Playing with Identities: Queering Digital Narratology and the Exploration of Gender and Sexual Identities

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Abstract

This study builds upon previous research that discusses gender and sexual identities and digital narratives by introducing a queer narratological approach to character creation mechanics. First, Lisa Nakamura's identity tourism and narratological constructs are applied to formalize the concept of the exploration in digital narratives. Second, exploration of gender and sexual identities is demonstrated through a queer narratological analysis of two digital narratives, *Always Sometimes Monsters* (2014) and *Hustle Cat* (2016). Third, the development of character creation mechanics in *The Sims* (2000-2016) series is examined to reflect the advancement toward progressive game designs. Concerns regarding a sexuality blind approach and the downplaying of homophobia are addressed, and Helene Cixous's poststructuralist "other bisexuality" as a transgressive product of the fluidity of identities in digital narratives is emphasized. This study elaborates the often-disregarded workings of queer narratology and theory in digital narratives or game designs.

Introduction

> [A]nd if any should like the world I have made, and be willing to be my subjects, they may imagine themselves such, and they are such, I mean, in their minds, fancies or imaginations; but if they cannot endure to be subjects, they may create worlds of their own, and govern themselves as they please. [Cavendish 2004, 224–225]

So ends Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle's *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World* first published in 1666 and, as can be seen, the idea of imagining into existence a world of one's own through narrative is no novel one. In the digital age, however, digital narratives give their readers or players an extra degree of freedom to imagine and explore in narrative worlds with the interactivity that is introduced. This article focuses on how digital narratives allow their players to explore their gender and sexual identities.[1]

1

Previous studies on sexuality and video games often quote Bastal [Bastal 2011a] [Bastal 2011b], a *Dragon Age 2* [Electronic Arts 2011] player who posted on BioWare's social forum, lamenting vehemently over the video game designer's choice to make the game so appealing to women and gays, especially when he believes that female and queer gamers occupy less than 10 percent of the entire gaming population. In less than 12 hours, his first thread received 420 replies. The criticism of the inclusive game design in the *Dragon Age* series continued, however. Three years later, in June 2014, five months before the sequel, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* [Electronic Arts 2014a], was released, another thread regarding the proposed romance dynamics in the upcoming game and its frightful marginalizing homosexuality was created by a player under the name of "Duncaaaaaan":

2

> I am white, straight, and male. Are you upset by this, bioware? [sic] Am I wrong for being white and

straight and male? No, of course not, I didn't ask to be born this way and to insult somebody for their race, gender and orientation is extremely bigoted. … It looks to me that bioware [sic] is trying to marginalize core gamers (men in their late teens and beyond) in favour of getting the support of the LGBT community and women, in regards to the character design and story.   [Duncaaaaan 2014]

In less than three hours, the thread received 121 replies. The continued criticism of major video game companies and their inclusion of non-heteronormative practices reflect a resistance toward game designs that challenge traditional gender roles and beliefs and attitudes toward sexual orientations. This article examines the character creation designs of digital narratives from a queer narratological perspective to propose that character creation mechanics can situate the player in an environment where heteronormativity is marginalized in favor of a poststructuralist understanding of gender and sexuality, where players are given the freedom to explore their gender and sexual identities.

3

In digital narratives, the ability to play as multiple gender or sexual identities has been seen as the liberation from an essentialist sexed body [Nguyen 2003], evidence of inclusion by video game companies [Condis 2015] or even an instance of sexuality blindness [Greer 2013]. But the narrative techniques and narratological ideologies that underpin the relationship between sexuality and digital narratives have rarely been studied. To study how digital narratives allow for the exploration of the player's gender and sexual identities, what exploration is in cyberspace is first established. This is achieved by a review of how identity tourism as a cybercultural construct has been discussed and can be adapted to an understanding of exploration. The requirements for exploration to occur in digital narratives are explicated. Then, the character creation mechanics of two digital narratives in the form of a role-playing game (RPG), *Always Sometimes Monsters* [Vagabond Dog 2014], and visual novel, *Hustle Cat* [DateNighto 2016] are presented, and an analysis is offered on how their designs allow for an exploration of gender identities and confront players with multiple, conflicting sexual identities through the emergent non-linearity and parallelism of plot structures. Subsequently, in light of the recent "Gender Customization Options" update to *The Sims 4* [Electronic Arts 2014b], the changes in attitudes toward gender as reflected by the modifications of character creation functions throughout the *Sims* franchise are discussed. The transgressive gender and sexuality configurations produced by the designs of the digital narratives are related to Hélène Cixous's "other bisexuality" to defend against claims of sexuality blindness or a downplaying of the experiences of members of the queer community.

4

Before proceeding, the specific usage of certain terms in this article — namely sex, gender, gender identity and sexual identity — must first be clarified. Adapted from GLAAD [GLAAD 2011] and the American Psychological Association [American Psychological Association 2016], briefly, sex is viewed as more biologically determined than gender, gender identity is understood to be an experienced self that may or may not be different from the assigned sex, and sexual identity is regarded as an orientation or sexual preference typically toward a class of sex.[2] Throughout this article, the reader, player and main character of each narrative will be referred to in the third person because at the heart of the argument in this article lies the conviction that within the digital narrative environment, the reader, the player and main characters' genders (and consequently sexualities) are made fluid by narratives that disturb gender binaries.

5

Research on on-screen bodies and their reaction with the interactor's gender and sexual identities has predominantly been involved with multi-user dungeons or MUDs. These are typically text-based virtual worlds, where users engage in synchronous interaction with other users and the virtual environment. Lisa Nakamura [Nakamura 1995] discusses "netsex" practices by white males who use Asian stereotypes in their online fantasies. Gender and MUDs have been studied extensively [Fanderclai 1996] [Kendall 1996], and the features of MUDs that gave people over the internet a chance to interact with new textual realities have been thoroughly examined. Sherry Turkle's [Turkle 1995] book-long study and Shannon McRae's [McRae 1996] essay discuss the sexual experiences and thoughts regarding gender and sexuality from interviews with users of MUDs. The detailed qualitative data from both studies suggest that, having explored in the virtual world of the MUD, users found their conceptions about themselves or how sexuality works changed.

