing. There are many ways in which a person can write, usually related to a job – a scientist, a journalist and a writer (as an umbrella term) all have different ways of writing for their jobs. When it comes to this paper, it is *creative* writing, or the type of writing most associated with writers, is the one of most interest. The question then is, what does *creative* mean? Using the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* again, the definitions given are:

“involving the use of skill and the imagination to produce something new or a work of art; having the skill and ability to produce something new, especially a work of art; showing this ability.” (Creative_1 Adjective - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com)

While there are other terms introduced in these definitions, I will focus on what creative means in relation to writing. That is, by using these definitions, we can say that

creative writing is the *act of using skill and imagination to produce a new work of writing*. Alternatively, we could refer to the website *oxfordsummercourses* which states: “Creative writing is all about using your imagination and creativity to express ideas and thoughts in a way which is personal to you.” (*oxfordsummercourses*) Both are definitions I would agree with, though both definitions have a specific problem (as it would be with any definition of creative writing). Scientists and journalists also use skill and imagination to write scientific papers and newspaper articles, which are new works of writing. Essentially, it is possible to stretch the definition to include *all* writing as creative writing. While that is, in my opinion, a topic that can be discussed *ad nauseam*, it is nevertheless true that writing comes in a lot of forms and is used for a lot of different reasons. Whether someone writes a highly-rated academic paper, a popular best-seller, or is simply writing in their diary, that still makes that person someone who has done the act of writing in a certain form and for certain use. In essence, it is part of the human experience, so long as one knows how to write (which is, unfortunately not all of the human population (Roser).

That leads us nicely into the topic of *identity*. According to *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, identity is:

“who or what somebody/something is; the characteristics, feelings or beliefs that make people different from others; the state or feeling of being very similar to and able to understand somebody/something;” (Identity Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com)

These definitions are very vague and are very philosophical. They serve mostly to give us further, rather philosophical questions. Who am I? What am I? What are these characteristics, feelings or beliefs that make people different from others? What does it mean to understand somebody? As Kathleen Wallace notes in her article *The self is not a singular, but a fluid network of identities*, these kinds of questions are ones philosophy has grappled

since the beginning and that they are important in how we make choices and how we interact with the world around us (Wallace). In the article, the concept of a *network self* is presented. The *network self* is a combination of multitudes of aspects that are both part of oneself and in relation to someone. Or, in other words, as Wallace states: “Social identities are traits of selves in virtue of membership in communities (local, professional, ethnic, religious, political), or in virtue of social categories (such as race, gender, class, political affiliation) or interpersonal relations (such as being a spouse, sibling, parent, friend, neighbour)” (Wallace). With that in mind, we can surmise that identity can be viewed through many lenses, and many of those lenses still lay unobserved or are not known enough to matter.

2.2. Examination of identity through creative writing

Creative writing as an act, at its core, enables exactly the kind of exploration that can examine any or many facets of identity in any given work. That is either achieved either directly through the people (if non-fiction is considered) or characters (if fictional works are considered) in question that the author wrote for that purpose, or indirectly as something that can be derived from the work by the reader if that is what the reader concludes from the work. However, it is, in my opinion, hard to examine identity in any one work of fiction to its fullest. The reason for that is simply in our limits as human beings, both as writers, as readers, and our understanding of ourselves and the world and all of the complexities drawn from that.

Thus, my attention was drawn to examining the inter-play between the real world and the digital world. One part of the topic of identity that I left untouched until now is the question of how static identity is. The answer is rather simple – it is not. Wallace uses the example of a woman called Lindsey in her article:

Transformation can happen to a self or it can be chosen. It can be positive or negative. It can be liberating or diminishing. Take a chosen transformation. Lindsey undergoes a gender transformation, and becomes Paul. Paul doesn't cease to have been Lindsey, the self who experienced a mismatch between assigned gender and his own sense of self-identification, even though Paul might prefer his history as Lindsey to be a non-public dimension of himself. The cumulative network now known as Paul still retains many traits – biological, genetic, familial, social, psychological – of its prior configuration as Lindsey, and is shaped by the history of having been Lindsey. Or consider the immigrant. She doesn't cease to be the self whose history includes having been a resident and citizen of another country. (Wallace)

Everyone who lives goes through many stages in their lives. How often does someone say that they were a very different person in the past? Even if they don't realise it, as Wallace says, they have changed their self, or their identity, throughout their lives. It happens to everyone in a myriad of ways, from small like simply aging, to large like traumatic or euphoric events.

However, identity is not just a philosophical question or a question of the self, but also a question of the world and how it treats said identity. Depending on the person, there can be a relative danger of a certain identity aspect being part of someone's identity. For example, LGBTQ+ people across the globe are generally one of the more restricted minorities due to not conforming to the cisgender, heterosexual standards of most cultures (LGBT Rights by Country 2022). Whether one is a gay man, a lesbian woman, a bisexual person, transgender, simply question, asexual, or the like, it is highly likely that that person's rights are in some ways restricted or their existence outright banned. That becomes even more dangerous when a person is another type of minority as well, usually by ethnicity. While it is true that in parts of the world, matters have been changing for the better – from the US' Supreme Court

declaration that gay marriage is legal in 2015(nytimes.com) to Japanese schools in certain municipalities allowing mixing-and-matching uniform clothing to be more in line to a person's gender identity (KYODO NEWS)— it also cannot be said that LGBTQ+ people can enjoy freedom and understanding everywhere across the globe nor be able to live in peace, full well knowing how that aspect of their identity is always something that can bring them harm.

In contrast, the digital world offers a seemingly less dangerous environment for minority groups. Theoretically, with internet access, anyone can find out what the words for 'lesbian' or 'transgender' mean and whether they can relate to it. However, it is not so simple. From governments controlling what parts of internet their people are allowed access too (The Great Firewall of China ("The Complete Guide to the Great Firewall of China (GFoC)") or Indonesia's crackdown on social media (Reuters) sites being prime examples) to the fact that the very same people who are anti various minorities have the same internet access, it is still not simple to be part of a minority in the digital world. As McKenzie Wark says in the interview made by Juliet Jacques *McKenzie Wark on the Future of Trans literature*:

I'm interested in the practice of constructing a subject in the postbroadcast era and the extent to which it's unlike the one we inherited from the golden age of mass popular consumption... Whereas now you can find any subculture or subjectivity online and create your own queer or trans sensibility out of them. But you can also make yourself into a neo-Nazi because that's easy to find, too. So, this new model of constructing bodies and subjectivities is definitely not an unmediated good. (Jacques)

Essentially, someone can both benefit from exploring identity in the digital world, but they can also end up down a slippery slope very quickly. The digital world is also here to stay, which means that part of ourselves is also going to be digital, at least in relation to the real

world. Therefore, either by accident or by intent, we are going to be exploring identity through digital means as well.

However, as Wark noted, it is simply not an *unmediated good*. That means that the exploration of identity through the digital can be beneficial. Not only that, I would argue that it can only bring more diversity in those terms. For example, Jacques and Wark talk in the aforementioned interview how Jacques noted that Wark did not see herself in traditional transgender narratives. Wark replies by mentioning how they read Jacques own memoir *Trans: A Memoir* [2015] and how she found that it was not *her* story, but because that story exists, so can Wark's own (Jacques). While they are talking about books in this part of the interview, by combining it with the previous quote, the relation between them is obvious: There are many narratives of identity, and many contemporary narratives spring from the current, Internet and digital-world dominated era. Those same narratives are also ever-changing and expanding as both reality and the digital world become ever more profoundly connected with each other.

Consider vtubers, or Virtual Youtubers, who are internet personalities who use a digital avatar controlled through motion-capturing software as well as hardware like phone cameras. In the paper *Designing Identity in the VTuber Era* by Bredikhina Liudmila, it is noted that, from the 95 people that answered the questionnaire: “53% En-VTubers, 75% Fr-VTubers, 77% J-VTubers were of male sex and gender, 47% En-VTubers, 25% Fr-VTubers, 23% J-VTubers were of female sex and gender. Regarding choices of VTuber gender, 82% En-VTubers, 100% Fr-VTubers, 48% J-VTubers chose a VTuber character of the same gender and sex as in the physical world (Liudmila, 2)”. This shows both a diversity in gender and sex as well as the chosen gender and sex for their VTuber character. The paper goes on to explain various reasons why they chose the sex and gender they have, which ranged from “not wanting to have a female voice coming from a male character” to “different way of

expressing themselves.” (Liudmila, 2-3) VTubers, in essence, are prime example of exploring identity and the relation between the real and the digital.

That same exploration and inter-play between the digital world and reality can also be brought to life through creative writing. Creative writing can also showcase not just identity, but changes in identity over the course of time. If anything, the stark contrast between the digital and the real world makes that exploring identity all the more fascinating. After all, the digital world is not tangibly, physically real, yet it is equally as able to influence someone as the real world is.

The story I have written focuses exactly on that – a person using a relatively new media (video games) which brings forth change in that person’s understanding of the world and themselves. Creative writing gave me the freedom to tackle this theme that I would not have been able to achieve in other types of media (partially because I am less skilled in those). Certain stylistic choices, as well as the construction of the narrative and the characters of John and Jane, were all made while keeping in mind all the aforementioned points. As such, I hope I have achieved in my aim to bring this topic and these themes to fruition in *Mirror / Screen / Mirror*, and I hope readers will enjoy reading it.

3. Glossary

Chat – in this case, part of a stream where people can chat; streamers often say “chat” instead of “viewers”, making the terms interchangeable

Stream – in this case, it refers to the screen where people can see someone “streaming” something from their PC, similar to streaming in google meets through a web-cam, but more elaborate

Spam/Spamming – repeatedly doing something, like clicking a button

Channel – in this case, the digital ‘place’ where a person streams or uploads videos

Emote/Emoticon - small images that show up in chat after someone writes a text input, for example, typing Kappa in a twitch chat will turn the word into an image

Subs – short for subscriptions, which is something people can do to support a streamer through their streaming platforms; they can also be gifted, with the one who gifts them paying for the amount necessary

Clips – short videos “clipped” from the original stream, or in other words, cut out to be posted and shared without more context than the clip itself

Twitch – short for the website www.twitch.tv, a stream hosting site owned by Amazon, formerly known as justin.tv

FPS – First Person (Point of View) Shooter, or a game where the point is to shoot enemies as if you were shooting them in real life

TPS – Third Person Shooter

RPG – Role Playing Game, or a game that features a lot of choices, and as such the player ends up playing a “role” in several ways

MMORPG – Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game

Action(-adventure) games – usually third-person POV games which focus on a different way of combat and story compared to other genres, usually heavily in favour of action.

4th wall-breaking games – while the term speaks for itself, the reader should check out *The Stanley Parable* to see the best example of such a game

Racing game – a game in which racing against friend or computer opponents is the main goal

Party game – a game that is a collection of several real-life games usually played at parties

Procedurally generated game – A game that uses an algorithm to create its world in a certain style

Souls-like/Soulsborne game – a specific (sub)genre of games which involve a repeated loop of trying to defeat enemies, fail often due to difficulty, then try again, with a lot of other mechanics specific to the (sub)genre; the name comes from a game called *Dark Souls* made by FROM Software, which brought them planetary popularity and is where the term originates from

PC – in gaming context, Player character

NPC – in gaming context, Non player character

Speedrunning – a term denoting the act when players devote their time to go from the start to finish of a game as fast as possible, usually achieved by breaking the game's mechanics or using exploits/bugs not noticed or fixed by the developers, though not always; can have many categories of speedrunning depending on the type of game played

Qunari – fictional fantasy species in the *Dragon Age* setting, distinguished by grey skin, large builds and bull-like horns

World import function – certain RPG games that are part of a series can have a function where the choices made in previous games have certain impact on the latter games

“PC” idea – Politically Correct idea, in the one line it is used in the story

“To wipe” (a digital thing) – to completely, irrevocably erase it

4. Mirror | Screen | Mirror

With the last shot, the bad guy was finally brought to justice. The decently long story mode was done. To somber music, the credits list was rolling. John supposed that, besides crediting people for their work, this game wanted to encourage deep contemplation of the events that happened.

