RUPTURE AND GLITCH IN PLEASURE: EXPLORING EROTIC ROLE PLAY IN VIRTUAL REALITY

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Extended Abstract

Social VR platforms are multi-user 3D environments where individuals express themselves through avatars and engage in real-time interactions. Since the introduction of consumer VR headsets in 2016, daily VR use has surged, with millions of users immersing themselves in platforms such as Roblox, Rec Room, and VRChat. Among these, VRChat has become one of the most frequented social VR spaces, where users adopt highly customizable avatars, ranging from anime characters and animals to objects like toothbrushes. VRChat's vast selection of public and private worlds from cozy indoor settings to sci-fi inspired landscapes serves as a backdrop for diverse social experiences, including karaoke nights, film screenings, and music events. These interactions position VRChat as a dynamic social hub for creativity, connection, and community-building.

A particularly notable yet underexplored phenomenon within VRChat's vibrant social fabric is erotic role play (ERP), which refers to romantic and sexual interactions mediated through avatars. Despite its widespread presence, scholarly research on sexuality and intimacy in VR remains scarce. Among the few studies focusing on the topic, Krell and Wettman (2023) demonstrate how avatars facilitate corporeal intimacy through practices such as cuddling and dancing, challenging the assumption that digital interactions are inherently disembodied. Similarly, Rzeszewski and Evans (2020) explore how users develop emotional attachments to virtual spaces, cultivating intimacy and finding comfort in these environments. However, mainstream discourse on VR intimacy remains dominated by sensationalist narratives surrounding child grooming and sexual harassment, often overlooking the complexity and nuanced socio-cultural dynamics of these spaces. While these concerns are undeniably pressing, this study argues that social VR can also function as an arena for exploring alternative and queer forms of intimacy (McGlotten, 2013), allowing users to experiment with novel pleasures, affects, and

embodied experiences through their avatars. By resisting cis-heteronormative and ableist constructions of intimacy and sexuality, these encounters can open possibilities for queer worldmaking, fostering new relational and embodied possibilities beyond traditional binaries.

To investigate the queer political potential of ERP in virtual reality, this study employs a year-long digital ethnography in VRChat, beginning in January 2025. The study follows an immersive ethnographic approach, utilizing a Meta Quest 3 VR headset and Slime body trackers to enable firsthand engagement with the phenomenology of avatar embodiment and the affective dimensions of social VR. The research has received ethics approval from the Faculty of Humanities Ethics Committee at the University of Amsterdam (UvA), ensuring compliance with ethical standards for participant safety, confidentiality, and informed consent. As part of this study, the researcher actively engages with ERP communities, participating in BDSM nights, lewd hangout sessions, striptease and pole dance performances, and bar crawls. Additionally, he conducts semi-structured interviews with 12–15 participants via Microsoft Teams to create a confidential space for participants to share deeper reflections on their VRChat experiences. The study is grounded in foundational ethnographic research on virtual worlds and video games, including Turkle on MUDs (1995), Taylor on EverQuest (2006), Boellstorff on Second Life (2008), Pearce on Uru (2009), and Nardi on World of Warcraft (2010). The author will share preliminary conclusions from the ongoing research during the conference presentation, inviting feedback from attendees to refine the analysis and strengthen the theoretical framework.

Central to this study's examination of ERP are moments of glitches and rupture, which, as preliminary observations of the author confirm, are frequent occurrences during these intimate sessions. Avatarial embodiment in VR is inherently glitchy, riddled with technical imperfections, sensory mismatches, and visual failures that constantly destabilize VR subjectivities. Motion tracking errors, network latency, and rendering issues often cause avatars to jitter, desynchronize, or collapse into fragmented forms. Avatars frequently behave erratically, passing through objects, getting stuck in "unnatural" poses, or failing to interact with the virtual environment as expected, leading to moments of friction, absurdity, or frustration. However, these glitches are not merely obstacles or errors; rather, they are constitutive of virtual subjectivities and intimacies, shaping users' experiences and expectations in the platform. As a result, traits such as clumsiness, awkwardness, and failure are not only tolerated but embraced within VRChat's social fabric. For example, in Krell and Wettman's (2023) study, one informant likens tracking errors such as dislocated body parts during ERP to "farts" during sex, humorously highlighting how imperfection reminds users that at the end of the day "we are all human". As the example indicates, these dynamics can encourage users to reimagine intimacy through the lens of imperfection, fostering spaces for experimentation and playfulness. In contrast to idealized portrayals of sex in mainstream pornography—which often feature choreographed, repetitive acts performed by abled, conventionally attractive, white,

heterosexual bodies—ERP in VRChat can provide a space for alternative, non-normative forms of intimacy.

Drawing on queer theory and what has recently been termed "glitch feminism" (Russell, 2020; Sundén, 2015), this study conceptualizes these glitches and ruptures not as mere failures or obstacles but as productive dissonances that can transform users' self-perception and bodily awareness during sexual encounters. Here glitches are not merely conceptualized as unintended technical failures, but also as intentional ruptures that can unsettle taken-for-granted norms around gender expression, sexual desire, and embodiment. As Russell (2020) cogently argues, "glitch is something that extends beyond the most literal technological mechanics: it helps us to celebrate failure as a generative force, a new way to take on the world." As this study will demonstrate, even when avatars function as intended, they can create a productive distance between users and their habitual selves, opening space for new perspectives and unexpected discoveries. For example, one informant describes how, rather than selecting conventionally beautiful or hypersexualized female avatars, they prefer slime-like, jelly-bodied forms. These avatars, they explain, offer greater flexibility and fluidity during ERP sessions, enabling them to move beyond rigid gendered scripts and explore new modes of "kinky" behaviour. As their testimony showcases not all glitches result from technological malfunctions: some are deliberately introduced by users as a means of subverting normative expectations and expanding erotic possibilities.

This study contends that these ruptures, whether intentional or unintentional, can create a space for sexual exploration not only for LGBTQI+ individuals but also for those occupying normative positions, enabling them to challenge their assumptions and biases. For example, one informant describes how engaging in 'size play' with his partner, alternating between 'giant' and 'tiny' avatars, allows them to move beyond rigid sexual scripts. As he notes, this practice enables them to experiment with different sexual roles and power dynamics, rather than conforming to conventional expectations rooted in cis-heteronormative sexuality. By investigating the queer political potential of these moments of fluidity and rupture during ERP, this study contributes to emerging scholarship on mediated intimacy and sexuality in virtual environments. It challenges the hegemonic dismissal of mediated intimacies as 'failed intimacies' (McGlotten, 2013), demonstrating how these practices can cultivate meaningful, enriching, and liberatory connections in digital spaces.

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