

Queering Stories and Selves: Gamer Poop and Subversive Narrative Emergence

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Abstract

Video games such as *Mass Effect 3* (Electronic Arts, 2012), *Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011) and *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Softworks, 2008) have been praised for offering highly customisable and personalised in-game avatars, experiences and narrative flexibility. The humour in popular YouTube machinima series Gamer Poop playfully rejects the heteronormative and hypermasculine expectations that still appear inevitable in these seemingly open and inclusive gameworlds. Across Gamer Poop's 49 videos, stable identifiers of race, gender, and sexuality are radically rewritten using post-production video editing and game modification to allow for intersexual character models, bisexual orgies, and breakdancing heroes—content not programmed into the original games.

We discuss the potential for machinima videos to act as tools for negotiating emergent queer narratives. These emergent experiences are generated by players and re-inscribed onto the broader video game 'text', demonstrating the limitations of video game texts for identity-building activity. Gamer Poop takes advantage of *emergence* as the 'primordial structure' of games (Juul 2005: 73), and presents to the audience moments of emergent, queer narrative—what Henry Jenkins describes as stories that are 'not pre-structured or pre-programmed, [instead] taking shape through the game play' (Jenkins 2004: 128). These vulgar and sometimes puerile videos are a critical and playful intervention into the embedded textual meaning of Gamer Poop's chosen video games, and demonstrate that a latent representative potential exists in video game systems, rulesets, and game engines for emergent storytelling and identity-building activities. We describe this creative practice as subversive narrative emergence.

Introduction

Emergent narrative experiences are stories created beyond the embedded textuality of games and are organic products of gameplay, not pre-programmed or planned. Emergent narrative is understood as emerging out of in-game experiences. It is an approach to interaction and narrative that helps explain the way in which games are experienced by gamers, as they generate personalised narratives 'on the fly' due to the forms of virtual agency afforded by video games. For some gamers, the relative freedoms allowed by in-game experiences can accommodate queer identification and narrative experiences. Video games such as *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), and *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008) have been praised

for offering highly customisable and personalised in-game avatars, experiences and narrative flexibility that combine to allow for varied, emergent individual player experiences. Together these might suggest a potential for players to represent and enact queer identities, an assumption reinforced by the provision in the embedded narratives of *Skyrim* or *Mass Effect 3* for same-sex relationships between the gamer's avatar and non-playable characters.

However, the humour created by YouTube user 'mans1ay3r' in their popular machinima series Gamer Poop subverts and challenges these promises. Machinima is the practice of manipulating video game graphics and engines, as well as video editing software, to generate animated videos. These videos

appear as the end product of this particular user's process of experiencing, creating, capturing and sharing emergent narrative experiences; stories that are neither scripted nor anticipated in the game by default, instead emerging through play and user interaction. The games that appear most commonly in the Gamer Poop series are precisely the roleplaying games that appear designed to immerse the player into worlds of free action and character shaping, but *manslay3r*'s videos combine to demonstrate playful rejection of the heteronormative, hypermasculine and Eurocentric expectations that still appear inevitable and intractable in these gameworlds. The games that *manslay3r* subverts are fantastical in nature, depicting worlds that are occupied by aliens, robots, dragons, wizards and all manner of wondrous creations. And yet, as fantastical as they may be, and as removed from our contemporary society as they may seem on the surface, these games consistently employ restrictive representations of gendered and sexed characterisations rooted in conservative gender politics.

The videos offer to players an insight into a latent (but, unfulfilled) potential that these games have to tell queer stories, by re-purposing and re-channeling the semiotic and narrative meanings of their programming, art design and world-building. Gamer Poop thus invites a new approach to narrative emergence that suggests the phenomenon can be utilised as a tool of subversion by players, by looking beyond the emergent nature of moment-to-moment player experiences during gameplay. Instead, in addressing the formalised narrative iterations of emergent experiences contained in paratexts, machinima, game modifications, and online user-to-user discussion, the possibility for emergent forms of broader textuality can be located. With these emergent and imagined alternative stories, gameworlds, and modes of play, new opportunities for gendered and sexual identification and experiences are also made available. Subversive narrative emergence is a creative phenomenon that allows players to respond to the repeated failure of mainstream video games to accommodate queer storytelling and queer identities in their embedded stories.

While the moniker Gamer Poop might invite

comparisons with the broader practices of 'YouTube Poop', we argue that the videos of *manslay3r* are better understood and appreciated in isolation as remediated responses to narrative emergence. YouTube Poop, a fairly inclusive title used for remixing practices online, is nevertheless characterised by a chaotic disregard for narrative sense which tends to result in fun, but narratively rapid confusions of pop culture artefacts such as children's animation shows. In contrast, *manslay3r* repurposes narrative segments of gameplay, most notably dialogue sequences, in order to construct entirely new, aberrant narratives that are notable because these repurposed narratives often coalesce into unpredictable, but consistently queered inversions of otherwise heteronormative gameworlds.

Method

In this article we draw upon textual analysis of the 49 videos contained in the Gamer Poop series on YouTube.¹ At the time of writing, *manslay3r*'s channel has 514,045 subscribers, one video with over 5 million views, four videos with over 2 million, and five over 1 million. On the Machinima YouTube channel, the statistics are even more emphatic: only six videos show *less* than 1 million views. The most popular registers over 8 million, and the majority feature 3-4 million views. Demonstrating such high viewership on the Machinima channel, which is currently recorded as the 35th most subscribed channel on YouTube and has a figure of 5.6 billion accumulated views in its 10 years of operation, *manslay3r* is evidently a notable figure in the online video game machinima community. 49 videos form a considerable volume of evidence and not every artefact can be (or has been) acknowledged and discussed in detail. Small numbers of artefacts are necessarily offered as being representative of larger trends and tendencies in the YouTube channel and player communities being discussed. In every instance of direct analysis of artefacts, the specific data presented has been selected because we believe them to be most characteristically representative of multiple other videos on the channel. This is a form of digital ethnography that addresses digital video and social networking platforms (Murthy 2008), and is supported further by textual analysis of

the video games refashioned by mans1ay3r and the authors' own experiences, journaling, and auto-analysis of gameplay.