“That was a crazy good game.” he spoke, ignoring the credits roll. “Thank you, *feelfree42*, for the suggestion to go on a classic FPS run for the last month. I’ve never been much of an FPS gamer. I mentioned this a month ago, but for those who haven’t heard it then, I used to watch dad play games like this when I was a kid. Couldn’t quite make myself play them for the longest time because of that, but now I can see why dad really loved playing them. I will play more of them in the future for sure. They’re really fun... and nostalgic.”

The chat was spamming memes about the game’s ending and commenting on his final words. The comments were going too fast to read all of them, but some caught his eye. ‘>the sequel’s much better’; ‘>dad had good taste’; ‘>omg dude you gotta play Apex gonna be awesome’, ‘>w/e u noob’; ‘>*comment was deleted by a mod*’; ‘>no deaths challenge when’. John had no way to reply to all of them - a thousand people were watching this stream, most of his active fanbase included. Instead, he continued speaking, turning the subject quickly to plans for next streams (as he did usually at the end of a game):

“I kinda wanna go back to my roots though. Holidays are up now so I won’t stream till next Saturday, but I have an idea what I could begin next. What do you guys think of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*? I don’t think I streamed a *Dragon Age* game yet tho *Dragon Age: Origins* is one of my favorite games. Like, top 10 game for sure. But this one’s newer and because of my previous job I couldn’t play it at release so I never got around to it. Wanna watch me play it? I’ll take chat suggestions for the choices I can make in the game. Sound good to everyone?”

This time, the flurry of comments was even faster, shorter, mostly one word ones that meant yes or, as subs usually did, a spam of his *johnplaysYes* emote. A few wanted him to keep

on playing other FPS games or stream something else, but they were a small minority from what he could glean. John knew he wouldn't be able to please everyone, but he was a tiny bit relieved that the chat was mostly fine with *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. No matter how much he expected the flood of support for just about anything he did, he could never shake off the feeling his viewers might disapprove of one thing or the other and the relief when that didn't happen. He was about to confirm the plan when a highlighted comment showed up.

'>Can't wait! Btw play as the girl protagonist, the voice actress is better.'

The comment started another avalanche echoing the sentiment. John's eyes widened enough that his webcam registered it for a moment, but he composed himself immediately afterwards.

"No way." John said at first, refusing it as if he had swatted a fly. Why would he do that? But then, he looked away from the camera to his poster-filled wall to his left. Gears were turning in his mind. It wasn't like he was against playing as a girl in games. If there was a female protagonist to a game he liked, sure, he was fine with it. But if it was a game in which he had to create a character, he always went with a guy. It wasn't like he thought about it much or anything. It was just how it happened. Why would he need to choose something other than the usual? But, that's what got him thinking. Maybe new viewers would get pulled in by him playing as the female protagonist? Especially if he were to roleplay as her. John had been streaming for long enough to know that a stream could easily become too stale. That was part of why he had initially agreed to play FPS games for a month. He was a total noob at them. It was easy enough to make (good natured self-deprecating) jokes about how his dad would totally swoop in and show him the right way to play. This could be kinda the same. And, his viewers kept commenting about how funny the idea was, besides a few who wanted put a stop to such a "PC" idea.

But he wasn't going to just submit to the demand. As a good friend of his always told him: *use everything you can to get higher stream engagement*. Truly inspiring words if he said so himself.

“Actually“, John began, a conspiratorial smile on his face, “tell you what, guys. Get me to a 1000 subs by next Saturday and I'll do it. We breached the 500 mark a few days ago so it'll be a challenge, but if ya all really want it...”

He left the rest of the sentence hanging and the chat ate it all up. Just like he knew they would.

*

Jane laughed when John told her about what happened at the stream.

“Can't believe it.” she said, reaching for the can of beer at the coffee table. “Such a stupid goal, and it's so gonna work out for ya.”

“I know right.” he laughed with her at it. “Free marketing and more money. What's not to like?”

“Hey, don't throw my words back at me!” she replied, her tone joking. “I haven't studied marketing for five years and gotten a measly entry-level job by chance so you could rub your success in my face.”

“And yet I hear someone's getting a promotion soon?”

Jane snorted. “I wish.”

They fell into a comfortable silence after that. Jane was searching for something to watch on Netflix – tonight was her night per their schedule – and kept her focus on the TV screen as she slowly swiped through the options. Honestly, no matter what she chose, John was probably not going to pay too much attention to it. The end of the classic FPS games run and

the new sub goal got him too wired up to pay more than a vague amount of attention on anything else. It took him ten seconds after Jane had chosen one of the newer Marvel movies to realize she had made her choice.

Not that Jane minded that. After living for three years now and knowing each other for five more – ever since their 2nd year of university – they had each other’s number in that sense. It didn’t seem like they’d develop this kind of friendship at first. They were both competitive enough in their studies that, as part of the top five of the class, there was a rivalry going on at first. However, they had ended up hanging out with their friend groups and learnt that they had a similar taste in games. Jane still called their relationship a friendly rivalry just as she did then even if there was no such ‘animosity’ between them anymore. They would probably not be able to live together if it still existed.

Honestly, John thought he had it made at this point. He wasn’t all that interested in relationships – he preferred to work, whether that was a ‘regular’ job or his streaming – and Jane, who more than a few guys John knew ogled because of her beauty, had the same mindset. It made entirely too much sense to move in together once they could afford to do as much. It was a mutually beneficial coexistence, a symbiosis of two people who simply fit together. John couldn’t - nor wanted to - ask for anything more.

Though his family always did ask for more, and the friends he still kept in touch, made fun of him for not “sticking it in” already. John sighed, shook his head, and explained again that he’s fine with things staying as they were. Usually, they looked at him in disbelief and dropped the subject, or teased him a bit more. John took it in stride.

Just as he did for most things in life.

*

The sub count reached one thousand by Tuesday, two days before New Year and four before the stream.

John kind of expected something like this to happen after seeing other streamers do some crazy long challenges like streaming for as long as people subbed to them, with each sub adding to more time for the streamer to stream. But, he did not expect to wake up at 3 am because one of his close friends called him to give him the news. Without any delay upon hearing it, John jumped out of his bed to confirm it for himself.

Once he did, he couldn't stop himself from waking up Jane too to share the news.

The next day, as they were hanging out together for their usual New Year's party, they laughed and joked for hours about it. John didn't remember when the last time he got as drunk as that night was, but it was worth it. All of it was worth it. The work, leaving his corporate job for the unstable one of being a streamer, taking his road through life... He was so certain he had made it at that point. What was a little hangover the day afterwards compared to that?

*

Of course, John knew he couldn't relax.

This was a success, yes, but John had learnt the hard way how things could change in an instant. He had shared the story on stream once – how a heavy knee injury took him out of the basketball field for a year. Before that, he was thought of as one of the more exciting prospects in basketball. After that, he was never the same on the court. He ended up pursuing higher-level education than he would have been able to because of that. While it was not all so bad, the pain of that happening lingered.

That was why John couldn't relax and think he'd be fine just like he thought then. He might have made it, but he needed to keep the momentum up. No rest for the weary... even if

he only just had a holiday. He had set up two polls before the stream, one for the character name, another for whether she'll be a human, an elf, a dwarf or a qunari.

Everything was ready. The game was loaded, his internet connection looked fine, his webcam was on and centred perfectly in the preview. John inhaled once and clicked the button to start streaming. The wait screen appeared on the stream, letting John figure out if audio was alright.

“Hey hey, testing testing, can you all hear me alright?” John asked, the wait screen still on. “Hope you all are doing fine cause I sure am! Just tell me if audio level is fine. It's such a pain in the butt to always have to adjust it...”

Predictably, the chat broke into a chorus of welcome messages. A dozen people commented that he sounded fine, which John took as a confirmation since there were about two hundred viewers at the moment. He asked once again when he turned the game audio on stream and had to turn up the game volume a bit. After that, it was smooth sailing as he switched to the game screen in the streaming program.

“Alright, let's get this show on the road!” he said and clicked on the new game icon. The previously visible animated backdrop to the main menu - a snowy mountain on top of which was a large temple, vibrant trees and two tall statues framing the sight, streaks of uniform mages in robes and armoured templars on the way towards the temple, all illuminated by the warm sun - shifted with an explosion at the temple, destroying the surroundings and sending a shield into the screen, making it black. A few moments after, the menu showed *Character Creation - Select Race and Appearance*. He had already known beforehand that he had the choice of four races. Those were human, elf, dwarf, and one unique to the Dragon Age setting - the large, silver-and coal-black skinned qunari, who also possessed horns to round up their appearance. He immediately picked the female option that was just under the title of the menu.

“Now, let’s see how that poll I set up earlier is doing.” John said, pulling up a different tab on his second monitor with his preferred site for taking polls. Since he knew the choices beforehand and liked the chat interaction, he had made the poll with the aforementioned options a day before the stream and posted it on all of the social media as well as in the chat before the stream started. Since chat already made the choice for him to go for female gender, it only made sense to pick the race as well. Though, he had stressed to chat that he would not take into consideration the votes that were done in the chat, just the ones in the poll. Not that that ever stopped chat from spamming while he checked the votes.

“Okay, vote is closed right now. Sorry to anyone that was going to get a last-second vote in, but rules are rules. And,...” he said, drawing it out like a show host, “lemme show you the results!”

John put the poll over the game screen. Human got what would be a decent result with 24.6% votes for it, but it was in truth a disastrous one. Back when he played the first game in the series, he found a statistic that 90% of players chose to be human in it, which had been one of the reasons why the second, ill-fated installment had only human as an option. Elf got a rather larger chunk more with 34.1% of votes for it, dwarf got a rather small, but expected 9.2% votes, while the Qunari got the rest of the votes, which tallied 32.1%. Maybe if he were playing the game at release, the results would have been different. Or maybe not. But John was rather certain of his guess that it was shift in the fandom when it came to these choices given both the popularity of the game and the current atmosphere.

“Alright,” John began, a joke having formed in his thoughts, “I see you guys have decided to vote honestly in the poll. I kinda expected you’d go for dwarf for maximum memes, but I guess you decided to be adults for once.”

It wasn’t a very good joke, but going by how the chat exploded in fake insults and jokes about being able to finally file taxes after all this time, it went over well.

“Truth be told, I’d have gone for qunari myself since they’re the new option for characters, but elf is good too.” he said after the clamor died down a bit. “It’s interesting how elves are the oppressed ones in this setting, rather than super powerful and majestic like in most. It makes for a refreshing scene... even if what has happened to them so far, if I recall correctly, has been horrible.”

The blurb underneath the tarot card for elves - that seemed to be a new thing for the game, combining its special art style with tarot - emphasized as much. John clicked it and was then faced with the option for the class of his character. This one he picked by himself.