6

That the complicated depth of the virtual world of MUDs can be an environment where users can explore their identities is not being contested. However, membership in the online MUD community has declined. On 9 September 2017, I

visited one of the major MUDs, *LambdaMOO*, and found that there was little activity — there were a total of 56 players, and only 7 of which were marked as recently active. Research on digital media and sexual experimentation and orientation need to now consider forms of more accessible media. Both Turkle [Turkle 1995] and McRae [McRae 1996] acknowledge that people who wish to enter an MUD need some basic knowledge of coding or at least a willingness to learn it. That digital narratives in the form of video games are much easier to install, engage with and disseminate realize and amplify their exploratory function as a greater gaming audience is reached. One of the key outcomes of the proliferation and increased consumption of gaming content that encourages exploration is that the needs of the traditional gamer demographic will be revised for the previously marginalized gaming community. This will become even more evident as video game companies begin to recognize that "even heterosexual, traditionally gendered gamers may want to play with sexuality and gender in video games" [Shaw 2009, 239]. Further, unlike single-player video games, the sexual encounters on MUDs occur between players, and without any other players online to interact with, experimentation would not be possible — which becomes problematic given the declining MUD community. One of the primary differences between MUDs and the video games studied in this article is that MUDs are more reliant on other players than the author-created environment to form a narrative. In the digital narratives discussed here, interaction with other players in-game is either optional or impossible. Experimentation with gender identities and sexuality in video games is studied as a result of the interaction between the player and a more pre-determined narrative structure and environment.

From Janet Murray's [Murray 1998] endorsement of a narratological approach to video games to Gonzalo Frasca's [Frasca 2003] introduction of a ludological approach, there has been debate as to which methodology and conceptual framework would be more appropriate for studying video games.[3] This article does not intend to resolve the debate, but introduces yet another lens through which to view video games — a queer narratological approach. Queer narratology was first employed by Susan Lanser [Lanser 1995] in her seminal article, "Sexing the Narrative: Propriety, Desire, and the Engendering of Narratology", and responds to the lack of attention given to sexuality and queer identities in the study of narrative. She reads Jeanette Winterson's novel, *Written on the Body*, and examines the omission of a protagonist's sex and gender identity as a narrative technique that prompts questions about the relationship between narration and queer representations. The burgeoning discipline has been gradually receiving more attention with Warhol and Lanser's edited collection [Warhol 2015], but it is still evident that more has to be said about how narrative theory and representations of queerness are inextricably related. Mia Consalvo's [Consalvo 2003] landmark study talks about how non-heteronormative sexualities are presented in the first *The Sims* [Electronic Arts 2000] game. Her findings, which will be discussed later, can demonstrate the great changes that have happened over a decade after her study to the portrayal of sexualities and gender identities in both *The Sims* series and other video games.

Exploration and Identity Tourism

Lisa Nakamura's [Nakamura 1995] identity tourism is where the conceptualization of exploration in a digital context comes from. She first used it as a metaphor "to describe the activity of racial identity appropriation, or 'passing' in cyberspace". Terms such as "passing" or "identity tourism" have been used predominantly in discussions of racial identity, and in American history, passing is associated with a "discourse of racial difference and especially with the assumption of a fraudulent 'white' identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as 'Negro' or black" [Ginsberg 1996, 3]. Nakamura [Nakamura 2008, 1675] notes that identity tourism is often performed by men who seek "netsex" and can be a process by which "users 'wear' racially stereotyped avatars without feeling racist". If we refer to this as racial identity tourism, gender and sexual identity tourism is the act of wearing different avatars of varying gender identities and sexualities. While racial identity tourism has been understood in a negative light, Mimi Nguyen [Nguyen 2003, 288] has adapted the term to sexual identities to show its transgressive capabilities. She argues that sexual identity tourism renders the digital space into a "liberatory space, disrupting the social determinism of the body from the identifications of the self", where genders and sexualities can be constructed and reconstructed by players at will through, for example, character creation. Nguyen contributes to the already robust discussion of how the digital space achieves poststructuralist philosophies of gender and sexuality, but the exploratory element of identity tourism, ironically, has not received much attention. In a study of users' experiences on online MUDs, Shannon McRae [McRae 1996, 249]

7

8

notes that gender swapping in virtual space can be "motivated by a sense of self-exploration, to see what sex is like from a different point of view". Through this process, she continues, "we can experience for ourselves, inside ourselves, the kinds of things that we associate with female or male, and realize that those aspects are not, after all, something Other and outside of us" [McRae 1996, 253]. This act of exploring by "identity touristing" with the possibility of discovering things previously unknown about the self forms the understanding of exploration in this article.

Nakamura's metaphor of "wearing" an avatar is a starting point for discussing how the exploration happens as a product of identity tourism. However, I argue that the metaphor is insufficient to explain exploration because exploration is an introspective process that requires players to go beyond *wearing* other identities to *being* other identities. There must be a temporary adoption of the digital body's identity (the digital body as the avatar or player-controlled character) by the real body such that the experience of the digital body can be internalized by the real body and thus modify players' conceptions of themselves. Agency in a digital narrative has been seen as what combines the real body and the digital body on-screen. Katherine Hayles [Hayles 2008, 17] offers a description of this agency as the alternation between "top-down approach to narrative in which the narrator spins a story, and the bottom-up model of interactivity in which the user chooses how the story will be told". This alternation forms what Dovey and Kennedy [Dovey 2006, 109] would refer to as the "cybernetic loop", that which makes it so that the "player and the game are inseparable for the duration of the game" and transforms the real body of the player into a cyborg, "a subjectivity that depends precisely on this collapse of boundary between the human and the machine". However, how it is that players can adopt the *identity* of their character or avatar must also be addressed.