Latent potential

The possibility of queer narratives and representations in video games has become an issue of considerable interest in game studies, not only because of the apparent lack of queer content in mainstream titles, but also because video games as a medium appear to be well-suited to the realisation of queer storytelling. Shira Chess goes as far as to suggest that the narrative form of video games is 'fundamentally queer', which accounts for the narratological position that video games are not narratives at all (2016: 84). With their unique blend of player input and agency, interactive narratives and representational outputs, video games can encourage the visibility of queer identities and the active realisation of the player's queer becomings through gameplay. However, in the increasing body of research into queer games and gaming, the recurrent theme is that queer potential exists for the medium but this potential is yet to be satisfactorily realised. In other words, queer content in video games remains closeted.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick discusses how homosexuals in 20th-century America were caught in the double bind of a regulatory system that needed to know the sexual orientation of public servants while simultaneously punishing those who attempted to disguise an identity that did not fit the norm. To be caught out of the closet was less an issue of sexual orientation than one of disclosure. It was a system in which disclosure was 'at once compulsory and forbidden' (Sedgwick 2008: 47). In response, the gay closet became 'a fundamental feature of social life' (Sedgwick 2008: 46), and the paradoxical binary of secrecy and disclosure persists. In video games the queer closet has ostensibly been opened, with games such as *Mass Effect 3* and *Skyrim* offering the choice of same sex couplings. Yet, to be outed as queer within the gaming community, is to be outed into a culture dominated by heteronormative assumptions and latent homophobic subcultures (Greer 2013: 4). Queer content is thus acknowledged, even accepted, but it is simultaneously relegated into

the closeted recesses of heteronormative game-worlds.

Despite (or in spite of) the closeted nature of queer content in games and gaming, the queer potential exists. Stephen Greer refers to this queer potential as the 'affordances' of a game, which are 'the constraints within which one is able to improvise' a sexual identity that might not be 'explicitly coded' in the game's mechanics (2013: 8). Greer understands queer 'as a term which refers not only to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans identities, but to a range of identities who cannot (or will not) be accounted for within existing normative categories of sex, gender, and sexuality' (2013: 4). If queer identities are not accounted for, or encoded, into a game, the affordances of the game's mechanics might allow for queer experiences to emerge. Greer offers the example of Peter Molyneux's ambitious *Fable* adventure game, in which the player's male hero had the ability to woo both male and female villagers. However, the decision to afford same sex relationships in the game was less a matter of recognition than 'the product of coding' because the artificial intelligence of the villagers was universally engineered to include an attraction to the hero regardless of gender (Greer 2013: 9).

The sexual orientation of non-player characters might be a matter of coding, but Greer argues that the sexuality of the player's character 'emerges performatively', a phrase that is connected to the influential work of Judith Butler (2013: 10). For Butler, the gendered body is not a passive surface upon which meaning is inscribed. Instead, the body is 'a continual and incessant *materializing* of possibilities' (Butler 1988: 521, emphasis in original); a materialising that, to borrow from the language of game studies, could be read as an emergent narrative. Butler goes on to say that 'one is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body' (1988: 521). In this queering of the gendered body, the rigid certainties of a historical body inscribed with cultural meaning or significance makes way for a fluidity of being and becoming, which is fundamentally at odds with the heteronormative, hegemonic, insistence on gender binaries and sexed categorisations. Butler's performed body is also consistent with David Halperin's assertion that 'gayness [...] is not a state or

condition [...] it is a practice' (2012: 13). The experiences of Butler's queer embodiment and Halperin's practice of 'being gay' are not so dissimilar to the queer identities that emerge through the gender performances of a controllable character. And yet, as Greer (2013) attests, these queer affordances can be unintentional or accidental because video games remain tied to heteronormative and heterosexist gameworlds.

Implicit in the criticism of the gaming industry's heterosexism is the belief in an alternative, unrepresented audience who lack adequate representation or acknowledgement in video game worlds. Adrienne Shaw (2009) emphasises the importance of representation, but she is also quick to question the way queer representation has been discussed in academia and in the video game industry. In *Putting the Gay in Games* (2009), Shaw responds to the queer appropriation of texts in which sexually ambiguous characters or homoerotic subtexts can be read as queer in order to subvert heterosexual narratives and norms. In the fictional worlds of fantasy games such as *Skyrim*, for example, the emphasis on the bodies and musculature of hypermasculine warriors might invite comparisons to the homoerotic interpretations of *Conan the Barbarian* or Fabio's game art for *Iron Swords II*. Queer readings of otherwise heteronormative texts can also occur through social subversion and communal identity constructions. In her ethnographic study of the queer researcher in *World of Warcraft*, Jenny Sundén discovers that 'even if game culture rarely encourages non-normative and anti-normative ways of doing gender and sexuality, it is quite possible for [...] women to come together and play at least partly on their own terms' (2012: 269). However, Shaw argues that while 'queer readings may allow audiences to compensate for a lack of representation [...] that does not preclude a demand for representation' (2009: 232). To be left out of cultural discourses is a form of symbolic violence, an erasure of valid possibilities, and as Shaw aptly states, 'representation provides evidence for what forms of existence are possible' (2014: 4).