“I know you guys are expecting another poll here or something,” John spoke dryly, “but I’m taking the reins on this one. I had lots of fun playing mage both in *Origins* and in *DA2* so I’m gonna be a mage. And really, who doesn’t want to be a mage? Well, in our world. I’m sure no one would want to pick being a mage in *Thedas* if they had to actually live in it.”

Thedas was the name of the continent on which the events in *Dragon Age* games happened. The name itself was also an in-joke with the developers - it literally meant “**THE Dragon Age Setting**”. He would have to mention that at some point in his playthrough, since back then when he had played the first two games, he wasn’t a streamer. As for mages, they were arguably even more oppressed than elves, locked up in what were called *Circle Towers*, effectually prisoners due to their potential with magic and being taken over by demons, always under the watchful and often overzealous eyes of the templars.

Most of the chat agreed with his statement, and even the few that disagreed seemed to say something along the lines of “yes, *but...*”. One comment in particular that John managed to read before it was buried by other comments, by a semi-regular, *terranovax12*, was interesting. They said they’d be a mage to try and fight for mage independence and equality. John decided to address it.

“Oh, nice comment, *terranovax12*. I guess being a revolutionary mage would be a reason worthy enough of being a mage by itself in this setting. But, I’m not sure how well that’d work out for you... or any other mages that you got on your side.” John said seriously. Before chat would end up in a debate over this, he continued: “Well, it is all speculative, anyway. Right now, I want to make my character and get in game to have some fun.”

He clicked on the mage card, which brought him to the next screen with the summary of his character’s background. He accepted that too, and then also to the world import function which served to set the world up with regards to the decisions he made in the previous games. It was something he really liked about Bioware’s games and wished more developers would do for their games. John had said as much in previous streams so he didn’t think it needed being repeated.

Once he clicked that, the scene shifted after a short loading screen. His character got up from the ground, green light coming from her hand, before the camera zoomed in on her face, an ominous dark green background, shifting like smoke. Then, he got his options to actually customize his character.

There were several templates presented for the head. He chose the one with a slightly tanned skin. From there, a whole new menu came up, each with its sub-menus. The ‘general’ menu had things like face shape, skin tone, complexion, eye colour, hair, hair colour, beard, and voice. Most of the options here were fine as they were, with only a small adjustment needed to skin tone, eye colour and hair colour. Other sub-menus focused on the more minute details. John noted with surprise that he could change the shape of the ears both in width, height and depth according to a fully controllable square board while looking at the changes in real time. That was the case for every single part of the head, including being able to separately edit each part instead of, say, change on one side of the face being mirrored as per default. The

possibilities made John's head spin. In his life, he had seen many, many character creators in video games, but none with this amount of fine-tuning customization options.

John hardly spoke after starting the adjustments in earnest. He didn't even look at the chat much. His focus was entirely on the character he was making. It was the first time in his life he felt the compulsion of the "character creation syndrome", a joking term for spending more time on creating one's character than actually playing the game. After all, before today, John simply could not muster it in himself to care beyond picking the default presented option for the character he played in any given game. But now, he was adjusting the slightest change in the position of the chin, the angle of the iris, even the amount of makeup and how it was applied to the character's face while considering the colour scheme he was going for! Most of all, it was fun in a way he could not really place the reason why for. He couldn't stop himself even if he wanted to... which he did not.

*

The face of his character enchanted him.

After almost two hours spent in the character creation menu, John was finally satisfied. The few times he glanced at the chat, the comments ranged from exasperated from waiting to actually play the game to teasing him about this to giving suggestions and, finally, some cheering him on (either ironically or un-ironically). Unlike usual, he did not want chat to influence his decisions. Interaction with chat was the only real way to build up a good audience. This time, however, he wanted to keep his creation to be fully his own.

"I think I did it." John said in the same vein fictional mad scientists proclaimed their creations to be finished - with a happy, maniacal cackle following his words. The cackle was

mostly for the audience, playing up the aforementioned image. But, he was truly happy with how he made her.

Dark brown hair, shoulder length, with more volume to her right side, brushed in a way to make it seem like she had been in more than one rough spot and hadn't had time to fully care for it.

Somewhat thick eyebrows, aiming for a rougher fantasy look rather than a supermodel's.

Eyes of bright amber, slightly angled, with just a small line of black eyeliner for definition.

Sharp, medium length elf ears.

Nose of an average size, a bit wide, but still cute.

Full lips, angled in a smirk, painted with a burgundy red lipstick.

Pointed, strong chin.

Blood-red tattoo of a tiara-like pattern on her forehead, the 'tip' going right on the part of her nose between her eyes. A continuation of the tattoo was below her lips, the smooth lines forming something like an upside-down chalice.

Her build was slender, like a runner's, but without looking like a weak mage as one might imagine such a mage to look like.

That was her. The character John made. The first one he had ever put this much thought and effort into. And John was going to play as her. The thought really hit him then, sending shivers down to his fingers.

John was going to play as *her*.

Fortunately, he was too professional of a streamer to sit stunned like that. Once he pressed the button to continue, the game gave him one last prompt - to choose the name for her. That proved to be the final stumbling block. After all the effort he had put it so far, John wanted to get this part *right* too. Naming anything was something he was bad at - it was part

of the reason why almost all of his youtube videos had names like ‘John plays *insert game name*’. The thing was, he didn’t want to just write in a name and be done with it. He wanted to use a name for her that also fit with the lore of Dragon Age as a series. At least the surname, ‘Lavellan’, was pre-designated by the game.

“Okay...” John started, resigning himself to this necessity, “what name should I use? You guys know how bad I am at naming so I’d appreciate a liiiiiiiiittle help, yknow? And try to keep it to a name that’d fit Dragon Age, alright?”

The chat, which had so far done mostly ignored during the last two hours, exploded with suggestions. It was as predictable as Sisyphus having to roll his boulder up a hill again that that would happen. Of course, it was equally as predictable that the chatters wouldn’t listen to the exact instructions. Some of the chatters were cheeky, like *tommYtommYtommY* who wrote ‘>oh did u ask something’; some suggested ridiculous names like ‘Terminatrix’ or ‘Best Mage’; yet others suggested names from other fictional universes like ‘Asuka Langley’ from *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, ‘Yennefer’ from *The Witcher*, and the like. The ones who suggested blatantly offensive ones, John and his moderators warned both vocally and with a time-out from the stream. Those chatters got a temporary ban.

As it always happened, only a few actually gave good suggestions that fit the setting. John noted names like ‘Elwyn’, ‘Dessa’, ‘Shanyla’, amongst others. None of those were particularly enticing to him. Good names, but even so, he kept on waiting for new messages to pop up, talking about the ridiculous names he saw while he did so. John kept up with that until, with the finality of the last cut of the axe before a tree fell, he noticed a chatter called *makerisnotreal* suggest the name ‘Liannaril’.

“Oh, wait, I really like that name.” John exclaimed, his hands shaking ever so lightly from excitement. “Liannaril, huh? That’s a very pretty name. The way it’s written also fits the setting, but... hmmm...”

He typed the name in before he realized what bugged him about it. The last part of the name felt a bit too unnecessary of a flourish to a lovely name. A second after, he deleted it and was left with a simple Lianna.

Lianna.

Lianna, Lianna, Lianna.

Lianna Lavellan.

That was it. The name was absolutely perfect. It was hard for John to describe how he felt except that it was as if a wave of happiness washed over him, that was how perfect Lianna was. John felt this feeling a few times in his life - the time he became close friends with Jane, when he was the second best basketball player of his team when he was a teenager - but it was never this... floaty. That was the only word that came to his mind. John wanted to think on it more, but his mind was set and he still had a stream to do.

“Alright, guys and gals. Let’s see what this game has to offer now that I’ve created my character. I hope it’s gonna be good!” John said as he pressed confirm.

*

Four days and thirty streaming hours total in that time, that same feeling of floaty happiness persisted for John.

During that time, John, as Lianna, played through up to the final part of act two of the game. That meant Liana had gone from being a prisoner accused of severing the barrier between the ‘real’ world of the game and the world of dreams, spirits and demons to the leader of the Inquisition, a newly formed force to help restore order to the world; helped a region called the Hinterlands get back on its feet; settled disputes between several nobles as well as the remainder of the Church administration; brought the war between the mages and templars

to a close by integrating the mages into the Inquisitions ranks; and slowly but steadily expanded her influence across the countries of Ferelden and Orlais, which were caught up in a critically unstable political economic situation.

In addition to that, she created connections with people both powerful and those without power, helping them become part of her Inquisition or a liaison between other factions. Some of those people became her trusted comrades, like Cassandra Pentagast, a steadfast soldier who had initially accused Liana of being the culprit for the severing; Solas, a wandering elf with a mysterious past and even more mysterious knowledge; Iron Bull, an agent of the qunari state, but otherwise a fun guy to drink with at the tavern; as well as many others. There were so many things that she did that exhilaration flowed through John like a river's strong flow in spring after the snow from mountains melted.

Even the part with romance, something he otherwise disliked dealing with due to chat becoming more rambunctious in similar cases, John faced with enthusiasm. Usually, he simply did a poll and chose the most popular character from the poll to romance. That meant his default-picked-with-no-adjustments male character almost always ended up with the most popular female character. This time, however, John took the chat's input, but made no poll. After all, all the characters were interesting in various degrees. Blackwall, a gruff soldier, seemed to have more to him than it met the eye; Sera was a maverick but had suffered a lot in her life; Cassandra herself had a hidden side to her - a love of trashy erotic novels, something completely at odds with her seriousness. John was yet undecided who he'd pick, and with having Liana as his character, he was even considering the male cast members as potential options, and if anyone had a problem with that, well, that was their problem.

It was... amazing. All of this was amazing. Although streaming was John's favourite job, if only because it was the only job he enjoyed to do at all, it had never felt so fulfilling as

it did now. More than that, he felt like a new person, a fresh slate, a crystal clear pond. It was a powerful, rolling wave. It... fit more than he thought it could at first.

But, John didn't think too much about this yet. After all, *Dragon Age Inquisition* was a stunning game to him. Sure, it had its quirks and issues, but nothing that really got in the way of his personal enjoyment. He was having too much fun playing the game and streaming it. Chat picked upon it quickly enough, asking for a new emote called InqJohn, which would actually just be Lianna with her magic staff raised high, and spammed it every so often during streams. One of them even remarked '>damn he really be enjoying playing as a gurl bwahahaha'. Though that comment got quickly buried under so many others, John noticed it, but decided not to react to it. That chatter, *82assass*, in particular liked to post some potentially demeaning comments, but had so far toed the line and never even got a timeout. It wasn't a big deal, really.

But, that night, as John went to sleep, that comment floated in his mind before he fell asleep.

*

The full playthrough of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* became a record breaker for John in every way. His subscriber count went above fifteen hundred people, his average viewership peaked about a thousand and his peak viewer count was 2541. It was so successful that some long-time fans were making short clips from his streams and posting them online, giving him more visibility when it came to the algorithms of popular social media sites. John could not believe it was all going so swimmingly.

And that it was all due to a random decision that resulted in him making Lianna.

*

Following the success of John's last stream series, he decided to keep going without a break and stream another RPG game. This time, however, it was a far more obscure game called *Tyranny*, which he picked exactly because of its relative obscurity. It was a good way to test how many of his viewers would actually stick with him after *Dragon Age*. A well known fact in the streaming business was that lots of people left after the game they were interested in wasn't streamed by the streamer anymore... not that John could blame them. Not everything was interesting to watch for everyone. However, people also often watched others because they liked them more than the games on display. John's hope was that he could retain most of the viewership so as to have a fully stable income. Maybe he could finally help Jane with her medical bills... afford a decent bed... a sound-proof room he always wanted for his stream...

