

# **“Playing with Gay Sex”: Exploring the Sexual Play of Gay Adult Video Games**

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**December 2024**

**This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

## Abstract

This research sits at the intersection of games, play and (gay) pornography. Though there is already a limited amount of academic work focusing on these games – emerging through the rise in queer game studies – such work does not engage with these texts from beyond the “researcher” positionality. As of such, research into adult gaming has rarely explored them from the perspective of the player. *Playing with Gay Sex* seeks to critically examine these texts whilst being inclusive to my subjectivity as a player within the research. Through a textual analysis that is interspersed with my autoethnographic gameplay accounts, I explore the affective sensations and affordances these texts offer in terms of sexual navigation and play. What this thesis concludes is that the sexual play within these games allows the player to discover new horizons of sexual pleasure that has been afforded by these games’ affective encounters.

The study examines past perspectives that surround (sexual) play and critiques them as aiming to offer more firm definitions of play. Instead, I argue that play is not firmly structured or defined; instead, play is subjective and ambiguous, tied to the affective sensations of the player. As such, sexual play is contextualised as actions that have been motivated by our (subjective) affective desires to strive and attain pleasure. I interrogate this further with sexual scripting frameworks to consider (dominant) structures that has prescribed (sexual) interactions within specific contexts and its relationship to affect and games. Following on from this, I explore the gay adult video game itself, overviewing a brief history and its respective content to provide context and continue the emerging work within this area.

With this perspective of sexual play, I analyse a selection of single-player gay adult video games in relation to avatars, sexual game mechanics, and transgression within the game space. Using my own gameplay accounts as points of provocation within the analysis presented, I argue that the sexual play of (gay) adult video games allow for affordances to construct forms of the sexual self, feature gameplay that is purposeful

at mediating sexual intimacy and satisfaction and offer spaces to indulge in “deviancy” as a form of sexual possibility or fantasy.

Yet, within the parameters of this study, the inclusion of my subjectivity and its autoethnographic method is also a point of contestation. What emerged during the process of research was further questions around the method’s application within single-player video games. Whilst the study mainly provides analysis into how these single-player gay adult video games mediate visceral affective pleasures within their confines, the thesis is also reflecting on further methodological questions. I consider the “appropriateness” of my own autoethnography, reflecting on paradigms of conducting subjective research within single-player video games. Further, it also broadly considers the implications of subjective research into explicit sexual materials and pornography. As such, alongside its conclusion of the affective potentials of sexual play in these game spaces, it also has an additional conclusion that questions the scope of the autoethnographic method and proposes for a maximalist definition in relation to this study.

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## Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to give my thanks to the Midlands4Cities Doctoral Training Partnership for funding this research and their support to my professional developing as a researcher. My wholehearted thanks are to my supervisors Prof. John Mercer and Dr. Nick Webber for all their support that they have given me and this thesis over its course. Without their invaluable guidance, comments, advice, and patience, this would have not felt or been possible.

Further thanks to the members of the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research and would like to give a special mention to a select few for their support: Dr. Nick Webber (again) and Dr. Charlotte Stevens for co-leading the Games Cultures cluster and making the research environment within it a safe and supportive space; the Games Cluster members (including Dr. Poppy Wilde, Dr. Alex Wade, Dr. Will McKeown and Zubay Ahmed) who all have been a wonderful group to be a part of; Dr. Yemisi Akinbobola, Dr. Annette Naudin, Dr. Gemma Commane, Prof. Oliver Carter, Dr. Asya Dragonova and Dr. Hazel Collie for all the wonderful advice and support you have offered me over the years. Beyond BCMCR but within BCU, I would also like to extend thanks to Dr. Jacqueline Taylor for all your professional and personal support.

Both within and outside the institution, I want to say a very special thanks to Reuben and Andrew, and our ever-continuing coven of (research) chaos for all their support during the PhD and beyond. I would also like to say special thanks to Matt for always being behind my back even after all these years. Thank you also to Davina for being a beacon of light and your never-ending support, as well as to Beth and Zoe always cheering me on during this research. Thank you to my friends on *Discord* for the gaming evenings, the gaming nights are now *Bound* memories. A very special thank you to Sam, who has had to bear hearing a lot about writing this thesis, supporting all the late-night working sessions, and importantly for being there for me to motivate me to get it done even when it had gotten very tough. Finally, a massive thank you to my parents Ian and Jo, and my sister Laura. All your support in letting me find my feet across my research journey and career has been beyond invaluable and I will be eternally thankful for it.

## Disclaimer

Please note that the following research features “Not Safe for Work” (NSFW) uncensored content that feature images from games that depict explicit nudity and sexual activity. There are also some mentions of video games that had depicted sexual assault and violence which have only been referred to or mentioned for contextual reasons. A breakdown of where the content above is placed within the thesis is listed below:

Chapter 1. “Playing with Gay Sex”: Ambiguities of Sexual Play

- Reference to a sexual assault/violence within a game (1.4)

Chapter 3. The Gay Adult Videogame in Context

- Inclusion of NSFW game images (3.2.1, 3.5.2)

Chapter 5. Self-Stimulating: Adult Video Game Avatars and Sexual Affectivity

- Inclusion of NSFW game images (5.3)

Chapter 6. Press X to XXX: Game Interfaces, Mechanics, and Haptics of Pleasure

- Inclusion of NSFW game images (6.2.3)

Chapter 7. (Un)Bound with Restraints: Sexual Possibilities, Affordances and Transgressions

- References to games featuring sexual assault/violence in their gameplay (7.3)

***Please note that the figures listed above and some of the subsequent figures throughout this thesis have been omitted and redacted following a request due to BCU OA Repository policies. Full thesis containing figures can be made available upon request.***

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## Introduction: *Playing with Gay Sex* in Video Games

*Craig asked me if I wanted to go on a gym date with him, and I gleefully accepted.  
Any excuse to see my old college roommate get shirtless as he works out...*

I have vague memories of finishing up a playthrough of what was then recently released game, *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (2017) by Game Grumps. The game's premise: *you* are a single dad with the goal of meeting and romancing other dads. My initial reason for playing it was simply curiosity. I had heard of the game through some of my gaming friends, all wanting to play it yet none of them ever took the leap. Fortunately, by progressing through academic studies, I had an opportunity to do a small amount of research on the game. From the outset, it seems like a light-hearted, fun, humorous game with its premise involving dads dating. It allowed to make my own "dad" to meet the others in hopes of attaining a relationship (I am quite a fan of dating simulator games, if we are being honest here.) But what I did not expect in my playing of the game was Craig. One of the dads in the game who immediately "captured my heart" with his personality (and eyes with his muscular body). Though I played the game years ago, you can consider the opening lines to this introduction as an indication (metaphorically) to how it would have felt for me to play. It was my mission to make sure I ended up with him - my new "ideal husband." My attachment to him and the game was intense, motivated to romance him. My effort did pay off though, and I was rewarded with multiple dates and a cute picnic ending for the two of us. Looking back, there was something that intrigued me about that attachment, and my feelings towards the game character that did not exist in the real world. Flash-forward a few years on from that period and we are at the point of this thesis. A piece of research that took that initial interest into those feelings and went *passionately deeper*.

*Playing with Gay Sex* is not a study that explores the romantic feelings to game characters, like I had thought about back then. Instead, it is a study that sits within the intersection of (explicit) sex and video games. As the designer of *Playboy: The Mansion*

(Cyberlore Studios, 2005), Brenda Brathwaite<sup>1</sup> (2013: 40) said in her book: ‘sex and video games. It’s always been here, right from the beginning of the computer games industry.’ For Brathwaite, sex and video games go “hand-in-hand”: offering explicit sexual (stimulating) content and gameplay, but also turbulent histories and politics. ‘Like any other form of media, sex is a part of the human experience, and that experience works itself into all forms of entertainment’ continues Brathwaite (2013: 40). It is in the sexual experiences offered by the video game medium that this thesis is most provoked by.

This thesis explores the concept of sexual play – as actions that are motivated to fulfilling or satisfying one’s desires (Paasonen, 2018) – within the context of single-player gay adult video games. Adult video games feature explicit sexual material, aimed at titillating and pleasuring their players through their sexual inclusion (Brathwaite, 2013). Through conducting a textual analysis of game content and representations that is interspersed with personal reflections from gameplay, *Playing with Gay Sex* seeks to explore the play experiences of these explicit video games but from a subjective perspective. Within its scope, it explores the subjective and ambiguous nature of sexual play within these games as mediated and affording horizons and potentials of pleasure. With my positionality embodied within the layers of the work, I argue that the sexual play of these adult video games allows for affordances to construct forms of the sexual self, featuring gameplay that is purposeful at mediating sexual intimacy and pleasure, and offering spaces to indulge in “deviancy” as a form of possibility.

‘Sex and play are intricately tied together [...] In their design, representative features, and play affordances, contemporary video games are influenced by and directly linked to sex, sexuality, pornography, romance and desire’ (Lauteria and Wysocki, 2015: 1). There is a myriad of contexts through which to approach the intersections of sex and play. For me, I wanted to understand the intricacies of these games through a player’s perspective, intertwining my position as a (white) gay male gamer within the layers of

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of the release of the game and her book, the author is credited as Brenda Brathwaite but is also known more currently as Brenda Romero. This thesis uses the published name as the reference.

the research. In *Queer Game Studies*, Shaw and Ruberg (2017: ix) stated that ‘after decades spent relegated to the margins, sexuality and gender are finally taking their place as key subjects in the study of video games [...] [diversifying] games culture and games critique. At the intersection of queerness, sexuality, and gaming, research has been conducted into queer players and content (Shaw, 2009; Shaw and Friesem, 2016), ways to play (Chang, 2017; Ruberg, 2018) and the (representations of) sexuality and romance (Consalvo, 2003). Here, this study explores the explicit, titillating, desirable, and the deviant within the realms of games featuring pornographic elements – all through my subjective experience and positionality as a player/researcher.

It goes without saying that there has been prior literature that does engage with explicit constructions of sex in gaming, such Brathwaite (2013), and Wysocki and Lauteria’s *Rated M for Mature* (2015). It would seem, then, that the studies of sex in gaming are lively and still growing and this thesis sits parallel to these extensive perspectives. As such, this project is not a “complete and objective” exploration since the field is still emerging and finding its way. Though the thesis has a beginning and a conclusion with analysis chapters that critically interrogate aspects of these video games, it is also an invitation for further work beyond its confines. Whilst I consider the use of my subjectivity in studying these video games as offering further nuance to the discussions in the established literature, it is also to invite further exploration and criticism into these games and how we methodologically approach and treat them in studying sexuality. Furthermore, it welcomes further explorations into other positionalities and subjectivities in the study of (erotic) games.

## ***Research Questions***

*Playing with Gay Sex* seeks to contribute to the study of sex in gaming and adult video games through its textual analysis and use of subjective accounts. As a project, it is situated within the academic discourses of (sexual) play theories, (sexual) affect, video games, pornography, and embodied research practices. The intention here is to explore the nuances of these specific “sexy” video games, open to how my ‘erotic subjectivity’ (Newton, 1993) and “closeness” engages within the experience of these games as a

player, *and* the critique of them as a researcher. In this regard, it seeks to answer one main research question:

- To what extent do (gay) adult video games structure sexual play and agency in affective ways?

The main question of this thesis is one that considers how these gay adult video games structure sexual agency and play for the player: how do they provide spaces that mediate or afford sexual engagement and interaction. The construction of the question is purposeful to consider how the subjective sexual experience is mediated by these video games in terms of the allowance they provide the player to interact and perform within game spaces sexually. It considers adult video games as allowing player bodies and desires to be embodied, performing within a space offers sexual pleasure or satisfaction. To further explore some of the intricacies of these texts, it also asks the following sub-questions:

- How can sexual conduct/practices be enforced through game boundaries and limitations?
- To what extent can the sexual play spaces of adult gaming affect player interactions?
- To what extent does the sexual representations of gay men in these adult games emerge from porn iconographies?

Each of these sub-questions is designed to provide scope for the critical interrogation and textual analysis of these games, offering contexts to explore their play experiences, game mechanics, affordances, and the cultural contexts that surround them.

### ***Scope and Corpus***

Though this thesis engages in wider discussions around adult video games, the research questions and analysis presented focuses on gay adult video games specifically. Complementing the subjective approach within this thesis, the game texts that comprise of the data collection feature overt or suggestive gay sexual content, representation, or inclusion. Whilst there is reference made to wider examples within adult gaming, the corpus of game texts informing the analysis is focused on these gay inclusions. For documenting my player experience, ten game texts have been selected

and played for this research. These games have been chosen predominantly through an initial search across (PC) gaming websites that allow for independent adult or pornographic games to be sold on their marketplaces (e.g., *Steam* and *Itch.io*). Others have been selected from their own individual publisher or independent adult gaming sites websites (e.g., *Nutaku.net*). Using the categorisation and tagging systems on these sites to specifically search for LGBTQ+ and gay (adult) content, the games have been selected through personal preference. This is intentional to keeping the research within its subjective approach as these games attracted my interest as a player.

The corpus is comprised of interactive narrative games (*Coming Out on Top* (Obscurasoft, 2014), *Full Service* (Mazjojo Productions, 2020), and *Camp Buddy* (Blitz Games, 2018)), an adventure game (*Cockwork Industries* (Digital Seductions, 2019)), a mobile game (*NU: Carnival* (Infinity Alpha and SGArts, 2022)) and a selection of simulation games by designer Robert Yang (*Hurt Me Plenty* (2017), *Succulent* (2017), *Stick Shift* (2017), *The Tearoom* (2017) and *Rinse and Repeat* (2015)). Some games in this corpus have been played multiple times due to their branching pathway structures, whilst others were only partially experienced or played once. Though the corpus is limited in terms of versatility, it is a selection that has emerged from within my subjectivity. Some of these games feature more prominently in the analysis compared to others. This is purposeful to not only provide a richer exploration of some of these game texts but invite further exploration into these gay adult video games beyond the conclusion of this thesis. As such, the corpus presented here is an initial selection of game texts to continue interrogating them and provide scope for future research into them and other video games.

## ***Chapter Breakdown***

Chapter one – “*Playing with Sex*”: *Ambiguities of Sexual Play* – is split into two main facets that outline the main theoretical framework used within this study. The first half explores the concept of play, defining it by its subjective and ambiguous form. I critique past literature that has previously engaged with ideas of play as offering a firm definition, instead imploring a more subjective perspective of defining play. In the

second half of the chapter, I contextualise a definition of sexual play for this study in relation to agency and affect. Here, I explore sexual subcultures in relation to sexual play to build the framework before moving onto considering the definition of sexual affect. Eventually, this provides my framework of sexual play as actions that have been motivated by our subjective sexual desires.

Chapter two – *Scripting Gay: Intersections of Sexual Scripting* – considers the sexual scripting framework through a subjective lens. Through contextualising it from its original definitions as prescribed social interactions, it then reconsiders this discourse within the spaces of games, as well as makes the argument how gay pornography offers representations of sexual scripting. All of this is engaged through embodying my subjectivity to define the relationship between sexual scripting and sexual play for the context of this thesis.

Chapter three - *The Gay Adult Video Game in Context* – explores the object of this study. Firstly, it offers a short critical history of the adult video game text and genre, critiquing that its undocumented territories have resulted in a heterocentric narrative. It argues for further academic research to be conducted to address these gaps. It then shifts to consider how industry structures – in a European and USA context - have defined and treated sex within gaming. Finally, the chapter offers a contextualisation to the kind of sexual content that can be found within contemporary adult video games, referencing some queer/gay sexual content to start to address the omissions in the literature around adult gaming.

*Chapter four – Methodology* – is where I articulate the method design and scope of this thesis. Here, I provide detail as to the project corpus, selection of texts and justification for the methodological practice being employed. This chapter also interrogates the ideas of researcher closeness, subjectivity, and embeddedness within “the field” in relation to its embodied research practice.

Chapter five - *Self-Stimulating: Adult Video Game Avatars and Sexual Affectivity* – explores the sexual self in relation to these games, considering some of the games

within the project corpus as being *prescribed* avatars. Using my own gameplay experience, I engage with the discussions around these avatars and how through their play, sexually affective experiences emerge in regard to navigating as the sexual self.

Chapter six - *Press X to XXX: Game Interfaces, Mechanics, and Haptics of Pleasure* – shifts the focus to the actual gameplay of these games. Here, I explore how game mechanics seek to stimulate sexual pleasure for the player in their play, considering how pleasure emerges through various design aspects. It then considers how these games engage in the idea of haptics in their representations and embodiments of the player’s “touch” in gameplay. My own play experience is again discussed here to add nuance to the sex mechanics of the games in the corpus.

Chapter seven - *(Un)Bound with Restraints: Sexual Possibilities, Affordances and Transgressions* – looks at the game space(s) of these texts and how they allow players to navigate in sexual possibilities or their affordance to play transgressively in their boundaries and limitations. Using my own gameplay experiences, it explores how the idea of transgression is present and represented within the gameplay and surrounding contexts. Yet, within play, transgression becomes more subjectively defined, and certain cultural contexts deemed transgressive are normalised within the diegeses of them.

The thesis concludes in two parts, providing one in relation to the theory presented here in the thesis; the other considers some of the further methodological questions that emerged during the data collection that reconsider certain notions of embodied research practices. In *Conclusion Part I. Gay Adult Video games: Reading, Representing, Feeling Sex and Play*, I argue that gay adult video games afford sexual exploration and navigation of subjective sexual desires. In reflecting upon the analyses of the finding chapters, it considers sexual play as a navigating through a “sexually thrilling” space, with an interplay of sexual subjectivity and transgressive frames whilst appealing to the sexual self and one’s desires. *Conclusion Part II. Post-Script Methodological Complexities* considers some of the methodological implications that emerged during my data collection, namely around the definition of autoethnography

and applying it to single-player game spaces. In it I revisit autoethnography from a single-player perspective as well as in relation to studying the sexual self. By the end I propose for there to be a maximalist definition of autoethnography to start to mitigate these complexities.

# Literature Review

## Chapter 1. “Playing with Sex”: Ambiguities of Sexual Play

### 1.1 Introduction

In this opening chapter, I explore the definitions of play and sexual play, to provide a theoretical framework that I will employ throughout this thesis to explore gay adult video games. What this chapter presents is a more subjective understanding of (sexual) play, which is useful in understanding player engagement within these video game texts that revolve around sexual interaction. This chapter initially opens with an interrogation of previous notions that have sought to define “play,” some of which has intersected with understandings of culture and games. However, I criticise these past perspectives as using a firm definition that neglects to consider its uncertainty, spontaneity, and emergence. As such, my own perspective addresses play that is open to these reflections, through contextualising games, rules and agency through their affective qualities and subjectivity.

Whilst the discussion presented in this chapter would appear to argue for a “new” definition of play, instead, the chapter acts as a provocation to expand these previous notions to consider subjectivity within our framings of play and “playful activity” to attain further critical understanding. Trammell (2023) critiqued the previous play discourse as being relatively colonial (and through a “white” heterocentric perspective), not addressing some of the wider positionalities which adds to the nuances of play discourse which has either been neglected or marginalised. Though my positionality as a (white) gay male is a reflection in a later chapter<sup>2</sup>, acknowledging the subjectivities of play opens the scope for further positionalities to be validated and considered within play discourses as Trammell proposes. As such, this chapter unpicks the contexts I have outlined in this introduction around games, agency and affect through a reflection on how subjectivities intersect with them. From engaging with this previous literature that has sought to define play, I argue that it is more fluid and

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter 2. Scripting Gay: Intersections of Sexual Scripting, Games and Gay Men

uncertain, considering the relevance of emergence and agency that subjectively frames one's play. Connecting it to wider frameworks discussing games, rules and (player) agency, I consider play as tied to the affective sensations and potentials of the player as they become intimately engaged in a space that mediates their subjective play activity.

Where the first part of the chapter focuses solely on understanding the definitions of play, the second part pursues a definition through a sexual context that is parallel to these previous play framings. This is where I articulate my understanding of sexual play: "meaningful" actions that are motivated by (sexual) desire to attain a pleasurable experience or outcome. The framework of sexual play I articulate draws upon previous literature that has specifically considered sexual play in context whilst also exploring the notions of play that have intersected with sex, sexuality, and sexual sub/cultures. Initially, I explore the intersections of play with sexual sub/cultural practices, using them to consider ideas of (sexual) conduct, power, transformation, and transgression. Akin to the discussion proposed in the first part of this chapter, I start to consider how sexual play can be understood through more subjective means by continuing onto defining sexual agency, drawing upon prior work that has looked at agency within a sexual context and its relationship to play. Since I have defined play by more subjective and affective means - *feeling* play when it occurs - there is a connection to understanding sexual affective experience to define sexual play through its sensations of desire and pleasure. By doing so, I explore the definitions of sexual affectivity in relation to subjective, uncertain contexts: as involving the shifting of (bodily) states when encountering phenomena that changes our interaction to some kind of sexual outcome. Using these discussions on the intersections of play and sex, I conclude "Part II." and the chapter overall by contextualising a "working" definition of "*sexual play*" as involving meaningful actions conducted or performed that have been motivated by the need to fulfil one's own desires. Though this definition is brought together through other literature and is relatively loose in its framing, it is purposeful to acknowledge subjectivity within understanding play and sex/uality - especially for a thesis that has aimed to conduct its research from within an autoethnographic position. As such, this "working definition" I construct proposes more openness to subjectivity as a part in defining what is sexually affective, pleasurable, and ultimately, a form of play.

## ***Part I. Approaching Ideas of Play***

### ***1.2 An Opening Reflection on “Play”***

Thinking about the meaning of *play* could lead one to immediately associate its definition with the imaginative acts of children, where play *and* playing are stereotyped as belonging to their domain only (Brown and Stenros, 2018: 216). Yet, rather, play is not exclusively tied to that realm, extending further and existing within more spaces. We *can* play, not always in every scenario, but we can. Alone or in a group. Physically or virtually. Play is “possible” even when we do not realise that we are playing. It can occur in diverse forms but what definitively forms play is unknown - it can be planned *and* impulsive, but we know it *is* play when we *experience* it. What I am alluding to here is the possibilities of play (Sutton-Smith, 2001) in which play offers us various affective experiences of shifting between states, being and becoming affected by them in the process which influences our actions and behaviours (Paasonen, 2018: 3; Jagoda and McDonald, 2018: 177). This affective experience is not bound to or by a particular space or time, in which some past theorisations of play have considered (see Huizinga, 1949; Caillois, 2001; Consalvo, 2009). In this regard, play is not a universal experience to everyone - viewing play through its affectivity means that we recognise play in some contexts but not others, even if we do not necessarily know if we are playing. In this regard, play is subjective, with cultural norms providing its form that allows it to be recognised as play for *those who are playing*. The aspect of playfulness itself being the mode or capacity to experience these affective ties, whereas play is the actualisation and meditation of these sensations into a context and/or scenario (Paasonen, 2018: 2).