Playing queer

That queer representation is necessary in mass media such as video games might not be problematic,

but what constitutes queer representation, and what form this representation ought to take, becomes markedly more complex. Shaw criticises the neo-liberal logic that drives the video games industry, stating that 'groups are representable only insofar as they are marketable' (2014: 18). The logic runs that marketers first recognised the untapped female demographic and then extrapolated the sub-group of LGBT gamers, who were identified first and foremost as LGBT; as a fixed and delineated group of potential customers whose identities could be categorised and appealed to as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. Where queer could be understood as fluid, boundless and transgressive—to the point of overhauling entire notions of sexed and gendered selves—marketing to a sub-group encouraged the reaffirmation of gender boundaries within existing categories. Shaw argues that 'appealing to a market based on limited notions of identity essentializes what members in that group would want in video games' (2009: 239). Within the predominately male, heterosexual gaming industry (Shaw 2009: 234), LGBT gamers are targeted as a discrete but concretised subset of the gaming market, rather than as a diverse community. Richard G. Jones Jr. interprets queer as a perspective 'that opposes established social and academic norms' so that it is 'more likely to deconstruct labels like LGBT than to unite and essentialize them' (2015: 767). To queer gaming content and representations, therefore, is not to pander to a preconceived market of marginalised gamers, or to unify queer identities (or any identities) as singular and sellable; but instead, to deconstruct and problematise the entire foundations of identity in video games. Same-sex trysts in *Mass Effect*, and same-sex marriages in *Skyrim*, are passed off as progressive. Yet, they remain limited by essentialised notions of love, desire, able-bodied eroticism and the relative fixity of gendered selves. While queer gamers had fallen outside of profitable audience categorisations, the establishment of queer categorisations is also problematic. Shaw criticises the way that 'marginalized groups become reified by industrial logics that wish to shape texts to target niche markets', which in turn limits the visible possibilities for realising a sense of self within those groups (2014: 18).

To return to Judith Butler, gender is performed rather than biologically inherited, and queer theory offers a means of resistance to the social script of heteronormativity (2006: 24). To queer the body and the self is to substantiate subjectivities that exist outside of the norm, and indeed to deconstruct the norm entirely. Gender can no longer be understood as a matter of binary oppositions or biological assertions between men and women, gay and straight, and identities can no longer be accepted as stable or unitary—the very assertions that dominate the narratives and characterisations within mainstream gameworlds. However, to say that gender is performed is not to say it is performative. To use the language of gaming, playing with gender does not constitute a subversion of norms if the play exists within the ruleset of a heterosexual framework. We can understand that ‘one aspect of the queer is to reject what is normal and natural in favour of what the straight mind finds monstrous, if not unthinkable’ (Crowder 2007: 493). In radical terms, rejecting the entire regime of gendered selves might be considered most monstrous to the straight minds dependent on these categories for self-affirmation and existence within a supposedly stable social hierarchy predicated on heterosexual modes of being. This is why we feel it necessary to expand the scope of emergent narratives. To queer gameplay one must first bend the rules, and this means playing beyond the game as packaged—a style of engagement that is emergent in nature.

Gameplay is, as Richard Bartle suggests, a form of identity play. When engaged in the roleplay of a character, ‘you’re not role-playing a being, you *are* that being; you’re not assuming an identity, you *are* that identity’ (2004: 155–6, emphasis in original). It is, however, the balance between the *player’s* identity, agency and motivations and the *game’s* intended and encoded pathways that prove problematic in the struggle for queer signification. Embodying an ingame avatar ‘allows for the many psychic self-reflections needed for identification’, but such self-reflection is always constrained by the text, as ‘the user remains aware that the ... game world is not of their own creation – it exists outside themselves, the virtual creation of others’ (Waggoner 2009: 173). The ingame avatar does not necessarily become us, the

player. Rather, the player is more often expected to acquiesce to the ludic qualities and fictional boundaries of the game and gameworld; boundaries and possibilities which are often shaped by the aggressive heteronormativity of games and their contexts of production. Torill Mortensen, in surveying a body of evidence that suggested video game players are often motivated to play by the potential for social and cultural acts of ‘bricolage’ and self-representation, described video games as ‘the tool at hand’ through which users could ‘understand him or herself, create an identity’ (2007: 198). When it comes to enacting or understanding queer identities, however, the video game has proved itself not necessarily the best tool at hand, as heteronormative codes, cultures and expectations appear intractable. There is a step before a video game can become the tool to tell these stories; other practices are needed to open up the video game and its symbolic systems to give players the means and modes of representation to extract queer stories.

The methods of creative practice adopted by *manslay3r* both reflect the need in queer signification to reject and to subvert dominant narratives, and the need to open up new modes of access to the symbolic content of video game systems. One way *manslay3r* manipulates video game texts and their narrative, aesthetic and cultural meaning is through ‘modding’. This is the user-driven practice of ‘modification’ where alterations are created and applied to a game’s programming in order to make part of its appearance or operation different from its original version and shared with wide audiences online. The very act of modding a game can be understood as a queer practice. It is a queering of the game text because it involves radically rewriting, or queering, the intended meanings of the video game. Queer modifications are not the reserve of video game texts, as the thriving study of queer identification through fan fiction, deviant art and slash fiction attests. In his seminal work on fans, fandom and fan fiction, *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins draws attention to the tension that has always existed between the boundless imagination of a text’s consumer and the regulatory efforts of the producer (1992: 24). The delineation between consumer and producer has become increasingly wrought as the popularity of homoerotic fan fiction

often rivals the canonical texts. Julie Levin Russo argues that attempts by the 'media industry' to cash-in on the burgeoning popularity of user-generated queer content has threatened to limit the participation of fans, in particular those who want to express and explore queer desires (2009: 125). Shaw addresses a similar tendency in the video games industry, which responded to queer expression by appealing to limited categorisations of queer identity and desire. Writing in response to homoerotic fan art, Jeffery P. Dennis argues that 'queering' ostensibly heterosexual characters is a strategy through which consumers can articulate queer becomings in cultures that are 'utterly blind to the possibility of same-sex desire' (2010: 5).