Before he realized it when he began *Tyranny*, he instinctively picked the female option for his character in the character creator. Putting in the admittedly small effort to click on that option without thinking as if it were normal was *not* normal for him. The moment he noticed what he did, he immediately picked the male option back without fuss. Though a few chatters picked up on that slip, since John showed no reaction to them, the matter was quickly forgotten. Not that it should really have been a thing people needed to talk about in this day and age as if they were trying to reveal personal secrets of famous people in newspapers' gossip columns. At least, that's how John saw that. Yet, there were always a few people in the chat that were guaranteed to make a fuss over every little detail like that.

But then... why was John making a big deal of it to himself? After all, he simply continued the stream as if nothing happened. He already showcased the setup of the story - being a Fatebinder, a high ranking judicial officer in the two armies that is about to conquer the last free part of the world. The world was turning, his stream was running, and John was

going to be moving on. This feeling he had was probably going to evaporate sooner or later. It was probably just the high from the particulate success that made it a big deal.

Yeah, that was that.

*

The feeling persisted all throughout the playthrough.

John was a good enough entertainer that he didn't let it affect him. After all, it was part of his brand to be invested in what he was streaming. That went for every streamer, of course, but he liked to make his streams more detail-oriented and perhaps even educational compared to simply entertaining like most did. More than that, even if he wasn't that into whatever he was playing, he could still pull off looking like he did. The only ones who bugged him about whether he was really enjoying the game were either the viewers that loved his streams the most - *terranovax12* came to mind - or his haters. What was important was that he was enough of a showman on camera to keep going even with something plaguing his mind. The average viewer count of about 850 people, smaller from the peak as expected, but higher than his previous average, was a testament to that.

And! The story of *Tyranny* was not only a good one, but a *great* one - almost every dialogue choice impacted relations between characters and factions, the characters themselves ranged from a bloodthirsty brawler to a kid who could enchant thousands with her song, and the setting of the game was horribly bleak, yet somehow still hopeful. After all, many choices and paths the player character could go through enabled one to essentially rebel against the almighty Kyros, the unseen, but terrifying conqueror of the world, and become the last beacon of resistance against them. Whether the player did so by taking over one of the two armies that were sent to conquer, by enlisting the help of the rebelling people of the land, or even by

destroying everyone by their own hands, there were so many to go through this story. And that was just the drop in the pond. There was more than a little enthusiasm as he played through it, even if it were not at the level he'd have liked.

And yet... And yet... the simple truth was that John couldn't feel the interest in his own, male main character he created. True, the character creator was not *nearly* as extensive as *Dragon Age: Inquisition's* was, but, after half an hour of trying to find something he liked, he ended up clicking on the randomize option and went with whatever the randomizer gave him as his character's look. He himself was invested in the choices he made, but he made them without role playing, as much as he hid that. Perhaps he'd have chosen the most evil faction with this character, but his own morals did not allow him anything but joining the resistance faction. He used diplomacy unless he was forced to fight and he stood up to the tyrant, just like he'd have liked to do in real life if there was one to do that to where he lived... But those were just random fancies of his mind. Either way, despite how much he enjoyed the game, there was a lingering feeling of regret as he finished up the final stream for it.

"Thank you all so much for watching!" John said, then, noticing a sub, he closed the stream with: "And thank you as well, *ribbitrabbit*, for the five gift subs! Pheeuw, barely caught that before I stopped the stream. It's suuuuper appreciated! See ya all next time!"

John let out a sigh. Whether it was out of relief, worry, or exhausting, he wasn't sure. He just couldn't get it out of his mind. But it was strange that he was rattled so by this. Or that he thought so much about this. Besides, it was just one game, right? It was probably going to be all right soon enough. For now, he got up from his desk and went to prepare something for dinner. That was when he realized he was famished in a way he hadn't felt in a while. It made John laugh. Perhaps it was just him not eating enough? His grandfather always told him to eat well and not make decisions on an empty stomach. It was high time he took that advice, just

like if he were playing a survival game and had to scavenge for food on screen, except in real life.

Once he prepared them and ate them, the still-hot pasta and meatballs felt all too real, and perfectly fulfilling, in his stomach.

*

Devil May Cry 5 - 14 hours of stream time

Metal Gear Solid V - 77 hours of stream time

A Tale of Two Brothers - 4 hours of stream time

Saints Row IV - 20 hours of stream time

The Stanley Parable - 11 hours of stream time

Trails from Zero - 58 hours of stream time

Trails to Azure - 87 hours of stream time

Divinity: Original Sin 2 - 95 hours of stream time

Darksiders - 18 hours of stream time

Sleeping Dogs: Definitive Edition - 21 hours of stream time

Tales of Arise - 84 hours of stream time

Hades - 25 hours of stream time

God of War (2018) - 22 hours of stream time

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt - 216 hours of stream time

The Messenger - 15 hours of stream time

Fifteen games. Three months since *Tyranny*. Seven hundred and sixty-seven hours of game streaming time, not taking into account the miscellaneous parts where he was just chilling with his viewers for various reasons or arranging some things in his schedule or such stuff.

There were high budget games. Low budget games. Action games, long RPG's, weird 4th wall-breaking games, speed-runner heaven games, so many types of games he played in that time. And yet...

John's eyes would simply glaze over the main male character, like a gentle yet insistent nudge was pushing them away. No matter how cool, interesting, handsome (in a way a guy would want to emulate) those male characters were, he was unable to enjoy playing as them. He tried, he really tried! But even the more regular viewers were starting to notice. *feelfree42*, for one, asked if John was really alright because it felt like he was forcing his enthusiasm like one of those streamers that screamed at every little thing in a horror game, and they were not alone. For the time being, John had been able to brush such concerns off, even as he noticed a very slight drain on his average viewer count throughout the past three months. 850 became 840 became 833 became 814... Even when he was playing *Hades*, a game which re-imagined a lot of Greek mythology through the lens of its amazing protagonist, Zagreus, the son of Hades, the best he could do was comment that Zagreus was very cool. In himself, John knew that Zagreus was more than just "cool". This was a god who tried to escape the Underworld to meet with his mother, Persephone, all the while fighting through the many areas of the Underworld that were designed so that no soul could escape, with rearranging rooms, ever-changing guards, and old heroes of Greek myth barring his way (while some aided him, including even the Olympian gods). To be unable to fully appreciate just how *amazing* Zagreus was felt wrong. Simply, utterly wrong, and all because Zagreus was a guy, but also the embodiment of everything John loved in a character. Why was this going on? Why?

And why did it also feel so-

No, he wasn't going to think of it that way. He couldn't. He wanted to talk to someone about it, but what was he going to say? It didn't even make sense to him, so how... No, no. John shook his head. He had to get through this somehow. He needed... something.

And food. Food first.

*

John sat back at his desk an hour later, the computer's digital clock showing 22:16 in the top right, knowing what needed to be done.

The idea came to him as he ate. He simply needed to make two characters in one game - one male, one female, to the best of his abilities. It was the surefire way to understand what was going on. He would be able to move on with his life once he figured out what was actually going in his brain with this.

In service of that, John picked *Code Vein*. It was an anime-themed action game with one of the best character creators in the world. Perhaps not the best, slightly inferior in some ways to *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s (though overall much better), but more than good enough to suit his needs. The range of options in *Code Vein*'s character creator went from extensive to frankly ridiculous, with only outfits being unfortunately limited in scope of customization. He was already on the character creation screen.

He clicked on the male character option first. His eyes were drawn elsewhere, but he was going to be orderly about this and design a guy first.

Or *try* to. The moment John laid his eyes on the default setup, his gaze went "past" the character as if it didn't exist. John forced himself through that overwhelming, almost oppressive feeling despite the gentleness of it. He began clicking through the menus, first the presets until he found one he vaguely, barely, liked. Then, every detail that was an option to change, he slowly, methodically, went through. Height. Width. Skin colour. Hair styles. Hair colour. Each individual eye. Eyebrows. Nose. Mouth. Scars. Face paint. Accessories. Clothing. Even voice. Gray.

And then do again, top to bottom, Height to Voice. Drab.

And again. Gray.

Drab.

Just like the real world refle-.

John still clicked away, insistently, but each click brought him closer to desperation, to drowning in a deep lake he could not swim out of. The gentle, insistent feeling grew ever louder, ever more insistent, and yet kept being gentle. ‘*Stop with this*’, it seemed to say. ‘*PLEASE change course*’. Eventually, he could not ignore it anymore. A look to the top right of his screen. 22:52.

Seeing as trying to properly make a male character he could be invested in, John decided to go with step two of his plan, the step he didn’t want to take: to make a female character. Why would he want to do it? It was probably going to confirm exactly what he suspected. The sense of relief washed over him the moment the female character showed up on the screen made that even more obvious. But, John was committed to this plan already. He would see it through to the end. At first, he simply looked at the default female character setup on the screen for a few minutes, unsure where to begin. Then, he started clicking.

Unlike before, John immediately knew what he was doing. An image had already formed in his mind of what he wanted to achieve, but still as malleable as a fresh canvas. No conflict, no inability to see what was in front of him, no lack of goal in his mind. The flow of his actions took over him just like back then, purposeful and unrelenting, an ocean wave picking up pace as it neared the shore. John didn’t think, not really. He was simply following his own *desire*, his own *instinct*, as he sculpted the image in front of him. Vibrant, alive, the flow of waves, his thoughts leading one after another, each choice made exactly as he envisioned. There was no rush. As he looked into the screen, each choice under scrutiny, but a smile on his face, he knew it was unnecessary. He simply sculpted.

It was only the dawning sun's rays breaking through his window that brought John back to reality. In that moment, all of the exhaustion fell upon him like an avalanche. He rubbed his eyes, trying to bring clarity to his world. The time on the monitor said it was 5:18. Oh. The uncomfortable realization settled in. He had spent the night away making exactly **one** female character. The fashion he did that in was one which he had only seen other people engage in - all-encompassing, unyielding until the result was perfect. It was the kind of obsession that drove people to buying all the merchandise they could find, to attend all the concerts of their favourite singers and bands, to make their entire lives revolve around the obsession itself. Worse, John could not even find it in himself to be solely mortified by the fact. No, he did not feel just that. What he saw on the screen was finished. And he was proud. She was so beautiful, as beautiful as anyone could imagine her to be. Drawing him in, calling to him like sirens would sailors in those myths of old, as if she were not merely on the screen and could reach out and touch him, as if were she touched it would mirror herself in him...

And John did **not** know why it was that that made him feel such a way. He did **not** see the mirror in front of him. It was only a screen. He did **not** want to. It was fake. He... It was NOT the real- He **wan-**

The world went dark.

*

Shaking. The world was shaking. His eyes were heavy as if charmed by a sleep genie. John let out a dissatisfied noise, but the shaking didn't stop. Against his will, the brain fog was clearing up. John realized it was he who was being shaken, then-

“Ow-!”

“John! Oh, you're awake! Finally.”

Both the pain in his back and the voice near him got John to open his eyes, then closed them again. Tentatively, he opened them again, this time slowly so he could adjust to the blinding light and the disorientation he felt. Out of the corner of his eye, he the vague outline of who could only be Jane, looking at him with concern.