For those “outside” - those who may *not feeling play* - may be unable to recognise play is occurring, especially if they are yet to experience it as such (Stenros, 2018: 20). Sicart (2014) and Shields (2015) attribute this individual affectivity of play to subjective human experiences: it is something *we all do*, but *how* we play is vast in range. Sutton-Smith (2001: 1) had noted this affectivity to play prior to these authors, describing the versatile nature of play: ‘we play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to what play is [...] there is little agreement among us, and much ambiguity.’ If play does not just exist only in the domain of children, and exists within a variety of

forms, then it is a subjective experience as we *feel* it. The position which Sutton-Smith holds presents play as diverse, and fluid - it is unable to be universally defined because we all play, differently or similar, and individually all feel what we see as play. Play becomes an individual affective experience that is only seen or understood as play to those who are *playing*. Nachmanovitch (2009: 15, emphasis added) argued that ‘we may try to define [play], but our definition will be clumsy, inadequate, and circular. That is because *play is about definition*.’ This is where part of the motivation for this chapter emerges, as whilst the title declares an exploration into a particular form of play, the subjectivity and versatility to play itself requires interrogation. With this aim to explore play as a concept first, viewing it through ambiguity and subjective experience, it provides an initial question: if play is so vast and unknown, then how can we define “what is play?”

Play is unable to have a universal definition because of its distinct and versatile nature: ‘play is the way we do it or say it, whatever it may be’ (Nachmanovitch, 2009: 3). We can understand play as something constantly different - shifting through states when playing (Paasonen, 2018) - which changes depending on the contexts surrounding play and its activity itself. Even when repeatedly playing in the same space, with the same players, the uncertainty and instability of play can still result in different experiences. As “playful beings” featuring the ability or intention to play – as alluded to by the views held by Sicart and Shield – any attempt to strictly define play would be limiting or restrictive. Having a firm structure of which to define play creates a binary refusing any forms that are beyond that definition - as suggested by this hegemonic view of play *only* being the actions of children - and diminishes this fluid spontaneity and improvisation that can occur as we move through the activity. Such binaries also extend to those “outside” as to whether they can indeed recognise others at play: understanding what counts as play is culturally and contextually dependent, even intervening, or existing in spaces not specifically designed for it (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 5-6).

The possibilities that play offers emerges from within a space that allows for spontaneous behaviours and sensations to occur through diverse interconnecting contexts that exist within and beyond the “play space” (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 1-6;

Henricks, 2008: 158-170). For example, the position of the video game player occupies a play space that is not composed of just their actions or behaviours within the “virtual landscape” of the game they are playing, but also arises through how they play (physically, controllers, devices or objects), where they are playing (bedrooms, cafés, arenas) and other contexts such as the identity of the player themselves. All these aesthetics of play frame their affective experiences. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) argue a similar view, finding that play is not just the system of the game itself, but rather how players interact with it in various ways. These multitude of contexts - varying in their overt or implicit presence - become aesthetics of play and the space it occupies, framing their experience and how they interact. ‘To play is to create and then inhabit a distinctive world of one’s own making [...] [it] may also be seen as a social or cultural “form”’ (Henricks, 2008: 159). Play, then, is actions framed within contexts, not necessarily based on societal or cultural norms, which create various affective experiences (Henricks, 2008: 170; Nachmanovitch, 2009: 11).

To accept a fixed definition of “what is play” enforces a binary that would diminish and reject different experiences of play. Trammell (2023) argues that play has traditionally been constructed as positive, narrow, and white, neglecting both the positions and experiences non-white communities that had been oppressed or marginalised - Trammell implores a reconsideration of play that has *been* and *is* harmful. Though Trammell is discussing the marginalisation of communities and voices in relation to the framing of play, there is an acknowledgement that previous definitions have proposed a fixed, resolute understanding. As such there is a need then to consider play in relation to positionality, to understand the nuances of play and negate from white, Eurocentric and even heterocentric discourses. Whilst I am white, and British (European), my own positionality as a gay male adds a layer to what I constitute as play. Therefore, to have a deeper criticality to the definition of play, it is necessary to consider play on a more subjective affective level, which takes account of the experiences of the individual. To recognise this subjective affectivity that is seemingly connected to play and its shifting structure, a definition of play must account for its broad and changing scope: players, actions, experience, space, and design (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 218-219). To recognise this intersection of subjectivity and affective sensations, a definition of play must

account for its uncertain parameters and changing scope that considers the presence of players, actions, experiences, spaces, and designs (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 218-219). To interrogate its vagueness and ambiguity, I will now explore some of the previous literature that has attempted to provide some framework and definition to play but will argue what it is not: *definitively structured*.

### **1.3 The Varying Perspectives of “Play”**

The literature studying play itself alludes to its diverse and ambiguous nature, with some focusing upon its relationship towards culture and its formation (Huizinga, 1949; Sutton-Smith, 2001; Sicart, 2014), as an aesthetic or affect (Shields, 2015) or classifying it through the concept of games (Caillois, 2001; Suits, 2005). The field of games studies itself has notably been highlighted for its increase in literature that approaches ideas of play from varying perspectives (Back et al., 2017), focusing on: rules and ludic limitations (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Myers, 2009), phenomenological experiences (Keogh, 2015), and even in terms of failure and challenging power structures (Ruberg, 2017; 2018). However, amongst these play positions, some of the attempts to contextualise play in some form has resulted in a framework that play is fixed and absolute.

In the seminal text, *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga (1949) considers play as a prior element to the formation of culture – rather than arguing that culture evolved from play, Huizinga argues that play was a way for culture to be shaped until it took on its own “form.” Later, Henricks (2008: 159) also discussed a similar view, that by playing, we embody a world of one’s own design that eventually leads to its own (cultural) form. Through the activity of play, cultural practices and structures are formed and culture is given “life” (Huizinga, 1949: 46). Sicart (2014: 1-6) suggested that play and playing allows us to understand these cultural contexts: ‘understanding what surrounds us and who we are, and a way of engaging with others [...] Play happens in a tangled world of people, things, spaces, and cultures.’ What these positions indicate is that our understanding of play arrives from our subjective place within culture, where some practices are recognised as play whilst others are not. Play emerges through these varied contexts - like power,

identity, and experimental play (Sutton-Smith, 2001) - and that shapes our affective experiences. For Shields (2015: 298), playful activities emerge through different structures, 'from dreams, to games, to sports, and even the most abstract notion of language.' However, like Huizinga noted regarding the language associated with play, this is not a constant universal experience and can shift between various states. The impact of utilising a universal conceptualisation of play leads to a binary of "what is play" and "what is not play," as we can encounter cultural forms and play practices that we have not experienced and justify classifying it as "not play" (Huizinga, 1949: 205).

To Nachmanovitch (2009: 11), play is lost when considering it through this definitive binary, as it is subjected to accepted rules or religious, political or societal control - play would only be demonstrative of institutionalised and hegemonic structures, rather than something generative and individual. For Nachmanovitch (2009: 11), play is not something that preserves religious and political doctrines as these structures - instead, they are contexts which facilitate play instead of "controlling" it, where play can exist through them but also transcend them. With this perspective, play is beyond this *firm control*, and unable to be interrogated down into something conclusive. In parallel to Nachmanovitch's view, to utilise a definition of play as *firmly* following these structures - that strictly define its expressions - would restrict the improvisation and spontaneity within cultures and does not account for the subjective affective experiences that play can offer. Retaining a perspective that considers play in terms of its fluidity, even as an "outsider" or differing culture, then these intersections and subjectivities can be accounted for. Not doing so, and thinking play within this firm framework then, as noted by Huizinga (1949: 205), the discovery of activity demonstrative or not of play may be misinterpreted - the expression of play is limited to the hegemonic discourses that Nachmanovitch suggested and ignores what play *could* be. -Accepting the fluidity and ambiguity of play - as something tied to the affective experiences of those playing - is to accept that it is unstructured, involving the sensations and *feelings* that emerge from those who are enacting *play*.

Huizinga (1949) does provide a framework to contextualise play within a playing culture through a series of shared characteristics: voluntary and non-obligatory; rule-ordered; existing within temporary fixed boundaries; feature no material value. These aspects suggest play to be distinct, free, and leisure-based that is separate from the practices of “ordinary life” (Huizinga, 1949: 7-9) and formed through “imaginative and expansive ways” (Henricks, 2008). As Henricks (2008) considered play as expansive, in this regard, the “limits” of what characterises play is uncertain or unknown as it describes a shifting space that distinct from the “confines” of the lived experience (Huizinga, 1949).

Similar characteristics were also described later by Caillois (2001: 9-10): free and non-obligatory; separate from life and within its own space; containing uncertain outcomes; containing no material value; governed by a new set of rules; involving “make-believe.” Caillois’ position is reminiscent of that held by Huizinga, described play through similar attributes. However, where Huizinga links play to the forming of cultures, Caillois’ aims to define it through games by assimilating play and games within some cohesive relationship. For Caillois (2001: 11-26), these play traits are distinctly found within specific game contexts: *agôn* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (role-play or pretend) and *ilinx* (disorientating or risk-taking). Whilst play can exist in these contexts, especially through ambiguity and spontaneity, Caillois (2001: 27-35) offers further distinction in relation to the structure of the “play/game space” and its respective behaviours in a division of *paida* (child-like, driven, “limitless” play) and *ludus* (game-like play with predefined rules or systems). However, I find Caillois’ approach to be somewhat exclusive: to use these categories that Caillois sees as framing play would only essentialise specific actions to those individual contexts. Whilst they are indeed addressing the broad scope of play that occur in game and game-like contexts, there is also an argument that specific play practices occur in these individually, rather than something potentially spanning across the wider space(s). Caillois does describe play as “free,” though there is also a limitation expressed where play matches these specific qualities, whereas this thesis argues for its fluidity and improvisational nature and lack of a definitive structure that is more tied to the subjective *feeling* of play.

## ***1.4 Thinking of Games and Emergence***

Here there are two elements I wish to address in my view: the difference between “play” and “games,” and the idea of emergent play/behaviours. Whilst play involves the practice of “playing” (Paasonen, 2017), games are rather the mediated spaces in which play can be discovered and formed, featuring specific purposes and the combination of players and rule systems (Suits, 2005; Lin, 2013; Brice, 2017). With this perspective of games, I take them to be representative of these “cultural contexts” that Huizinga had alluded to, where its structure and experience has been facilitated by the various extents and uncertainties of play. Caillois’ categorisation of play through games limits this transcendence and emergent nature of play – if play is something ambiguous and impulsive, then it is difficult to always determine what behaviours may occur, in which unexpected experiences may emerge or be discovered. Reflecting on Huizinga’s consideration to the mutualist nature of play and culture, the element of “emergent” play means that the play space is never stable, changing and (re)articulating with each play approach. As such, the play space is more fluid and tied to the desires of those “playing” until it eventually becomes its own cultural form. To be solely reliant on Caillois’ structure to understand play and games would ignore the potentiality of other expressions and articulations of these contexts, as the understanding of them would only be within such resolute framing. Though I am not disagreeing entirely with Caillois’ positions on play and games, I am rather arguing for an expansion upon these categories so as not to limit how we classify them, especially when aiming to approach them from subjective perspectives and ideas of emergence.

This is where we can address the second element: defining emergent play. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) - writing from primarily a games developer perspective - found emergence to be crucial in exploring how games and game-like systems or spaces were something meaningful for their players. Fernández-Vara (2006) considers the player as an active performer within the play of games, with experiences emerging through one’s own interaction in relation to game mechanics and structures. Research that was conducted by Costello and Edmonds (2009) and De Valk et al. (2013) are examples of this idea of meaningful emergent actions occurring during play. In their investigations of

video game design and player interaction, it showed the opportunities that some video games had to allow players to creatively explore possibilities and avenues previously unknown to them. Their work highlights how new and other experiences of play can emerge within the play or game spaces, regardless of rules or structures surrounding it and be a locale that continually develops and changes where new horizons of play can be mediated and discovered.

Pearce (2009: 9-45) provides an understanding of emergence possible in games using the context of Mass-Multiplayer Online games (MMOGs) and tabletop gaming:

‘Player creativity has long been a component of tabletop game culture, with players of tabletop game culture, with layers not only contributing to the storytelling process, but also creating drawings or three-dimensional figures of their characters [...] [in MMOGs] a play community can exhibit patterns of emergence that transcend any particular virtual world, but these are made explicit through interactions unique to the affordances of each play ecosystem.’

Through these varying player interactions - the playing - within the space of a game, new play experiences can emerge through which have not previously been predefined or even intended. By the players interaction within the game and other players, unknown horizons and capacities of play become (re)realised through the act of playing:-  
Momentarily focusing on video games in particular to best articulate the kinds of emergence that does occur, virtual world-based game spaces have been seen having a range of phenomena appearing such as weddings, protests and economies that had not previously been intended (Pearce, 2009: 46). As such, in this regard, player interaction was mediated by the play space of the video game, allowing the potential for “unintended” play acts to occur. If play here was considered through Caillois’ descriptors, it would be difficult to fit within a framework that exclusive spontaneous emergent activity. Whilst the “game” may have initiated a certain layer of play – as in the contexts Caillois highlights – it also transcended them, with emergent play being mediated through the framing of the game to offer new play experiences.

In the examples of tabletop gaming that Pearce mentions, to some extent, the players are in control of the form of the game and its experiences as their actions have been mediated by the game's structure. Yet, framings to the form of the game are only indicative to "implied" player actions (Aarseth, 2007) and not necessarily the extents to which play is conducted, or what play *could* be. With a perspective of play that views it as emerging ambiguously within a cultural form or context, I find it difficult to accept the idea of there being forms of games "without play." I would argue that a game without any capacity of play is authoritarian, a tool that would dictate behaviour. Instead, I adopt a position that views play as indeed being present as emergent activity despite any potential ludic limitations. Play informs the "cultural form" of the game, recognising that multiple behaviours and performances are in motion through the affective engagements of players, regardless of game rules or systems. It is for this reason I view play as not being firmly structured, being unstable and uncertain in some capacity and instead embodies an ambiguous nature.

Argued by Suits (2005: 48), 'to play a game is to engage in an activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs,' where there is a combination of player interaction and rule systems - through interaction, play is mediated by the game (Lin, 2013; Brice, 2017). Suits definition of the relationship between play and games is one that suggests the temporal nature of game spaces, involving the strive to reach a "specific state" in which the game is "over." However, though it is not explicitly stated in this referenced position, there is an acknowledgement to the relevance of player interaction within that game space that mediates the play into uncertain and fluid territories. Though, as Suits posits, games do feature an extent of framing in which the player(s) operates: rule systems which define the objectives, aims, or "end goal." However, I find issue with maintaining such an approach of defining this relationship of play and games by its temporality, especially with understanding play as a subjective and affective experience. Therefore, I consider these "rule systems" that "intend" for specific play to occur within its boundaries as less indicative to the temporary space the game occupies and rather more highlighting the emergence of subjective play occurring when "playing the game." What I mean here is that through player engagement with these rule systems and intentions to bring about these "state of

affairs,” emergent activity that has been brought forth by player interaction and performance may result in *transformative* or *transgressive* play experiences.

Understanding the ambiguity of play through its subjectivity and emergence, even within “fixed” game structures, recognises the potentiality of transformative or transgressive behaviours and experiences that could occur. I understand *transformative play* to be the (re)appropriation of a play space through emergent activity that results in new and meaningful experiences (see Sotamaa, 2007; Barab et al., 2010; Marriott, 2011). Examples of transformative play within games are evidenced by research that has looked at the emergent relationships and identities within social (game)play (Marriott, 2011) and online social spaces in MMORPGs<sup>3</sup> (Taylor, 2006). In these examples, whilst within the game space, players were able to conduct activity that had not been expected by the ludic structures or mechanics of the game - the space itself had been restructured to conduct and experience these new meaningful forms of play for their players. Parallel to this transformative possibility and inability for a game to entirely predict how a player will behave or engage in the game space, the purposeful disregarding of these “rules” becomes an act of *transgression/transgressive play*.

Games studies literature has often considered *transgressive play* as going against the preferred/intended “ideal player” of the game (Aarseth, 2007; Sundén, 2009), or engaging in play practices that were not intended by the game itself: *griefing/trolling* (sabotaging other player experiences), cheating, or play practices not deemed ‘socially acceptable’ (Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018; Carter, 2022). In extreme cases, acting and performing transgressively has resulted in unlawful, violent and dangerous activity, such as the documented experience of Dibbell (1993) and their encounter with “cyberrape” whilst playing the MUD<sup>4</sup>, *LambdaMOO*. Transgressive acts and play can violate not only the “agreed rules” established by the game's structure, but also fellow players involved in which those playing have agreed to a shared conduct. Transgressive

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<sup>3</sup> Mass-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games

<sup>4</sup> Multi-User Dungeons: early real-time, and traditionally text-based, virtual worlds.

play also gives an insight into playing cultures, as certain practices or activities may be culturally subjective or specific, being viewed as transgressive to some but not others like that to recognising play itself (Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018: 2-4). Both transformative and transgressive play come about through a player's emergent behaviour, demonstrating that varying cultural practices are formed and practised through play regardless of their boundaries, and continues to demonstrate its ambiguous nature.

### **1.5 Rules ≠ Agency**

Interaction within the play space is dependent on player behaviours in terms of their own ethics and values – the conducts or practices they bring with them when playing – however, the power structures of games would be unable to anticipate all player actions if we take play as a subjective, emergent, and affective sensation. The player, and their body (physical or, for video games in particular, virtual) are integrated into this 'rule structure' as the player draws upon this affectivity for their decisions. The player interacts within the game through a 'play figure' (whether an in-game figure or persona, or themselves) that they control (Westecott, 2009: 1). We can view this as the relationship between *agency* and *rules*.

Salen and Zimmerman (2004) found play to arise from the performance of a player and the contexts surrounding their actions within this 'rule-based' system that is the game. We can view this performance and interaction in the game as *agency*: meaningful choices that are expressed via player action, afforded, or constrained by the games' design (Murray, 1997; Bódi, 2021). Performing one's choices in games positions them as an "active player" (Tulloch, 2010; Keogh, 2015: 22) as the player is able to demonstrate, to an extent that the *boundaries of play* and games allow, an ability of choice that initiates action within the space. For example, video games are seen to occupy a "traditionally interactive" nature, requiring a player's active choice and engagement in order for it to progress (Westecott, 2009: 1; Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán, 2015; Wilde, 2018: 27). The space of the game allows a form of "*directed freedom*" as the player has an extent of freedom and power to choose their

actions, within its limitations (Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán, 2015: 120). Video games offer the player relatively limitless actions that they can initiate, but only within the constraints that the game allows, whether by design, mechanics, or aesthetics (Wilde, 2018: 27). Players are still able to exhibit agency and emergence, but within the possibilities available to them by the game space – various playing can occur within the limitations of the game.

Suits (2005: 50-54) offered the idea of the '*lusory attitude*', arguing that only certain behaviours are permitted to 'achieve the goal' depending on the game being played, and as players we willingly accept that the rules of the game in order to bring about this specific state of affairs. Chess, for example, features strict rules in terms of pieces being only moveable in certain directions and lengths, but the way to reach the 'goal' (ideally, checkmate) are relatively limitless and allows for the player to perform actions they deem most appropriate or suitable to their wishes (Murray, 1997). Other examples like Sandbox-type games<sup>5</sup> may feature boundaries – such as the game map or ludic controls – but heavily relies on the creativity and 'activeness' of its player in terms of what actions occur. Therefore, there are both explicit and unseen rules within the structure of the game that facilitates play and the agency of the player (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004).

Fron et al. (2007: 312) and Tulloch (2014: 336-338) take a pessimistic view of rules, finding that they revolve around obedience and force rules automatically. I argue that if games enforced their rule structure onto the play experience, then play is not occurring as there are no spontaneous actions emerging. These views are also reductive and deterministic, as they place play to be entirely dependent on a ludic system as rule structures. These limitations do not govern the entire interactivity of the player and, as we have discussed with emergence and the acts of transformative and transgressive play, the player is not bound to follow these rules but rather expected to. Myers (2009) and Svahn (2009) hold a similar view, finding that rules are also objects of play, as they

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<sup>5</sup> *Sandbox* games allow players to relatively create their own environment and are frequent for open-world, city-building, and tycoon style games.

shape the play experience instead of governing it. Considering these structures as forcing player agency would only mean that the player *must play specifically* in terms of the rules or objectives in order for the game to progress and would not consider these meaningful actions that players take, especially through emergent behaviours as transformative and transgressive play. Therefore, as proposed by Murray (1997), agency is offered and hindered by the design of the space, and that playing occurs in relation to these limitations, not just in accordance with them (Bódi, 2021: 41-42). ‘Whilst as players we recognise that our choices in a video game are [relatively] limited, we still like to think that we have control – that we shape the play experience’ (Tulloch, 2010: 36). Accepting to play within a game is to accept that there is an extent of governance, but that we also still retain an extent of activeness.

Agency, drawing upon the ambiguous interactions from the player with the game structure, allows for emergence to occur in the game space as it relies on the affective and meaningful sensations a player experiences when playing. Games may desire particular behaviours when playing, however it would be unable to prevent emergent practices whether altering or disregarding the system or not playing the game at all. Both Suits (2005: 39) and Tulloch (2014: 336-340) have the position that the player *can only play* when obeying the rules and by ignoring them, the player is not playing the game. Whilst I do accept that the player is partially subjected to the game structure’s dominance, I find their perspectives limiting to the fluidity of play. In their view, by not following or obeying the rules, in essence, the game ends. Finding disobedience to the system as no longer playing the game is counterproductive to how play aids in facilitating cultural forms – play can be damaging and hurtful when ignoring rules (Sicart, 2014) as we have already seen with transgressive acts when playing. Since even ignoring these rules are a meaningful act by the player, I prefer to adopt the idea Huizinga expressed that even transgressions help shape ideas of culture. If the player ‘changes’ the space, then I argue that a ‘new game’ and new play cultures are made.

Suits and Tulloch are accurate in that the ‘original’ game ends for the players changing the dynamic of the space, but I find that this becomes another instance of emergence where it becomes “a game within a game.” Within this ‘new game,’ then new structures

of power: take the act of cheating, where you appear to be following the “explicit” rules but instead are implicitly disregarding them in order to “win.” This is particularly evident in the events of *EVE Online* (CCP Games, 2003) and the *GoonFleet Corporation/GoonSwarm Alliance* where through transgressive disruption, members ruined the experience of play for other players to the point of no longer playing, all for personal satisfaction (Milik and Webber, 2017). Even when a game is being played, there can still be the emergence of another occurring within its structure. Surely, then, we can view the nature of play and structure of games as fluid, constantly changing depending on the emergent behaviours occurring in the space. Like Sutton-Smith argued, there are various agents operating that compose the play experience and even those that disrupt the nature of play are still a form of cultural activity. If emergence can occur within the play space, then I suggest that the rules of the game are not as rigid as some attempt to attribute it with as a player’s behaviour is dependent on their own choices within a game. The rules are themselves objects of play and through interaction, new cultural contexts and practices that can be viewed as play emerge and be interpreted.