Gamer Poop invites a direct parallel between the practices of game modification and fan art by encouraging viewers to draw Skyrim's Jarl of Whiterun like a French girl at the end of several videos—a sly nod to the famous scene in James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), where Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) draws a nude portrait of Rose (Kate Winslet). Fan art and game modification intersect, and the queer potentials far exceed those that were possible in the original content. A cursory search through the mods available for games such as *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* would hardly be considered overtly 'queer' in nature, as they predominantly focus on heterosexual fantasies involving female character models and ways to improve the graphical features of environments to make them more realistic. Game modification is deemed necessary by users who consider that the video game-worlds they are investing time in do not adequately meet their desires. In response, these users actively deconstruct and then reconstruct the gameworld to satisfy the identities they wish to create in the video game. Even though the content of the mods might be 'straight', the practice itself is consistent with the way we can understand 'queering' as an act of deconstruction. Janet Murray anticipated a new kind of storyteller who was half-hacker, half bard (1997: 9); Mans1ay3r has delivered a new kind of storyteller who is half-modder.

As a consequence of the modification and manipulation of gameworlds, players such as mans1ay3r set up and encounter *emergent* narrative

experiences, rather than those intended in the original design and development of the games addressed. Marc LeBlanc is the first member of the game studies community to stake out a place for narrative emergence in video games (in Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 383). He offers two contrasting approaches to game narrative that have proven influential to scholars following him: *embedded* and *emergent*. In this dichotomy, embedded narrative is 'pre-generated narrative content that exists prior to a player's interaction with the game' (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 383). Its emergent counterpart 'arises from the set of rules governing interaction with the game system ... often in unexpected ways', and player choice is the key, with user decisions leading to 'unpredictable narrative experiences' (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 383). Jenkins' view on narrative emergence is often cited, asserting simply that emergent narratives 'are not pre-structured or pre-programmed, taking shape through the game play' (2004: 128). Essential to Jenkins' account is the interaction of the user with a simulated environment or game space 'rich with narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players' (2004: 129).

Narrative emergence in video games traces its heritage to literary and narrativist thought. Richard Walsh offers dramatic improvisation as an example of emergent narrative in practice. He notes that when a group of actors create a story through improvisation it is 'not determined from the top down by a playwright or director; nor is it the creation of any one actor', emerging instead 'from the interactions among the members of the group [...] the elements of the system' (2011: 76). Tinsley Galyean updates this logic for digital media, suggesting that interactive systems exploit a human tendency to construct narratives out of our daily activities by providing environments for users to explore. We, 'by combining the elements of these spaces with our goals, [...] allow a narrative to emerge', with the sense of story that emerges representing 'a product of our interactions and goals as we navigate experience' (Galyean 1995: 27). Ruth Aylett continues the idea of emergent digital narrative being a product of interactions between user and digital agents inside a simulated environment (1999: 83–6). Emergent narrative experiences

are, in these approaches, organic, incidental and ephemeral. Research into these storytelling phenomena is concerned with the emergence of stories not simply told by the video game text, nor by the gamers, but told as a result of a kind of dialogue between the two. These narrative pathways are not pre-planned and come into being because of the systemic nature of video games and their variable constituents. Rules, game mechanics and existing narrative elements are these constituent elements, and together with players they form a textual relationship within which their highly variable interactions can result in highly variable, unpredictable narrative outcomes.

Often when game scholarship has addressed emergent experience and story, it has almost seemed a phenomenon rooted in coincidence; for example, when players of *Quake* (id Software, 1996) inadvertently discover the combination of physical conditions that allow rocket-jumping (Juul 2005: 81), or when a series of disparate possibilities for acting out mundane house-life in *The Sims* games happen to combine to tell an entertaining story (Jenkins 2004: 128–9). We suggest that mans1ay3r demonstrates the ability for emergent narrative to become more than just unexpected, novel and passive narrative by-products of gameplay. Instead, as analysis of some of the Gamer Poop channel's machinima videos demonstrates, mans1ay3r casts emergence as a subversive opportunity, something whose storytelling power can be harnessed and used in purposeful and transformative ways by players.

The Gamer Poop videos are, ultimately, very deliberately constructed, involving various degrees of effort by mans1ay3r in terms of planning, scripting, customising and applying game mods, video editing, audio-manipulation, and voice-over work. This might appear at odds with the typical understanding of emergent story as an in-the-moment product of play experience, generated 'on the fly' thanks to the unpredictability and variability of player action and experience within game spaces. However, despite the process of assembly and deliberation involved, these videos are nonetheless the products of emergent experiences. The videos, constructed and polished, act for us as a kind of piece of evidence for the original emergent process. In their final mediated state these

artefacts expose users to the possibilities for radically alternate stories and gameplay experiences, as well as demonstrate the imaginative process of mans1ay3r's play activities. Together the Gamer Poop videos combine to create a broad, emergent sense of textuality for the games addressed by mans1ay3r, unlocking what Stephanie C. Jennings describes as the games' *potential textualities* (the texts-within-texts that appear possible but are not actualised in their original published forms) (2015: 10). Through this process of capture and remediation, emergent experience transforms from an isolated individual experience and into a cogent, competing sense of the meanings of these particular games as texts.

(Re)constructing stories and selves

As noted already, one of the most notable features of the Gamer Poop videos is that they are heavily edited and feature numerous game modifications, post-production video effects and remixed dialogue samples. In other words, mans1ay3r's queer engagement with these games does not emerge from playing the game, but rather, from reconstructing the game to suit their own ends. In Greer's writing about queer affordances in video games, he explains that in the role playing genre this can be understood as 'the ways in which the player is able to express his or her wishes 'in role' as player character in relationship to the game designer's conception of that role' (2013: 7). However, the queer reconstructions of Gamer Poop's videos game content are queered in ways that would be impossible within the fixity of the gameworld as played by gamers. Mans1ay3r engages with queer affordances within the game engine, rather than the game's narrative or ludic potentials. The user therefore exposes the heterosexual assumptions that govern these gameworlds. Latent queer content exists in the games, but mans1ay3r must stop playing them to engage with it. To read these games as queer is much too passive an activity, because it is a queer engagement within the constraints of the dominant logic. The videos of Gamer Poop take their queer engagement one step further by queering the infrastructures of the gameworld itself.