“Jane? Uhh... What’s going on?” he asked, his tone uncertain. His vision had not yet cleared up enough to see much more than blurry shapes.

“You fell asleep at your desk, John.” she spoke slowly, worry laced in her words. “Normally I’d not bat an eye and casually wake you up, but you’ve been acting strange recently and your face is super pale. Figured it’d be better to wake you up, yeah?”

“Um... thanks?”

“Why’s that sound like a question? Eh, whatever. I’ll get you some water. We can talk now or later if you need more sleep. Take it easy, aight?”

There was not much else John could do. Thankfully, it did not take long for him to become more awake, helped by the water Jane brought him. It was already past 2 in the afternoon - a time he used to wake up back in the day when he was streaming for a lot longer than nowadays - and the emptiness in his stomach was jarring.

“I could use some food. Do we have something in the fridge?”

John asked not because they didn’t, but because both of them had different diets. He was allergic to red meat, so even though Jane was mostly vegetarian, since she was the one who last went to buy foodstuffs, something that’d really be filling was more than likely not gonna be something he could eat. To his surprise, Jane nodded affirmatively.

“Well, it’s not what you think. On my way home from my shift there was apple pie on discount so I bought it, and there’s some tomato soup from yesterday. Soup’s already heated up, by the way, so let’s eat that first, I’m kinda starving too.”

“Sounds good to me.”

John moved towards the kitchen, but Jane stopped all of a sudden, forcing him to stop in his tracks. She turned her head to look at him, eyes piercing like she could see through him. She had not yet asked about the character he made last night, still there on the monitor. Sweat broke out on his brow.

“I gotta say this, John, you’ve not been looking too hot for a while, y’know? Last time you were acting like this was not a good time. Please tell me what’s goin’ on... or take a break, at least, aight?”

John let out a sigh of relief. Perhaps she didn’t think it anything unusual, or he was just thinking too much about the whole deal. How stupid.

He smiled at Jane.

“Let me eat something first.”

Jane smiled back at that.

“Sure.”

*

“Hi guys,” John started, his tone more tired than he’d have liked, “sorry for the sudden stream. Thank you all who came on such short notice.”

The chat exploded in greetings, questions and comments as soon as he appeared on screen. Since he wasn’t streaming a game, John simply put the image from his webcam to be the one streamed to his audience so they could all feel like they’re chatting with him and each other. Most of his chat seemed pretty surprised since he didn’t usually stream this early in a day. Before he began speaking again, he noticed one particular message that got deleted quickly by mods, but he had already read it. ‘>I’m calling it this imbecile’s gonna finally give up on streaming like he should haha’. Going by the chat logs on the moderator page, *84assass* wrote

it. John was thankful he already had thick enough skin not to let something like this get to him, but this person reaaaaaally liked to make new accounts to write stuff designed to piss John off. He sighed, then turned his head back to the webcam, not showing how the comment did actually affect him for once. John suspected it had nothing to do with the comment itself and more the war that had kept raging in his mind for the past week. He had managed to stream as usual for most of the week, but between how exhausted those made him feel and his conversations with Jane, he figured this short stream was something he needed to do.

“I’ll get straight to the point.” he spoke as non-challantly as he could. “I’ve felt like I’ve been pretty strained the past few weeks and that I could use a vacation. I’m gonna be out of town for a week or two, visit my family. It’s been a while so it’ll be really good to see them again. I hope you guys understand the situation now.”

John waited for a few moments before the reaction comments started to show up.

‘tryharddiehard77> a visit to the fam? nice’

‘[mod]keepjaredletooutofmovies> you did kinda look tired recently, take care’

‘[12-month-sub] feelfree42> aw man wish I could do the same’

‘[4-month-sub] ddddddoooooon> get some good rest!’

‘disisnutz >damn was looking forward to Valkyria Chronicles next week’

‘[41-months-sub]langleyasukafan > good get out’

‘[41-months-sub]langleyasukafan > i-it’s not like i’ll be waiting for you or anything!’

‘[mod]keepjaredletooutofmovies > @langleyasukafan simp’

A sigh of relief escaped John. It was always a risk to announce a break from streaming. The audience was generally fine with that, but every streamer knew that the more casual viewers drift away even after a few days. It was still better for his audience to know about the sudden change of plans.

“Thanks guys. I’m just trying to sort some personal stuff out. Maybe once I get back I’ll have that as a story to laugh about! Oh, and if I get some cool stuff, I’ll show those on screen, so look forward to that.”

At that, the chat’s mood lightened a bit, with various jokes being thrown around. More than a few wanted to see photos of John as a kid. John was not going to show those even if he brought them with him. Either way, he could go to his vacation without much worry.

For the stream, at least.

*

It was good to be home.

As the scenery transitioned from the forest into a small clearing where an old stone house dwelt, John could hardly sit still. His younger sister was driving, casually talking with John about unimportant things. She told John their parents got her to pick him up from the bus station. Little bit of driving practice in the big city, they said. John laughed. He knew how that felt. Yet, the conversation didn’t go much deeper than that, considering he had left the house right out of high school when she was young, and his visits were rare and never for too long.

Suddenly, the anticipation turned to dread, as if clouds appeared out of thin air to blot out the afternoon sun. He was so distracted that he forgot the reason he did not come home often. It kept memories he did not want to remember. Nothing that was *bad*, but there were things he wished he could forget. The isolation he was hoping it would bring - though his family owned a small apartment in the city as well for various needs, everyone preferred to stay at their house outside of the city. Cleaner air, nature, all that stuff. Perfect for meditation... if it hadn’t had things he wanted to forget and he would unwittingly be reminded of.

Still, John kept a smile on his face as he got out of the car to greet his parents with open arms into a hug. Whatever the reason, it *had* been too long. And they were both at home too, which was a rare occurrence due to their work schedules. They had already prepared their special family lunch to boot. That made John feel a bit better, enough to ignore the cold sweat on his skin. Unfortunate that his younger brother, the middle child, was too far away and far too busy to come on such short notice. The whole family being back again would have been perfect. John shrugged. He took out his luggage from the car and walked towards his childhood home, his shoulders feeling a little bit less heavy than before he came here.

*

A week into the visit, John was certain it was an unmitigated disaster.

Perhaps a bit of that was hyperbole. Everything was as it should have been. His room had been used as a storage until recently before getting cleaned up for him again, and it felt much the same. His parents were the same as ever - father spry and gentle, taking him on walks and talking philosophy, mother arriving, destroying father's arguments, then taking John for fishing. Younger sister... okay, she had changed, as one would growing up from child to young adult, but seemed to keep her spark of energy as she ditched schoolwork for drives around the area or practicing football. Not that that had an impact on her grades, thankfully.

This was what should have been right. It was the normal, loving family he had always known, its small secrets notwithstanding. It was the way his mother emphasized his name, his sister got him to get some exercise, his father being his friend, his brother not there just like he rarely was back then, all of it was unchanged. It was the way he could wake up at 7 in the morning in the same way he woke up at noon when he was in his apartment. It was the way he looked in the mirror and was looking past it anyway, the hair on the back of his neck constantly

itchy, his body as if rising out of his skin. It was the way his old laptop still worked, John's old digital belongings still on it before he wiped the hard drive without looking. It was the looks out of the corner of the eye between his family that John wasn't sure if he was imagining those being about him or not. It was everything and it should have been nothing. John was tired.

So, so tired.

*

At dinner that night, John was contemplating saying something. He wasn't sure what. His worries? His confusion? Ask for explanation? Help? Leave for his apartment because he could not stay here a moment longer? Listlessly, he picked at his spaghetti, eating like a machine, his mind in contemplation.

“Oh, right.” John's father said in a curious tone that got John out of his stupor to pay attention to the conversation. “A few of your old high school friends messaged me on Facebook this morning. In truth, they messaged me a while ago, but I forgot until they messaged me again this morning.”

“What? Why?” John asked, confused.

“They said they're organizing a 10 year high school reunion party and were asking if you'd want to come. They couldn't reach you cause you shut down your old social media accounts. It's not a proper reunion if everyone's not there, or so they say. Not sure I agree with that, but I thought it was worth mentioning.”

“If you're gonna go, we should help you out with some clothes.” John's mother said. “Even if you go very casual, it's better to have something newer looking to bring.”

His younger sister said nothing. John didn't have to guess why, and more than that, he was also unsure about what to say. Inwardly, he *really* did not want to meet his old class while

his mental state was like this. It had been a long time, yes, but even though the memories were not clear, the feeling of drama stuck to the memories of that period of his life like sweat. Back then, he hated a few of his classmates, too. Typical high school stuff. But, most were okay people and John had even kept sporadic contact with a guy who became a sailor on oil tankers. That guy wasn't even a close friend at the time. It was their shared interest in action movies that kept that connection alive. It wasn't the best time to see people he knew from so long ago.

“Ah.” he let out, his eyes widening. His family looked at him curiously.

“What is it?” his little sister asked.

“I'm gonna go.” John replied unsteadily. It was true that he was not in the best state, that his old high school class was probably so different he would hardly recognize them, but... but perhaps... just maybe...

Maybe *that* - how it could be the opposite of what he found at home - was just what he needed.

*

What John found was the opposite, alright.

The party was less of a party and more of a decent dinner at a good restaurant in the town where they went to school. There were drinks, but they were drunk less than John imagined they would. His old classmates had all changed so, so much. The ones he remembered hating embraced him in a very fond way, as if delighted to see him, and talking about the most mundane family life imaginable that John wasn't sure if he had accidentally transported into a different world in the multiverse. Most of them were cordial and generally simple, some having found their life's passions, some stuck in boring office work loop, almost all of them with their

families. Even the guy he had kept in touch with looked more like a gentleman than a sailor at the reunion, his crisp suit in contrast to the casual pants and white shirt John wore.

That was why John decided to drink. He wasn't sure he could stay sane for the night without some alcohol in him. In truth, he wasn't sure if he could stay sane WITH the alcohol in him. But, it was a damn better prospect than whatever the hell was going on. It was so tiring and John wanted to forget. At first, he planned to just make it a bit easier with a few drinks. He started later than others did and drank faster, joining in on the conversation about the good ol' days and singing songs they used to sing. Even as the reunion wound down, John kept the flow going.

And he did not stop at the few drinks.

*

“Hey, hey look at me, John!”

“What are you doing?” he asked, his voice far too young, the world a strange blur, as the girl twirled a stick in her hand.

“I'm a baton twirler! Look!”

The girl threw the stick up in the air, still twirling, and caught it back in her other hand, twirling her body around and putting on a pose, a proud smile on her face. It all happened either in one second or one hour. John couldn't tell either way, this, or that. What he understood was that he was looking at the girl with admiration, adulation. It was the first time he wondered, asked. The image before him crystal, clear. His own chest beating, screaming. With words his mouth would not let out, out. The world strange, focused, then unfocused. Yes, it was the first time he wondered. The very first, first time. The rain, a mirror, a screen. A droplet, reflecting, mirroring. Another, screening, mirroring. The girl had disappeared, vanished.

Lianna appeared, smil-

*

John opened his eyes.

Aaaand immediately shut them, all the while breathing heavily, the pain in his head a hammer brought down upon an anvil. In the darkness, he did not recognize where he was immediately, until he reached for the nightstand and found it exactly where it always was in his room. A few moments later, once he could open his eyes properly again, he realized he really was in his room, with no idea how he got there. It was still night by the look of things. Probably someone called his home to get him back in one piece. John was thankful for that.