## **1.6 Feeling the Realm of Play**

Earlier in the chapter, I alluded to discussions of play as revolving around subjective personal experiences of the player - “feeling” play when it is occurring and its uncertainty. Yet, so far, the chapter has discussed play through its relationship to games, emergence when playing, and the relationship of rules and agency within play spaces. With my earlier reflection, I argued that play is subjectively experienced through this “feeling” of its presence and occurrence - that we know it is play when we are “feeling” it, and so it is difficult to define its form. What such an argument suggests is that play is something that is *affective*, subjectively felt and individually experienced by each player. Yet there emerges a question to understanding the framing of “affect” as an experience within this awareness of subjectivity. Though the chapter has yet to explicitly discuss affect, the discussions posited so far have already started to indicate its relevance as a quality to play. Emergent play within game spaces was articulated as relying on the personal desires of the player(s), and not necessarily a part of the

intention of the game, resulting in experiences that were transformative or transgressive. The experiences themselves indicated encountering some kind of phenomenon that had some form of impact - this is an entryway into having an articulation for what is “affect.” Gregg and Seigworth (2010: 1) highlight the difficulty of understanding something as affective - or rather, affect itself - in which they ask how it can be understood when there is no “original state.” For them, their question as to the difficulty in understanding affect points to a kind of fluidity or uncertain quality akin to the ambiguity that surrounds play. Gregg and Seigworth argue that affect emerges in a state of “*in-between-ness*”: ‘in the capacities to act and be acted upon’ (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 1). In this regard, an “affective experience” emerges to an individual which they subjectively encounter that shifts them from one “state of feeling” to another, altering their perspective of the “world” (Husserl, 1985; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010).

I find the perspective that Gregg and Seigworth discuss as alluding to the ties of affect to the capacity of the body to feel these sensations alter our engagement, interaction, or understanding. Through an encounter, unknown intensities emerge that we continue to feel until another “shift” in our body capacity occurs. It is for that which I align this thesis’ perspective of affect as a kind of “force,” phenomena, or intense sensation that intimately shift our bodies to a different state (Blackman, 2012: 24; Wetherell, 2012: 2; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 2; Wilde, 2023: 67). For Ash (2013: 29), affective encounters were about connections to the encounter or “world”: ‘affect does not simply operate between body and world on an unconscious level, but actively creates associations.’ Similarly, Anable (2018: xviii-xix) defines affect by intersectional contexts akin to Sutton-Smith on play, in that it takes account of the emotions, feelings, body entanglement and embodied capacity *to feel* in understanding what constitutes an affective experience. It is in that ‘*embodied capacity*’ that Anable describes that is most apparent in this overlap of affect and play in terms of the body. As Blackman (2012: 1) writes:

‘bodies are not considered stable things or entities, but rather are processes which extent into and are immersed in worlds [...] bodies are open, defined perhaps by their capacities to affect and be affected.’

In thinking of the body as *feeling* play, its affective shifts to engaging in the play space becomes an act of *embodiment*: through a lived materiality and attuning where the body orientates the self within it (Blackman, 2012) and understands the sensations as play. Referring back to the point of “in-between-ness” by Gregg and Seigworth (2010), there is a sentiment of “becoming” within embodiment and play, as through these affective experiences, the body experiences what is subjectively defined by the self as play and thus becomes immersed within its “limits.”

In thinking about the affective capacities of play within game and game-like spaces, players become associated within it, and we open ourselves up to the aesthetic, narrative and material properties contained within the game and game space (Anable, 2018: xii). Through primarily exploring games through posthumanism, Wilde (2023: 67) argued that recognising affect is important in exploring the player’s embodied experience and feeling when playing, and ‘how the interaction between human and machine [or space] is felt emotionally, cognitively, and physically.’ Our engagement within game-like space emphasises this dynamic in which the player affects and is affected by the game (Jagoda and McDonald, 2018: 174), potentially becoming emergent transformative or transgressive experiences through our actions. Through our own subjective play experience, the conducting of actions opens the “self” up to uncertain outcomes and phenomenon that may emerge when playing given its ambiguity: play itself is an affective experience as we change in state to be open to these sensations. Mediated through these affective ties – where through playfulness there is an openness to experiences these affective shifts (Paasonen, 2018: 2) – being within the play space is an act of *embodiment* as the capacities of the sensory body becomes reorientated to the play space (Blackman, 2012).

Considering play through affect as involving change in bodily states implies that play occupies its own space separate from the “lived reality,” with play occurring in its own temporality (Huizinga, 1949; Caillois, 2001). Some academics have attempted to characterise this play space where games (alongside their rule structures) and play activity as being a kind of “*magic circle*” which ‘allows players to become someone and

do things that we are unlikely to do in the “real world” (Barab et al., 2010: 100). This perspective views the play space as a separate locale, becoming a dynamic that of “reality” and “fantasy” whereby the latter is a place to play in ways unavailable to us in “reality.” Games (and video games themselves) offer the player opportunity to be ‘transported to another world discrete from the actual world’ (Keogh, 2015: 59) and offer affective experiences of play (Jagoda and McDonald, 2018: 174). It would not be inaccurate to think of the “magic circle” as being a different world, as there are different practices and rule structures that can emerge when playing that they may not in ‘reality.’ However, the problem with this idea of a “magic circle” is the “literalness” of it that some has suggested, which has in turn generated the same binaries that this chapter has outlined in regard to that of games, and of the wider understanding of play. Huizinga (1949: 9) had alluded to the idea of a “magic circle” by describing play as: ‘distinct from “ordinary” life both as to locality and duration. It is “played out” within certain limits of time and place [...] Play begins, and then at a certain moment it is “over”.’ Since Huizinga’s perspective was one that equated play with the forming of culture, I would argue that Huizinga was discussing how in this magic circle play occurs until it becomes a form of culture and why it would be viewed as temporary and eventually ends. Huizinga’s view of play is one that sees it as fluid, and so the same could be suggested for the “magic circle” in that it is not a fixed structure. However, some other academics have taken Huizinga’s idea in a literal sense to give it a firm existence in understanding and defining play.

Salen and Zimmerman (2004) alluded to the same temporality as Huizinga, seeing it as a boundary defining the “space” and “time” where the game occurs – for them, it is simply where the game takes place. Whilst they do share a similarity in terms of viewing the space as separate from the “real world,” Salen and Zimmerman views it within this fixed binary: given the focus on video games, the “magic circle” would seem obvious to a binary of ‘not playing the game’ to ‘playing the game.’ Carse (2012: 4-8) also alluded to this binary by stating that the temporary boundaries were limitations for player behaviour. However, earlier I questioned the rigidness of games and their rule structures as so much of it is dependent on the varied and emergent behaviours of its players. Salen and Zimmerman in particular attempt to provide a definitive idea of what

the “magic circle” is but I argue that it is as fluid as the act of play itself as it can disappear and emerge in different forms either within a game or beyond it.

In a discussion around engagement with game characters, Consalvo (2003: 180) referred to this play space as:

‘[a] period of *liminality*, where the player is between [their] “real” life and the life of the character on screen. As the rules of real life are temporarily lifted, so are the social expectations [...] because the experience “is only a game”.’

Here, Consalvo is suggesting the same fixed temporality as Salen and Zimmerman in which all aspects of “reality” are left in favour of this “new world”. In doing so, both these positions treat the idea of a “magic circle” as some physical entity or barrier that divides these “reality” and “fantasy” spaces. This was also further enforced by Consalvo (2009) who linked the act of cheating with engaging in the rules of the game space – for them, the “magic circle” is literal because “*cheating occurs there*”. I align my perspective of the “magic circle” with Kawitzky (2020: 133) in that it is not some impermeable barrier that separates games and the “real,” as emergent activity can shift between them constantly – the “magic circle” is fluid because play can continue both within it and beyond it. Fernández-Vara (2009: 3), who considers the intersection of video games and performance, argues that ‘the magic circle is transportable and flexible, and as permeable and performers make it to be.’ Here, Fernández-Vara is addressing that through player actions (as performance), the parameters of the play space shift and elements of play is not solely confined to such a space. Rather, there is a recognition of player intentions and actions, emergence and uncertainty in play that comes through the performances of players. As Fernández-Vara (2009: 3) defines it: ‘the video game space must also extend beyond the screen [...] there is a multiplicity of aspects that define the space involved in video games as performance, from the represented space on screen, to the physical space the player is occupying.’ The exploration of *EverQuest* (Sony Online Entertainment, 1999) by Taylor (2006: 30-31) demonstrates the constant emergence of activity that occurs in-game and outside it, as they suggest that the game’s social elements had built webs of relationships existing in online and offline life. In short, the “magic circle” is a metaphor for the play space

rather than some restrictive structure as it can still allow play to fluidly move within it and still utilises contexts brought from reality. As I argue, play is tied to the subjective and affective capacities of the player, the magic circle is not necessarily within its own fixed reality, shifting and altering in accordance with the embodied desires of the player.

If we consider play as being tied to the subjective acts of the player – who shifts the play space in relation to their intended acts – the player is an active performer as they interact within play *and* is the spectator of it (Fernández-Vara, 2009: 6). In contextualising this play space in response to the “magic circle,” there is an intersection of agency, affect, and structure surrounding play. Within these layers, there are potentials for the body to shift in its affective capacities, through the acts of players that are mediated by the structure of the play space. To explain this in terms of games, the structure of a game consists of specific rules and objectives (Suits, 2005; Salen and Zimmerman, 2004) that the player is expected to aim for. Yet, through these structures, the player can perform subjective forms of meaningful actions (as agency) (Murray, 1997; Bódi, 2021) that is afforded by the game, whether constrained to the “rules” or transgressing them in accordance with individual player desires (Aarseth, 2007; Sundén, 2009). Fernández-Vara (2009: 6) considers player performance in relation to game structure as the dynamics, where the player enacts translates the rules into their own strategies of play. As “active players” (Keogh, 2015; Fernández-Vara, 2006), the player’s performance in relation to game structures affords affective shifts when playing, becoming embodied within the play space to encounter sensations, emotions and tensions (Anable, 2018; Huizinga, 1949; Paasonen, 2018). Play and its parameters are the intersection of agency, affect and spatial structures, as it becomes situated within a context (such as games) and through the mediations of subjective interactions, play phenomena is experiences.

## **1.7 Part I. Conclusion**

So far in this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate that some of the discourse around the concept of play has attempted to describe it as definitely structured. Play is

ambiguous, uncertain, and occasionally spontaneous – the definition of play has to remain fluid and unstable in order for it to account for the change contexts in where play occurs and what is involved within it. Even when within spaces that appear to be fixed, play draws upon the agency of the player that can still result in emergent activity regardless of the rules in place. Because of this, we can be sure that play revolves around the affective sensations experienced by the player as this is what leads to their actions and emergent behaviours. Much of the literature around play has attempted to do explicitly define it, rather than accepting that due to its relationship with the player's affectivity, it can be unprompted, instinctive, or autogenic. Attempting to give it a fixed definition would place it within a binary of “what is play” and “what is not play” – yet its fluidity is what allows for various cultural contexts and practices to be interpreted. Play has various agents operating when playing, whether that is the activity, the space and game, the rules or the sensations we experience during play – we know it is play when we feel it is play. Our agency allows interaction within the play space to shape the play experience, even if the power structures attempt to dictate it. Through navigating the play space, performing subjective acts in relation to these structures, affective outcomes are achieved. If we are to understand play, the player, and how it is embodied within the play space, we have to accept that play is ambiguous and draws upon the feelings of the player.

## ***Part II. Approaching Ideas of Sexual Play***

### ***1.8 Where Play Meets Sex***

Within this chapter so far, I have explored these various perspectives that had attempted to give play a strict definition and instead argued for a perspective that recognises its fluidity and ambiguity. In this exploration, I consider play to have various agents that allow us to *feel* what is and is not play and argue that we require a position that is not only intersectional to these contexts but directly recognises the feelings and sensations of those playing. Rather than continue to address play from a generalised

position, I will now shift to discuss a form of play that is directly attached to the ‘feelings of the players,’ in relation to sex/uality<sup>6</sup>: *sexual play*.

Play features an interweaving of contexts and structures – participants, actions, space, and design – that composes the ‘play space’ (Sutton-Smith, 2001). For Murray (1997), these structures create an ‘immersive environment’, tied directly to the affective sensations and agency of players through their ‘meaningful’ actions and performances (Murray, 1997; Bódi, 2021). Henricks (2008: 159) alluded to this interaction as creating and inhibiting ‘a distinctive world of one’s own making’ – afforded by the design and rules of the space (Murray, 1997; Suits, 2005; Lin, 2013; Bódi, 2021) – and attributed to the shaping of culture (Huizinga, 1949). Emergent activity within play can be seen as what is “meaningful” for players (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004) as it is not necessarily anticipated or predefined by the structures mediating the play space, offering “creative” or “unknown” outcomes and possibilities to occur for an affective experience (see Costello and Edmonds, 2009; De Valk et al., 2012). *Playing* in accordance with one’s agency is then conducting meaningful or purposeful activity within the limitations of the space, not necessarily conforming to its rules or practices, but actively playing alongside them (Murray, 1997; Keogh, 2015). I described this dynamic in the previous part as the difference between play and games: play is the practice of *playing*, whilst games *can* be mediated spaces that form particular play through rule-systems, objectives, and players (Suits, 2005; Lin, 2013; Brice, 2017). Games can mediate but not solely define play.

Thinking of games in terms of the ‘*lusory attitude*’ as proposed by Suits (2005: 42-55), to play a game is to willingly accept the rules of the game, and bring about a specific state of affairs, reach some goal or objective, and behave in a way that is permitted by these rule systems. Suits (2005) argued that to “meet the goal” of the game – “to win” the game – one has to follow the rules, and by ‘breaking’ or disregarding the rules, the game

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<sup>6</sup> The stylisation here is purposeful, to acknowledge the shifts and differences between them, whilst also how they can inform each other and are not fixed or permanently linked. Sex may describe specific actions, whilst sexuality can be more related to one’s identity (e.g., ‘heterosexual’ men and ‘men who have sex with other men’ (MSM)).

is no longer being played. I argued that games were not necessarily absolute in terms of their structure, considering that our agency can create emergent activity not necessarily predefined by rules or systems (Murray, 1997). As we *feel* what is play and can only understand play individually (Nachmanovitch, 2009), the “disregarding” of rules also posits that “new games”, and “new goals” are created for that player. The rules of the game are also objects of play, becoming a context of understanding and exploring play behaviours (Sutton-Smith, 2001). Playing within a game is to accept an extent of power dynamics that mediate it, from both the form of the game or play and those playing. Whilst there may be intentions for that play to have implied or intended behaviours as a part authoritative structure to the “original” game (Aarseth, 2007), there is still a sense of freedom and autonomy for the player in their engagement with those structures (Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán, 2015). Therefore, when thinking of the relationship between play and games, we are not only considering their definition but are considering their qualities and power relations to each other and to/with players. One may follow the rules or disregard them and follow their own conduct, changing the form of play occurring and the play experience for the individual and others playing. Despite all these structures, the play of the game space still affords a recognition to emergent activity occurring regardless of the “limitations” present.

Previously, Caplan (1987: 22) had asked ‘when we talk about [sex/uality], are we considering behaviour or a set of ideas and, if both, what is the relationship between them?’ Caplan’s question is similar to discussing these perspectives on play and games: are we speaking about *playing* itself – the act, activity or behaviour – within the space of games, or the ideas that surround the two of them? I argue, like Paasonen (2018: 2), that playing is in relation to actions demonstrative to being open to affective potentials and horizons compared to the space of play which mediates them.

In terms of sex/uality and play, are we then asking around the sexual behaviours that can occur when playing, the ideas of sex itself, or the links between them all? It is this relationship between sex and play, particularly in understanding game-like spaces, that this chapter is most concerned with, especially in regard to how sex and sexual activity impacts the experience of video games. Considering sex in terms of play foregrounds

affective sensations of pleasure and desire when playing, where bodies shift from one state to another sexually or erotically (Paasonen, 2018: 3-8). There's a relation here to agency, as the player follows their desires towards some form of outcome – whilst it is not inaccurate to suggest that the motivations are linked to the affective thrills of orgasms or relationships (Paasonen, 2018: 26-27), it is also a way to (re)articulate one's sexual identity within play or game-like spaces. Returning to Caplan's question, and aligning with the intersecting nature of play, when discussing sex/uality, we are exploring behaviours, ideas, practices, motivations, and spaces alongside those *playing sexually*. Now, the rest of this chapter will contextualise what is meant by *sexual play* through an exploration of the relationship between sex and play and its embodiment and intersection within sexual sub/culture spaces. Through this, it aims to argue that we can think of sexual play as: actions that draw upon the affective (sexual) sensations of the player (Paasonen, 2018: 2) that are motivated by meaningful actions and outcomes (Murray, 1997; Cense, 2019; Bódi, 2021) and potentially result in emergent or transgressive experiences.

### **1.9 Play and Agency in Sexual Sub/Culture**

Already in the chapter, I contextualised the concept of agency as the exertion of “meaningful” actions that were afforded by space (Murray, 1997); to exert agency is not only participation, but a self-validating ‘aesthetic pleasure’ (Murray, 1997: 140) that is enjoyed for its own sake alongside playful activity. This sense of pleasure that is attained through one's “choice” within the confines of the play space can be further contextualised through sexual activity and practice. As noted by Paasonen (2018), agency can be tied to following one's sexual desires, whether for sexual intercourse, procreation, or relationships. Albanesi (2009: 103) viewed *sexual agency* as the ‘willingness to exert power within a sexual encounter in an attempt to sway the outcome of events.’ In this regard, agency is defined by the extension of one's “power” to act within a space, along with the “intent” to utilise that power. In Albanesi's view, this would be to alter the course of events to one's own subjective desires, though the outcome of which is ambiguous. Yet, the opposite can also be said: it can also be the choice *not* to exert power within an encounter and instead disregard some of the

expectations and aims in an act of transgression (Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018). Regardless, the capacity to conduct one's own subjective actions irrespective to the space's parameters is still "meaningful" for the individual who is agentic in following their desires (Murray, 1997).

For example, reflecting on the intent to exert one's own power regarding sexual engagement, if the "end goal" was for procreation purposes then participants would be exerting behaviours with this aim in mind. In this regard, the "sexual space" where sexual activities can occur feature similar structures to games/game-like spaces that Suits (2005) described, where there are certain objectives and rules that are implicitly stated (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004). Yet, within these confines, there is still affordances for the participant to interact in accordance with their own sexual desires (Paasonen, 2017). Therefore, power structures are formulated within the space with the intersecting of contexts within it: the players, the aims (of the activity or personal aims of the player(s)) and the restrictions imposed by the activity or space (Sutton-Smith, 2001). Vanwasenbeeck et al. (2019: 380-381) defined sexual agency through direct engagement, understanding it as having the ability to initiate sexual activity and communicate sexual desires that meet the needs of the individual. This would constitute an extent of agency for Albanesi, as there is the exertion of one's subjective power within the space to sway the direction to one's own desires. With sexual agency as involving the desires to bring about a participant's or their own sexual satisfaction – whether to a point of orgasm or not – sexual agency can also emerge from informative, educational experiences or lead to new horizons or (re)articulations of one's desire (Race, 2015: 266; Paasonen, 2018: 3). With sexual agency, then, we are discussing personal authority, the body, definitions of sex and engagement within a sexual scenario that attribute to a form of sexual satisfaction, afforded by the design of the space where it occurs.

For Cense (2019), sexual agency was a bit more varied than just the extent of control over one's body or role within a sexual scenario, finding it something of a multicomponent model. Cense (2019: 248-257) categorised the various ways sexual agency is facilitated: embodied agency (positioning and engaging in sexual practices or

identities that are accessible through lived culture), bonded agency (negotiations involved in retaining relationships and sexual expectations), and moral agency (positioning the self within moral frameworks, like guilt or shame, for example). Whilst these may not be necessarily applicable to every scenario, they allude to how behaviours are situated and recognised through different contexts. Viewing sexual spaces parallel to play spaces – as fluid, improvisational, and ambiguous – one’s sexual agency positions the sexual self in relation to the space and other agents within it. For Cense, these intersecting contexts composes the navigation and exertion of one’s sexual agency. “Entering” the sexual (play) space, participant’s affective engagement shift and navigate through the space and structures that surround their actions. As such, in Cense’s view, conducts and contexts “lived culture” (reality) shift into the “play space” (fantasy). In doing so, participants negotiate and navigate these structures – as bonded and moral agency (Cense, 2019) – and in turn create the expectations and objectives for play. To reach those potentials, the sexual acts performed by individuals are performed through their own morality and practices within this space of sexual possibility. Whilst it is not necessary in every case that cultural conducts and rules are adopted from ‘lived experiences’ when playing in a sexual space, it does signify cultural definitions of ‘appropriateness’, much like Foucault critiqued. Therefore, the exertion of one’s sexual agency within the space may be in relation to unknown and ambiguous goals and experiences, involving the navigation and engagement of various agents or structures. However, predominantly, to exert one’s sexual agency is to interact in accordance with one’s sexual desires to produce particular outcomes. Sexual agency when playing is not only engaging with the desires of the self, but the desires of the space or scenario itself: rules, conducts, other participant pleasures, to name some examples. Performing an extent of agency is navigating these power structures, whether or not conforming to them (Paasonen, 2017: 5) or diverting from these structures to an individually sought experience.

Within sexual spaces and sub/cultures, sex and play are tied together, as play elements inform the behaviours and practices that can and do occur (Lauteria and Wysocki, 2015: 1; Paasonen 2018: 1). For Tiidenberg and Paasonen (2019: 391), play in the context of sexual cultures is central to knowing the motivations behind particular

scenes or spaces, as well as how players/actors shift between roles, behaviours, and positions. Play aids in the '[discovery of] sexual thrills, pleasures, and intensities' (Tiidenberg and Paasonen, 2019: 391), affecting shifting the self (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Anable, 2018) to experience these new horizons of satisfaction. In the context of these positions, play in sexual cultures embodies a sense of improvisation, where participants or their bodies shift when playing as their actions are tied to their motivations, pleasures, and behaviours (Paasonen, 2018). It would not be inaccurate to suggest that the sexual motivations within sexual cultures – the feelings felt when playing – are 'connected to the goals of orgasm, procreation and relationships' (Paasonen, 2019: 27). However, further considering these motivations in terms of agency – aligning with the idea of 'meaningful actions' as described by Murray – the relationship of sex and play is also one of (re)articulation in terms of one's sexual identity. Actions like sexual intercourse – a physical act of 'playing sexually' – had historically been perceived to hold the purpose of procreation (Foote, 1954) but have shifted to be seen as recreational behaviours and experimental spaces (Diamond, 1997; Piha et al., 2020). Foucault (1978) had previously stated that sex/uality had been constructed by cultural discourse – much like play itself – dictating 'acceptable' or 'appropriate' forms of sexual behaviour (procreation) and other acts as perverse or taboo (sex as recreational). The reason for mentioning this discourse is to allude to how our understanding of sex and play has changed, instead less reliant on the cultural assumptions of bodies and identities (Butler, 2006) and now attached to motivations and sensations of pleasure beyond procreation intentions.