One example of queer limitations in heteronormative gameworlds is the built-in desexualised

nature of *Skyrim*'s universe. There are men and women (whether human or non-human), old and middle-aged character models, and a stock cast of children. But there is no sex within this world, and without modifications the character models remain sexually ambivalent. The dialogue and narrative arcs of the game also remain void of sexuality, meaning that there is no mention of sexual liaisons or references to the sexed bodies of the characters. When the player's avatar marries (whether a same-sex or heterosexual union), the language of the service is highly platonic in nature, referring to everlasting friendship and companionship rather than consummation, and children are adopted rather than conceived. Without sex, there can be no queer sexuality, merely the heterosexual assumption that men and women have the requisite biological functions to conform with their outward gender performance. When creating an avatar, choosing the sex of the avatar is limited to the biological binaries of male or female with a

physical transformation fitting the sexed choice. These are unavoidable limitations built into a sandbox fantasy gameworld that promises freedom of exploration and character customisation. Tanya Krzywinksa argues that the lack of sexuality in video games is ironic because 'we often see in games, bodies that seem tailor-made for pornography, yet often these game bodies actively avoid sex—even where it might be a logical outcome of a relationship' (2012: 146).

The sexual content in mans1ay3r's videos—particularly in their continual references to pussies, cocks and sexual acts—sex an otherwise desexualised world, so that heterosexual assumptions of the sexed body can be more readily queered. When a man's head is placed on the character model for a woman (Figure 1), the transexual implications would not be apparent if mans1ay3r had not first sexed the bodies to begin with. It would be a cosmetic change, just as superficial as selecting a new set of armour.



Figure 1: a modified Oblivion character model (mans1ay3r, 2011a).

And yet, it is the very desexualised nature of the world that allows for mans1ay3r's manipulations. A Gamer Poop video can have the masculine Lord of a town (the Jarl Balgruuf of Skyrim's Whiterun, physically gendered male) deliver a speech about being a little girl in France, because the game has not proven otherwise. To borrow a phrase from Michael J. Boucher, Gamer Poop creates images that 'encourage people to see and comprehend a form of gender that is conceptually impossible within the boundaries of the dominant ideologies of sex and gender', ideologies that are evident in the assumptions that dominate these gameworlds (2011: 193). Mans1ay3r's playful insistence that hypermasculine men can be women, and that sexualised women can be men, rejects established connections between gendered selves and sexed bodies. Queer studies suggests that identities no longer exist on a continuum but are instead open to the fluid and disruptive potentialities of queer becoming(s) (Taylor 2012: 14), and in similar fashion mans1ay3r's queer engagement with video game texts actively resists the heteronormativity built into game assets.

That the queer characteristics of modded game models might exist for ridicule is certainly possible, and it might have rendered the queer readings of the videos moot were it not for the repeated celebration of queer spaces within previously straight gameworlds. To mod the physical attributes of characters is subversive, at least through its direct reconstruction of in-game assets, but to radically deconstruct the spatial cues for appropriate performance is something more radical. Video game spaces are constructed to foster specific player experiences: a mountain encourages the player to climb it, and a cave is opened to invite exploration. Likewise, domestic environments such as villages and castles encourage the player to rest, buy equipment and initiate quests. Rarely, if ever, do domestic spaces within normative gameworlds invite queer performances as seen in mans1ay3r's first *Skyrim* video (Figure 2). An indeterminate tavern becomes the setting for a rave of bare-chested men. A guard's dialogue is adjusted to say, 'don't go fiddling with any cocks or we're going to have a real big party'. That mans1ay3r makes a guard refer to touching penises is less interesting

than the gay club scene that has just been endorsed and defended by a representative of the law. When the queer space is questioned by a secondary character, who asks if women should be invited, the violent response is not to impose heteronormativity, which is a reality discussed by Fiona Buckland (2002). Instead, the guard's response is to defend the queer space and the dancing bodies within it. Without mans1ay3r's in-game and post-production modifications this queer space does not and could not exist in *Skyrim*. That a queer rave can exist in the Gamer Poop videos, however, demonstrates the underlying potential of mainstream titles to foster experiences, and performative potentials, outside of, and in defiance of, heteronormative expectations.

Mans1ay3r's use of a gay dance club scene in the *Skyrim* #1 video, and its video's reference to a well-known episode of the television show *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-) with the line 'these boys work hard and they play harder' ('Homer's Phobia', 8:15, 1997), suggests a postmodern pastiche of references to gay subcultures. However, the gay dance club, and queer dance routines become a recurring motif in Gamer Poop, and they point to a much broader sense of a thriving queer space in video game worlds within which queer identities come into being, become reified, and are just as quickly forgotten so that the next subversive turn can occur. We refer to these dances as queer because the performances transgress both the coding of the game and the heteronormative expectations of how particular bodies ought to behave and move. For example, a sword training exercise in the *Oblivion* universe is subverted into a dance spectacular, so that the overt militarism and patriarchal rites of combat instead becomes an opportunity to perform a different identity altogether (mans1ay3r 2011b).

In the eighth *Skyrim* video, a meeting of Grey Beards (ancient mystics who teach the player the language of dragons) turns into a sexualised dance party where the character models of the Grey Beards are modified so that they can dance seductively (Figure 3). The music is then swapped out for a seductive R&B track, where once again the old bodies of the Grey Beards writhe in ecstasy. And their bodies are not the hypermasculine character skins of the younger male warriors of *Skyrim*—bodies that might more



Figure 2: one of *Skyrim*'s taverns transformed into a rave (mansIay3r 2012).