He sat up at the edge of his bed, thinking of what to do about his headache, when the images from before - the dream, he realized now - came unbidden. Despite it being a dream, it was strangely clear, like a damaged painting in its full glory after restoration. He remembered all. Most of all, he remembered how right it felt. How right it had felt all this time.

He wished he didn't.

*

For the remainder of his stay, John mentioned nothing of the dream.

He couldn't avoid all the questions, of course. While he had been drunk in the past, he had never drunk until he had passed out before. His family was naturally curious. Still, they did not press him too much. His little sister even joked how she now had experience in driving drunk people to their homes. In the end, they were satisfied with John saying it had been a good

time - an objective truth - and that he had simply gotten a bit carried away - also an objective truth. Nothing else needed to be said.

Nothing at all.

*

When John came back to his apartment, he kept to himself.

More so than usual, that was. He didn't avoid Jane. He ate at the usual times when they had their meals. He talked as if nothing much had happened. Which, John guessed, was truth in a sense. If he simply continued ignoring the problem, it would go away eventually. That was how it went, right? It was something he had spent his whole life doing, after all. The bullying he endured as a child wasn't so bad compared to other people's stories he had known even back then. His school life was okay overall. Decent grades, a small friend circle and a girlfriend for six months was entirely fine. Expected, even. College went even better than that. John still had a small circle of friends, but, he was a lot more outgoing. He hadn't gone to every party ever or anything, but he experienced just about everything one could do at parties. Smoking, getting blackout drunk, smoking weed, though that was the line he drew. And he never kept up any of those bad habits afterwards. Not that he wasn't tempted...

More than that, after the confusion of what he wanted to do with his life during his teenage years, John had at last found his dream job - streaming. Back then, his family expected him to get a high profile career - a doctor, a lawyer, or hell, as his dad once said, John probably wouldn't do too bad at arts, so, so long as he could become someone who had made it in life, it was fine by him. John had flirted with a lot of possibilities during the initial college years. It was only an unexpected meeting with a bunch of streamers at a convention that got him to considering streaming as a possibility.

Of course, he knew about streaming before. Of course, those streamers were strangers. Of course, they only talked up how cool it was to be a streamer. But what drew John to pursuing it as a career - finishing an unrelated degree in the process - was that it felt like a career he'd be fine with pursuing more than any other. And it paid well - if you got big enough - making it worth a shot. He had been playing games since childhood so that part wasn't a problem. When he set his heart firmly onto it, John wasn't even sure if it was going to pan out. Not for financial reasons, but whether it was what he truly wanted. It wasn't *his life* then.

But it *was* his life now. John had Jane, had his friends, his hobbies, *streaming*. By all accounts, he was living the life. Nothing like a billionaire or anything, but everything was set. And it *was* right. No matter what his stupid body and his dumb brain were trying to tell him for some reason, things were fine. He was set on continuing with things they were, little discrepancies be damned. John was John. No one else could be John, and John could not be *anyone* else.

John lit up a cigarette before leaning on the window sill of his room. A little stress management wasn't gonna hurt him. He exhaled the first smoke with relief. Things were going to sort themselves out soon, he decided.

Soon.

*

The first stream back went... fine.

John picked *Hollow Knight* as his "return to streaming" game. It was one of those games the status of which was somewhere between a cult classic and a beloved, popular one. Admittedly, he only knew the game was a platformer with very difficult combat. He soon found out how difficult the combat was meant to be. No wonder that one of the tags for the game was

that it was a *souls-like*. It certainly felt as difficult as a *Dark Souls* game. The atmosphere and the music conveyed the creepiness of a crypt - not that the game tried to hide it was, essentially, placed in a particularly large one. He wasn't quite enjoying either the difficulty of the combat or the aesthetics, but there was a bright spot in the game. Its story, despite the overall dark tone, kept having bright sparks of hope in it. Enough to keep John going through the story, at least.

It was a different story when it came to his chat. His first stream back drew a respectable 700 viewers on average throughout it, yes. Chat welcomed him as warmly as ever. John was glad for that. As the stream went on, nothing seemed wrong, both him and chat being as engaged as ever. *feelfree42* commented how happy that the good old John was back. That comment in particular eased John's concerns. The image he had built up over the years of him streaming - a regular guy who simply enjoyed playing games and talking with a certain amount of depth on various topics while being down to earth and instantly approachable - was intact. Not that he had intentionally built the image up. It was simply the natural result of his personality. That was how he liked him too. A regular guy who managed to make a job out of streaming. John looked to the web camera part of the stream preview on his other monitor out of the corner of his eye. He didn't look at that tiny part of the screen for the rest of the stream.

He didn't want to look at *it*.

*

Despite John's best attempts, as time went on and he kept streaming various games, things were falling apart.

'>dude you look like you don't enjoy this, wtf'

'>is everything okay John?'

'>you can talk to us'

‘>bruuuuuuuuuh’

‘>what are you even doing’

‘>you just have to be in the right position that’s it come on John you can do it’

‘>cant even do a proper rotation lmao’

‘>y dont u give up playing this gaem’

‘>if you need some help we can probably gather a full group’

‘>don’t bother look at how badly he’s doing’

‘>shut up he’s trying, don’t see you playing this huh?’

These comments were only the tip of the iceberg of the current game John was streaming, *Final Fantasy XIV. A Massive Multiplayer Online RPG*, it was one of the most celebrated games of its genre in current time. That hadn’t always been the case. No, the game was in fact quite possibly one of the worst, if not THE worst, games ever made when it launched. The reception of the game with how bad it was usually meant that it would be binned and eventually forgotten. In a rare case of fortuitous turnaround, the developers, headed by a new leader, managed to convince the publisher to give them free reign to remake the game as best as they could in their situation. What they produced became the foundation for the fame the game held today - entirely average, but a turnaround in quality so large it was like comparing a primitive human dwelling dug up from the dirt and a regular stone house of days gone by.

If only John’s fortunes weren’t turning around in the entirely opposite direction.

There was none of the enthusiasm he engineered during his streams, neither real nor fake. His voice was as flat as a still sea, if he spoke at all. Not speaking often was generally seen as a no-no - while there were streamers who were silent, usually those who simply streamed gameplay because they were speedrunners or were *really* good at games or were simply not social but made up for it in some other way, most streamers preferred to engage directly with their audience as much as realistically possible. Sometimes, silence was

unavoidable, and that was fine. No one really minded. The problem became when someone made their brand to be audience engagement and then not delivering it. Fans split up. Some, the more engaged viewers who really enjoyed the streamer's content, would try their best to help in games or offer support while defending against the haters. A lot of fans would simply stop watching, or tune in to streams far less regularly than they otherwise would - the regular viewers, or the majority. And then there were the haters. The final group would surge and engage with as much toxicity they could for whatever imagined beef they had with the streamer. Usually, at least some part of the reason for some of that group was legitimate, though John never found that a valid enough a reason to harass a streamer. The first and the third group would clash, creating a whirlpool of negative engagement that most streamers avoided. Those that didn't were those that liked to stir up drama themselves and reveled in it.

John was decidedly not someone who wanted to stir up the drama.

No, if anything, he just wanted everything to stop. His brain, his body, his feelings, the look he had whenever he saw his reflection in the screen, the chat alternating between help and hate, Jane wordlessly putting some of her cigarettes on his table without comment. John didn't know who or what he hated most - the haters, the supporters, or himself. But he had his suspicions, and not just about who.

About why as well.

*

A knock on his door. One, twice, thrice.

"Hey." Jane said to no response. John heard her try the knob. He had not locked the door. In a way, he thought of that as an invitation. While he had effectively isolated himself for two days, he did not want to go so far as to lock the closest person he knew out of his room.

Hell, if she needed help, he'd be jumping off from his bed like a boulder thrown from a catapult. Besides... though he did not have a *memory* of it, a feeling of being locked in somewhere terrified him. John wasn't even sure if it was because of something that had happened in the past or if he were terrified of being completely shut off from everything (he had left his phone outside) and everyone, alone with himself and the tempest in his brain.

The door opened with the slight swoosh of air. Jane entered with short, hesitant, lightly audible steps. Without any words, she sat at the edge of his bed. John looked at her with... he wasn't sure with what. Hope? Rage? Sadness? Even if she was mostly a silhouette - the only reason the room wasn't completely dark was the now-ajar door.

"John." Jane spoke, voice mercilessly gentle, her words hellishly weighted.

"Yeah?"

"Talk to me."

"About what." he replied, feeling more than seeing a glare with no bite for it.

"You know what. You're suffering. You've been suffering for a long time. I've kept on watching, tryin' a help somehow. I've known you for a long time and I thought I knew how ta do it, y'know? Turns out, I don't. I'm not sure I even know enough about ya to do it. I'm just watchin' you slowly destroy yourself and you're not saying anything, not to me and not to anyone. I was tryin' a watch your streams more recently to get a feel for it, but you just kept on tryin' a smile a weak smile and push through it. And now you're here, barely eatin', barely sleepin', barely livin'. I've been waitin' to figure it out and I've been lettin' ya down for it and I can't do that anymore."

She gave John a nudge.

"Tell me. No one really wants ta take their biggest regrets, their biggest fears, to the grave without someone knowing of them. And I don't wanna see you in that grave, John."

That was what it was, wasn't it? John was pushing on and on, trying his best not to face the mirror, and he knew where he was leading himself to. Like a parched desert traveler, he kept following the mirage for a whiff of oasis air. But how was he to accept that? How was he to accept that all that he was, *was not*? How was he to face anyone with that kind of a burden? How was he to face *himself*?

Minutes passed in silence as John was mulling such questions. Her words pierced him at his heart, but not fatally. He still could not say anything. He could not look into the mirror.

Jane sighed.

"I don't know if what I'm gonna say applies to you in any way, but I've also been dealing with something."

John turned his head towards Jane then, eyebrows raised.

"You have?" he asked, his voice shaky.

"course I have." she replied sardonically. "No one goes perfectly through life. In my case, it was nothin' special that really bothered me, but it's been somethin' I've been askin' myself for as long as I've been alive. Do you want to hear it?"

A nod.

"Aight." Jane said with a sigh. "Ever since I can remember, I don't think I coulda thought of somebody in a romantic way. Princesses gettin' saved by princes on white horses? Cartoon couples gettin' together and kissin'? Movies with so much romance in 'em I can't even watch 'em now cuz they got old and borin'? I got the meanin' of 'em all, but not the feelin'. It was alien to me- no, maybe alien ain't a good word. It... it felt like, if someone touched me in a romantic way, thinkin' we were both feelin' the same, I'd just be feelin' like I'm outta my own body. They'd be talkin' more to a doll than a person then despite me bein' entirely there.

And that ain't just about romance. Sex too. Even did it twice, two different *type* of people. But I was just movin' with the motion, yknow? I was just... existing."