Lauteria and Wysocki (2015: 1) offer a summary for the sexual practices and cultures have been described as playful activities: safer sex practices may be referred to as "*playing safe*," and the use of recreational drugs during sexual intercourse can be described as "*party and play*" (*PnP*). As similarly noted by Tiidenberg and Paasonen, play's embodiment goes beyond practices themselves to denote sexual positions – using sports metaphors like "*pitching*" and "*catching*" – through to the actual sexual activity and its 'actors' or participants, like "*playing with yourself*" (masturbation) or "*playing together*" (group play/sex) (Lauteria and Wysocki, 2015: 1). I argue that the range in which play is embodied in terms of sex/uality and sexual cultures is

representative of the ambiguous nature of play itself: there are new and various outcomes or experiences to explore and be located, depending on the kinds of play occurring. lasenza (2010: 291) attributed this sense of ambiguity to sex and something queer: ‘sex is a queer experience for everyone at one time or another. It can be unruly, ecstatic, routine, mysterious, transgressive, confusing [and] unpredictable.’ Returning to Foucault’s critique of the sex being defined previously by culture as solely a mechanic for procreation efforts, the intersection of play with sex shifts our conceptualisations to viewing sex as more versatile. As lasenza argued, sex can be unpredictable, and therefore fluid and changing. This fluid – and arguably, limitless – view of sex is also suggestive of the possibilities of play, allowing for spontaneity or new sensations to occur and be *felt* (see Sutton-Smith, 2011: 1-6; Henricks, 2008: 158-170). Sexual cultures involving *group sex/play* may involve sexual encounters where couples and partners “swap” to engage in intercourse with other participants (Harviainen and Frank, 2018: 221-222) or in BDSM<sup>7</sup> communities, there is the ‘enactment of fantasy [...] [where BDSM] scenes are unscripted and unrehearsed’ (Newmahr, 2011: 61). The point being made here is that sexual sub/cultures feature an extent of fluidity and ambiguity in their structure and experiences, often emerging through one’s agency, and dependent on the contexts where the play occurs.

As Sutton-Smith (2001) noted, with play being the product of an intersection of contexts – space, actors, activities, ‘props,’ rules and others – the same can be said about sexual cultures where there are player agents, sexual behaviours and practices, aesthetics, and spaces. Considering these intertwined structures within these cultural contexts through the perspective of play acknowledges the shifting, affective and fluid behaviours, and experiences: sexual behaviours within this fluid space of play opens up the possibility for various experiences to emerge. Barker (2014: 157) spoke of the affective *pull* sex has, in that bodies are constantly engaging in sex/uality, shifting from desiring it – and enjoying desiring it – to experiencing it. As such, the connection to goals of sexual satisfaction and (re)actualising one’s desires – or further aspirations of

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<sup>7</sup> I am using this acronym in reference to sexual communities and practices involving Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism. However, it may be the case that further practices and terminologies are also a part of this acronym.

orgasms and/or relationships – ‘foregrounds [personal] pleasure and bodily intensity’ (Paasonen, 2017: 2)’ within sexual engagement and interaction. In this regard, sexual play involves the subjective and mediated actions to satisfy this affective pull. Therefore, with this intersecting of versatile contexts, and the unknown natures and potentials of sex, experiences emerge through these personal affective motivations as ‘humans are designed to react emotionally and physically to sexual stimuli’ (Brathwaite, 2013: 107).

### **1.10 Finding Play in Sexual Sub/Culture**

This link of sex and play as dependent on intersecting structures and the affective sensations of its participants within the ‘sexual space’ are manifested within a broad scope of sexual cultures. Within these cultures, the abundance (and ambiguous) intersecting contexts that compose them or mediate certain behaviours change the outcome or experiences. Through these sexual cultures, there is a direct engagement with the agency of participants, with these cultures embodying game-like qualities in terms of affordances, space, design, and motivations behind the behaviours that occur. To further explore this, I will contextualise this discussion through working through some examples from various sexual sub/cultures and communities.

As already mentioned, *group play/sex* or even those classified as *Group Sex Events* (GSEs) involves several actors and participants – even to observers – where agreements and rules are shared and followed (Frank, 2013; Harvianen and Frank, 2018). In this space, there is a negotiation of various systems – the rules of the activity through to the values brought into the space by its members – which mediates the kinds of play that occurs and the pleasurable experiences that can be attained (Harvianen and Frank, 2018: 234-235). There is an allusion here to game-like aspects of this kind of (sexual) play, as each participant adopts their own codes of conduct and value systems – acting as personal limitations or rules – each with the shared “goal” of sexual satisfaction. here is some amount of ambiguity and unknown outcomes here, as by performing an extent of sexual agency – such as choosing to engage in sexual activity with particular members in accordance with one’s desires – there is an acceptance of the rules and

agreements of the space, aiming to be sexually gratifying. An accurate metaphor to this would be a “sandbox,” where there is a ‘player-driven’ structure as participants can fluidly shift between sexual partners, whilst still respecting or conforming to the established agreements. As such, within the parameters of this “player-driven” space, emergent play can occur as they subjectively navigate space in accordance with their own values (Costello and Edmonds, 2009).

*Chemsex* – the involvement of recreational drugs in sexual activity – alters the sexual experience for communities engaging in this practice (Frank, 2015; Hakim, 2019: 249). *Humiliating and Aggressive play*, for Apostoglou and Khalil (2019: 2187), involved ‘harmful’ practices – where a member is ‘humiliated’ or subject to acts of aggression by others, depending on the activity – and was still found to be desirable by participants. Similarly, *trauma play* involved adults consensually engaging in activities related to past trauma and/or abuse (Thomas, 2020: 3). Though such sexual practices may be suggestive to play as harmful or risky (Henricks, 2008; Myers, 2010), it is the subjective desires of (consenting) participants that (re)mediates these elements into a point of sexual play.

In *BDSM* communities, play takes a fluid approach (Newmahr, 2011: 9), as it involves a wide range of consensual experiences and interactions (Sihvonen and Harviainen, 2020: 3). Play and sexual experiences in *BDSM* emerge through ‘prop-use’ and specific performances, involving practices of ‘bondage, domination/submission, pain or sensual play, power exchange, leathersex, role-play and fetish’ (Weiss, 2006: 230). Here, in *BDSM*, there is the dependence on the actual persona or performance of those involved in play – as is also the case with trauma play and humiliating/aggressive play – where there is an engagement with positioning and power exchanges in terms of domination and submission. In these contexts, play becomes a form of “roleplaying,” where the actualising of specific positions, performances and objects provide (representational) meaning in negotiating the (rule) structures of situated sexual scenario (Hoover et al., 2018: 213-226; Fernández-Vara, 2006; Schechner, 2003). As such, there is an extent to which these power exchanges are bound by rules and

conducts, in order to “regulate” the game space and to not break conduct (Stenros and Bowman, 2018).

Play elements also extend beyond participants and performance, to include aesthetics or design aspects as a part of its sexual experience. *Adult Baby/Diaper Lover* communities (AB/DL) involve performance of ‘infant’ behaviours and the use of diapers as a form of clothing in its activity (Hawkinson and Zamboni, 2014; Zamboni, 2017). Communities engaging in *age-play* – performing and mimicking roles or identities different to their age – require ‘styles of engagement, interaction, and bodily stylization that fit the situation’ (Tiidenberg and Paasonen, 2019: 381). Again, there is a recognition of this play structure as intersecting with ideas of performance as specific identities and roles are adopted and there are situated stylisations of (play) actions (Hoover et al., 2018; Schechner, 2003). This allows for participants to author their play experience and ‘engineer its affective intensities’ (Tiidenberg and Paasonen, 2019: 381). *Pup-play* – role-play that mimics the behaviour of dogs/puppies – there is the presence of power dynamics and performance, as well as the inclusion of specific aesthetics from ‘collars and other “gear” associated with owning a dog’ (Wignall and McCormick, 2017: 801).

What becomes apparent in these sexual cultures is the emergence of affect play experiences that is mediated by the actions (playing) within these “temporary” intersecting structures of conducts, participants, and/or aesthetics. Positioned within a specific sexual role – whether as a “pup” or as a “dom” for example, play allows one to “test” the affective capacities of the self or (re)articulate the sexual self within this sexual space. The relationship of sex and play in terms of sexual cultures is not just limited to physical spaces, as much of these outlined examples appear to exist within, as it can also be located within virtual and online spaces. Internet spaces and virtual environments have become sites for sexual experimentation (see Waskul and Vannini, 2008; Nielsen, Paasonen and Spisak, 2015). For example, internet sex<sup>8</sup> ‘is often ludic in that it is playful, casual, distant, and noncommittal’ (Waskul and Vannini, 2008: 259).

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<sup>8</sup> May also be defined as virtual sex or cybersex.

This perspective of the internet space being ‘playful’ and ‘noncommittal’ suggests a fluidity that occurs in its interactions, arguably returning to the idea of ambiguous play that results in emergent experiences. Sub/cultures shifting to virtual platforms as a part of their ‘play’ suggest this ambiguity and emergence. Tziallas (2015) described gay male social networking apps (*GMSNAs*) as embodying a playful attitude, due to users integrating and merging their daily lives and values into a virtual creation and self-presentation. Race (2015: 256) documented the experience of *Chemsex* but instead upon online ‘hook-up’ apps, suggesting that they are an entanglement of sexual ‘expertise’ and motivations, subjectively brought forth by each user. Even in (video) game spaces, sex and play can be found with flirtation and relationships emerging through “online chat” and “emote” systems in MMORPGs (see Sundén, 2012).

### **1.11 Feeling Sexual Affect/ivity and Space**

Virtual and online spaces allow an extent of “distance” to be maintained, as the space is separate from the “physical landscape” without the use of physical bodies within the (sexual) play. However, those spaces *can* be more multiplayer and interpersonal, in which the play spaces *can* be shared between multiple participants and therefore involving an intersection of contexts. However, to state that this distance is affirmed, with the landscapes of the virtual and physical never overlapping is problematic, as it would consider the playful acts and identities of this “separate” realm as being only performative than tied to the player themselves. As such, the spaces of the “virtual” and “physical” are not always *exclusive*, with intentions to play emerging from the player themselves *into* the virtual space.

Play and sex in this sense *can* be limitless, as the participant decides through their own choice how they will be perceived and perform in the subjective “sexual” space. In this context, the relationship between sex and play is one that not only allows a distance from other participants, but a distance from reality and the ‘self.’ In this context, the relationship between sex and play is one that does allow a distance from physical confines of space and “self” to open up the possibilities to play as an affective experience: *play offers us various affective experiences of shifting between states,*

*becoming affected by them in the process* (Paasonen, 2018: 3; Jagoda and McDonald, 2018: 177). Then, this relationship of sex and play involves an affective shift that becomes a part of a performance of “a” self that engages with sexual sensations and subjective motivations of its players. Through rules, codes, bodily capacities and affective emergence, the performance of one’s play becomes shaped by these contexts intersecting (Jayemanne, 2017). Elements are tied to personal sexual desires and practices - both individual and shared practices - and are representative of how these pleasures influence the form and experience of play regardless of being a physically lived space or an imagined virtual experience.

We can return to the earlier discussion around the affective qualities of play to interrogate this performance and experience of sexual sensations, as I established the framing of affect as involving the shifts in body capacity to *feel*. Though, the discussion itself was framed around the notions of affect generally, whereas here there is a need to discuss this affectivity in relation to the specific contexts of sex and desire. To rely on my earlier contextualises of affect would not address the contexts of how sex, sexuality, intimacy, and desire intersect with affective experiences of play nor the embodiment of a sexual self. There is a need here to articulate what *sexual affect* is to provide a frame in how this thesis understands the relationship between these contexts. Already, the question raised by Gregg and Seigworth posited around the difficulties in defining affect when there is no “original state” can be returned to. If viewing affect through a perspective that considers it as involving forces, intensities and shifts in body capacity, sexual affect is then tied to the sexual engagement and embodiment of players that leads to these shifts and phenomenological experiences. Rather than only operating and creating associations between the body and space (in this thesis, games) (Ash, 2013: 29), sexual affect directly draws upon the sexual desires and sensations of the player. Tomkins (2008: 226) alludes to sexual affect through the aims for sexual pleasure, describing emotions and sensations in the search of this pleasure as interest, excitement, release/relief, and enjoyment. To Tomkins (2008: 226), these are affective qualities that are central for sexual pleasure and stimulation, which facilitates a kind of negotiation and intimacy. Again, there is this recognition of

the body's capacity in creating these experiences, where the body shifts to experiencing these emotions and thrills to achieve sexual fulfilment.

Paasonen (2018: 95) extends this notion from Tomkins by exploring how (sexual) play emerges these sexually affective experiences, arguing that through play, the body can experience intensities through negotiating desires, needs, interactions, and pleasure. For Tiidenberg and Paasonen (2019) play and affect are correlated, as the 'notion of play is central understanding what drives particular sexual scenes, how players move between roles, positions, and headspaces, and how they come to discover sexual thrills, pleasures, and intensities in the process.' As actions driven or motivated by bodily pleasure and desire (Paasonen, 2018; Tiidenberg and Paasonen, 2019), sexual play shifts the body from its original state into these unknown sexually affective outcomes - particularly if connected to aims of sexual fulfilment, intimacy or relationships (Paasonen, 2018: 27).

### **1.12 Part II. Conclusion: A Framework of Sexual Play**

'The notion of play is central to understanding what drives particular sexual scenes, how players move between roles, positions [...] and how they come to discover sexual thrills, pleasures and intensities in the process' (Tiidenberg and Paasonen, 2019: 391). In this intermeshing of play structures, sex, and game spaces – including video game cultures – pleasure, desire and bodily intensity have been foregrounded as motivations for playing (Paasonen, 2017: 2). Waskul and Vannini (2008: 242) argued that the value of sex and play is the actual playing and the pleasures that arise from it. Sex and play tie directly to the affective sensations, sexual or not, that are experienced by the player (Paasonen, 2018: 2), becoming forms of meaningful actions (Murray, 1997; Cense, 2019) that generate some satisfying outcome. Various sexual cultures and spaces have featured game-like qualities in terms of rule-systems or specific objectives that players or participants wish to attain (Suits, 2005). Even so, sex and sexual desires are embodied and demonstrated in a variety of ways, not necessarily predicated by the game or the structures that operate within them. Behaviours and actions may occur in a "*sexual magic circle*" – as the participant leaves reality to enter temporary spaces of

sexual fantasy (Barab et al., 2010) – but these spaces are not fixed, allowing for emergent or transgressive experiences to occur. Since the participant is entering a personal space, whether with others or alone, they are accepting that they have entered a sexual reality that can be unpredictable, flexible, and pleasurable.

Whilst sexual play does come with an aspect of exposure, there are also sexual possibilities: the space enables participants to explore sensations or sexual ideas that may not have previously been apparent, which can lead to a transformation of an individual's sexual identity or behaviour (Weiss, 2006: 236; Race, 2015: 266; Paasonen, 2018: 3; Tiidenberg and Paasonen, 2019: 390-391). The varying degree of sexuality in the play experience of games offers possibilities to discover new desires or forms of play that may have been previously unknown to the individual. Sex in video games is not something new, ranging from the phallic joysticks of the arcade era to the “hardcore” sexual simulators of the modern age (Brathwaite, 2013). Through the intersections of content, participants and conducts, sexual play can emerge through these structures for the player. The thread between them is that they foreground pleasure and desire as an aspect of playing, where the body is fluid and constantly shifts in experiences – sexually, erotically, or even changes in identity (Paasonen, 2018: 3-8). At the beginning of this chapter, I stated that play is the practice of playing, performing a sense of autonomy within the limitations of the space. Games provide the “playground” that mediates play, with “rules” that shape the game space in doing so players “move” in accordance with their agency – the actions they deem meaningful.

Thinking towards sex, then, there is a similar perspective: *sexual play* is the practice of playing sexually, whether actively or passively, within a situated sexual context. Sexual play acts are motivated by our affective desires (Paasonen, 2018: 2), giving currency to the basis of our (playful) actions within a sexual space or scenario (Murray, 1997; Cense, 2019). In engaging in certain stylisations of performance, rules or roles within the situated scenario (Hoover et al., 2018; Fernández-Vara, 2006; Tiidenberg and Paasonen, 2019: 381), our subjective actions can result in emergent, transgressive or (re)articulative experiences that are afforded by the space. As “active players” (Keogh, 2015; Fernández-Vara, 2006), the player's performance in relation to play structures affords affective shifts when playing, becoming embodied within the play space to

encounter sensations, emotions and tensions (Anable, 2018; Huizinga, 1949; Paasonen, 2018).

As this chapter argued, play is ambiguous, uncertain and expansive (Henricks, 2008), where our playful actions subjectively emerge through various contexts that surround the play space (Sutton-Smith, 2001). As theorised by Huizinga (1949) – and later by Caillois (2001) – play involves imaginative, distinct, and leisure-based qualities as forms of pleasure that come about through our mediated interactions within the confines of the play space. However, whilst sexual play shares these traits in terms of improvisational and affective qualities, it is situated within a specific context and intention where sensations of pleasure additionally emerge through sexual exploration, engagements with intimacy and desire, and a strive for titillation. As Paasonen (2018: 150) argues, ‘sexual play helps set in motion the felt boundaries of imagination and bodily capacity’ as our sexual agency is mediated through a particular context. Through sexual play, sexually affective horizons *can* be discovered and/or explored, and specific forms of pleasure can be attained.

## Chapter 2. Scripting Gay: Intersections of Sexual Scripting, Games and Gay Men

### 2.1 Introduction

Shifting from the preluding discussion of sexual play in the previous chapter, here I contextualise my understanding of *sexual scripting*: the prescribing of sexual conducts and practices. As a framework, it considers sexual interaction and practices as being socio-culturally defined, understanding sex/uality and sexual subcultures as being a set of followed principles (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). The previous chapter had considered the presence of play within sexual subcultures, where certain rules and expectations were embedded within the space - this started to suggest some extent of prescribed behaviours that can be seen as sexual scripting. In this chapter, I am contextualising sexual scripting in terms of sexual acts and sexual navigation of (social) encounters and the kinds of power dynamics that surround them. However, rather than solely focus on the social interaction that the framework has usually been applied to, I contextualise it in relation to games and game-like spaces, as well the representations of sexual conducts in the context of gay men and pornography.

Generally, this chapter seeks to explore the intersect of sexual play and sexual scripting: prescribed actions and/or behaviours framed within a particular social/cultural context (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). As I argued in the previous chapter, games and game-like spaces mediate the capacity to (sexually) play, with their rules and objectives guiding the interactions of those involved in the space. Yet, despite these “rule systems,” play itself is tied to the subjective and emergent affective engagement, becoming formed through this mediation and how the interaction(s) are framed. This is where sexual scripting intersects with ideas of rules and conducts within the play of game spaces. Whilst the previous chapter did explore the subjectivities within play and affect, it did not consider (play) interactions within social or cultural contexts that mediate or provide structure to them. As this chapter will contextualise, sexual scripting provides an initial framing to interrogating player behaviours and performances of play/ful actions as being socio-culturally mediated. However, in my

treatment of this framework, I also highlight how through these subjective and affective aspects of play that the “script” (prescribed interactions in a social/cultural scenario) is potentially fluid and open to renegotiations.

To continue exploring these frameworks – like play, affect, and sexual scripting – with an awareness to their intersections with subjectivity, elements of this chapter utilise my own personal commentary as points of intervention. In considering “scripting behaviours,” I reflect and contextualise my position in relation to my identity by considering the elements of which may have contributed to the socio-cultural scripts I “perform.” The use of my positionality here is not to privilege my position as authoritative or prioritise that as the most valuable source of academic exploration in this regard. Instead, the use of positionality here is to reflect on the construction and navigation of sexual scripting on a subjective personal level. Much of the discourses of sexual script theory frameworks have focused on heterosexual dynamics. Whilst these are still relevant as an initial point to contextualise the idea of scripting, the reflection to my subjectivity is an attempt to shift this pre-existing focus onto more queer and gay sexual identities, as well as situated it within the (socially) interactive space of games.

## **2.2 A (Gay) Confession of the Self**

Directly including the “self” within academic writing is a complicated space, even within the parameters of a literature review. To actively and openly discuss the self as an autonomous presence or entity within the research itself may be perceived as unusual or ethically complex with preconceived notions of research requiring a firm retention of objectivity (Newton, 1993; Kulick, 1995). Yet, some researchers *have* used themselves as a site of inquiry within their writing as subjects to provide first-hand accounts of their experiences and encounters or using more creative approaches to forms of academic writing (Bochner and Ellis, 2016). In some studies, more closely aligned with this thesis, academics like Sundén (2012) and Wilde (2023) have used subjective writing to explore the affective experiences of gameplay and interaction. Elsewhere, the use of personal narratives and novels has further been previously conducted within studies of sex/uality and sexual cultures (see Altork, 1995; Bolton,

1995; Adams, 2011). For Haynes (2011), the self is embodied through all aspects of academic work, from inception to publication. As such, the self is intertwined with all layers of the academic work, embodying and performing the subjective self overtly or implicitly in how the researcher presents the work *and* themselves. As Commane (2016) discussed around researcher reflexivity in ethnographic work, exploring this intertwined self in academic work can create opportunities to reflect on the relationships with have with research, participants and our sense of self as a researcher. Whilst the brief mentioning of such reflexive work here is more demonstrative to autoethnographic methodologies and practices<sup>9</sup>, I am highlight them here as they emphasise the capacity of research being conducted and articulated through subjective means. The “self” is positioned as the site of inquiry, which the individual experience validated as a form of academic exploration.

For these scholars, the relevance and purpose of recognising reflexivity and researcher subjectivities within this academic work is to open the extents of nuance within research, highlight unknown biases that may perpetuate the work, and seeks to achieve a greater criticality. As someone who considers themselves as a fellow autoethnographer akin to these aforementioned scholars, the openness to using my positionality as a point of research is intended to blur the lines between the “academy” as a “public,” synthesising the “researcher” and the “researched” (Reed-Danahay, 1997) and seeking to bring the reader directly into the experience and phenomenon I encounter. Recognising and using the self within the research may be deemed as “self-glamorising” or “self-indulgent” as an autoethnographer (Pratt, 1986: 31; for myself, the use of my own subjectivity is to address the research as articulated and emerging through a specific positionality rather than offering sweeping generalisations. Though this discussion is something parallel to a methodological justification, I am mentioning it here to validate the relevance of the “I” within the theoretical frameworks considered within this chapter. Since this chapter *does* engage in ideas around sex/uality, practice and gay men, it would be remiss to not consider my own positionality in the context of

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<sup>9</sup> I define my methodological approach in this thesis as a form of autoethnography, specifically engaging in this discussion within Chapter 4. Methodology.

the theory. Though not to privilege my own experience or articulations against the theoretical work that underpins this chapter, it would be inconsistent to not consider my “self,” especially with the previous chapter arguing for an awareness to the subjective capacities of play.

Further, this chapter references literature that emerges from more sexology or sociological backgrounds which, at their time of writing, had been focused on heterosexual or heterocentric conceptualisations of sexual dynamics and interaction (Simon and Gagnon, 1986; Gagnon, 1990). Instead, I occupy a different positionality to those that were commonly discussed and using my “self” seek to expand upon these notions into other contexts. As mentioned at the opening of this section, whilst it may be perceived as an uncommon practice to engage the self with literature - given these prior notions of objectivity - for the context of this doctoral thesis, I would like to continue addressing one's own identity as an intervention with literature. For a framework exploring the prescribed and dominant structures of (sexual) interactions within a social/cultural context, then I would argue it is also relevant to interrogate my own identity and interaction in relation to them.