If a player is to experience a merge between the identities, then the player must *believe* that such a merge can happen. Concepts such as immersion, what Janet Murray [Murray 1998, 98] terms the "sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality", Roland Barthes's [Barthes 1989] "the reality effect", and realism in general are related to whether this belief is possible. The crux of this issue is, however, whether players can believe that they are an Italian plumber called Mario trying to save Princess Peach of Mushroom Kingdom. Despite the sometimes large physical, psychological, or mental differences between the real body and the digital body, the player can comfortably negotiate these distances and assume the identity of a digital persona. Katherine Angel Cross [Angel Cross 2012] has cited pretend play, role playing, and imagination as processes that occur when someone takes on a digital identity, but Peter J. Rabinowitz's [Rabinowitz 1977, 126–134] analysis of narratological audiences provides a more structural approach to this phenomenon. Rabinowitz states that there are four audiences: (1) actual audience — the flesh-and-blood person who reads; (2) authorial audience — the hypothetical reader for whom the author writes; (3) narrative audience — the audience that accepts the fictional world in which the story happens; and (4) ideal narrative audience — the audience by which the narrator, not the author, wishes to be read. Only when players are able to become the appropriate narrative audience — those willing to accept a reality in which they are occupants in a digital, fictional world for the duration of the narrative — can their players adopt the identities of their digital bodies. When the digital body or world is so incompatible with the norms of players that they cannot or refuse to believe they can adopt the identity of their digital body, their role is then more like that of a voyeur controlling and observing an on-screen subject. Pretend play, role play or imagination are then processes by which Rabinowitz's narrative audience is adopted. Unless players come to change their mind about their digital presence or world, exploration cannot occur because then the distance between the player and their avatar or character becomes so great that the player is not "being" or even "wearing" any digital identity.

The ability to create a character in digital narratives cements the relationship between the players and their digital bodies. Catherine Gallagher [Gallagher 2006, 351] makes some noteworthy observations about the fictionality of characters in novels and the emotional attachment between the character and the reader. Readers are attached to fictional characters not in spite of their fictionality but precisely because of it — the fictional setting establishes "a protected affective enclosure that [encourages] risk-free emotional investment". That the personality exists only in the boundaries of the narrative without "extratextual baggage" means that the reader can be immersed in the experience, identifying with and investing in only the presented individuals. A character's "peculiar affective force", Gallagher proposes, "is generated by the mutual implication of their unreal knowability and their apparent depth, the link between their real nonexistence and the reader's experience of them as deeply and impossibly familiar" [Gallagher 2006, 356–357]. Gallagher is primarily referring to characters in novels, but the players in creating their characters in digital

narratives would seem to strengthen their bonds toward them. First, by creating a character, one is effectively responsible for its existence. In novels, according to Mieke Bal's character effect, the illusion of an identity is created. This identity is conceivable only on the textual level as represented by the author. In digital narratives, the character created is a product of both the agency of the player and the author's systems and rules so that the impenetrability of a character in a novel is less applicable to a character in an electronic setting in which players contribute to the presence of *their* on-screen personality. The players personalize their characters in a way that renders them knowable only to the players themselves, and the imaginary status of a character is no longer imaginary because the players are able to identify parts of their characters' being as originating from themselves. This relationship between the character and its creator helps situate the player within the narrative audience, and the exploration of one's identity can be seen as a capitalization on the cyborgian inseparability of players and their creations.

Exploring in Queer Worlds: *Always Sometimes Monsters* and *Hustle Cat*

Always Sometimes Monsters (henceforth *ASM*) was released in May 2014 by Vagabond Dog and has since received over 1,000 reviews on Steam, most of which were "very positive", and awards for Best Writing and Best Indie Game from the Canadian Videogame Awards in 2014 [Valve Corporation 2017a]. The narrative starts with a brief introductory sequence, after which there is a scene at a party where the player selects the characters. Then, the game progresses one year in game time, and the protagonist is shown to be living a life in squalor because of career issues and, most importantly, because they broke up with their partner. The protagonist receives an invitation to a wedding between this partner and someone else, and the main conflict of the narrative and objective of the game is presented — the protagonist must survive and pass through two cities to reach the wedding ceremony to win their lover back with little funds to spare. Depending on the players' choices, and assuming that their character survives, they are either successful or unsuccessful in stopping the wedding and getting back with their partner.

Character creation in *ASM* happens in the party scene, where players control the host of the party and talk to the partygoers. Whomever players make the host talk to becomes their avatar.

Figure 1. Screenshot of the scene where the player selects a character. Circled in red is the host that is controlled. Taken on May 19, 2016.

Most of the characters seen in Figure 1, besides the host, can be chosen to be the protagonist. After this selection process, the player controls the protagonist and goes out onto the patio where the lover of the protagonist can be selected.

Figure 2. Screenshot of the scene where players select the lover of their protagonist. Circled in red is the character that has been taken control of. Taken on May 19, 2016.

Again, most of the characters in Figure 2 can be selected as the protagonist's lover, and after this the player gives the protagonist and their lover names. The player is free to select whatever sex the protagonist or the lover is but, at this point, the expressed gender always corresponds to the assigned sex.

Research on the player's freedom to choose an avatar's sex or gender has discussed this as some form of resistance against the privileged, straight white male gamer, or as a step toward a liberal feminist philosophy. Nielsen [Nielsen 2015, 49] argues that in some RPGs when the characters' sex or sexuality "does not directly hinder characters' abilities in the game world", the design of the game conforms to a liberal feminist ideology. This understanding of sex and gender presupposes that gender identities are stable. Perhaps this is because, in scholarship on video games, character creation is seen as a gameplay element that occupies typically the starting sequences of a game, and characters' sex and gender are understood as subsequently fixed throughout the rest of the game. However, each playable character in *ASM* is a tabula rasa distinguishable only by the appearance of their avatar, and the choices the player makes to modify this character throughout the narrative reminds us that character creation or characterization is a continuous process. It was mentioned that the expressed gender in *ASM* corresponds to the assigned sex; however, in the final sequence of the game, the wedding ceremony scene, the protagonist is able to have a conversation with a transgender character. This character asks the protagonist a question about their views on gender identity, to which the protagonist may respond that they are transgender, their lover is transgender, they "find it gross" or they are "fine with it". The answer to this question does not affect the plot but can affect players' conception of their protagonist's gender identity both retroactively and for every future read-through of the narrative. The introduction of a transgender identity distinguishes sex from gender identities and provides players with the opportunity to explore the gender identities generated from a permutation of assigned sexes and experienced genders in a digital narrative. Gender identities and

characterization in general in digital narratives should be recognized as fluid and continuously shaped by the narrative and the decisions made by players if the full potential of exploration and identity tourism is to be examined.