Figure 3: *Skyrim*'s Grey Beards, rendered topless, sexualised and dancing by mansIay3r (2013a).

readily invite a homoerotic gaze. The near naked Grey Beards are thin, their skin leathery and their long beards are white. They do not represent the mainstream, marketable model of the gay dancer as youthful and buff (Buckland 2002: 142). Mans1ay3r's videos are edited in post-production so that the thumping techno music and dazzling lights might not be possible during gameplay itself, but these videos demonstrate that non-normative representations are possible, and emergent narratives that are queer can thrive in otherwise straight gameworlds with heteronormative limitations. Gamer Poop's queer dances and dancers represent specific sites where queer identities can exist, but their queer space is much more expansive and radical. In her work on club culture and queer world making, Buckland writes of 'queer lifeworlds' where social interactions, movements and bodies actively fashion a queer space (2002: 19). In the case of the New York City gay club scene, queer lifeworlds were contested and criminalised by the police, making it clear that queer lifeworlds exist in opposition to dominant patriarchies and 'a dance space is always on license' (Buckland 2002: 129). In the emergent narratives of Gamer Poop, heteronormative gameworlds are subverted into queer lifeworlds where queer performances and identities can exist openly and sporadically to such an extent that to be seen as straight, or to watch the videos as straight, is to become the outsider.

One video—the seventh in Gamer Poop's *Skyrim* series (mans1ay3r, 2013b)—sees two men at an inn engaged in conversation. One of the men asks, 'do you get that weird taste in your mouth after kissing another man?' The stern reply is 'no', prompting the viewer to expect that heteronormative social norms will apply. But the two men abruptly start kissing. When the bartender interjects, the expectation is that heteronormativity will now surely be imposed as expected from the game's dominant mode of desexualised interactions and the viewer's assumed heterosexual identity. Again, the initial moment of straight normativity is disrupted when the barman says, 'get a room ... for three'. This is but one of numerous instances where queer encounters, performances and transgressive identities start to embolden the queer lifeworlds that emerge from an otherwise straight

gameworld. Much of mans1ay3r's content relies on the 'shocking reveal' ploy, for instance in which men are revealed to be women, and women as men. The extent to which these reveals are normalised within Gamer Poop's alternate textuality is significant.

Another example of mans1ay3r's expansive queer lifeworld occurs in Gamer Poop's *Skyrim* #8 video (Figure 4), when a Khajit (a cat-like species) named J'zargo informs the viewer that he has purchased a pair of tight-fitting trousers to better accentuate his crotch. J'zargo confidently hums that he is going to get a woman, but he is almost immediately accosted by a man impressed by the 'real nice lump down there'. The passer-by asks if he can take a look, and while J'zargo resists the first request he capitulates and says 'just this once'. Almost immediately a male voice from off-screen says 'I call next', and as the camera pans we see a hooded figure, followed by a growing queue of other male characters including Jarl Balgruuf. These reveals subvert the norms of the viewer, and mans1ay3r uses them to elicit laughs; but the characters in Gamer Poop's videos only temporarily feign surprise before accepting queered identities as normal elements of their reality. Where resistance to queer lifeworlds is shown to exist in mans1ay3r's queer narratives, the opposition is either silenced—as in the case of the gay club scene mentioned earlier—or it is subverted and convinced to participate in the queer revelry. Men are women, women are men, and same-sex attractions are prolific within a queered gameworld created by mans1ay3r.

The safe heterosexual gaze of the viewer, protected by assumptions of normativity and ideological certainty, is challenged by the repeated invitation to participate in the queer carnival of Gamer Poop. In Gamer Poop's 13th *Skyrim* machinima (Figure 5), a half-naked man proclaims that he used to work the lumber but now the lumber works him, which invites the commencement of a familiar dance routine. The expectation is that the viewer, presumed to be a straight male, will want to turn away and stop watching, a point picked up by the character who says 'you're still here ... most men turn just turn around and leave'. The character then points at the screen to make it clear that the viewer is being addressed. In mans1ay3r's second *Oblivion* video (mans1ay3r 2011a),



Figure 4: The ‘nice lump’ in J’zargo’s pants attracting the attention of *Skyrim*’s townsfolk (mans1ay3r 2013a).



Figure 5: “Oh, you’re still here ... most men just turn around leave ... except YOU” – direct viewer address from one of Gamer Poop’s lumberjacks (mans1ay3r 2014).

a guard vomits when a transsexual character (modified in the video to have a male head on a woman's body) blows a kiss and invitingly slaps their bottom. An extra-diegetic prompt is then displayed with the words '*achievement unlocked: private dance*'. At this point the perspective returns to the first person view more commonly associated with the player's own engagement with the game. The transsexual character says 'today is your lucky day' and begins to dance as the first person camera pans around their body. If the aforementioned guard vomited due to his staunch heterosexual position, the viewer, positioned as the player, is invited to gaze at the dancing body and participate in the erotic encounter – a queer eroticism that would be impossible in the game without modification.

If at times the queer gaze is forced on the viewer, either for comic effect or to position the viewer as an outside observer, *mans1ay3r* also encourages the viewer to actively participate and produce material for these emergent queer narratives. This is best exemplified by the ongoing narrative of Jarl Balgruuf, the transsexual ruler of Whiterun, who (in *Gamer Poop*'s alternative textuality) was a French girl in France turned self-proclaimed 'baller'. In a repeated closing segment in *Gamer Poop*'s various *Skyrim* videos, Balgruuf invites the viewer to draw him like a 'fancy French girl' at which point examples of fan art are shown while a seductive music track plays. The quality of the user-submitted art ranges from crude stick figures to professional pieces all contributing to the queer life of Balgruuf. The sexual orientation of the artists is impossible to know—most of the artwork is unnamed—but as Jeffrey P. Dennis suggests in his piece on homoerotic fan art, the sexual identity of the artist does not necessarily matter (2010: 11). What is apparent in homoerotic fan art is the acknowledgement and celebration of various forms of desire that are not, or cannot be, witnessed in mainstream commercial media. *Mans1ay3r* invites the viewer to participate in the queer lifeworld that they have created, so that it can exist beyond the videos of *Gamer Poop*.