Jane paused there for a moment, allowing John to gather his thoughts. As much as he could, that was, because, wow, did he not know this about his best friend. Jane, asexual? Jane, laughing at romances with him whenever they watched, laughing at weird horny jokes they said, heard, read? Jane, so full of life, just existing? How did it come to pass? Escaped his notice? Why had she not told him until now? Why was his body heating up, his heart beating as if to pump all that blood it had left to wither beforehand all at once, his brain under a foggy pressure? Why was she-

“Eventually I met you. Haaah... it was just a simple meeting with friends of friends on the college campus and I thought nothing of it. Eventually, we became friends, just like any other friend I have ever had. It was all going as it always did. Aaand... Eventually, to my surprise, I found myself noticing things. Noticing... discrepancies with you. Or feelin’ em’? Sensin’? You were always talkin’, always being the base of a group, but never for yourself, never ‘bout yourself. I’m not sure if that’s what it was, even what it was, but sooner than I realized I found myself being around you. There was nothing really in me in terms of romantic or sexual emotions then, maybe not even now, I don’t know, I’m just ramblin’... What I mean is that I “saw” somethin’ in you. A kernel, maybe. But it was a kernel more than with anyone else. And I’m still askin’ myself why. Why it just so happened to be you I have that special kernel of interest in. Why I’ve been livin’ with you when I could’ve done a whole lotta things more with my life than be stuck at my low-level entry job. Why I’m feelin’ like I’m family with you, but also not? It’s all sorts of confusing for me, John. I just live and mostly I’m fine with it. But you-” she accentuated her last words with a hard, though not super hard, nudge, “you’re very dear to me, one way or another. I don’t want to lose you.”

Jane faced him then. A tiny ray of light illuminated her eyes. Mirror into the soul, people said eyes were. John could only agree in this very moment as he looked into her eyes, waiting for the sword of his doom commit to its final strike.

“Tell me, what’s going on, John? Whatever it is that is weighing on your soul, I’ll accept it. You don’t even have to ask me to. I’ve shown you the truth of my soul. Please, John, for the first time in your life, for your own sake, show me yours.”

John’s body exploded from pain. The burning flesh pierced by the sword, one bit of flesh for one of Jane’s words, reminded his body he was alive, still so very alive. The reminder gave him the strength to open his eyes, to ignore the mirage, to face the mirror. And what a sight it was! The world in front of him, which had always felt as if tilted by a degree away from normal, righted itself to how it should be. Instead of a desert, there was just a place. No, not just a place. A person holding a screen. John focused himself on the image displayed and found that the screen was not a screen. It was a mirror. And in the reflection... in the reflection... it was Lianna. It was herself.

“I think...” she spoke, finally, her eyes teary and her voice hoarse, “no, I know, I’m pretty sure I know now that...”

She smiled at Jane, somehow, with terrible force to keep it there through the tears and the pain of acceptance. Jane just looked at her, waiting. She was glad for it.

“I’m a woman, Jane.” she said, *finally*. “I’m a woman.”

Jane said nothing still. No surprise on her face. Then, she smiled.

“Okay.” she said as she hugged the other girl. “I got you. I got you. I got you.”

Jane said those words, letting her cry as she could, emotions stored from so long ago pouring out in salty tears, repeating that last line over and over again as if trying to instill warmth through them. *I got you. I got you. I got you.*

I got you.

*

In the two days since, the two of them simply stayed at home and played co-op games.

Only one part of the elephant in the room had been addressed initially - the name. Jane did not want to refer to Lea as John anymore, nor did Lea herself want that. After exploring some names like Candice, Taylor, and the like, Lea remembered the name she had chosen way back when. Less than a year had passed since that stream, but Lea could still conjure up the memory of the warmth that the name gave her. It was a bit of an archaic name, though. Jane eventually suggested shortening it to a simple 'Lea', and thus, Lea was born anew. Mostly. She was really, really, *really* tired and could use a bit of time to rest and recoup properly. Now that she could actually do that, that was.

Fortunately, it was the weekend, which meant that Jane could stay and shut herself in with Lea like a cave gremlin. They ordered enough takeaway, holed themselves in the living room, and played whatever games they felt like playing in the moment. Jane wasn't nearly as much of a gamer as Lea, but she did enjoy playing cooperative and party games. *Mario Kart* was first, the usual classic game to lose friendships over. Lea won most of the races by a tight margin. For the few that Jane won, she did not hesitate to try and revoke Lea's gamer cred. '*How could you lose to me?*' Jane wailed. '*You play games all day!*'

Next up was *Risk of Rain 2*, a procedurally-generated game through which they fought through various levels for the rewards. That one was all cooperative, which meant for a mostly stress-free time besides when they were getting overwhelmed by enemies. Lea still had fun. It was good to game with an empty mind sometimes. The last game they played during Saturday was *Payday 2*, which was also a cooperative game, but with much higher stakes. After all, they were playing as criminals robbing banks, with levels designed for many, many ways to complete the mission. They'd always agree to do the current ongoing mission with stealth. Jane would get found out way too often. That would force Lea to improvise. Usually, the level would be cleared with a lot of dead bodies behind them. '*Oh no, we accidentally killed everyone,*

sorry, we didn't mean to! Really!' Jane said at one point, prompting Lea to laugh way too much. Since that happened early on, Lea thought it was slightly suspicious how Jane would get so easily revealed in the next levels only to give a similar comment after it, looking sideways at Lea as if to see if she were laughing. Sometimes she did, other times she jokingly berated Jane, and a few times she made the mission go to hell herself to prevent Jane from making another bad joke.

Sleep that night came easier.

Sunday was reserved for *Divinity: Original Sin 2*. Most RPG's had single-player-focused stories, but *D:OS2* had an up to four people co-op mode for the main story, which was part of why the two chose that game. They could take the whole day just to do some random quests and experience more than a few of the weird things that the devs have put in the game. This time, Lea created a female character without a second thought. On the other hand, Jane chose a male wizard, for fun, as she said! Lea had fun back when she streamed it, but it was an entirely different experience playing it alongside Jane. Though it was sometimes a bit aggravating how inexperienced Jane was at playing RPG's, it was more than worth it in exchange for the look on her face when NPC's randomly turned into toads due to a wayward spell, and other such incidents. Most games in general did not offer such freedom of things randomly happening that *D:OS2* did. That was the main reason Lea chose it. That, and how easy was to pass time with the game. It was lighthearted enough for that. Not enough to truly make her heart feel light, but enough.

Just about enough.

*

Everything that Lea had put aside for the weekend came crashing down upon her on Monday as if it were an avalanche - slow to start, overwhelming once it picked up the pace.

During the weekend, Lea had not dared look into the bathroom mirror. It was hard to force herself to do so now, but she had to take stock of herself again even if she did not like what she saw. It wasn't just her looks that bothered her, but how she came off to people. For most of her life, she had lived in entirely different set of equations when it came to behavior. She knew more than most how acting one way or another changed perceptions of that person. It was part of her job as a streamer to understand how she came off to people and how to be more approachable by then.

Oh, the stream. Lea would have to find some way to deal with her stream.

She shook her head. Her stream would come later. The first priority was to figure out how to actually be a woman. That thought sounded ridiculous even in her own head, but it was still true. Lea had spent most of her life drifting through what she was given as her identity before she started questioning it, unwittingly as it had been at the time. She knew that there were so many differences between what people saw to be a man and a woman. Whether those were true were beside the point. Lea accepted herself, yes, but she did not want to stop at that. What would be the point of continuing to live the lie if she had the chance to change it? But, even if it were a lie throughout her life, she knew how to play the role. Well enough, at least.

Lea also had no clothes. Not quite literally, but her stature was different to Jane's, while her closet consisted of the most casual things to wear possible. That was certainly a complication. Makeup was a different thing. She did actually have some of her own - for Halloween purposes, or so she had told herself at the time - and could possibly borrow some of Jane's. Though, that was still mostly uncharted territory for her as well. It would be so good to learn... Lea giggled. The excitement that coursed through her at the thought of learning makeup was euphoric. It would bring the face in the mirror closer to the face she wanted to see

in the mirror and that thought was more than enough for her right now. But, she had questions, and many of them at that, not just about makeup.

She wished she had made friends with a transgender person before. She was acquaintances with a few LGBTQ+ people, but none that she could turn to ask about some things. In hindsight, it was an oversight that Lea couldn't help but to blame herself for despite knowing that she could not have known beforehand. She'd have to reach out to some, but who? How to find someone like her in the vastness of the world and the density of the internet? Lea sighed. At least she could ask Jane a lot of things, even if it wouldn't be everything.

Which, Lea supposed, could as well be her next step. She finished her daily "routine" and left the bathroom, joining Jane in the living room. Jane was up earlier than usual (as was Lea - unlike most times when they played throughout the day, Jane insisted on them sleeping at normal times at night), sipping her coffee, a thoughtful look on her face.

"Hey there." she said as Lea sat beside her on the couch. "Good mornin', Lea. How're you feelin'?"

"Morning." Lea replied, preening at hearing Jane speak her name. "I'm as good as I can be, I suppose. Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah. I'm alive 'n kickin' so I'm good. You still look a bit pale, though."

Lea couldn't deny that. She had little idea of what to do next, her future was as frightening as an unopened book and as exciting as the first time one visited the sea, and far too many thoughts running in her head rent free.

"I just... have so much to think about."

Jane smirked.

"Of course ya have. Now, normally I'd say let's leave the hard stuff for after work, but I'm contemplatin' some stuff 'bout that, so I'm all yours today. Besides, I woke up earlier than you and mostly drank my coffee already. Best to start bright 'n early, eh?"

Lea's eyes widened.

"Huh? What's going on? Are you quitting your job or something? This is so sudden-"

Jane stopped Lea from speaking by waving her hand in dismissal.

"It's no big deal. I still need to think some more myself. When I'm more sure, I'll talk about it. Right now, I wanna help you, okay?"

"Okay." Lea said, nodding. "Okay. That sounds good. Uhhh... uhmm... shit, I don't know what to ask now that you've put me on the spot! There's so much!"

"Is there? Well, I'll bite. Do you want my help with makeup?"

"*Please*. I know basically nothing about it. I... I don't want to look like this anymore. I know I'll still have to, for now, maybe for longer than I want, but..."

Jane smiled enigmatically before putting a hand on Lea's back, moving it in circles. A gesture of comfort. Warm. Very warm.

"s alright." she spoke. "There's a lot to teach you. I'll do that, yeah, but lemme first try 'n do a makeover for you. I'm na 'n expert, but I've my experience. We'll test out some stuff - makeup's trickier than ya think - and we'll find some combo that looks good on ya. If that doesn't work out, we can try searchin' for an LGBTQ+ friendly stylist. That's gonna be nervewrackin' for ya if we do it, but they'll be a pro, so you'll be in good hands."

"THERE'S LGBTQ+ FRIENDLY STYLISTS?"

"Yup. Not surprised you didn't realize that. The world's very hostile to us. But, there's more LGBTQ+ friendly people than it seems, ya know? We should be able to find someone."

Lea looked at Jane in utter disbelief. The very idea that they could just go out and find an LGBTQ+ friendly stylist never even occurred to Lea. And the way Jane said it, there were probably a lot more people Lea could get help from than she had estimated. She wasn't sure she could quite believe that right now, but there seemed to be no lie in Jane's words. The warmth spread throughout her body.

“And for clothes?”

“Of course! We can order online at first if ya not comfortable going directly to try the clothes on, and that’s always a gamble since you can’t know whether you’ll get it exactly as ordered, but it’d be easier. Have you thought about what you’d like to wear? What style? Anything at all?”

“Umm... not really...” Lea admitted sheepishly, to which Jane rolled her eyes, as if she had expected the response. “I’ve never really thought about fashion or style or clothes beyond what I needed at most so I’m totally lost. I.. I should give that some thought. Maybe look at clothes and pick stuff out? But where do I look for them online? I don’t know any sites...”

“Don’tchu worry ya pretty lil’ head ‘bout that.” Jane replied confidently. “I know. We can go look that stuff up now if you’d like. Really, I was gonna ask ya, do ya wanna do clothes first or makeup? A day’s short and we ain’t got all of it for everything. No need to rush, though. We’re not gonna get booted out for not payin’ rent anytime soon. You should go with the pace that you’d like.”