Hustle Cat was released in March 2016 by DateNighto and has garnered 360 reviews on Steam, with an overall rating of "very positive" [Valve Corporation 2017b]. Although it is an RPG, classifying it as a visual novel (not to be confused with the graphic novel) would be more accurate. The visual novel originated in Japan [Cavallaro 2010] but the manga/anime art style seen predominantly in this genre has been adapted by Western cultures, as in *Hustle Cat*; though there has been little academic attention to this genre. Lebowitz and Klug [Lebowitz 2011, 193] argue that "only a handful of visual novels have been released outside the country", but the genre is in fact quickly gaining popularity outside of Japan. On Steam, there are over 700 games with a "Visual Novel" tag [Valve Corporation 2017d]. Lebowitz and Klug [Lebowitz 2011, 194] state that it is similar to the choose-your-own-adventure style of narrative and that, most importantly, "they don't face the length restrictions found in physical books". The large amount of branches and complex plots in visual novels require large word counts that are more easily achievable with a digital medium. In Marie-Laure Ryan's [Ryan 2009] terms, the visual novel, would be considered a "playable story" rather than a "narrative game", but the visual novel, as a digital product, is composed of more complex non-linear plots, gameplay functions and audio-visual elements. In the visual novel, the reader is told the narrative predominantly through text and there are junctions in the narrative where the player must decide which option to choose (see Figure 3). The route and endings change according to the choices.

Figure 3. Screenshot of a narrative junction in *Hustle Cat*. Taken on May 19, 2016.

The protagonist of *Hustle Cat* is Avery Grey, a young adult who takes a job at a cat café. It turns out that the café is cursed by a spell that turns all its employees into cats when they leave the café. How Avery breaks the curse for the employees at the café is the main storyline. If Avery does not die, Avery always ends up with one of the bachelors/bachelorettes at the café. As in many visual novels, experiencing how the romance plays out with each of the bachelors/bachelorettes is one of the main goals a reader has when approaching the narrative.

Creating a character in *Hustle Cat* is restricted to choosing what gender the character should be referred to as (Figure 4) and what picture image they have (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Screenshot of character creation screen in *Hustle Cat*. Taken on May 19, 2016.
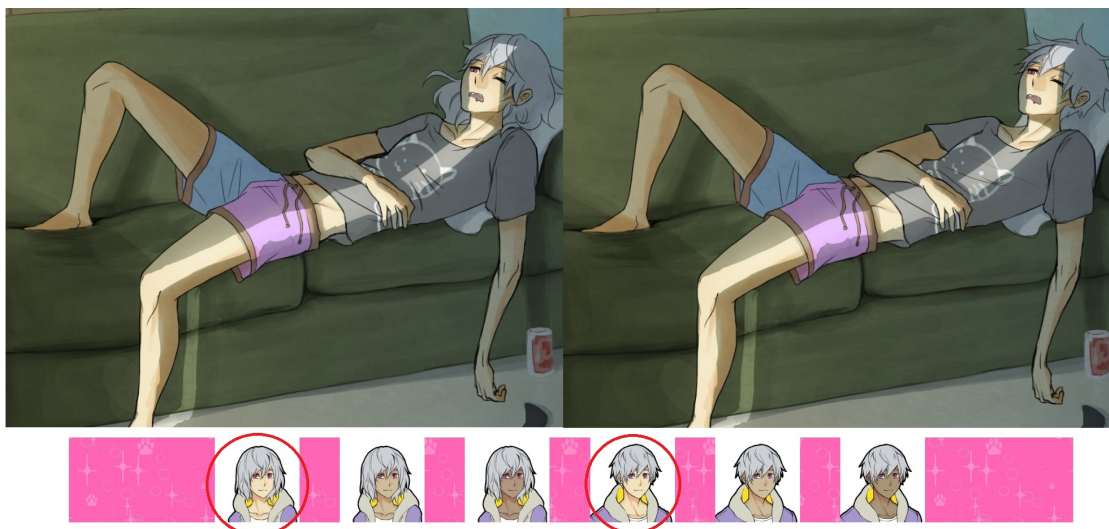
Figure 5. Screenshots from *Hustle Cat* of possible portraits (below). The images during the main narrative (top) correspond to the circled portraits. Taken on May 19, 2016.

Although it is not made explicit, the portraits the reader may choose from in Figure 5 suggest the choice of the character's sex. Physical features associated with a stereotypically female body, long hair, breasts and skinnier arms, appear in the "female" version of the character.

Even though it is ambiguous as to whether the sex of the character can be chosen, it is clear that there is a distinction between physical appearance and expressed gender identity. This is executed more explicitly than it is in *ASM*, and the rare inclusion of the third-person pronouns to refer to the protagonist in a digital narrative establishes the equality of the multiple gender identities. Whereas from a feminist narratological perspective, Ruth E. Page [Page 2006, 29] argues that "ambiguous characterization [challenges] the reader's notion of gender as a stable, defining feature of a character's identity", in this case the reverse is true. The unambiguous assignment of a character's expressed identity, which may or may not differ from their physical appearance, makes it explicit that a notion of stable binary gender identities is incongruous with the design of this digital narrative. The ability to mix and match sexed bodies and gender identities is what allows the reader to explore how each combination elicits a different response toward their own conception of

gender identities. Further, upon closer inspection of Figure 4, underneath the selection of pronouns, it reads "You can change this mid-game if you like". While reading *Hustle Cat*, the reader can open the options menu to change what pronoun they would like their character to be referred to. From a game design point of view, switching pronouns is not difficult because of the text-based nature of the visual novel. However, the effortlessness of changing the character's expressed gender on the reader's part makes *Hustle Cat* the epitome of a digital narrative that encourages exploration of gender identities. Even when the reader does not wish to change pronouns, the knowledge that they can always do so throughout the narrative continuously asks readers whether they are comfortable with the gender identity they experience on-screen. Not answering this question is in itself a response that reaffirms one's current gender identity. It is from this question-and-answer feedback loop that the exploration of gender identities can occur.