To state explicitly, or rather, “confessing the obvious”: I am a (white) gay male. To add further detail and nuance, I am a white gay man from a working-class family background, British, and still presently residing within the UK at the time of writing. I am also a “queer gamer,” a layer which intersects with other elements of my identity and how I navigate socio-cultural contexts (Shaw, 2011: 29). I am acknowledging these aspects - or rather, contexts of my identity - as they are in essence how I “understand” the world and experience it - they are contexts that compose my subjectivity. All these contexts in their exploration of online spaces and identity, Maratea and Kavanaugh (2012: 102) had considered the self as emerging and communicated through our interactions with forms of culture and language. If interacting with cultural contexts *can* inform compositions of self - where culture *can* contribute the “crafting” or “modifying” of our behaviours and subjective perspective (Maratea and Kavanaugh, 2012: 102) - then some aspects of our subjectivity has been *prescribed* through culture. One could point towards cultural aspects as nationality, ethnicity, religion, or sexuality, for

example, as guiding our interaction or prescribes specific roles, motives, behaviours or performances (Simon and Gagnon, 1986; Escoffier, 2007). As such, there are various dominant cultural contexts that may attribute to a formulation of identity and interaction (Gagnon, 1990; Plante, 2006).

Needless to say, being a white male or British may not be contexts that assist in “realising” my sexuality, or rather, has explicitly prescribed my conducts as a gay man. They are simply examples in which my identity has been formed, framed and mediated. A similar argument can be made for also identifying as a gamer in how my identity is constructed and mediated, especially in relation to the play expectations of games and navigation of wider socio-cultural gaming spaces. The positionality of being a white, male, British gamer affords certain privileges compared to other (non-white male) positionalities, as highlighted by the well documented issues of sexism and racism within gaming representation and cultures (see Nakamura, 2019; Malkowski and Russworm, 2017). Reflecting on my positionality in my own definition, I would instead attribute my sexuality becoming apparent through my engagements with (desirable) male forms over time. Thinking to playing with the muscular and buff “*Action Men*” dolls from *Hasbro* (1993-2006) as a young boy, through to seeing the attractive faces and bodies of sensationalised actors on screen, to the gradual awareness and exposure of sexual relationships with other men and pornography as an adult. Considering this through Maratea and Kavanaugh’s point on interactionism, my engagement with these contexts has informed my articulation of “being gay” or how I understood these *affective sensations* towards other men and same-sex relationships. Generally, though not entirely, in this regard my interactions and performances of behaviours within these contexts aided in the construction and realisation of myself as gay. Such engagement relates to the argument by Frith and Kitzinger (2001: 210) that sexuality is *learned* from culturally available messages, and that sexual conduct and encounters are prescribed from such spaces.

To give a crude and essentialized contextualisation of their argument using my personal reflection: playing with an *Action Man* doll becomes a space to interact with an “idealised” male form (being Herculean in their physiques), eventually manifesting into

a desire for other men and masculine bodies, to further see such forms be realised and performed within gay pornography, attempting to “depict *real* sex between men” that is adopted into one’s articulation of sexuality (Sun et al., 2016: 985). This summary should not be taken as universally acceptable nor an argument that states how sex/uality is “learned” through these lays. Such arguments would render the construction of sexual identity as determined through culture than something subjectively navigated. Rather, this crude summary is just one strand at which to potentially engage in how dominant scripts surround aspects of socio-cultural life by using my own subjective contextualisation as a point of provocation. Given its essentialised nature, a closer interrogation would be needed to understand some of the nuances and intersections through these contexts in how (my) sex/uality is formed and mediated. However, the relevant point here is that they are cultural contexts in which (normative) performances and contexts *can* be prescribed through interaction. They can inform particular behaviours or roles, as they reflect cultural norms and values around sexuality (Morrison et al., 2015), and shape interpretations of masculinity, sexuality and sexual performance practices (Gagnon and Simon, 1973; 2005; Sun et al., 2016: 985; Klein et al., 2019: 632). It is considering these socio-cultural interactions that becomes the main entryway to articulating ideas of (*sexual*) *scripting*.

### **2.3 Contextualising the Sexual Script Metaphor**

Generally, *sexual scripting* is a framework that positions social and cultural life as featuring prescribed actions or behaviours (Simon and Gagnon, 1986). The perspective of viewing interactions through sexual scripting posits that there are informal guidelines and norms surrounding sexual conduct and practice that have been socially or culturally constructed (Plante, 2006: 64; Escoffier, 2007: 62; Mercer, 2017b: 244). Viewing sexual behaviours and interactions as indicative to (social/cultural) *scripting* addresses sex/uality through a more contextual lens that solely dependent on “biological drives” (Frith and Kitzinger, 2001: 210). In thinking of these informal guides as *scripts* to interactions, there is an intersection to ideas of *performance* where the script can ‘mean something completely different depending on how the actor’s delivery and movement, even if the words are the same’ (Fernández-Vara, 2009: 4).

As exemplified by Maratea and Kavanaugh (2012: 102), they argued that identities in online spaces are crafted through interpersonal communication with others within that context or landscape. Utilising an approach of sexual scripting addresses three aspects: (1) the individual subjective engagement within a sexual interaction; (2) the (socio-cultural) norms surrounding sexual conduct and practice; and (3) the “appropriateness” of one’s sexual behaviour within the interaction or experience (Krahé and Tomaszewska-Jedrysiak, 2011: 697; Marshall et al., 2021). The central notion to sexual scripting revolves around aspects of sex/uality as being ‘*learned* from culturally available messages that define what “counts” as sex, how to recognise sexual situations, and what to do in sexual encounters’ (Frith and Kitzinger, 2001: 210). Though there is an extent of subjectivity in relation to this framework since aspects of it are reliant on (sexual) biological drives that shift our interaction (Frith and Kitzinger, 2001; Paasonen, 2018). But rather than solely limit sexual interaction to one’s subjective capacity to engage in their sex/uality, it seeks to identify the discourses and strategies that have constructed normative – and conventional – sexual activities and practices (Krahé and Tomaszewska-Jedrysiak, 2011: 697; Mercer, 2017b: 244; Marshall et al., 2021: 16). Sexual scripting addresses sex/uality as intersectional: featuring a multitude of contexts involving participants, motivations, scenarios and conducts, all of which prescribe and mediate forms of activity. Exploring sexual interactions through an intersectional perspective recognises that there are various contexts and ‘conventions informing sexual behaviour, interpersonal sexual interactions, and individual sexual desires’ (Marshall et al., 2021: 16). For McCormick (2010: 98), these scripts offer ‘stereotyped information about how a cast of characters [or “actors/performers”] might be expected to behave and the likely sequence of events.’

In the seminal definitions by Simon and Gagnon (1986) and Gagnon (1990: 9), sexual scripting operates on ‘three levels: the *intrapsychic*, the *interpersonal*, and the *cultural scenario*.’ In their view, each of these layers to the sexual script prescribes sexual activity and conducts that are constructed within collective/social life, communication between participants, and individual sexual affective desires. Initially, Simon and Gagnon (1986: 98) suggested the *cultural scenario* as the ‘instructional guides that exist

at the level of collective life [...] [they] essentially instruct the narrative requirements of specific roles; they provide for the understandings that make role entry, performance, and/or exist plausible for both self and others.’ Cultural scenarios are the space in which there are dominant hegemonic surrounding contexts that define sexual practice and conduct within collective and social life; they are the space in which shared and accepted cultural values around sex/uality is reflected, and the parameters in which interaction is mediated. By being the scripts that “function” at a shared collective level, they shape our personal and interpersonal understanding and activity of sexual conducts (Morrison et al., 2015: 656; Klein et al., 2019: 632). With the cultural scenario indicative to an intertwining of (dominant) cultural contexts, ‘sexual conducts [are] entirely historically and culturally determined’ (Gagnon, 1990: 5). As such, within the parameters of a cultural scenario, instances of improvised behaviours may be reinforced, reintegrated or remediated in relation to the hegemonic contexts (Simon and Gagnon, 1986; Krahé and Tomaszewska-Jedrysiak, 2011: 697-698; Paasonen, 2018: 34).

Whilst the cultural scenario script is indicative to the collectively accepted interactions, the interpersonal script is the interactions between participants: ‘the acceptance and use of such scripts are the basis for continued patterns of structured social behaviour [...] the individual is an actor meeting the expectations of the other persons and guiding [their] conduct in terms of [others].’ (Gagnon, 1990: 10). Interpersonal scripting is the acceptance of the cultural scenario structures as “conduct,” framing the “acceptable” actions and behaviours between participants (Simon and Gagnon, 1986: 99-106; Klein et al., 2019: 632). Whilst the interpersonal interactions may follow or divert from hegemonic structures, the interpersonal script also embraces a shared sense of agency, as they ‘transform the social actor from being exclusively an actor trained to [their] role [...] [to] being a partial scriptwriter or adaptor as [they] become involved in shaping the materials of relevant cultural scenarios.’ (Simon and Gagnon, 1986: 99). As such, they become negotiations with other partners within the given (cultural) scenario: an interpretation of the contexts surrounding the scenario and the “appropriate” interactions that are mediated between partners (Klein et al., 2019: 632). Interpersonal scripts can be further defined as an intersection of participant negotiations, their

motivations, and the socio-cultural “acceptability” of sexual (inter)actions. With the cultural scenario framing the dominant cultural structures to sex/uality, interpersonal scripts become an exchange of shared agency within a sexual space. However, in this mediation, there is also an extent of improvisation within this layer of interpersonal scripting: various playful engagements between participants that are performed may complement or deviate from the expected patterns of the cultural scenario or the expectations of the other partner(s) (Paasonen, 2018: 33-34).

On a subjective layer, Simon and Gagnon (1986: 100) describe the *intrapsychic script*: a performative script that is linked to the personal desires and motivations of individuals. At this level of scripted behaviour, the intrapsychic script is the ‘linking of individual desires to social meanings’ (Simon and Gagnon, 1986: 100). Plante (2006: 64) also considered that there was a link to the personal within our social interactions: ‘stories we tell ourselves, our memories, our internal rehearsals; we develop intrapsychic, or mental, scripts based on cues from culture, subculture, and interactions.’ The definitions of the intrapsychic script from Plante alongside Simon and Gagnon posit a layer of interaction that is subjective and internally constructed. As such, it is not solely constructed by our interpersonal and cultural scenario interactions; the intrapsychic script is the desires to interact in a specific capacity that is mediated by engagement with other participants and the scenario in which they take place. There is an intersection here with the discussion around play: the interrelation of the personal, interpersonal and cultural which frames our behaviours in which there is a space mediating play actions (the game), yet the actions performed or *experienced* within the space is individual and/or shared. As a ‘private world of wishes and desires that are experienced as originating in the deepest recesses of the self’ (Simon and Gagnon, 1986: 100), intrapsychic scripting informs *and* (re)negotiates other forms of the script, as our individual desires are linked to emergent meanings from cultural scenario and interpersonal scripting layers (Paasonen, 2018: 34).

## ***2.4 Intersection of Affect and the Sexual Script***

Despite the personal ties to one's desires, this breakdown of the sexual script metaphor is one that describes a universal application, that the script is operating at these levels constantly across any form of culture or sexual interaction. With the self-authorship that seems to emerge through interpersonal and intrapsychic scripting, there appears to be varying conducts of scripted behaviour. In their original theory, Simon and Gagnon (2017: 55) had described a formulaic approach to a "conventional" heterosexual sexual interaction:

'First there is kissing, then tongue kissing, then touching of the breasts through the clothing (perhaps here a break in the sequence), touching of the breasts under the clothing or the genitals through the skirt or outside the underwear, then finally the genital contact with either a branch to mouth-genital contact (in some few circumstances) or coitus.' (Simon and Gagnon, 2017: 55)

For them, this approach was a systematic way of exploring sexual dynamics and progression, however by considering this as the only conduct would present the script as definitive. In the previous chapter, I argued that play, and sexual play, involves a sense of ambiguity and vagueness, as it is tied to the personal desires of players that may or may not be parallel to the expected behaviours. I would argue the same can be said here in terms of sexual scripting – whilst Simon and Gagnon are not inaccurate in suggesting this progression of sexual conduct, considering this as the "official" conduct would negate from the improvisational nature of sexual play and pleasure entirely. Abelson (1981) and McCormick (2010) have noted that sex does contain a degree of "order," featuring a series of expectations but also must contain some extent of ambiguity to "fill in gaps" within the omnipresent script. In this view, sexual scripts should be understood in relation to the individual contexts where it is being practised, and be open to potential changes that may occur, particularly when an individual can exercise agency to control the course of the script (McCormick, 2010).

Simon and Gagnon (1986: 102), and later in Gagnon (1990: 4) did acknowledge that there is social and cultural specificity that is required to understand the operations of

sexual scripts in context. They argued that the sexual script should be understood in relation to localised phenomena and spaces, where each contains their own intersecting structures of conduct, appropriate actions, and content. Returning to my own personal examples where sexual scripting could be discovered, my recount of playing with the Hasbro *Action Men* dolls leading to a sexual desire towards other men is an example of potential scripting localised context. Though the assumed intentions of the *Action Man* doll were that of child's play, it can also be argued as constructing idealised male form and hegemonic masculinities within that play (Brennan, 2018; Tollini, 2017: 420) – my own individual engagement resulted in an early unbeknownst affective identification that eventually manifested into attractions to other men. Thinking of the doll itself in context highlights the multiple scripts already discussed around culturally defined norms and a “crafting” of subjective behaviours (Maratea and Kavanaugh, 2012: 102), with the Herculean physique and militaristic aesthetic demonstrative to the cultural scripting of men, yet the interaction and play of that body and identity being something more personally constructed.

Some of the sexual subcultures discussed in the previous chapter are also useful in seeing the multiple layers of scripting in operation. For example, group play/sex involves several actors, participants and observers in which there are agreements and negotiations of systems that frame the values and activities of the space (Harviainen and Frank, 2018). Contextualising this with Simon and Gagnon's model, then, the cultural scenario is the group play space, featuring certain social assumptions in relation to conduct and actions that then frame the interpersonal engagements between performers and observers, adapting the overhanging script to suit their shared aspirations. Then, intersecting with them are the personal affective desires of the participants, developing their own practices and conducts to achieve pleasure for themselves and/or others, most likely as attempts to achieve a climax. The intersection of personal desires and preset practices is suggestive to what Fernández-Vara (2009: 6) would refer to as an *active performer* as participants are not only spectators, but initiators of experiences in how they navigate roles and dynamics. Even with these overarching structures framing the expectations and behaviours of the space, the intersections of these different script layers still allow a degree of fluidity to achieve

pleasure, primarily based on the participant's own desires in relation to what is expected of them in the space. For BDSM, these layers of scripts seemingly offer something firmer: though the play itself is fluid in the actual (sexual) performance (Newmahr, 2011), the presence of props and bondage, dominant and submissive roles and power exchanges (Weiss, 2006) suggest that these scripts are more defined and adhered to in some capacity. Yet, even in this context, there is still a strive for personal affective sensations, whether emotional, sexual, painful or sensual within these scripts that are in operation. Thinking through the relationship between sexual scripting and affect then, I would argue that there is an awareness of what affective potentials are possible in terms of the social/cultural context (cultural scenario), the negotiation of acts to achieve pleasures between participants (interpersonal script), and the personal subjective desires to strive towards that pleasure (intrapsychic script).

The varying degrees of scripting, in terms of socio-cultural conducts and the attachment to one's personal desires or motivations presents an extent of ambiguity and fluidity, as whilst the cultural scenario dictates a common ethos of "appropriateness," such conduct is not necessarily enforced in sexual interaction. McCormick (2010: 99-103) noted this ambiguous to the universal script, which would include systems as to why people *might* have sex but when desires and behaviours deviated from these expected norms, the rules and identities are suspended till a new norm is created. In this regard, the script is given power to guide the sexual engagements of individuals by themselves and is provided meaning when conforming to it or renegotiating a new script. Gagnon (1990: 8) had alluded to this in an example of a group of boys sharing a sexual photograph, by stating the 'social context of viewing [...] provides the erotic meaning and tension for the photograph.' To Gagnon (1990: 8), we pick up on specific cues that inform us to consider the photograph in a particular way – the expressions, the presentation or spectacle of the bodies, the sexual organs and so on – and through the shared understanding of what these signs may mean as a collective, an erotic view of the photograph is achieved.

This is reminiscent to the point about scripts being learned from cultural messages by Frith and Kitinger (2001: 210), as these define how to perceive a sexual situation or

encounter, similarly to the interactionism that Maratea and Kavanaugh explored. Whilst these “rules” are learned from these socio-cultural contexts – with behaviour deriving from social hierarchies, categorisation and normative powers, identities and tropes (Paasonen, 2018: 33) – there is still an extent of improvisation that is needed to test the “appropriateness” within the script. Jackson and Scott (2007: 109) argued that sexual scripts are not about strictly defining people into predictable sexual roles or performance, but rather the scripts themselves are a structure of play. Scripts become open to renegotiation, as cues and guidance is taken from partners and the fluidity of sexual play (Jackson and Scott, 2007; Paasonen, 2018). Through the strive for pleasure that motivate the (sexual) play, the script can be renegotiated as those “playing” navigate their intersecting desires despite the cultural scenario surrounding it. As such, the sexual script itself, regardless of its layer of scripting, is still tied to the affective capacities of the body. The individual desires to “feel” a certain way of playing can lead to the rearticulation of the script through (sexually) meaningful actions (Murray, 1997; Cense, 2019). However, it is relevant to recognise the potentiality that some participants in sexual encounters may not be seeking out sexual gratification or pleasure, potentially from not experiencing it or motivated to attain it. Since the sexual script proposes the intersections of sexual desires and conducts, it is important to address that such theorisations of scripting may not be applicable to all participants engaging in socio-sexual interactions, if any. Though these nuances are not part of the discussion being made in this thesis, it highlights the limitations of this framework and a need for it to be contextualised into contemporary contexts. As such, further research and critique is required in respect to these contexts, particularly in relation to other non-heterosexual dynamics and identities.

Reflecting back to the ideas of transformative and transgressive play discussed in the previous chapter, the scripts within the sexual encounter are open to change with the actions performed within the encounter rearticulating the script or disregarding it, until it becomes a “new norm” for those sexually playing (Paasonen, 2018). Similar to my contextualisation of sexual play being fluid and tied to affective sensations, the fluidity of the sexual scripts offers an extent of affordance to play with or against these structures and articulate new sexual encounters.

## **2.5 Intersection of Games Spaces and the Sexual Scripting**

In the previous chapter, I argued play as spontaneous, emergent activity that arrived from the agency of the player, regardless of the “space” in which play is facilitated. In that exploration, I discussed “games” as a site for play, with literature describing the game space as containing a series of rules and objectives that the player was expected to match or follow (Suits, 2005; Lin, 2013). What was referred to by Suits (2005) as the *lusory attitude*, games involve the player willingly accepts that games contain or permit specific goals or behaviours to “win” and will act in accordance with these rules to continue “playing” the game. However, I found issue with the firm structure of games, arguing that play is fluid and uncertain, as players follow their own meaningful desires (their agency) (Murray, 1997; Cense, 2019), that can conform or disregard the game – or indeed create an entire new game in their transgression.

The reason I return to this discussion is that there seems to be a similarity between the concept of games and the concept of (sexual) scripting: both favour particular performances in the specific (cultural or social) space where playful behaviours are occurring. The definition of sexual play I utilise is one acknowledging the passive or active practices motivated by one’s own desires (Paasonen, 2018), conforming to the pre-existing rules or distancing from conventions. Games in their construction of rules and objectives – sexual or otherwise – feature conventions around particular interactions in their experience (see Suits, 2005) and therefore adopt scripts that expect players to conform to. Sexual play, in its link to the affective desires and motivations complicates the fixed nature of the script, being an emergent activity in terms of meeting the expectations of the game but also renegotiating it.

The emergent activity that can occur during play shifts games between linear and modular structures, as in the view of scripting, the expected conduct and progression to “win” or “meet the objective” become fluid. Emergent potentialities within the play of games means that “anything” is possible with what the game permits or mediates. Whilst there is an expected objective and assumed conduct of players - a *prescribed*

way of playing - it does not necessarily mean that *all* players adhere to that. So, games themselves are demonstrative to these various script models that Simon and Gagnon had described. On one layer, they are demonstrative to a cultural scenario: players encounter other players/characters/scenarios that have hegemonic contexts surrounding them, containing the “dominant” conducts that players are expected to follow (to “win”). Then, there is the interpersonal script, in which players have agency to adhere to this expected conduct in their engagements with other players or characters. Intrapsychic scripting is thus the player’s own desires and conceptualisation of their conduct in relation to these other contexts, bringing about their own desires of play that may or may not compliment or follow the scenario they are within.

Multiplayer and virtual world gaming are useful initial sites in contextualising these various scripting models, as players interact with each other as a form of social encounter and gameplay. Initially, the multiplayer space is the broader cultural scenario, featuring dominant structures that are indeed to be the more (universally) accepted conducts and interactions. On an interpersonal layer, there *can* be the extent of communication between participants, consisting of expected exchanges and shared negotiations through their play. Yet, this interpersonal script only is demonstrative to the expected conducts and values, in relation to the scenario itself: for example, performing in a specific way within the rules of the game to meet the objective. Rather, there is flexibility for the players within the cultural scenario to be interacting with intrapsychic scripts, as players perform in accordance with their own desires and understandings of (their) play. Thinking of MMORPGs for example, players are presented with a game environment in which they have the flexibility to follow the objectives and intended behaviours (Aarseth, 2007), interact with others mediated by expected rules or communication (Brown, 2012: 261), *and* play in accordance with their own concepts of what they deem as play. In regard to scripting, the player is afforded their own adherence or distancing from these defined structures into their own play.

The reappropriation of sexual scripts - particularly in relation to interpersonal communication in scenarios that was not *purposefully* designed for sexual engagement - has also been a consideration in research within virtual spaces. Already, I mentioned

Maratea and Kavanaugh (2012), who had explored deviant identities within online identities, establishing that transgressive play had emerged within an expected (cultural) scenario. Others have explored the emergence of “virtual sex” (Turkle, 1994; 1995) and “cybersex” (Döring, 2000) in digital spaces that had not intended to prescribe or platform sexual conducts but became rearticulated by players to suit their sexual desires. The exploration of MUDs by Turkle (1995) had highlighted the prominence of virtual sex relations emerging through its virtual messaging capacities. Sexual communication within these virtual spaces involved ‘two or more players typing descriptions of physical actions, verbal statements, and emotional reactions for their characters’ (Turkle, 1995: 223). Even though the interactions were limited to text-based engagements, their interactions do suggest various layers of scripting occurring: (1) the space as a cultural scenario itself was not *intended* to be for virtual sexual encounters yet there was capacity for sexual communication to emerge; (2) the flexibility of the space allowed for a myriad of possible interactions between users/players, with the potentiality for sexual interactions to be permissible or desired; (3) the desire to engage sexually with others is a subjective desire, mediated through these social parameters. Through these text communication, erotic meanings could be attributed, with ‘learned imageries, routines, appetites, and interactions’ (Paasonen, 2018: 33) that suggests physical sexual activity emerging through these encounters. Döring (2000) further noted ties to “real-life” sexual interactions by describing cybersex as the real-time social interaction between multiple participants which eventually leads to sexual arousal and stimulation. In these virtual spaces, scripts are renegotiated to both alter the established cultural scenario and allow for sexual engagement that is recognisable from interpersonal sexual relations to flourish.