Lea nodded, half-listening. Not because she wasn’t paying attention, but because so many possibilities bloomed in her mind. She asked only two questions, and yet, they were far more revealing than she expected, almost too much. She wanted to visit an LGBTQ+ stylist right away, or no, maybe an LGBTQ+ friendly clothes shop would be better first? But she’d be jumping the gun if she did that, wouldn’t she? Maybe better to just look for some clothes and figure out some makeup at home first? But, oh, will there be enough time today? Probably not, no, but she could still try? The whole stream of thoughts was going through her as fast as a race car. It took a minute for Lea to remember to breathe. Breathe. Breathe in, breathe out. Okay. Okay. She needed to calm down. Pick one and go with it. Not something she was good at doing, usually. But she could try. She would try her best with those kinds of things. Still...

What to choose, when there's more to pick from than Lea ever dared to hope there could be?

*

A week later, Lea looked into what she could do on the medical side of things.

It looked like she was near a hospital that provided transgender healthcare. That was a load off her chest. She still didn't know everything the process entailed - only that she should start taking estrogen and testosterone blockers as part of *HRT*, or hormone replacement therapy, and that there existed gender reassignment surgeries. Both of those things appealed to her, but she didn't know enough. She'd have to ask around soon, either at the hospital or elsewhere. Jane did give her an online contact for a trans friend she was vaguely acquainted with, and Lea had already found and joined several servers on Discord that advertised themselves as LGBTQ+ friendly (including her own fan server, or at least the part of it that she never went to before, but on a different account than before). She wanted the change badly, so, so badly. She needed to know.

Lea started typing...

*

More than a month after that, Lea finally mustered up the courage to look at her stream.

In truth, there wasn't much to look at. The stream setup she had in the necessary programs were as she left them. Pretty basic, really, but she never thought to make her stream some extremely unique thing, so she didn't need much of the flair a lot of other streamers used. Of course, her stream views were zero since she had not been streaming for a while. There

were comments on various connected social media platforms asking her when she'd be back, or would she come back at all. That was more than understandable. Lea did leave her fans a month with an enigmatic voice-only video on YouTube saying how she was sorry for taking another sabbatical and that she'd return as soon as possible after everything settled down on her end, finishing the video by saying she hoped they'd be proud of her when she came back (though she used *they/them* in the video to refer to herself instead of either *he/him* or *she/her*). Perhaps it was a good thing that everything was pretty much exactly as Lea had left it before all this happened? She could get back to streaming as soon as she felt ready for it.

Her eyes went back to her streaming program. Though the stream preview showed nothing, when she hovered the cursor over the bottom right corner of it, the webcam part got highlighted. The webcam wasn't turned on nor did Lea want to turn it on. She stared at it as if her stare could erase that component from existence. There were easier ways to do that, of course, like simply clicking on it and pressing the delete button on the keyboard, but it wasn't so simple. Not simple at all. Lea sighed.

“What'cha doin' there?”

The voice behind her came out of nowhere, making Lea jump in her seat. Thankfully, it was just Jane, but it still gave her hell of a fright. She must've been so absorbed in her thoughts that she didn't hear Jane enter the room.

“Oh, it's just you, Jane.” Lea said, trying to calm down. “I'm thinking, I guess, not that that's surprising. Not sure what to do with this.”

“Ah, the webcam screen?” Jane asked, tilting her head towards where Lea had her cursor hovering over.

“Yeah. I don't *need* show my face on stream, yeah, but it'd be strange for the stream to stop with it now. It's also more engaging for everyone.”

“Hmm. You don't want to show ya face anymore? Not even as a woman?”

That... was a good question. Lea supposed she should have debated that one over with herself for a long time, but the answer came to her immediately. Her face from before had become a permanent relic attached to the stream, a memory of time, a reflection. It was a far more vulnerable matter than she realized.

“No.” she said simply, shaking her head. Jane nodded.

“Well... then it’s best ya re-brand. I don’t know ‘bout the streamin’ world, but you’d not be da first one to re-invent yourself publically. I could talk ya ears off about all such PR re-brandin’ cases I had to handle- Lea? Lea? Hello?”

Lea’s eyes widened when Jane said the word ‘re-brand’. Of course. How had she not thought of that before. Lea face-palmed. It was probably the best way for her to continue as a streamer, for her stream to grow, and for her mental health. She turned her head towards Jane and smiled widely.

“I know what to do.”

*

It was a shame Lea was not an artist or particularly well-skilled in finer digital crafts like coding or 2D/3D modeling. There would be a lot she could do herself with what she was planning to do if she knew such things. With everything going on in her life, however, learning that on the fly was unrealistic. It took a long time to hone such skills to the level that she needed.

Instead, she decided to commission two separate artists, one who was primarily doing drawing and one who mostly did 2D/3D modeling. She thanked her old self for doing that stupid subscription goal because it meant she had the funds to properly pay these artists for their work. That was something Lea was always conscientious about in the online world. It was better, and simply nicer as a human being, to have good relationships with artists (really, most

everyone). That also freed her to pursue her real life obligations whilst the commissions were in progress. And there was a lot to do there still. So much to do, and yet, Lea was freer than she ever was. No more ill-fitting masks, no more lies.

‘Things are getting better,’ Lea spoke to herself and got off her desk.

*

The stream showed only a white, blank screen at first.

“Hello, hello, can you guys hear me?” Lea spoke. “Testing, testing. Is the audio loud enough? Please tell me if I need to adjust it.”

Almost nine months had passed since her last stream and her chat was buzzing with curiosity about it. Only a few days ago did she make a post on social media that she’s going to be back to streaming and soon, and an hour before the appointed time, several chatters have already appeared and were waiting for the stream to start. That wasn’t that unusual when it came to streams, but it was notable for Lea’s stream because it was only several chatters and, as time went on and the stream time neared, less than a hundred had showed up. Expected, really. There were a dime a dozen streamers like Lea used to be. More people would probably show up again as she streamed more and more, but this was more than good enough for her stream right now.

Especially with the comments she was getting right now.

‘[20-month-sub] feelfree42> huh, a girl?’

‘[49-months-sub] langleyasukafan> wait what?’

‘tryharddiehard> whats going on’

‘azbaz>wait you’re not John’

‘[mod] keepjaredletooutofmovies> wait I wasn’t told anything about this?’

‘[20-month-sub] feelfree42> @keepjaredletooutofmovies you don’t know anything about this either?’

‘[mod] keepjaredletooutofmovies> nope I’m out of the loop as the rest of you are’

‘[49-months-sub] langleyasukafan> okay then who are you and what have you done to John?’

Good. Lea’s voice training was paying off. She was not entirely sure she could do a woman’s voice as properly as she’d have liked, but if the chat was freaking out about it, then it was good enough for now.

“Okay guys, I see you hear me loud and clear.” she spoke with more confidence than she felt she had. “I’m sure you’re all surprised about hearing me like this. A lot of things have happened. I’m not sure I can tell you everything... but I can tell you who I’ve become and what the future of my stream will be. I should just address it right now - there is no more John. In a way, there never was, but I could not accept that even when the truth was staring at me in the face from my reflection. With that in mind, this stream is going to have a lot of changes, including the name of it. It’s still going to be a gaming stream, you can rest assured. It’ll just have... a different flavour to how it was before.”

Lea sighed. She practiced her introduction a dozen times, made easier by keeping it simple. It was time to reveal her new self... the reflection of *her* soul in the screen, and a character costume she was donning in front of a mirror, ready for the play. She clicked a button.

A person appeared on the previously white background. She was an elegant, tall young woman, with long, tawny-brown hair that reached to her waist in curls. Green eyes, short eyelashes. Slight blush on cheeks. A pair of owl ears on her head. Her arms and legs, where clothes didn’t cover, were littered with feathers.

“My name is Grace, Grace Wiz. Nice to meet you all anew, everyone, and I hope we can get along well. Or, well, that we can get along as well as an owl and a bunch of humans can, I suppose.”

Oh, good. She didn't flub her intro. Now, all that remained was to wait for her cha- oh god the comments were coming by so fast!

‘[mod] keepjaredletooutofmovies> oh, you're a vtuber now? and a girl one? that's what you meant by surprise earlier when you told me you'd be streaming again?’

‘[20-month-sub] feelfree42> am I reading into this correctly? oh... oh, that's why it took so long for you to come back...’

‘tryharddiehard> not John not interested’

‘azbaz> better than John could ever be lmao’

‘[mod] keepjaredletooutofmovies> that's a real big surprise sis you got me good’

‘[49-months-sub] langleyasukafan> oh okay you're SO much cuter than John I can't even’

‘[20-month-sub] feelfree42> I'll still support you, Grace!’

‘ddddddooooon> lmaoooo I won't, what the hell is this’

‘[mod] keepjaredletooutofmovies> coulda told me but I guess mods are the only ones without rights here :Kappa:’

‘[49-months-sub] langleyasukafan> @keepjaredletooutofmovies if you didn't add the kappa at the end I'd have smacked you’

‘[mod] keepjaredletooutofmovies> see what a cruel world it is here for us mods...’

‘honestbrutale2222> didn't expect this comeback, not sure what to feel about this’

‘[mod][61-months-sub] akihitomaboi91> gotta support her is how to feel about this dumbass’

‘[new chatter] apexisshit> just a new vtuber dont get what the fuss is about’

There were many other comments, but Lea could only read so many of them so quickly. The reactions were mostly okay to positive, which was good. It was a complete departure from her previous image in more ways than one that she'd not have been surprised if there had been a lot more uproar about this. Then again, most of those that came here were her more passionate fans from back then. They were probably just relieved and happy to see her streaming again, even as someone entirely different.

Lea smiled. It was good. More than good. This was just the beginning, but the hope that had been budding in her ever since she decided upon this course has permeated her entire being now. For the first time, possibly ever, she just *knew* she'd be fine. In the end, the screen became the mirror, and she could not be any happier for that.

“Hmmm, like what you see?” she asked her chat. “Well, let me show you some more, then...”

5. Conclusion

To summarize, identity is a multi-faceted part of any one person on Earth. I explored identity and certain aspects, namely realizing the characters in question were not who they thought they were, of that identity. In the course of that, I also explored how someone might realize they are actually part of a minority group and the interaction between the digital and the real-life. By doing so, I hope I have both brought an enjoyable and an enlightening discussion on what it means to be someone in this modern world.

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Summary

Writing is a form of media through which identity can be expressed, in particular creative writing. Various aspects of identity can be examined through creative writing, for example LGBTQ+ aspect of identity. This thesis paper explores and examines identity in particular through the story written by the author, *Mirror / Screen / Mirror*.

Sažetak

Pisanje je medij kroz kojeg se identitet može izraziti. Kreativno pisanje je pogotovo pogodan način za to. Kroz kreativno pisanje se mogu izraziti razni aspekti identiteta. Dobar primjer toga je LGBTQ+ aspekt identiteta. Ovaj diplomski rad istražuje i izražava što je identitet kroz priču koju je autor rada napisao, *Mirror / Screen / Mirror*.

Key Words

Creative writing

Identity

LGBTQ+

Digital world

Real world

Ključne riječi

Kreativno pisanje

Identitet

LGBTQ+

Digitalni svijet

Stvarni svijet

Obrazac A.Č.

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Creative Writing and identity

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