How character creation allows for the exploration of gender identities has been discussed as predominantly the result of readers' ability to adopt an array of gender identities. When gender identity is not fixed, however, sexual orientation cannot be fixed as well. How character creation mechanics, in creating parallel worlds and influencing the temporality of the plot, confronts the reader with multiple sexual identities is now examined.

Susan Lanser's [Lanser 1995] study, "Sexing the Narrative", as mentioned earlier, reads Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body* from a queer narratological perspective. Lanser contends that the protagonist of the novel being unsexed and ungendered produces two major outcomes. First, the reader cannot assign a gender to the protagonist so that they are straight because the protagonist has romantic experiences with both men and women, and thus the reader is always confronted with queerness in the novel. Second, narrative tension from the ambiguity of the protagonist's sex and gender is created, and she uses as an example of this a scene where the protagonist is in a fight with a male. While an analysis of narrative tension would be interesting, in terms of examining the exploration of sexual identities, understanding how the reader is confronted with queerness is more helpful.

Those who engage with *ASM* and *Hustle Cat* are confronted with queer identities from the beginning of the character creation process to the end of the narrative. Whether readers choose to create an identity that is queer or not does not matter, but the design of the digital narrative and the resultant ability to play as queer already situates the reader in an environment of fluid sexual identities. An examination of the parallel/possible worlds and temporality of the digital narrative can demonstrate this. Although to summarize her entire description of these theories would take too long, Marie-Laure Ryan [Ryan 2006, 669] notes there are two major types of possible worlds, actual or non-actual. She says, "In a story with multiple branches, the world shown by the *current* branch is the only actual one; the others are just nonactualized possibilities" (original italics). In other words, the world created by the reader's active involvement and shown to the reader is the actual world. She further argues that "the branches not chosen become counterfactual and usually disappear from the readers' minds until they start all over again … and the branches passed over no longer matter". It could be argued that in a hypertext novel, those as complicated as Shelley Jackson's "Patchwork Girl", it is extremely cognitively taxing for the reader to keep track of all the choices they could have made, but the branches passed over do, in fact, matter and they can have an effect on the reader's mind.

The queer effect of these parallel worlds or universes on a reader is created by the experienced temporality in a digital narrative. Two notions of time in digital narrative are used here. First, "gameworld time", which is "established by the set of events taking place within the represented gameworld" [Zagal 2010]. Second, Mieke Bal's [Bal 1985, 39] understanding of a duration of time in a narrative as "moments of crisis", moments when "in a brief instant of time, the life of persons or an entire nation takes a decisive turn". Though the outcomes of each read-through may be different, each narrative is grounded in the same crisis — winning your lover back in *ASM* and undoing the curse from the cat café in *Hustle Cat* — and the gameworld time becomes bound to the crisis in each read-through. If the lover in *ASM* is getting married to the protagonist's rival in one read-through, and in another read-through the lover is leaving the rival for the protagonist, because these events take place in the same gameworld time and moment of crisis, the only logical explanation is that these two events are occurring concurrently in two separate possible worlds. Each digital narrative is then a sum of its parallel worlds, all of which conflict with each other but are of equal validity. Thus, even if a player attempts to select or create "nonqueer" avatars by selecting, for example, a male protagonist and a female lover in *ASM*, these same avatars start off queer. The design of the narrative necessitates that, at the same fictional time of the narrative, the avatars are romantically engaged with avatars of different sexes and genders in other universes. By

default, each character must then possess every quality within the limits of the digital narrative so that the player can choose which one to experience in a particular read-through. The player is confronted with the fact that, "[i]n virtual reality, mind and body, female and male, gay and straight don't seem to be such natural oppositions anymore, or even natural categories to assign to people" [McRae 1996, 249], and where multiple, fluid sexual identities are the norm becomes the environment in which players explore.

The conclusion that all of the possible actual or non-actual worlds in *ASM* and *Hustle Cat* do not inhabit protagonists and love interests with heterosexual sexual identities rests on two premises: first, that there is nothing in the narrative that can confirm the heterosexuality of the protagonist;[4] and second, that protagonists can be attracted to either sex, and particularly in *ASM*, a transgender character. Without the narrative marker of sexuality that Lanser [Lanser 1995] describes, the multiple sexualities possible in a single character should only exhibit queerness. There is, however, a possibility that the queerness is not fully experienced. If digital narratives might make people imagine "the concept of changing bodies/identities/genders" [Angel Cross 2012, 80], the structured polysemy that Katherine Sender [Sender 1999] describes, that the same message produces different meanings based on one's social background and beliefs, presents a possibility that straight people imagine strictly straight worlds. To a part of the narrative audience who refuses to accept that queer sexualities are in the narrative, the queer characters in non-actualized worlds remain marginalized or do not exist because the worlds in which queer characters play a role in the narrative are so incongruous with the player's norms. The power to explore gender and sexual identities becomes hindered. Although this could be an issue in *ASM*, for *Hustle Cat* this is not the case.