In the context of video games, similarly games have features emergent sexual play to change the kinds of behaviours and conducts existing within them. The exploration of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) and erotic role-play by Brown (2012: 260) described how ‘players [manipulated] the lore, fiction and game mechanics [...] to create unique stories and erotic narratives to compensate for the absence of sexual themes in play.’ There is a repetition here to how a cultural scenario is neglectful to sexual activity, and thus players adapt the situation to allow for sexual conduct to

occur. Similar to the documenting of sexual play in the early MUDs, erotic role-play within games such as *World of Warcraft* has been conducted within private chat mechanics and in-game behaviours to express actions not possible within the game's design (such as undressing avatars, or specific kind of positioning) to be sexually suggestive (Brown, 2012: 262). Taylor (2009: 332) describes the assemblages of play as games being constituted by a broad range of interrelating structures:

“technological systems and software (including the imagined player embedded in them), the material world (including our bodies at the keyboard), the online space of the game (if any), game genre, and its histories, the social worlds that infuse the game and situate us outside of it, the emergent practices of communities, our interior lives, personal histories, and aesthetic experience, institutional structures that shape the game and our activity as players, legal structures, and indeed the broader culture around us with its conceptual frames and tropes.”

In Brown's example, these intersecting design features to the play of *World of Warcraft* can be seen as exploiting the game for subjective desires for sexual emergence. I would argue that alongside exploiting the pre-structured game space (as a cultural scenario), it also rearticulates it to feature the prominence of sex/uality and erotic pleasures where it would otherwise not be featured. As such, within the parameters of game spaces, it would appear that the “script(s)” develops and is (re)negotiated: the game itself is a cultural scenario that not designed for or intended to permit sexual interaction, yet taking inspiration from wider sexual culture and negotiations with other players, developed systems to construct a new “sexual world” with its own syntax and practices (Brown, 2012: 260). Thinking of games through a lens of an imagined, fantasist landscape where the player self-authors a world at will (Juul, 2005: 6) – arguably, demonstrative to the ambiguous meaningful nature of agency within play (Murray, 1997) – the cultural script employed within the game through its design is not definitive to the conducts and experiences it can offer.

Brown (2012: 263-264) does note the cultural specificity and response to this scenario within *World of Warcraft* as the inclusion of adult behaviour and content in a space

which was not the original intention received backlash, being described as “smut” or “filth” compared to the “pure” game. The definition of the “spoilsport” by Huizinga (1949: 11) as a ‘player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them [...] robs play of its illusion’ is a useful metaphor to consider the position of those deviating (and “breaking”) these scripted “norms.’ In this specific context, the erotic role-players were perceived to have “ruined” the experience for other players (becoming “spoilsports”), deviating from the expected norms of the game space to more subjective experiences of play. Yet within the gameplay, the established script still permitted it unintentionally, with the norms becoming renegotiated between players as interpersonal communication that has emerged from subjective, interpsychic desires for sexual stimulation and pleasure. As such, the shift away from the established scripted layers becomes a form of deviation, emerging from one’s subjective desires (much like the subjectivity of play). As Becker (1963: 9) argued: ‘deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an “offender.”’ In this capacity, the parameters of the game space feature intersecting scripting layers within a social context (Jackson and Scott, 2007; McCormick, 2010), from the normative (rule) boundaries of the game space to the interpersonal agreements and engagements, to the subjective desires of play. Yet within these layers, formations of “deviant actors” can occur with the breaking of these scripted conducts, emerging from subjective desires that frame these individual acts as deviant and “not playing the same game” (Maratea and Kavanaugh, 2012). The addressing of something deviant (within the game space) is to indicate a dominant hegemonic structure around the play (and sexual) actions being initiated, being expressed within the game and beyond it.

## ***2.6 Scripting the Gay Male and Pornography***

The framework of sexual script theory primarily addresses sex/uality in terms of learned practices and routines, where sexual social interactions and fantasies follow gendered structures prescribing the encounter (Paasonen, 2018: 33). Primarily, the framework that Simon and Gagnon proposed had originally revolved around heterosexual and heterocentric dynamics as well as interactions with other participants and/or partners.

In shifting from these historical perspectives, an initial question is to the presence of “normative” structures and scripts within dynamics that are non-heterosexual, queer and other socio-cultural contexts. In the previous section, I explored the intersection of scripting and games as an initial way to shift the prior discourse from its heterosexual origins. Here, I shift the discourse again to consider the other facet of this thesis: gay men and masculinity. As such, it is necessary to recontextualise the discourse presented so far to the context of gay men and gay male sexual interactions. Though the framework of *scripting* has usually been applied to social interactions, sensibilities in regard to dominant structures and contexts can be found elsewhere and surrounding various interactions. In this regard, *scripting* is not only present or occurring within an actual (lived) interaction, but through interactions that are mediated within specific spaces or texts, like games or more relevant here, gay pornography.

In an exploration of sexual culture for gay college students, Barrios and Lundquist (2012: 287) considered comparatives between heterosexual and homosexual scripts in relation to sexual relationships: straight men as sexual conquerors and gay men as sexually reckless. As Barrios and Lundquist argue (2012: 287): ‘[straight men are] free to explore their sexual urges without stigma [...] gay men are also framed through this lens of risky sexual conquest.’ Though not directly acknowledging interaction conducts, I would further argue that Barrios and Lundquist are highlighting normative assumptions around sexual engagements between gay men as a cultural scenario, addressing the stereotype and stigmatisation of gay men as sexually “risky.” As such, there are normative (stereotyped) paradigms that are established in terms of hegemonic cultural perceptions: the sexual prime of straight males, and the risky sexual nature of gay men. Naturally, the extent to which this is a normative structure from within a gay male perspective/community is subject to further exploration as dominant ideologies that stereotype the forms of socio-cultural interactions (as “risky” between gay men come from privileged “outside” positions. Therefore, there is a need to consider the interactions of gay sexual dynamics from within insider positionality.

Brennan (2017: 318) explored the risky practice(s) of “stealth breeding”: ‘unprotected sex [being] performed under the guise of protected sex.’ Brennan (2017: 320-327)

further noted that those conducting such risky (and criminal) activity break the interpersonal conducts agreed: they deviate from the script, shaping the cultural scenario (of the sexual encounter) and the interpersonal agreements to be a personal play of abusing power and trust. That is not to suggest that the practices of stealth breeding are common practice and a normative script or instance within gay sexual communities. However, the proliferation into wider (media) areas like (gay) pornography has started to represent “risky” sex in their fantasy construction.

Barrios and Lundquist (2012: 287) did state that it was apparent in their research that gay (and same-sex) relations resulted in fewer relationships, as “non-relationship,” “non-committal” sex is considered normative behaviour and practices:

‘our results also point to a college student sexual script for gay men in college in which non-relationship sex is normative [...] The majority of gay men in our sample were less likely to report a lasting relationship since entering college; gay men in our sample also had fewer romantic relationships than their straight counterparts.’

In their research, Barrios and Lundquist highlight some of the historical cultural hegemonies that surround sex/uality and its definitions as “normative.” Yet, they also acknowledge that sex itself is unconventional, with myriads of its forms being “normative” in their own respective contexts. The view of sex as versatile in nature suggests that the accepted “conventional” script is actually fluid, being renegotiated and rearticulated depending on the context in which the interaction is taking place to create new forms of scripts that describe these sexual practices (Jackson and Scott, 2007). Earlier in this chapter, I suggested that playing with Herculean action figures and the depiction of men within media (which I summarised as Hollywood films and pornography) were a cultural scenario in terms of scripting and guiding sexuality. These contexts reflect the values and norms surrounding sex and sexuality, constructing performances of masculinity, muscularity and gendered performances that are idealised (Duggan and McCreary, 2004; Morrison et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2016). In regard to the male body specifically, ‘in contemporary Western society, men are being told that their bodies define them’ (Duggan and McCreary, 2004: 47), capitalised

and glamorised through areas of culture, especially that of visual and screen cultures. The “image” of “the male” is one that has been shaped and formed by scripting, aiming to display a particular performance.

Video games themselves have been designed with this awareness to these idealised gendered displays, influenced by existing roles and expressions of gender, and their stereotypes: ‘video games have been designed within the context of our existing culture [...] [they] could very well perpetuate negative or damaging stereotypes or gender roles based upon the images portrayed within them.’ (Gross, 2005: 54). In an example of how gay men and lesbian women are constructed in video games, Gross (2005: 54) found that ‘gay men are comical, flamboyant, and stereotypical [...] Lesbian women are highly sexualised and are often used in games to please a heterosexual male audience.’ Gross alludes to the same point made by Maratea and Kavanaugh in terms of how the self becomes generated, that through ‘repeated consumption of such images [...] will lead to a greater acceptance of that is considered appropriate or inappropriate for males and females despite the stereotypical or harmful nature of these scripts’ (Gross, 2005: 54-55). Whilst this example of game representations is one that recognises the gendered perspective culture has on men and women – especially those identified as queer or queer-coded – pornography provides an expression of scripting in its abundance of sexual constructions and performances.

Krahé, Tomoaszewska and Schuster (2021: 3) find pornography to be an abundance of various sexual interactions, constructing complex, diverse scripts into sexuality and its representation. Marshall et al. (2018: 17) had also previously made a note to the sexual scripting of pornography, finding that such a lens has been employed to explain the certain effects of pornography on those that consume such media. So, then, it would seem that consumers of pornography or the interaction with it also features a series of scripts that *may* be interacted with through its engagement, having some mediations upon one’s sex/uality. Though not to establish porn as pedagogical (see Hambleton, 2020: 294), it is rather in relation to Maratea and Kavanaugh’s point on interactionism at the very start of this chapter in which engagement with gay pornography *could* influence one’s own conceptualisation of sex/uality. In my own reflection at the start, I alluded to

my own experience with gay pornography, aware that whilst it has not influenced me in terms of defining my sexual practices, it rather assisted in affirming my desire towards other men and defining my sexuality. So, then, gay sexuality - and by extension gay masculinities - *can* become verified and articulated through and within pornography, amongst many other engagements with cultural forms (such as my own play with Action Men dolls or sexual relations with other men).

As Neale (2012: 283) described it, pornography primarily showcases an erotic spectacle of its performers, in which the use of their physiques and performances constructs engendered acts of sex and voyeurism to please and simulate its audience. Thinking of Neale's view through scripting then, pornography offers a representation of sexual encounters, constructing a cultural scenario and a visualisation of the strive for pleasure. For Sun et al. (2016: 985), pornography in this capacity becomes a tool to articulate one's concept of sexual engagement: 'consumers use pornographic sexual scripts to navigate real-world sexual experiences and guide sexual expectations.' In this regard, pornography *could* mediate one's desire and understanding of sexual interactions, using it to articulate one's intrapsychic script around their individual pleasure that eventually may intersect within a cultural scenario. Gagnon (1990: 34) describes the engagement in pornography and sexual relations as 'fantasist, memorialist, and utopian'; the participant becomes the author of their own desires and fantasy, becoming a space to play with those desires and discovering new horizons of pleasure and one's articulation of sex/uality.

In this capacity, the body and sexual performance spectacle of (gay) pornography is constructed and mediated through socio-cultural contexts, in which there are representations of socio-sexual interactions that conscribe sexual body politics and practices. As Krahé, Tomaszewska and Schuster (2021: 3) posit, the sexual script features descriptive normative elements to interactions within a *given* culture – with the given cultural context here at least being (gay) pornography. Brennan (2018: 916) highlights a hierarchy of sexual scripting within gay sexual relations and gay pornography: 'a clear tendency is revealed for performers in the lower end of the penis range to be defined as "bottoms," while those in the higher ranges were increasingly -

and, eventually, exclusively - aligned with the “top” position’ (Brennan, 2018: 916). For Brennan, hegemonic gay sexual paradigms have solely been assimilated with gay male genitalia, considering it as a performative aspect of one's sexual place within a relationship. Escoffier (2003) had earlier argued that much of the emphasis of one's sexual prowess and positioning is dependent on penis size and certain body politics. As such, pornography in terms of representing cultural contexts around sexual interaction and the body, representing ‘hegemonic masculinity [...] expectations traditionally associated with men (e.g. physical prowess, rationality, and aggression)’ (Tollini, 2017: 420)

However, for Mercer (2017a: 251) the prescribed masculine form is not as static, particularly in relation to its performance or body spectacles, and instead pornography offers a range of masculine (body) types for erotic consumptions. Though dominant discourse would posit that the use of masculine and body archetypes would be offering a ‘blueprint for the ‘ideal’ image of what it means to be gay (Dowsett et al. 2008: 128), rather, it is in the proliferation and expansion of the masculine (sexual) performance within pornography that is most relevant to scripted identity. As Escoffier (2003: 537-539) argues ‘pornography’s identity effects are enunciated through the genre’s dominant semantic and syntactical conventions [...] relies upon the learned sexual responses of its participants—much of the sexual behavior shown in pornography is a display of situational sexuality.’ As such, pornography represents hegemonic ideologies to sexual interactions or scenarios, whereby pleasure is attained through dominant structures and conventions. Even though there is a myriad and proliferation of versatile masculinity and gay sexual performance, representationally, the script is only made normative through the viewer’s sexual validation of engaging with it (Escoffier, 2003: 535).

## ***2.7 Conclusion: Sexual Scripting and Sexual Play***

So, then, if sexual scripting is the metaphor for a series of prescribed (sexual) interactions with define socio-cultural norms, how does this intersect with the affects of sexual play? In this chapter, the sexual script had been applied to understanding the

norms and deviations within sexual dynamics, and further considered in terms of representations of scripted behaviours within wider cultural contexts that may feed into socio-sexual interactions. But in the previous chapter, I had defined play as being spontaneous and uncertain – emerging through subjective and affective sensations. It would seem that the tension between the sexual scripting and sexual play lies with the former's firmer framing around sexual interaction as *culturally learned* compared to the latter's improvised *playfulness* driven by curiosity (Paasonen, 2018: 36). To try to synthesise this tension, I return to my opening confession at the start of the chapter: my play of the *Action Man* doll.

Whilst the doll itself is a product of its own gendered and *scripted* construction, my play is not necessarily scripted by norms and instead embodying a sentiment of *playfulness* (what Caillois (2001: 27-35) would refer to as *paida*). To address it through a sexual scripting lens would posit that all improvised play was normative and presumed – my eventual attraction to other men had been preconceived for me during this moment of play without any agency or affective potentials. I am interested in the visceral affectivities of (sexual) play, revolving around the subjective self and its horizons of pleasure. Like Paasonen (2018: 35-36) I am more engaged in the 'physical intensities' of (sexual play). The sexual script acts as *intended cues* for social and cultural contexts (Escoffier, 2003: 538-539) rather than confines in which one affectively navigates. It highlights intended routines that are indicative to socio-cultural norms. Yet, as this chapter sought to reflection on, subjective desires (or in the scripting framing, the *intrapsychic script*) is present at all layers of the script, (re)negotiating it throughout its interpersonal and cultural positioning. This thesis uses the framework of sexual scripting simply as the dominant (social) structures in which one's sexual play(fulness) emerges: visceral affective drives that arise through one's subjective interaction and engagement within a situated context that mediates our play rather than defining it.

## Chapter 3. The Gay Adult Video Game in Context

### 3.1 Introduction

The following chapter places the “*gay adult video game*” in context, in terms of game genre and content, and the cultural discourses that surround them. Though there are different facets to them, exploring these games contextually is important to continue the rise in established discourses around sex/uality in gaming in recent years (Shaw and Ruberg, 2017). Following on from the significant focus on sexuality and queerness in gaming (e.g., Shaw and Ruberg, 2017; Ruberg, 2018; Ruberg, 2019; Shaw and Friesem, 2016), academic focus on adult video games is emerging with texts like *Sex in Video Games* (Brathwaite, 2013) and *Rated M For Mature* (Lauteria and Wysocki, 2015) exploring explicit sexual representations and the intersections of pornography in gaming. As such, there is a continued need to expand this growth of sexuality and games as academic discourse; this also applies to focusing on games and (explicit) sex to provide more nuance within the field. However, such research that has been conducted on sex in gaming has been more concerned with heterosexual sex due to the omissions and undocumented spaces of this genre. This does open itself to potential implications in constructing particular narratives and perceptions on gaming cultures and histories. In this chapter, I contextualise an initial history of adult gaming using already documented material to understand constructions of “sex” in early gaming. This early and brief historical overview is then used to consider sexual content within contemporary video games, referencing gay males and explicit homosexual content to further contribute to the preceding literature around adult gaming.

Firstly, the chapter opens by reflecting on intersection of sex, sexuality and gaming through providing a brief “history” within a European and USA context, considering a potential early history of sexual presence within tabletop roleplaying, to then its inclusion in early console gaming and immediate periods that followed. This overview also critiques past literature that has sought to offer chronologies but feature omissions to gay sexual content, which I argue is due to lack of documented material. Though a more thorough historical narrative that could consider greater periods and

wider contexts would offer a more detailed contextualisation of the gay adult video game, that would require its own focus and is beyond the limitations of this thesis. Such work is particularly important in order to consider other non-Eurocentric or Americanised contexts, which also offer its own limitations in terms of language barriers and accessibility to resources and literature. Though the contextualisation of the history of these games presented here is smaller and more focused, considering these “early” days does provide a sense of the abstraction of sex within gaming (Krzywinska, 2015) to the later explicit high-fidelity sexual representation I consider within this thesis. This also allows reflection to the cultural responses to the idea of sex being present within video game experience. As such, the conversation shifts from the short “erotic prelude” to considering some of the (moral) panics and structures surrounding “adult content” (rating systems). My exploration of the history of adult video games within these specific contexts should be considered as one initial layer to the studies of gay adult video games and the inclusions of gay sex within gaming. Building on from these socio-cultural and political structures, the chapter shifts to focus on the content itself, overviewing how (gay) sex can be located within these texts as inclusions and gameplay to build on the pre-existing literature.

### **3.2 The “Erotic” Prelude: Pixel Penises and Virtual “Sextopias”**

‘A few aberrations aside, the sexy side of the net holds some good entertainment for adults. That’s why more and more people are taking the relatively safe, yet exciting, digital walk on the wild side’ writes Katz (1994: 88) in an article for the *Electronic Games* magazine. The publication’s cover story: ‘Virtual Sex: The New Revolution,’ an issue dedicated to the rise of virtual erotica and cybersex in what was then the strongly emerging presence of sex in the virtual space. In the same issue, another author (Anon., 1994: 79) alludes to the pull digital and virtual landscapes had for sex and erotic experiences as ‘people can’t resist enlisting new technology into the service of sexual titillation.’ Whilst the issue was focused on the cybersex phenomenon of the 1990s in a USA context, it does acknowledge a widespread (cultural) recognition of interactive and digital entertainment as offering adult and erotic content. As the issue indicated: *virtual* sex was “here” to stay.

According to Brathwaite (2013: 40-41), the emergence of sex in video games is no different to any other form of media, with the perspective that ‘sex is a part of the human experience, and that experience works itself into all forms of entertainment, one way or another’ (Brathwaite, 2013: 40-41). The intertwining of sex/uality within gaming culture(s) has already been recognised within academia, highlighting the inclusion of queerness and queer gaming cultures (Shaw and Friesem, 2016; Shaw and Ruberg, 2017). Beyond that, further studies have linked sex with the design and experiences of video games, with content and features being influenced by sex, pornography, romance and desire (Lauteria and Wysocki, 2015: 1-3). From (traditionally) heterosexual “saving the princess/damsel” narratives in arcade classics like *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo R&D1, 1981) (see Consalvo, 2003), and erotic and sexual representations of video game bodies and avatars like *Tomb Raider*’s Lara Croft (Core Design, 1996) (see Downs and Smiths, 2010), to emergent player relationships (see Turkle, 1995; Sundén, 2012) alongside 3D sexual virtual worlds like *3DX Chat* (3DX Chat Team, 2012) or “cybersex game” *3DGayVilla* (ThriXXX, 2002) – there is a wide array of sexual presence within video games. Sexual representation and inclusion in gaming demonstrates a break from long-standing discourse that viewed (video)games as entertainment only for children (Ruberg, 2019: 313), indicating a shift in what games *are* or *can* be and the experiences they *should* or *do* offer. Even the referencing of the “virtual sex” issue of the Electronic Games magazine is indicative to acknowledging that (video)games were not just a childish pastime but actually were also offering more explicit and provocative material for adults (Ruberg, 2019: 313). Through these “shifts” - or rather, the more overt noticing of such wider content beyond this hegemony - the genre of the “adult video game” is evidence gaming no longer being directed at children, recognised by such inclusions of explicit sexual material aimed at mature/adult audiences (Brathwaite, 2013; Clough, 2022).

### **3.2.1 Exploring the History of Sex in Gaming**

The “gay adult video game” has become associated within games featuring such sexual material and experiences that is being targeted at adult players and audiences, which is

demonstrative through its history and turbulent beginnings. Though the mentioning of the Electronic Games magazine at the start of this section would suggest that the 1990s saw the emergence of “adult (game) content” in European and USA contexts, the history is more complex. The explicit constructions of sex have arguably had an established relationship within video games, with some early (unlicensed) console releases in the USA in the 1980s featuring narratives of sexual conquest and sexually graphic – albeit, pixelated – representations of genitalia and intercourse (Mills, 2015; Kaser, 2020). Whilst there has been previously published material that has brought attention to adult content in gaming (e.g., Brathwaite, 2013; Mills, 2015; Kaser, 2020) - parallel to that of the virtual sex magazine - these are also limited in their scope. Though incredibly useful to provide understanding to the adult video games by their own research and reference points, they have also had to rely on primarily (“mainstream”) heterosexual examples. As such, there is a need to expand upon this to consider the histories and presence of sex in non-heterosexual gaming contexts.

For Downs and Smith (2010: 722), the inclusion of sexual content and erotic elements were not only an attempt to draw the attention of the avid (male) video game player to invest in games, but also had the potential to be sites of sexual exploration and engagement - video games *could* allow you to “play with sex.” For Beck (2018), this potentiality was video games offering a new kind of sexual experience, with sexually driven creators seeing a medium that offered interactions unlike its predecessors. With the “maturing” of some gaming cultures to the presence of sex/uality, ‘over time, sex has become less of a pornographic oddity and a more common element in storytelling [and experience] in games’ (Kaser, 2020). Whilst the title and framing of this chapter alludes to a close interrogation of adult video games as texts (and a gaming genre), as already argued, recognising its history and origins is relevant to understanding them and how they are situated within specific contexts. Featuring a section titled “*Erotic Prelude*” would indicate an exploration into their beginnings and existence throughout some gaming landscapes. However, it is also important to first establish the difficulties in providing a comprehensive historical account since the emergence of sex in gaming in the contexts of European and USA landscapes had points of alienation from mainstream channels and pushes them into unlicensed, underground or perhaps

undocumented spaces. This is where the difficulty lies in providing a comprehensive in-depth historical account of these games, especially those featuring queer and gay sexual content which appears to be more diminished, or absent which makes this attempt to write a history of gay adult video games more complex. As Brathwaite (2013: 80) notes, the shifts of gaming economies to more virtual and PC spaces provide difficulty in researching the history due to its expansive nature and difficulty in tracing releases that no longer necessarily require publisher approval.