The development of *mans1ay3r*'s queer subversion can be traced through the games the user selects for ridicule. Games that limit the user's ability to modify or queer original content result in videos

with limited queer subversion. For example, the earliest *Gamer Poop* videos remix dialogue segments from *Fallout 3* (*mans1ay3r* 2009a). Because in the process of constructing machinima the user is limited to the infrastructures of the game and the fixed camera of dialogue interactions, *mans1ay3r* can do little more than make the characters say dirty words by clumsily cutting and rearranging segments of audio. Likewise, in a video addressing *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom 2005), *mans1ay3r* is limited to in-game cut scenes where character models cannot be manipulated in any way (*mans1ay3r* 2009b). In this example, there is very little in the way of queer subversion or emergent narrative, and it remains the user's least popular video in terms of YouTube views. These are rudimentary forms of queer subversion, as the user is still rejecting the world of the game as it exists, but it is only after *mans1ay3r* is fully liberated from the restrictions of the game (and the in-game avatar) that *Gamer Poop* can play most effectively with the queer potential of video games.

In later games, given greater freedom by the underlying engines and systems to traverse game-worlds uninhibited by gameplay restrictions or the fixed perspectives of in-game avatars, *mans1ay3r* is able to apply techniques borrowed from cinema and other visual texts. For example, *mans1ay3r* introduces hypertextual elements such as a grainy overlay effect reminiscent of eight millimetre film stock in order to convey nostalgia – in one case, a Jarl's nostalgia for life as a French girl (*mans1ay3r*, 2012). *Mans1ay3r* includes the iconic red recording symbol of a digital camcorder viewfinder in another scene to suggest immediacy, or perhaps the voyeuristic gaze of the cameraman, as the camera tracks the homoerotic dance moves in a gay nightclub (Figure 6). Gerald Voorhees suggests that, in rhetorical terms, video games 'can only be understood as a set of potentialities [...] a field of possible actions structured by the game but traversed by the player's agency' (2014). The use of these cinematic techniques are acts of remediation and hypermediation (Bolter and Grusin 2000), which can be understood as extensions of the gamer's agency acting within and beyond the game text, mimicking for *Gamer Poop*'s viewers a variety of media codes that imply control, access and immediacy.

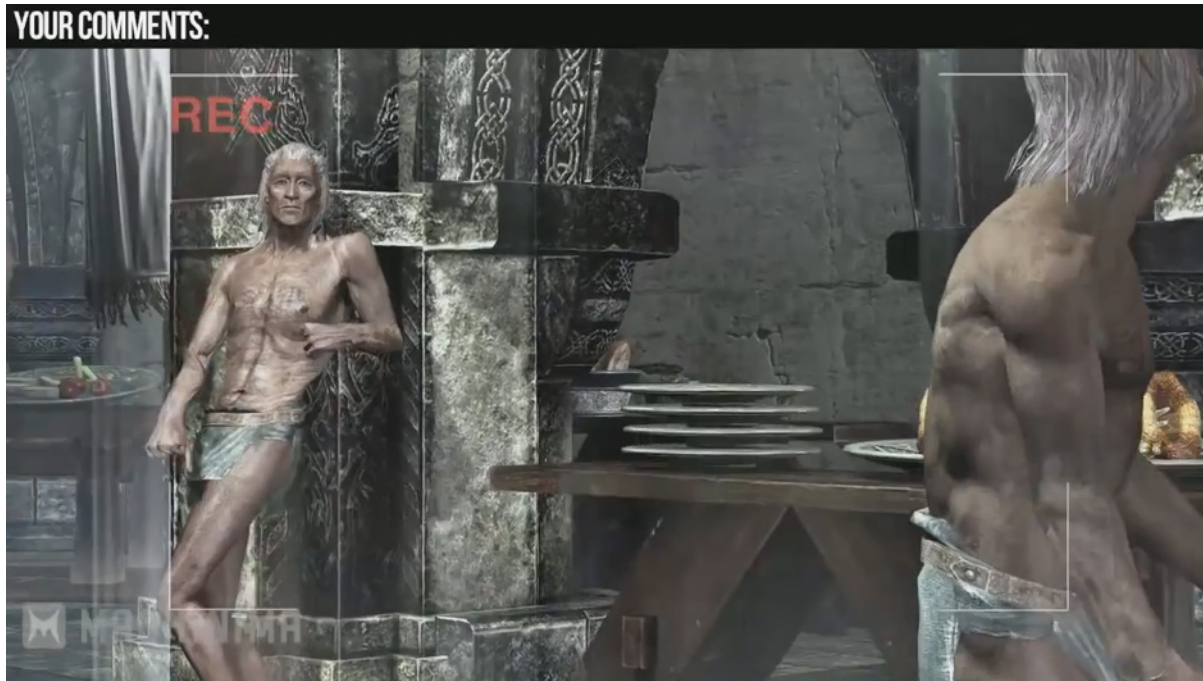


Figure 6: Voyeurism and hypermediation in one of manslay3r's imagined gay nightclubs (manslay3r, 2012).

Manslay3r also develops the repertoire of queer signifiers and visual codes beyond simply crude references to anal sex and genitalia. For example, as noted earlier, manslay3r uses disco music as a cue for queer narrative content without having to explicitly or physically demonstrate queer encounters. The intended meaning of the music depends on the viewer's familiarity with the gay disco trope as employed by *The Simpsons*, and a musical style associated with Frankie Goes to Hollywood, the Village People and Pet Shop Boys. The Gamer Poop videos employ queer tropes that are familiar to the viewer, but utterly foreign to the fantasy worlds of the games.