22

The main objective in *ASM* is to survive and stop the wedding ceremony to get back with the lover, but, as with any novel, digital or otherwise, the goal of *Hustle Cat* is to master the narrative, to finish reading and to understand the whole story. While in a hypertext novel, as Robert Selig [Selig 2000] notes with Stuart Moulthrop's "Victory Garden", to go through every combination of lexias is implausible, the mastery of the text is possible in the more manageable narrative space of a visual novel. In *Hustle Cat*, there are six major routes the reader can go through, and in each one the protagonist romances one bachelor/bachelorette. However, one of these bachelors, Graves, is unlocked only after all the routes with other characters have been completed. It is in this route that the backstory of the curse is revealed. Thus, if readers are to fully understand the story and master the text, they must go through every route and, in doing so, their protagonist must experience romances with both males and females. Although the reader may choose the sexes and genders that retain the illusion of heterosexuality, some of the characters, such as Graves and Mason (a bachelorette), are revealed as having queer relationships in the past and when readers must be romantically involved with these two characters, they are reminded that no complete reading of *Hustle Cat* can avoid interaction with queer identities. *Hustle Cat* allows readers to explore sexuality in a digital environment where queerness is the only constant, forcing its readers to either adopt queer identities or actively engage with the lives of its queer characters.

23

The ability to explore one's gender and sexuality in these two digital narratives has been shown to be primarily based on the ability for its players and readers to choose both the protagonist and a love interest's sex and/or gender. This freedom opens up permutations of sexes, genders and sexualities that are unavoidable because in every play-through, regardless of whether a heteronormative configuration of characters is chosen, the temporally parallel structure of all the possible actual and non-actual worlds forces the player to experience the narrative in a game system in which all the player-controlled protagonists in the narrative are of all possible genders and sexual orientations. Each player is thus confronted with the knowledge that the gender and sexual identities of their on-screen presence can never be fully stable. The inclusion of queer characters other than the player-controlled ones in the game environment further force players to engage with non-heteronormative identities in order to progress through the narrative. It is not only indie digital narratives such as *ASM* and *Hustle Cat* that employ this "queer worlds" approach to narrative construction and game design. In the following section, progressive character creation designs in *The Sims* series, and especially its latest sequel, *The Sims 4*, are analyzed.

24

The Sims, One through Four

Every four to five years, beginning in 2000, Electronic Arts has released a new sequel to its critically acclaimed and often-studied life-simulation series, *The Sims* [Electronic Arts 2000]. In 2014, the latest game in the series, *The Sims 4*

25

[Electronic Arts 2014b], was released and was named the most sold game in both 2014 and 2015 by the Entertainment Software Association [Entertainment Software Association 2015] [Entertainment Software Association 2016]. For many reasons, it has been and still is mentioned in many video game studies. The first game, which became popular soon after its release, drew attention to the simulation genre in video games. Mia Consalvo in 2003 [Consalvo 2003, 181] called it "perhaps the most progressive game yet released concerning sexuality, making it a good candidate for study". Not many substantial changes regarding sexuality were made to the series in the years following the first game in the series, but with the newest update in the latest addition, Electronic Arts may have reclaimed the title that Consalvo gave it over a decade ago.

In the first game of the series, Create-A-Sim (the name of the character creation process in the game) is a simple matter of choosing between a few options. The name, the age, the race, and the appearance of the Sim (the name of a character or "person" in the game) can be decided by the player. The Sim is either male or female. The player may allocate "points" to different traits a Sim may have. A created Sim or group of Sims is always referred to as a family; however, as Consalvo [Consalvo 2003] notes, the player is reminded in the game manual, by its illustrations of heterosexual couples and by its statement that only heterosexual couples may have children, that there are certain restrictions to homosexual romance. Marriage is only allowed for heterosexual couples, while sex or "playing in bed" is permitted to both homosexual and heterosexual couples.[5] Any family of Sim adults can adopt a baby, and Sims may receive a phone call when adoption is possible, though this happens randomly and is out of the player's control. From *The Sims 2* [Electronic Arts 2004] onward, restrictions on homosexual Sims are lifted. Marriage becomes an option for gay Sims, though it is called a "joined union" until *The Sims 3* [Electronic Arts 2009] where it is then referred to as marriage. Adopting a child is possible from the second game in the series for Sims hetero-, homo- or bisexual, and they can call adoption agencies directly to arrange this. In the third installment, "family" is no longer used to describe a group of Sims that live on the same lot but "household" is used. Character creation mechanics remain largely unchanged except that each subsequent game allows for more customization of, for example, hair styles, clothes and make up. The size of a female Sim's breasts is made modifiable in *The Sims 3*.

When the latest game in the series, *The Sims 4*, was first released, it had character creation options very similar to the previous game. Electronic Arts in their marketing of the game emphasized that Sims now had "emotions," which are indicated to the player in terms such as happy, flirty or depressed. On 2 June 2016, however, two years following the initial release of the game, major changes to the customization of sex and gender in the character creation system were introduced. Players now first choose the Sim's sex, which is either male or female. The following additional four choices are given to the player when creating a Sim.

- Physical frame:
  - Masculine
  - Feminine
- Clothing preference:
  - Masculine
  - Feminine
- Pregnancy:
  - This Sim can become pregnant
  - This Sim can impregnate
  - Neither of the above
- Toilet options:
  - This Sim can use the toilet standing
  - This Sim can only use the toilet sitting down

The physical frame of a Sim refers to aspects of their body, such as their bone structure or muscle tone. Clothing preference is an option more for convenience and decides what clothes are presented to players when selecting their Sim's attire, so that a Sim who prefers "feminine" clothing will be shown those clothes and not "masculine" clothing.

Sims games previously only allowed "masculine" clothes to be worn by male-sexed Sims and "feminine" clothes for female-sexed Sims. Traditionally, Sims of the female sex are the only ones who can be impregnated by having sex, whereas those of the male sex, if they are abducted by aliens, can become pregnant with alien offspring, which is not possible for female-sexed Sims. Male-sexed Sims used to be the only ones who could impregnate. Pregnancy options revamp this design and lift restrictions applied to the biological sexes. Toilet options can be configured so that the animation of a Sim using the toilet reflects the choice the player makes. After the initial Create-A-Sim sequence, players may click on a wardrobe to change these aspects about their Sim again if they wish to do so.