However, in a strive to provide a chronology of the early days of the adult video game where documented research has already been conducted (e.g., Brathwaite, 2013; Mills, 2015; Kaser, 2020), there had had to be a reliance on specific reference points to build narratives (which have predominantly been heterocentric accounts). For a researcher more interested in gay sex in gaming, this push of the games onto these unlicensed and undocumented spaces provides much difficulty. I would posit that the past literature, whilst very useful, are limited narratives that indicate these complexities. Even more so, these academic and journalistic records are more localised to European and USA contexts, which restricts the writings of such histories to these locales alongside heterocentric narratives. Brathwaite (2013: 42) has indeed recognised this issue within her own account, stating to record a global history that would document “every sex game” would require its own dedicated focus. The reasons underpinning this are vast, ranging from undocumented resources of previous games and those located on the internet, lack of accessibility to texts, cultural or political barriers, or more concerning towards queer-based game content, a promotion of a heteronormative view of games that suppresses *other* sexualities from belonging in games culture.

If the case of writing adult video game histories is difficult due to omissions and undocumented territories, then having a reliance on heterosexual examples may indicate a greater complexity to attempting to discuss queer or gay adult content in gaming. As such, to keep within the parameters of this thesis, this section overviews the history of adult video games like previous attempts but makes a few references to queer/gay sex to start to expand upon the prior work it utilises. It should also be noted that it will cover similar scope and examples to the preceding literature in terms of

European and USA contexts. Whilst having contexts beyond these locales, and a more comprehensive exploration of *gay* adult video game history would allow for a more critically nuanced discourse, it is unfortunately not feasible within this thesis, nor it is the sole focus of it. That being said, the mentioning of this limitation is indeed a call for this academic work to be conducted beyond this study, so that our understanding of games history is not continued to be heterocentric and implicitly alienate (explicit) queer/gay inclusion from being visible. To do so would open further pathways for the study and academic critique of (gay) adult video games as texts and a gaming genre. Even though there does not seem at this time of writing to be a focused attempt to write a comprehensive history of gay adult games – and gay sexual content – there has been work completed that aims to provide historical accounts to queer content (e.g., Shaw and Friesem, 2016; LGBTQ+ Video Games Archive, 2016; Queerly Represent Me games archive, 2016) which has provided some framing to interrogate adult gaming from queer perspectives. Others that have sought to offer more focus on explicit sexual representations within gaming (e.g., Brathwaite, 2013) have been useful as an initial contextual framing to adult video games.

### **3.2.1 (Early) History of Sex in Gaming: *Suggestive Controls and Male Bunnies in Heat***

Fortunately, this established research does assist in building a sense of what sex “looked like” for the early days of video games. Though the historical tracing only goes up until a point purposefully, as what is more significant in these early days is overt cultural concerns and responses to the presence of sex. As my project corpus utilises more contemporary games from indie-spaces, it seems more reasonable to explore what has “been” than what there “is” currently. In this regard, this short re-telling only goes to a certain extent within adult gaming history which I argue is a useful initial point to then engage with sexual content in video games itself. Therefore, this overview should not be perceived as a detailed comprehensive breakdown and instead is an initial layer to adult gaming history to set up the rest of the chapter’s discussion.

An issue that immediately emerges when attempting to compose a historical account of video games, especially if thinking of the history as uncertain and complex, is that of its own inception: *the start*. Though there has been previous literature that has strived to provide an historical account of video games (e.g., Wardyga, 2023; Schreier, 2017), what can be argued is that the history does involve various (cultural) shifts in “interactive entertainment.” As such, (video)games emerged through various forms: tabletop/RPGs, arcade machines, online networks and virtual worlds, and console gaming. Through some of these periods, I argue that we can interrogate the “early days” of adult content within (video)games, and the situation of gay men and gay sexual content within them.

As mentioned, there have been previous attempts to provide a chronology of video games generally, with further focused research conducted that strives to document (early) queer inclusions within them. The work being conducted by online on-going databases of *Queerly Represent Me* (2016) and *LGBTQ+ Video Games Archive* (2016) have aimed to research queer and non-heterosexual content and presence within gaming. As such, these resources are useful to starting to articulate this history. Before entering the spaces of digital gaming, these databases have listed tabletop RPGs as some of the earliest examples of queer inclusion: Gary Gygaz and Dave Arneson’s *Dungeons & Dragons* (Tactical Studies Rules, Inc., 1974; later published by Wizards of the Coast, 1997) and B. Dennis Sustare and Scott Robinson’s *Bunnies and Burrows* (Fantasy Games Unlimited, 1976). Though these games do have source/guidebooks that help inform some of the rules and structures to the gameplay, it does not account for the kinds of emergent activity that may occur from players. Stenros and Sihvonen (2015) also hint to a potential uncertainty as to all the kinds of play that occurred in these RPGs ‘since role-playing games are shared social game experiences that use textual sources as starting points and not as determining guidelines, the actual practice of role-playing may have had content markedly different from the guidebooks.’ In this regard, it can be argued that whilst game materials may not have explicitly indicated characters or scenarios as having queer presence, there is the potentiality that some games *may* have featured these contexts. So, whilst the documenting of their history and game material may not have made direct explicit points in relation to queerness

(Stenros and Sihvonen, 2015) - or even that of sexual interactions or play within their roleplaying - that does not necessarily mean such engagements did not occur. These tabletop games - and potentially undocumented others - may have indeed featured the presence of queer identities and sexualities, and sexual interactions in their play that may have emerged through players roleplaying.

Even in these “early days,” there are implicit mentions to queer sex/ualities - especially in relation to representing gay men and gay sex - that are mentioned in early tabletop games. This is where we can start to articulate a narrative for gay adult video games and the emergence of adult material in gaming, as argued by Kaser (2020) that the roots of the (USA) games industry started within this 1970s period. As already mentioned, within these early tabletop roleplaying games, with the vast possibilities in their play and only the sole guidebook material to provide some framing, there is possibility that players themselves may have identified as queer or played queer characters. I would further argue in the context of this thesis that this *could* also mean that players may have sexually engaged in their roleplay, whether in relation to a particular scenario or with fellow players (see Fischer and Edland, 2020<sup>10</sup>). Though, within some of these games, there are references to gay and sexual presence within some of the game material itself outside of player performance. For example, within the context of *Bunnies and Burrows*, there are references to “male bunnies in heat,” characterising them as ‘bunnies [who] will hump anything, including inanimate objects and other male bunnies’ (Represent Me, 2016). Though anthropomorphic, it does indicate the presence of same-sex interactions whilst also offering a representation of male homosexuality and gay men as being “sex obsessed” or perhaps sexually reckless and solely driven by desire. Whilst the mention itself is minor, this implied reference does suggest that adult material in some degree was present within these “early days” of gaming. To conduct a full-scale study of early tabletop roleplaying games and their explicit or sexual material would require a more focused study, as it would be inaccurate to suggest that this example of *Bunnies and Burrows* is representative to the entire medium. It may even be argued that “adult material” within early tabletop games may be extremely infrequent,

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<sup>10</sup> <https://nordiclarp.org/2020/11/30/how-to-play-an-erotic-larp/>

which again would require its own research. However, I argue that this example alone suggests that *some* featured sexual material, and so it would be remiss to not acknowledge the possibility that others were similar, especially for any undocumented or unresearched examples.

Parallel to these tabletop mentions, implicit sexual representation was also seemingly emerging within the shift to digital and virtual sides of gaming. Looking towards the ‘arcade’ space of the late 1970s, we see a continued presence in which sex/uality was referenced in the play of video games: the *joystick*. In this period, although the joystick may not have been used for every arcade machine, its frequency became a signifying element of arcade machines and how they were played. Brathwaite (2013: 43) argues that their designs were phallic in nature, with the shape of their vertical upright handles that required players to hold and move it in multidirectional motions resembling that of phallic genitalia. The sexual undertones did not stop at the joystick, with follow-up arcade games like Atari’s *Gotcha* (1973) that utilised “pink mounds” instead of a joystick as part of their control mechanics that appeared to be suggestive to breasts (Brathwaite, 2013: 43), representative of gendered (heterosexual) female bodies. The use of these suggestive controls may have also been a (“comedic”) response to the phallic nature of the joystick to construct something more “feminine” (Brathwaite, 2013: 43). Gameplay itself continues this sexual inclusion, with the game’s objective involving two players where one (as the (male) “pursuer”) tries to “catch” the other player (the (female) “pursued”)<sup>11</sup> through the “fondling” of game controls. Alongside these suggestive arcade controls was the emergence of online text-based networks in which emergent sex would occur between users and players. In these virtual/online spaces like Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs, or as Richard Bartle (2003) specifies as *MU\** for solely text-based worlds) had featured sexual interactions and (fantasy) sexual relationships when it was not originally intended to occur (Turtle, 1995). Brathwaite (2013: 48) discusses *MUCK*<sup>12</sup> spaces that were frequented by furry communities (such

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<sup>11</sup> <https://arcadeblogger.com/2019/09/28/atari-gotcha-the-boob-game/>

<sup>12</sup> Acronym for other early virtual worlds that is a play on MUDs with various definitions. Here I use MUCK to mean “Multi-User Construction Kit” (see Shah and Romine, 1995).

as *Tapestries* or *FurryMUCK*) and text-based erotic role-playing games like *Belariath* to enjoy the interpersonal sexual interactions.

### **3.2.2 (Early) History of Sex in Gaming: *Back Door Play and Porn Oddities***

Following the emergence of early online worlds, the early 1980s saw the use of home modems to connect to digital platforms for sexual entertainment. As Brathwaite (2013) describes it, the era became a point in which there was the rise of Bulletin Board Systems (also known as BBSes or BBS Door games) that allowed users to connect to virtual platforms and sites to continue playing suggestive content and “sexy games” but from within the comforts of their own homes. The BBSes themselves acted as a “door” to connect to external programs that users could run from their home computers, with some still using the same communal structure as the MUDs. However, the games (or programs posted on these virtual boards) were varied, with some “doors” featuring trivia games, roleplay spaces, or others directly designed to allow players to connect and engage in cybersex with each other (Brathwaite, 2013). Though as historical overviews that are offered by Brathwaite state that sex did occur in these platforms, the versatile nature of their content is also either undocumented or, unfortunately, lost through the rise and fall of further game and virtual technologies. Some BBS sites are still accessible today, for example, a website titled “*DDSDOORS - DoorWare*”<sup>13</sup> (seemingly created in 1999) that I had discovered in my own research into the histories of adult video games which appears to still host some programs categorised as “adult” games. The website itself still hosts 23 games for players to indulge in. Whilst I have not personally explored these games myself, they are still indicative to a history that was present and perhaps may still be located on the internet space today for them to still be possible to play and be researched in more detail.

However, for the European and USA landscapes, the recorded histories of 1980s gaming into the early home console and computer platforms started to see the direct intention to appeal to adult gamers (Kaser, 2020). Following the period of early network

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<sup>13</sup> <http://doorgames.org/indexes/adult.htm>

gaming and their respective “adult worlds,” there is the arrival of the early consoles and home computers, with common text-based games and crude pixelated graphics (Brathwaite 2013). Released by then-named *Sierra On-Line* on the Apple II computer in 1981, *Softporn Adventure* was a text-based game in which the player searches for certain items that will allow “him” (assumed player) to win the affection of three women. There is a parallel here to the Atari Gotcha game, in that the assumption is that its player is a heterosexual male, with a game narrative revolving around heterosexual conquest. The overview of *Softporn Adventure* offered by Brathwaite (2013: 52) argues that even there was not a formalised rating system - at least, in the USA - the game had included its own self-imposed “R” rating<sup>14</sup> and a direct warning for players that the game featured content for adults only. Taking Brathwaite’s account to be accurate, it can be argued that this is one of the earliest game examples - after years of (gay) sexual inferencing and emergent sexual communication between users on early networks – that games were catering to adult players.

Shifting to the early console years, there is a similar recognition and tailoring of content to adult viewership. According to Mills (2015: 76), explicit early console games - such as those released on the *Atari 2600* console - were unlicensed and not supported by mainstream channels whose primary demographic was targeting families and children. Mills (2015: 76) also argues that the gaming publisher *Mystique* (later known as *Playaround*) had released the initial pornographic games, appearing on the Atari 2600 console as early as 1982. Given that these games have been argued by scholars such as Mills (2015) as being unlicensed and undocumented, there is the possibility that there may be other games either around the time of *Mystique*’s releases or in fact prior to them. To locate the potential existence of any would be incredibly difficult, beyond both the capacity of this thesis and me as a researcher. However, regardless as to whether *Mystique*’s games were the first initial “pornographic” video games, these games do still provide an insight into the early days of games with explicit content.

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<sup>14</sup> Further discussion around game ratings and rating boards is continued in Chapter 3.4 – Mind Blown: Sexual Content and Moral Panics/Anxieties

Some of the more documented, and rather infamous, games of this period were released by Mystique primarily in the USA, under a published series of “*Swedish Erotica Presents...*” Some of their known releases include *Custer’s Revenge* (1982) and *Beat ‘Em and Eat ‘Em* (1982), and *Philly Flasher* (1982), each offering their own sexually infused gameplay that primarily consists of (extremely misogynistic) heterosexual content. Other games released from other publishers like *X-Man* (1983) by *Universal GameX* were also present around that time, with their pixelated and suggestive gaming. It is in these early games that the presence of sex starts to become more prominent and less about suggestive controls and more overtly tailoring sexual experiences to older audiences. As expected for this period of gaming, they appeared as consisting of bold, contrasting, pixelated graphics from the then apparent limitations of platform and technologies. Looking at some of the figures represented in the box art compared to their in-game construction, there is an obvious and stark difference in detail between the two due to these technological limitations faced. That said, in that period, such graphical quality of games beyond the adult video game context would have been revolutionary and current.

Reflecting on “graphical detail” we have in today’s gaming, we see these limits of the early days. However, Krzywinska (2015) argues that despite the limited visuals that appeared for players, their pixelated images still provided some degree of graphical fidelity. Despite the lack of detail, players can still recognise the presence of certain genitalia and body aspects (Krzywinska, 2015). I would further posit that whilst the graphical fidelity allows the understanding of a sexually explicit or suggestive body is on screen, it also extends to recognising the presence of sexual acts and activity is represented. For example, in *X-Man*, the player navigates through a timed maze as a pixelated figure with an extended part of its anatomy that can be suggested as an erect penis despite no distinguishable features. The advertising material for the game posits a narrative and objective of the game as having the player playing as an aroused male who is in pursuit of a “sexy attractive female” (see Mills, 2015). The nature of this in-game representation being sexual in nature becomes all the more apparent when the player successfully completes each maze, as they unlock small minigames that involve two figures engaging in sexual activity. Given the overt heterocentric advertising, it

would suggest these two figures as being male and female, and possibly further, the characters seen on the advertising material. Despite also not having any detailed graphics to their bodies, players can still recognise representations of sexual intercourse and oral sex between them, becoming a part of the entertainment of the game and its reward in a comedic sentiment.

Much of these games in their content appear to be targeting a dominant heterosexual gamer audience. However, the sole reliance on such examples is not necessarily accurate to the history of adult gaming, with other games also featuring content beyond heterosexual representation. As I reflected in some of the earlier TTRPGs there is an uncertainty and ambiguity into how heterocentric these games were, with the potentiality that queer and non-heterosexual gameplay *could* have occurred. The same argument can be applied here in a more overt capacity, as some early console games had featured gay or suggestive queer content. The extent that these texts may be deemed as adult or “pornographic” is subject to interpretation and given the ambiguous and undocumented beginnings of adult games could posit that explicit gay content was produced but never released or located. In my own exploration of early explicit gay or suggestive content, I had come across representations of homosexuality than necessary something erotic.

*Le Mur de Berlin va Sauter!* released in 1985 on the Apple II by Froggy Software involves the player becoming an agent/spy who is tasked with stopping a (gay) left-wing terrorist who is intending on creating an explosion to bring down the Berlin Wall. As the player progresses, they visit various sites to stop Carlos (the “terrorist”) such as a public bath and a nightclub. Whilst the game suggests that Carlos is gay which itself offers an implication of vilifying gay men, the locations of a public bath and a nightclub may be interpreted as “queer” locations. It could be implied that these settings are (sexually) suggestive to the places that gay men would visit in order to engage in sexual encounters or “hook-ups” with strangers [Fig.3.1-3.2].



**Fig.3.1–3.2** – Game screenshots of “*Le Mur de Berlin va Sauter!*” in which the player must grab specific items (like a *gilet*) to game access which was further followed by game narration that, upon a rough translation, indicated about “walking with you back against the wall.” The game appears to present these as stereotypes of gay men.

Parallel to *Le Mur de Berlin va Sauter!* in terms of early homosexual constructions (with harmful sexual undertones) is *Mad Party Fucker* (Stretch and The Spy, 1985) which featured a homophobic AIDS reference within the narrative [Fig.3.3]. As the game states, the aim is to engage in intercourse without encountering gay men (referred to by a homophobic derogatory term). Though these examples are not “sexually explicit” compared to some of the heterosexual counter parts mentioned earlier, there are still sexual undertones in which gay sex was vilified or perceived as sexually risky or dangerous. This is not only suggestive to the perception of gay sex at the time but potential wider considerations of the place of homosexuality and gay men.

[Image redacted. Full thesis available on request.]

**Fig.3.3** – Screenshot of *Mad Party Fucker* gameplay obtained from [https://girls.c64.org/a\\_show.php?squery=mad+party+fucker](https://girls.c64.org/a_show.php?squery=mad+party+fucker)

Beyond the console market, home computers began to emerge in the domestic space, with early PCs beginning to frequent homes which opened further doors for sexual content to flourish onto further technologies. Some of the prominent adult “gaming” content to be found on the home PC platform was that of “virtual playmate” software. One of the earlier examples was the *Mac Playmate* (1986) which has been described as the first “virtual woman” game and framing the scope of the genre (Brathwaite, 2013: 62). The player was expected to use these digital representations of sex toys to arouse and stimulate the virtual female figure to a point of an orgasm. Momentarily reflecting back to the point made by Krzywinska (2015) around graphical fidelity, here in the change of technologies do we see the rise in more detailed and “realistic” graphics, yet the actual gameplay was limited to the clicking of sex toys and body parts to please. However, since *Mac Playmate* did start to offer its players more detailed (and “realistic”) constructions of the female sexual body, the shifts in graphical fidelity may have been an essential aspect to the further development of virtual doll games and selling more titillating game experiences. As such, the purposeful starting of games as sexually titillating experiences becomes more prominent, and the adult video game in its definition begins to form.

It is at this point that I will stop building the game narrative, not because there is “nothing else” to be said – rather, there will be and that is a point and provocation for further study. It is because games like *Mac Playmate* offer explicit content and graphical fidelity that starts to resemble the sexual content seen in contemporary video games. As such, it provides a frame consider the definition of the adult video game: explicit content that titillates and stimulates the player (Brathwaite, 2013). Though that is not to attribute the game as being the first or initiator of adult gaming. Rather, it is a starting point to address sexual content of later video games, using the graphical fidelity and explicit nature of games from around that period. In this regard, taking this simple premise of sexual content in games being the explicit representations of the body and sexual acts, I can now contextualise the cultural contexts surrounding it and tease out gay sex in games within contemporary video games.

### **3.4 Mind-Blown: Sexual Content and Moral Panics/Anxieties**

The points at which sex intersects within the spaces of video games appears to suggest a complex position that “adult” and “mature” gaming has found itself trapped within, that through its emergence and turbulent history it is directly engaged in the discourses around the suitability of content, and even what games can or should offer their players. As suggested by its history, adult video games had found themselves confronted with controversy and oppositional responses to such material by games economies and culture.

Often, adult video games had competed with a traditional rhetoric that “games are for children” and the “family friendly” guise of gaming employed by the industry (Clough, 2022; Brathwaite, 2013). However, the emergence and developing history of adult gaming has destabilised the idea that (video)games are only for younger audiences, with sex appearing in games not intentionally or overtly designed for sexual representation, within overlapping genres in games with a more nuanced audience, or those purposefully designed for sexual titillation. For example, action sports game *BMX XXX* (Z-Axis, 2002) was primarily based around the BMX sport yet allied players to create fully topless female characters, as well as allow them to unlock live-action footage of strippers. This transition to altering games and game technologies to offer sexual content is not only limited to game content as well, with reported instances of game tech like the Xbox Kinect controller being used for “cybersex”<sup>15</sup> (see Wells, 2010). As such, especially in relation to the latter, the inclusion of sexual content within video games has highlighted an on-going discussion that is to the suitability of games and their content for specific audiences.

Historically, the concerns over the inclusion of sexual content can be traced to the controversies that arose with Mystique’s Atari 2600 console games, particularly with *Custer’s Revenge*. Infamously, the game garnered controversy with its gameplay involving the player controlling the game character “General Custer” to avoid a series of shooting arrows to eventually depicting the rape of an Indigenous woman.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.cnbc.com/2010/12/17/xbox-becomes-sexbox.html>

Understandably, the game was received poorly, having received considerable social critique and negative reception from various indigenous and anti-pornography groups due to its harmful construction of sexual violence against women (Mills, 2015). This was also not the only instance that such a conversation had emerged, with further anxieties over the inclusion of sex and violence in games coming later with the release of *Night Trap* (Digital Pictures, 1992) and *Mortal Kombat* (Midway Games, 1992). The release and panics over these games eventually led to the establishing of content review boards (firstly, in the USA context) (Brathwaite, 2013: 66). Other game companies like Nintendo opted for strategies like their “seal of quality” to indicate that their content was suitable for families and younger audiences (Brathwaite, 2013: 63-64). Though these were not a form of game regulation in terms of restrictions or censorship overall, they eventually became the main systems games used to be released and marketed towards the specific “age-appropriate” audience.

One of the main structural changes which was a direct response to “mature” content in video games was the establishing of regulatory ratings systems, particularly in terms of rating the suitability of content for audiences. These systems have an intended use in terms of signposting the appropriateness of content – or rather culturally deem what is appropriate – for particular audiences, primarily through the age ranges of potential players. The presence of these systems can be explicitly seen through how the game is marketed upon release, being present within advertisements, game trailers and box/cover art.

Given the prominence of these rating systems in the games ecosystem – primarily for mainstream/AAA gaming – they are arguably a representation of how the games industry understands and perceives different games content. In this regard, the definition of sexual content in gaming by these rating systems can be considered to be an individual industry’s response to such material. Each rating body reviews the suitability of content based on the perspectives of their wider geographical locales, and not necessarily parallel to other rating boards. In this regard, classifications of sexual content in gaming are reviewed through subjective practices that are demonstrative to cultural responses to sex. It is here that sexual content in gaming arguably suffers from

ambiguous conceptualisations and a lack in cohesion of what is meant by “sex,” as each rating board would feature a different response to such material. To consider sexual content in gaming under a universal definition would neglect these various cultural sensitivities and so requires a more intersectional approach that recognises different rating bodies’ response.