Emergent queer textuality

As manslay3r's videos demonstrate greater technical and intertextual proficiency, an internal logic develops for a kind of alternate world that Gamer Poop's manipulated video game characters inhabit. As an audience, we perceive a sense of a cohesive and coherent queered space where we should expect different things of bodies, sexualities and masculine archetypes. An audience unfamiliar with *Skyrim* or *Oblivion* could almost watch these videos and reasonably come away assuming that these games feature

queer stories and selves right out of the box. As we have noted, we do not necessarily believe manslay3r should be cast as a content creator championing queer stories, rights or textualities. In fact, at times the Gamer Poop channel's humour is counter-productive and veers towards mockery. But what manslay3r does show is the emergent *potential* for queer storytelling and identification: plausible, logical and seemingly sustainable alternate versions of these video games' worlds can be created, and they can be queer.

As users play video games and encounter elements of embedded narrative, it is often possible for them (as with any other storytelling media) to discern a distance between the level of story they are encountering and the broader backstory that underlies their immediate situational experience. According to Krzywinska this is the 'worldness' of a game and its story (2008: 127). The worldness is a 'unifying consistency' in the fiction encountered by the player, encompassing spatial design and logic, aesthetics, and physical rules, as well as 'the past events that constitute the world's current state of affairs, to which the player character is subject' (Krzywinska 2008: 127). The videos of the Gamer Poop channel co-opt

representational and symbolic elements of the source games, but it is through the consistent application of (queered) gender norms and sexual politics that they create their own sense of worldness and coherence. Voorhees suggests that 'digital games can participate in the construction, contestation, and performance of civic and cultural identity by attitudinally orienting players in relation to social and political tensions', and that the rhetorical effect of gameplay is best understood as 'a crossroads structured by the game's design but traversed by players' (2014). Manslay3r and Gamer Poop suggest to us that a more significant form of agency than mere travel is required in the case of the tensions of queer signification; sometimes we need to restructure a game's actual design in order to open up meaningful paths, rhetorical effects, and stories.

Similarly, for Sun-ha Hong, 'game interfaces often seek to withdraw from users' phenomenal attention' to 'perpetuate an illusion of indexical execution, which engenders specific modes of engagement and subject positioning' (2015: 41). Manslay3r's videos both affirm and reject such a logic. Manslay3r affirms it in the sense that the Gamer Poop videos, and increasingly so as the user's skills seem to improve, participate in this very withdrawal of interface. We sense meaningful, sustainable alternate worlds when their presentation is conducted seamlessly and fluently in terms of both game modification and video production. However, at the same time, to any user familiar with the games used by manslay3r, these videos are jarring because they pull *Skyrim* or *Oblivion*'s interfaces directly back into our phenomenal attention. Audiences *know* these scenes cannot be triggered in the course of gameplay without modification and manipulation. The audience's positioning as subjects, especially in relation to identity, gender and sexual possibilities and politics the games have overlooked, is called straight into question.

The sharing of these machinima paratexts to online platforms such as YouTube is significant: what David Beer (2009) terms web 2.0's 'performative infrastructures' are here co-opted to transform the private experience, interpretation and manipulation of manslay3r's own gameplay into acts of public performance. Web 2.0 software has a 'discursive capacity' relevant to storytelling, 'creating a dialogic online

environment which connects storytelling participants with each other' (Page 2011: 215). This allows fragments of personal narrative to negotiate with, and contribute to the overall, extended meaning and story of an individual text (Page 2011: 215). The Gamer Poop videos take one user's emergent experiences, interpretations and narrative desires in particular video games, and realise them in consumable, formal narrative artefacts; unlocking and activating for everyday players coherent, radical and alternate potential textualities.

Conclusion

Diane Crowder offers a summation of queer politics that is applicable to video game studies and the radical potential of emergent narrative experience, arguing for a 'politics in which one can strive to refuse to play the game, not just aspire to play it another way' (2007: 499). This is the radical potential evident in the videos of Gamer Poop, in which manslay3r does not simply play these games in different, queer, ways. The user refuses to play the games as written. These paratextual artefacts create and embrace emergent stories that defy the embedded narrative head-on, and gesture to a form of emergent gameplay that can occur within the game text, be sustained outside it on web 2.0 platforms such as YouTube, and allow the emergence of queer narratives in otherwise heteronormative gameworlds. This is not to say that manslay3r is attuned to the political nature of queer theory, or that their channel's queer content is progressive (for the most part it is definitely not). Even if the objective is simply to elicit audience laughter at the videos' representational absurdities, a rejection of heterosexual norms and heterosexual narratives is evident. Manslay3r's destabilisation of norms might not derive from positive or progressive intentions, but they remain forms of queer subversion and this article's analysis of these practices reveals this form of subversive narrative emergence – both the product of, and an enabler for, an active desire to manipulate the textual meaning of a game text.

Subversive narrative emergence is to reject the story as written, and in the era of web 2.0 platforms such as YouTube, expansive queer narratives and textualities are able to emerge for video games. Characters are rewritten and remodelled to allow for

identity constructions and queer becomings beyond the scope of the original game texts, and while this may seem to be little more than surface-level parody on first viewing, the extent of manslay3r's queer spaces and lifeworlds invites a closer investigation into the user-driven realisation of thriving queer game-worlds where patriarchal and heteronormative logics normally prevail. For viewers, the experience of Gamer Poop's videos might be disconcerting, disorienting and perhaps a little disturbing, but we argue the experience is a fundamentally queer one. Where there is potential for further queer engagement and embodiment is in the gameplay and avatar-building opportunities afforded by manslay3r's in-game manipulations. Over the past seven years, manslay3r has produced a deliberate and carefully edited flurry of episodic non-sequiturs, but if players were able inhabit this queer space and contribute to it (hinted at, for example, in the fan art of Jarl Balgruuf), the result could be a queer text housing queer narratives for gamers who want more than the *potential* for queer becomings in their games.

Notes

¹ Gamer Poop videos discussed in this article are sourced, where possible, from manslay3r's own YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/user/manslay3r>). For a period of time the user was a contracted content producer for the gaming and media streaming site Machinima (<http://www.machinima.com>) and some of the videos analysed are drawn from this platform's YouTube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/show/gamerpoop>).

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