While the masculine/feminine distinction used to describe the clothing in the game can be seen as problematic, because it still presupposes an essentialist configuration between clothing and sex, it could be argued that if no distinction was made between "masculine/feminine" fashion, every time a player clicks on clothing options, both types of clothes would appear, which could lead to longer load times and confusion on the player's part. Placing "stereotypically" in front of terms could resolve this, but the new options given to the player more than makes up for this little shortcoming. Avoiding the oversimplistic conclusion that the game in offering the player such freedoms is in some way liberatory, the character creation design can be first approached from a feminist software design perspective. Feminist software design, says Justine Cassell [Cassell 2000, 304–305], adheres to the following tenets:

1. Transfer design authority to the user
2. Value subjective and experiental [*sic*] knowledge in the context of computer use
3. Allow use by many different kinds of users in different contexts
4. Give the user a tool to express her voice and the truth of her existence
5. Encourage collaboration among users

In the previous section on *ASM* and *Hustle Cat*, the emphasis was on how players' subjective and experiential knowledge of themselves and the truth of their existence are uncovered when design authority is transferred to the user by creating a character. In the later installations of the *Sims* series, Electronic Arts created collaborative platforms on which a community of "Simmers" can be formed. For *The Sims 3*, Electronic Arts [Electronic Arts n.d.] created a site called "The Exchange" to encourage players to share the Sims and buildings they had created in the game. *The Sims 4* uses a "Gallery" in-game where players can directly download others' creations or upload their own. In under a year of the game's release, over 92 million Sims were created in *The Sims 4* [Franklin 2015]. The many discussion forum sites both created by Electronic Arts and fans of the game encourage collaboration among and the participation of players. The addition of the new gender customization options allows players to share created Sims whose identities are explicitly queer so that the feminist game design in the previous games is now also a queer game design in that it promotes the explicit expression of the experiences and subjectivities of players of varying gender and sexual identities.

The queer worlds approach used in the previous section is applicable to *The Sims 4* in that it could be conceived by the player that a Sim is always inherently bisexual because Sims are able to romance a Sim of any sex or gender. However, referring back to Sender's [Sender 1999] structured polysemy, players can imagine or perceive a heteronormative gameworld very easily because the vast freedom given to players in a *Sims* game makes the narrative produced emergent. Tinsley Galyean [Galyean 1995, 1] on emergent narratives says, "We all construct narratives out of our daily activities to help us remember, understand, categorize and share experiences. … If any narrative structure (or story) emerges it is a product of our interactions and goals as we navigate the experience". In a *Sims* game there are no prewritten narratives like there are in *ASM* or *Hustle Cat*. There is no identifiable moment of crisis that can corner the player into recognizing each subsequent play-through of the game as part of a universe of parallel worlds. In this case, it is the sudden overhaul of the game's character creation mechanics that "queer" the game. It is the fact that the most popular computer game of 2014 and 2015 has been updated to include transgenderism and a greater range of queer options that demonstrates a recognition of queer gamers by the video gaming industry. The trend in attitudes towards sex and gender in the *Sims* series that favors progressive and inclusive game designs forces its players to come to terms with the fact that future games in the series will continue developing to recognize queer identities.

The exploratory element in *The Sims 4* can be seen from the play style that the design of the game encourages. Consalvo [Consalvo 2003, 189] argues that in *The Sims*, "the player does not take on the 'identity' of any one character

in particular, but is expected to create and manage multiple characters. … In *The Sims*, players can control any character they desire, by quickly switching among them and by zooming into and out of different houses". Although in the newer games, the player often controls a few Sims in a household, and although alternating between a few households is still an option, *The Sims 4* encourages a play style in which players attach themselves emotionally to the Sims they create. Major gaming channels on YouTube such as Pewdiepie [Pewdiepie 2014], Jacksepticeye [Jacksepticeye 2014], and DanAndPhilGAMES [DanAndPhilGAMES 2014] have produced "Let's plays" of *The Sims 4* where the video makers have created versions of themselves to play within the game, which demonstrates the more personal approach taken to gameplay as opposed to the "playing god" mode that Consalvo describes. The time and attention a player gives to tweaking their character, which the detailed customization options makes possible, and the goals players hope their Sims can achieve encourage an emotional investment in their characters. The game marketed as that which allows players to play with life lets players explore the world of the Sims through the eyes of the Sims. Richard Walsh [Walsh 2011] contends that the *Sims* series as simulation and thus representation does not offer a reliable portrayal of real human behavior, which seems to repeat Plato's dictum in *The Republic* of art and representation as at a third remove from reality, but this does not impede the player's ability to internalize on-screen experiences because of the verisimilitude of the systems in the game. The resemblance of the relationships between Sims and gender and sex systems in the gameworld to the experiential world assists players in taking part as the narrative audience of the game — an audience that accepts a reality where they are occupants of this digital world. The result is that players can explore by experimenting with the combinations of sex and gender and sexual identities of the characters they have created and are attached to. It is the combined effects of the encouraged play style and the ease of choosing from a multitude of queer identities that foreground the *Sims 4* as a digital narrative that allows for the exploration of one's identity.

Being Sexual Blind, Being "Other Bisexual" and Concluding Remarks

For Stephen Greer [Greer 2013, 16], in his examination of the *Fable* and *Dragon Age* video game series, the ability to play as different sexualities without any consequences "presumes an even playfield" and reveals a sexuality blind approach that might "free creators from the burden of attempting to create an extended range of avatars, characters and narrative variations covering multiple configurations". Greer quotes T. L. Taylor [Taylor 2003, 35], who says the result is that "issues pertaining to gender and race get taken off the table as areas to be articulated, debated, and confronted". It is possible that the treatment of different sexualities as equal can cause the important issues on this subject to be disregarded, and in a message board on Steam, some players commented on the lack of homophobia in *ASM* as unrealistic [Valve Corporation 2017c]; and on a popular site that specializes in articles on *Sims* games, SimsVIP [SimsVIP 2016] comments on the ability for two biologically male Sims to impregnate each other sparked criticism for being anatomically inaccurate. It could even be said that changing a Sim's sex, gender, or ability to be pregnant mid-game with a click on the wardrobe is unrealistic and does not adequately reflect the psychological and physical challenges a person faces when undergoing operations to change their sex. However, it must be acknowledged that issues relating to sex, gender identity and sexuality, particularly transgenderism, are only beginning to be incorporated into games by major video game companies.

Further, in response to allegations that some inclusive video game designs, because of the conflation of varying sexualities, foster an environment in which important issues regarding sexual identities are ignored, it should first be noted that even the inclusion of queer options in video games was met with uproar, as Megan Condis [Condis 2015] notes, from the "straight male gamer" demographic, thus placing issues of gender and sexuality under the spotlight. The academic reportage of forum threads started by conservative personalities such as Bastal and Duncaaaaaan has revealed the on-going debate on these issues that have taken place simply because game designers have so much as accommodated people outside the privileged heteronormative demographic. In place of the sexuality/gender/transgender-blind approach by some scholars toward the design of video games that encourages an equal treatment of individuals, the emergent transgressive poststructuralist ethos, the idea of "other bisexuality", should be considered as well. As described in her seminal essay, "The Laugh of the Medusa", Helénè Cixous's [Cixous 1976, 884] other bisexuality is:

> each one's location in self (*répérage en soi*) of the presence — variously manifest and insistent

according to each person, male or female — of both sexes, non-exclusion either of the difference of one sex, and, from this "self-permission," multiplication of the effects of the inscription of desire, over all parts of my body and the other body.

Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" argued against Sigmund Freud's "Medusa's Head", published in 1922. Whereas Freud saw bisexuality as a merge of masculinity and femininity, Cixous's "other bisexuality" resists these binaries. She imagines a sexuality that destabilizes traditional dichotomies of male and female, masculinity and femininity — phallogocentric dichotomies where femininity is formed based on what masculinity is not. What results from other bisexuality is "a future when males and females explore the infinite possibilities of their bisexuality, in this world of elsewhere, 'woman' will no longer hold us captive, and the either/or of essentialism will be worn out" [Binhammer 1991, 77]. "Other bisexuality" describes desire as flowing infinitely and everywhere, from anyone and to anyone, with no restrictions whatsoever.

Cixous's essay was also famous for its coinage of *écriture féminine*, or "feminine writing", which according to her is [33] where other bisexuality can be experienced. However, the spirit of other bisexuality appears in the discussed digital narratives as well. While it is implicit that characters in *ASM* or *Hustle Cat* are sexed as male or female, and it is explicit in the *Sims* series, these digital narratives design characters as bodies of infinitely variable desires not directed exclusively at any gender or sex, where essentialist configurations of gender and sexual identities collapse. Especially in the queer parallel worlds analysis, where a digital narrative is the culmination of playthroughs or readthroughs with protagonists of all possible sexualities, the limitlessness of experimentation with desire encapsulates the transgression of other bisexuality. In such digital narratives, the progressive poststructuralist understanding trumps the heteronormative categories of genders and sexualities and a destabilized essentialism and unstable identities become the only stable understanding of gender and sexuality. Considering the freedom to choose one's on-screen identity without consequence as embodying the spirit of other bisexuality rather than being sexuality blind appreciates the transgressive potential and power of the digital narrative. It also recognizes progression of the designs of digital narratives in a direction that promotes the inclusion of a previously marginalized gaming demographic. This is not to say that the shortcomings that a sexuality blind approach uncovers should be ignored, but the digital narrative as a platform where unrestrained, multidirectional libidinal economies can be realized and can be experimented with should be considered as well.

As Jerry Kang [Kang 2000] notes, passing in real life is significantly more difficult than doing so in a digital space — to [34] pass racially in real life, he says, for example, one might need to undergo expensive and dangerous surgery. Digital environments allow for the separation between the experienced self and the expressed self at the click of a button. Sherry Turkle [Turkle 1995, 213] contends that when you choose to swap genders virtually, "you may discover things about yourself that you never knew before … [and] explore conflicts raised by one's biological gender". The ability to play as different sexes and have romantic attachments with either sex appeared as early as at the beginning of the *Sims* series in 2000. However, only recently have digital narrative designs considered that the sex to which one is assigned may differ from the gender identity that one experiences. Even though hypersexualized sex icons continue to appear to cater to the straight male community, as major digital entertainment companies become more aware of the previously marginalized consumers of video games, characters with non-binary gender identities, such as Krem in the widely popular video game, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* [Electronic Arts 2014a], are slowly being introduced.

The study of the exploration of gender and sexual identities has previously focused on interaction in online MUDs, a [35] digital space that requires its users to have some coding knowledge or the willingness to learn coding, but digital narratives accessible by a greater community, such as *Sims* games, *ASM*, and *Hustle Cat*, are beginning to realize the same exploratory function as well, in particular by situating readers in an environment where gender and sexuality are never fixed, where boundaries of a structuralist ideology of gender and sexuality are continuously challenged. The movement toward narratives where sexual difference and rigid configurations of sexuality are rigorously being undermined might suggest that Cixous's visions are not that far behind.

Notes

[1] Research for this project was done with funding from the Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

[2] There are significant differences between GLAAD's and the APA's definition of one's sexual orientation. GLAAD's definition is more general in that sexual orientation is seen as any attraction to another person, whereas the APA's definition specifies that said attraction be toward a sex.

[3] Oliver Laas's chapter, "Narratives in Digital Games: Their Place and Function in the Study of Digital Games," in *Expanding Practices in Audiovisual Narrative* (2014) provides a good summary of the narratological versus ludological debate.

[4] In *ASM*, the protagonist may be faced with homophobic or stereotypical remarks by side characters if the protagonist is in a same-sex relationship. However, the reader and protagonist can neither confirm nor deny their sexual orientation.

[5] Sex, or "playing in bed," is not possible without the installation of the expansion pack to the base game, *The Sims: Livin' Large*. Heterosexual Sims do not have sex to create a baby if the pack is not installed but do so through a dialogue option.

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