The purpose of the rating system itself is not necessarily to restrict or censor the presence of sex and sexual content within video games. Primarily it acts as a structure that allows the signposting of how explicit or inappropriate the game content was for particular audiences, so the intended audience were purchasing and playing the game (Bushman and Cantor, 2003). Yet, there is an element of contradiction with these ratings boards as supposedly structures that do not purposefully aim to restrict or censor sexual content. The practices of engaging with ratings boards involve game companies submitting their games for review - even those that are necessarily finished and ready for release - with the review board taking account of the game content and attributing it an “appropriate age” value. As such, the game is either released with the awarded rating, or, further developed to achieve lower ratings - this may be so the game can be sold to more audiences with higher ratings less likely to be as profitable due to its restrictive audience (Brown, 2018: 120). The attribution of high age ratings leading to the removal of certain content that suggests contradictions with these cultural structures. Whilst the ratings boards do not necessarily “remove” the content, they are still a layer in how sexual content in video games is addressed and mediated within game economies.

Whilst the creation and adoption of systems to classify content in video games have indeed highlighted the suitability of content for particular audiences, there appears to be a lack of cohesion in how the industry understands sexual content within gaming, especially since it appears to be classed alongside other “harmful” content like violence and gore. Mills (2015) had stated that, previously, there had been a heavy focus on the violent elements of video games, with releases like *Mortal Kombat* and *Night Trap* being attributed to the downward progression of the moral value of gaming.

For the Australian Classification Board (ACB), there is a utilisation of broad content certifications to allow consumers to make informed decisions about the viewing of a game's content, featuring categories as: "General," "Parental Guidance," "Mature," and two versions of "Restricted" (Mature Accompanied 15+; 18+) (Australian Government, n.d.). Whilst these classifications are in essence for advisory purposes, games that are reviewed and categorised as "restricted" find themselves subject to greater extents of legal control due to their "explicitness." However, within these categories, there is a complexity in how their industry views sex as, according to the ACB's website, the inclusion of sexual scenes would suggest a "Mature Accompanied 15+" rating and, at the same time, could also be applied the 18+ category (Australian Government, n.d.). Yet, there is no clear distinction between these two ratings, and what would indeed establish a lower classification. A further complication emerges in that the ratings of these games borrows from the review structures from other media, namely that of film, as the ACB also makes usage of further restricted categories for "adult films" as "X 18+" that has 'sexually explicit content including actual sexual intercourse or other sexual activity between consenting adults' (Australian Government, n.d.).

These uncertainties around the classification of sexual content are not only found within the Australian regulatory structures, as they are also apparent in wider global contexts. Similarly, Japan's certification system, *Computer Entertainment Rating Organization* (CERO), also uses a system where content is categorised by its appropriateness for certain audiences. However, there is also a repeated issue regarding the precise meanings of its ratings, with sexual content once again finding itself displaced in its structures and with its ambiguous definition allowing it to be applicable to multiple categories. For CERO (n.d.), this is the precise and unknown difference between the suitability of content for '17-year-olds and above' - a CERO D grade - and '18-year-olds and above,' a CERO Z grade.

Even beyond both the Australian and Japanese contexts can this ambiguous sense of sexual content be implied, as – and more closely aligned with this chapter and wider thesis – the USA and European classification boards also seemingly offer this issue. In

the USA, the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB, 2024) utilises a system that adopts a varying degree of categorization, such as “M” for “Mature” or “AO” for “Adult Audiences Only” (ESRB, 2024). For a game to be awarded an AO rating – which deems it as appropriate only for consumers over the age of 18 – the ESRB (2024) stipulates that such games ‘may include prolonged scenes of intense violence, graphic sexual content and or/gambling with real currency.’ On the other hand, a “mature” rating – featuring content appropriate for audiences only aged 17 and above (ESRB, 2024) - is not too dissimilar from the AO classification, given to games that arguably feature nudity and implicit sexual content than anything “graphic.” In this dissimilarity is where we find these obvious anxieties around the situating of sex in gaming: a lack of distinction and its classification alongside violence. For the ESRB, these higher ratings group inclusions of sex and violence together, alluding to a perspective that views violence in the same regard as sex (Gallagher, 2012). Even more so, there is no clear distinction between specific content descriptors as nudity and sex scenes across these ratings, further perpetuating an ambiguous definition of sex in gaming.

Having sexual material subjectively considered as the same category as violence suggests the cultural sensitivities within the USA games industry. Yet also presents its contradictions as violent hack-and-slash games could be awarded a “Teen” rating but any instance of sex pushes it to higher ratings. The European board – Pan European Game Information (PEGI) - offers no solution to these issues either, instead continuing this discourse that assimilates sex alongside violence. Within the structure of PEGI, a game rated “PEGI 18” is considered to feature gross violence and motiveless killing, glamorising the usage of illegal drugs or substances, simulating gambling, and explicit sexual activity (PEGI, 2017). Exploring lower classifications adds further ambiguity: “PEGI 12” indicates a presence of sexual posturing or innuendo and “non-realistic” violence, whilst “PEGI 16” is applied when depictions of violence and sexual activity are constructed which ‘looks the same as would be expected in real life’ such as erotic nudity or intercourse (PEGI, 2017). The description that PEGI gives for its more “adult” ratings is seemingly down the extent sexual content is sensationalised, yet it does not appear to clarify its meaning of “real life sex,” and what would differ between its PEGI

16 and PEGI 18 ratings when both would arguably demonstrate this “realistic sexual content.”

Given some of the previous concerns that video games have glamorised violence within gaming, these systems that (subjectively) rate the suitability of games have arguably rated the inclusion of sexual material as a similar response to violent content.

Following its turbulent controversial history, the implications of rating sexual content alongside aspects like violence through these systems perhaps alludes to an industry anxiety surrounding sex: it is as unsuitable as illegal activity, gambling, and violence and should not be in video games. Furthermore, categorising such controversial material under a single scope could suggest an implicit hierarchy to the kinds of content the mainstream industry and economy is “comfortable” with, with sexual content having greater or lesser significance in favour of other “harmful inclusions.”

With this ambiguous structure, it is not clear as to the kinds of value that regulatory and industry bodies place on sexual content, especially in relation to this “family friendly” stance it often likes to employ (as evidenced by Nintendo’s “seal of quality”). However, what can be argued is that such responses present a culture that is relatively hesitant to sexual content, creating a homogenous view of what games can or should be – a mainstream economy that does not understand or desire sex to be part of its interactive entertainment.

### **3.5 “Homo Lewdens”: Finding (Gay) Sex in (Adult) Video games**

Beck (2018) and Kaser (2020) – journalists investigating the history of sex in gaming – argued that the medium had always provided sex to occur: creators and designers were using sex as an inspiration to the design of video game experience, whether it was to “entertain” and/or “stimulate” players or offering affordance for player interaction to be sexual in nature concurrent with virtual chat-rooms and cybersex (Turkle, 1995; Brathwaite, 2013). Yet, despite the turbulent and often controversial histories of adult video games, inclusion of sex in gaming continues to resist and develop alongside the “wider games culture.” Explicit sexual representation and inclusion in video games has become, and *is becoming*, more versatile to the types of content and experience they

are offering their players. Though the exact reason may be unknown, I posit that the emergence of adult video games and explicit sex within gaming has been to provide more (sexual) stimulating game experience(s) whereas it was otherwise ignored or absent. Ranging from player interactions, romantic or sexual narratives, pixelated and high-fidelity constructions of genitalia and sex, to publishers that are dedicated to supporting and releasing adult video games, sex and sexuality has influenced the features and experiences of video games (Brathwaite, 2013; Lauteria and Wysocki, 2015: 1).

However, sexual content - or at the very least, the presence of sex in gaming - covers a wide spectrum, whether it is involved in the game design, emerging through play, or games specifically intended to be utilised for building players to sexual climaxes (Brathwaite, 2013). Addressing sex in video games under a singular definition would characterise a homogenous meaning and limit what sex *could* be, which is a relevant reflection to consider given its shifting and evolving history. Then, there is a need to consider a more intersectional approach to provide a framing to what “is” sex in video games currently rather than a perspective that is more firm or definitive. Krzywinska (2015: 107) proposes that studying sex/uality within gaming should be through an intersectional lens that considers ‘representation, rhetorics, conventions, game mechanics and [sexual] economies.’ Gallagher (2015: 14), also sharing a similar view, finds that the authorship and responses to exploring sex in video games is needed in order to understand the various capacities and nuances. In this regard, both authors highlight the range of sex in video games - from game elements, design aesthetics, economy and “industrial” contexts, and opportunities for players to engage in sexual acts with one and other (Hart, 2015: 151). Remaining aware of the multitude of structures that have historically or currently frame the definition of sex within gaming offers a more nuanced understanding of what can be attributed as sex in video games. For my own articulation in this chapter, I adopt a similar framing of “sex” that has been utilised by Brathwaite (2013) to encapsulate this wide spectrum of content, inclusion, and context.

For Brathwaite (2013: 10-22), the presence of sex in gaming is varied in its content usage, for design inspiration and a range of purposes, to the engagements and experiences of players. Even further, the inclusion of sex is also not limited to game texts or gameplay itself, with it being located beyond these locales to be utilised in wider areas of gaming culture, such as the hypersexualised advertising of video games as an example (see Downs and Smith, 2010). For the purposes of this chapter, I describe this content as two aspects: as an “*Aesthetic*,” as by “*Design*.” To build on the opening historical overview which had to rely on heterosexual examples due to being currently documented, the examples included in this breakdown of sexual content in game are more gay/gay sexual content to keep within the scope of this thesis. However, such inclusions are not definitive, and so again, there is a need to consider wider examples to contextualise (gay) sex within gaming.

### **3.5.1 Sex as Aesthetic**

As Niedenthal (2009: 1-3) defined, “game aesthetics” is game elements that involve embodied and (pleasurable) sensory experiences. Niedenthal (2009: 1-3) frames the term in three aspects: sensory phenomena that players encounter, shared aspects with other art forms, and emotional experiences from playing the game. In this regard, the “composition” of the video game in visual and ludic contexts creates an impact upon players, with various designs and structures intersecting to create this “aesthetic experience” of play. Contextualising this in terms of adult video games, sex in gaming involves creating immersive (sexual) experiences that stimulate as many senses as possible (Brathwaite, 2013: 14; Clough, 2022). The intention to create sexually engaging game environments is, as already argued, a staple in the adult video game genre – purposeful attempts to construct and offer sexually interactive experiences for players. However, to only describe the aesthetic as simply a sexually embodied experience would not highlight the intersecting structures that compose this “sexy aesthetic” of gaming, especially when considering abstract or implicit sexual presence (Brathwaite, 2013: 11).

Krzywinska (2015: 107) does provide a useful frame to consider the aesthetic of sex in games in terms of its composition – particularly in terms of its visuality – by its extent of “graphical fidelity.” By this, Krzywinska (2015: 107) stated that as players and audiences, we can recognise sex through the presence of certain anatomical features and the actions that are being described, performed, or represented. Beck (2018) also pointed to this recognition in their historical overview, finding that adult video games and sexual content resembled “real life” in some form. So, for the visual constructions within video games then, these recognisable features that mirror “real life” counterparts are most explicitly present in the use of *nudity* and *sex scenes*.

### *Nudity:*

The use and presence of sexual or erotic bodies in game experiences has seemingly developed parallel to video games themselves, with implied and explicit sexual representation of in-game figures and avatars to express particular attitudes of sex/uality. Reflecting back to the discussion of graphical fidelity that Krzywinska (2015) considered, “nudity” has shifted from the early abstract and suggestive pixelated beginnings to more detailed and emphasised body parts and genitalia. The exploration of Downs and Smith (2010) into game advertisements also offered a similar reflection, by highlighting the use of hypersexualised characters to not only make the games appealing but reflect certain attitudes around ideas of sex/uality. For example, as Downs and Smith discussed in their work, Lara Croft being consistently represented in a “pinup” style, with emphasised breasts and occasional suggestive body presentation. Even more indicative to the intersection of sexuality and nudity within gaming, for adult video games, eroticised nude bodies become a facet to the (sexual) “sensory experience” of their gameplay, which in the more overt way is constructed as exposed genitalia or explicit constructions of sex. As this chapter’s history section explored, there is an established presence of “sex” in video games, though more specifically the inclusion of nudity has been a prominent tradition of games stretching back to early console periods (Hatfield, 2010; Mills, 2015). These prior inclusions of nudity were often pixelated or undetailed – due to its graphical limitations of the era – yet they still demonstrate what Krzywinska described where we can still recognise the presence of breasts or penises. However, since these pixelated beginnings, nudity has developed

alongside the changes in technology in video games to reach a point that is demonstrative of what Beck (2018) considered the “uncanny valley.” Now, video games feature more “realistic” constructions of the naked and erotic body, featuring fully rendered parts of human anatomy and giving a visual experience more closely alike to “real life.” For example, games like *Robin Morningwood – A Gay RPG* (Grizzly Gamer, 2022) features the presence of explicit nudity of fantasies game characters, overtly showing male genitalia as a point to the game’s overall aesthetic experience [Fig.3.4]. In a similar capacity and complementary to Beck’s argument around the “uncanny valley,” games like *3D Gay Villa* and *Wand Out* (Male Doll, 2023) make use of 3D rendered human models, with fully defined “realistic” genitalia as their sexual inclusions.

[Image redacted. Full thesis available on request.]

**Fig.3.4** – Game screenshot from *Robin Morningwood: A Gay RPG* of a naked orc during gameplay.

### **3.5.2 Sex as Design**

Whilst the visual elements or sensory stimulants of video games can offer forms of sexual aesthetics, they are arguably somewhat superficial, and what Brathwaite (2013: 15) referred to as “window dressing” in which sex is used to affect the experience or response to playing these games rather than how it is played. However, sex can also be seen as a quality or inspiration towards the design aspects to a video game (Lauteria and Wysocki, 2015: 1-3). Like sexual content and aesthetics, sex can be present and

operate in a range of ways: as rules or mechanics, a part of its story or be an objective for the player, or even be a reward for the player's specific interaction (Lauteria and Wysocki, 2015: 1-3). It would seem, then, that we can explore these areas by considering how sex operates within the *Narrative Design* and *Game Mechanics* of these adult video games.

### *Narrative Design:*

What I am arguing here in terms of “narrative” is the embodiment of sex within a game’s “storytelling” elements, where the inclusion of sex is, in some way, assistance to the progression of a game, or perhaps even acts as its main objective. In some of the early video games previously referenced in the history section of this chapter, some of these were sexual conquest/comedies games, in which the pursuit of relationships and pleasure (or, typically a male avatar in pursuit of a female character) was the main narrative progression. For games like Atari’s *Gotcha* and *X-Man* (Universal GameX, 1983), though gameplay was limited to moving pixelated figures rather than something that directly addressed its narrative in its play, there was still this implicit idea that the goal was to “catch” the female character to “win” her over. For the later *Leisure Suit Larry* series, the inclusion of sex as part of the narrative is more prominent, as sex took the form of a motivator for the pleasure to pursue an erotic experience or a sexual outcome. In the view held by Kaser (2020), sex was a commodity in these early examples for comedic purposes and featured a “sex-with-woman-as-gameplay-goal” ethos that was commonplace in their entertainment. Kaser’s recognition of something apparently heterosexually driven is reminiscent of the view by Downs and Smith (2010) where inclusions of sex/uality were to appeal to specific audiences – in this case, the heterosexual male. However, as also noted by Kaser (2020), sex/uality has become a more common element to storytelling than just for sexual gratification, and even more have expanded for gay/queer inclusions and appeal. I refer to these video games where there is this narrative as “sexual conquest” games, where the player is given the motivation to pursue some kind of sexual outcome, or perhaps even pursue the act of sex itself (Hart, 2015: 158). Clough (2022: 57-67) argues that the inclusion of sex (and sex scenes) has a purpose in pushing the narrative of a game forward, whether

establishing characters, showing the intimacy and dynamic changes between characters or creating a particular mood in relation to the story.

For Clough (2022: 67), these purposely designed narrative aspects can intersect with creating titillating experiences for players, arguing that sexual inclusion should evoke emotions related to the story/game and through specific design choices can these goals of arousal and enticement work best. This perspective is how I contextualise a sexual conquest game: a game featuring a narrative that revolves and features objectives around the pursuit of sex that are aimed at being sexually gratifying or entertaining for players. The inclusion of sexual relationships has been an element to the design and experience of video games (Lauteria and Wysocki, 2015: 1), such as dating simulator/visual novel<sup>16</sup> games that involve romancing NPC/in-game characters (Song and Fox, 2016). Yet, the video games I am addressing as sexual conquest games are texts that are more sexually explicit in nature, intending to be sexually stimulating, pleasurable, or titillating in their play. It should also be noted that not all adult video games are designed for sexual titillation, with some having sought to provide comedic interactive entertainment such as some of the early video games like *Leisure Suit Larry*. However, this chapter is more concerned with exploring games that are purposefully seeking to create sexually stimulating experiences for players. Hart (2015: 158) argued such games featuring sexual conquest narratives as offering sex as a “reward” for players and their performance, such as making the pursuit of sex central to in-game missions or providing upgrades or enhancements to sexual acts. In this regard, the player is rewarded for their motivations of sex and pleasure. As already argued by Clough (2022), this could be the outcome of intimacy that has built between characters throughout playing or as described by Kaser (2020), in reference to early console games, being the sole focus of the game’s narrative.

Beyond that, the inclusion of “sex-as-reward” design has awarded players for their performance, “[making] sexual content available to the player as a result of [their]

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<sup>16</sup> These terms have been used interchangeably. For the purposes of this thesis, I will be referring to these games as dating simulators to emphasise the relevance of these games narratives which revolving around emerging relationships than solely just “interactive fiction.”

actions' (Brathwaite, 2013: 13). For example, in the dating simulator game *Mister Versatile: A Gay Superhero Visual Novel* (Y Press Games and Studio Kosen, 2020), through gameplay featuring various narrative pathways and outcomes that shift depending on player choice, it invites the player to progress through the various scenarios. For games like this, the outcome of scenario choices involves the player being able to see static sex scene images of characters (or chosen character to romantically/sexually pursue). In this regard, the interplay of sex with the narrative entices the player to sexually navigate the stories, strive to unlock the sex scenes with their favourite characters, and/or achieve (sexual) relationships with them.

#### *Game Mechanics:*

Parallel to the narrative design of adult video games, their “game mechanics” can also provide an important element to the sexual experiences and entertainment adult video games offer their players. Ideas of sex and sexual representations have been included and embodied within the actual gameplay, tied to how these games operate, the rule structures players engage with, and how they navigate or progress through them. I am using the term “game mechanics” as indicative to the rules or ways of playing within a game that may restrict or facilitate certain actions or behaviours from players (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Brathwaite, 2013). Clough (2002: 353-365), who approaches the discourse around sex in games from the perspective of a designer, argues three facets of game mechanics: (1) controls that are representing ideas of “touch”; (2) tension-building experiences; (3) establishing connections between players, characters, and narratives.

Though the actual composition of game mechanics within (gay) adult video games is too vast to explicitly or fully define here, Clough’s breakdown does provide a useful initial framing. For example, *The Devil’s Club* (Crispy Tofu Games, 2021) is an idle sim and merge game in which the player runs a fantasy tavern, using the money accrued to purchase demons and merge them together in order to unlock explicit images and animations of these demons in a collectable gallery. *What in HELL is bad?* (PrettyBusy, 2023), a mobile game, makes use of the touch screen in which the player has to “tap” the fantasy/demon characters which in turn makes them more aroused [Fig.3.5].

[Image redacted. Full thesis available on request.]

**Fig.3.5** – Game screenshot from *What in HELL is Bad?* of the “touching” intimacy minigame in which the character becomes more aroused from the player tapping the screen

Other games have adopted a mixture of genres in their game mechanics, like *Cloud Meadow* (Team Nimbus, 2020) which offers a mixture of farming simulator and turn-based RPG gaming. Gameplay revolves around the player building and maintaining a farm, engage in turn-based action combat, and “bond/breed” the various fantasy monsters (featuring multiple animated sex scenes with the characters). Whilst it is not an extensive list, it does indicate that sex is embodied within gameplay mechanics in versatile ways, not only to indicate intimacy between player and NPCs, or be a part of an objective to unlock sex within the game, but also be a form of (sexually) stimulating play for the player to indulge.

### **3.6 Conclusion: The “Sexy Purpose” of Gay Adult Video Games**

Through the brief historical overview of sexual presence within video games and the contextualisation of game content, it is apparent that a defining quality of the “(gay) adult video game” revolves around the use of sexually explicit material within the game space in some capacity. Brathwaite (2013: 20) defined the purpose of sex in video games more broadly: ‘to simulate players is just one reason. Sexual content can be

used to entertain [...] It can be used to teach, just as it is in sexual education.’ As such, there is a question that emerges there as to the intention of these games themselves and what experience is intending to be offered to players. Reflecting on the early history elements of this chapter, some of the early “adult” games had utilised sexual inclusion as comedic entertainment whether offering a sexual conquest/adventure for their gamers, or the opportunity to play with suggestive gameplay controls. In terms of representations, literature described the misogynistic and sexist constructions of women (Mills, 2015) in order to make entertainment appealing to primarily heterosexual male gamers. In a more industry context – for mainly Europe and the USA locales – sex had been deemed inappropriate, and solely for the spectatorship of adult gamers.

Yet, gaming continued to develop further, becoming more detailed and the emergence of new technologies, sexual content in video games shifted, offering more realistic and interactive experiences as stimulation. As Lauteria and Wysocki (2015: 1) described: ‘Sex and play are intricately tied together [...] In their design, representative features, and play affordances, contemporary video games are influenced by and directly linked to sex, sexuality, pornography, romance and desire.’ Sex and sexuality have since become integral to games (Consalvo, 2003), being a presence in the aesthetic direction of the game in terms of nudity, or a part of its mechanics and play experiences by embodying sex in design. For Kice (2015: 253), sexual acts and presence within gaming may involve passive or active participation from the player(s), offering experiences that require observation from players, or actual button inputs. So then, when it comes to the purpose of the (gay) adult video game, it is about intention and experience. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that not all players who play adult video games or engage with sexual content in games are doing so for sexual titillation. Instead, players who may not experience sexual desire and pleasure, or actively search for it, could still be players of these games for their own gaming satisfaction and aspirations. However, for this thesis, gay adult video games are being explored as games featuring the presence of explicit sexual content that is *purposefully* designed to (intentionally) be sexually stimulating for its players.

## Methodology

### Chapter 4. Methodology

#### *4.1 Introduction*

This thesis is primarily interested in gay adult video games and the affordances they offer players to interact and engage sexually within the game space. Until this point in the thesis, I have provided a literature review interrogating theoretical lenses that explore sexual interactions on individual and subjective layers in comparison to wider socio-cultural framing, and a contextualization of (gay) adult video games as sites of sex/uality. In chapter one<sup>17</sup>, I defined sexual play as involving the performing of meaningful sexual actions that are motivated by one's desire for pleasure (Cense, 2019; Paasonen, 2018). This was followed by a chapter that provided a contextualisation of sexual scripting as the prescribed norms of sexual conduct and interactions (Simon and Gagnon, 1986; Escoffier, 2007: 62). Both these chapters had aimed to consider these frameworks as something more fluid and subjective, not entirely universal, and affectively tied to the desires of the individual. However, the previous chapter was more contextual to the site of study of this thesis: gay adult video games, and exploring the intersection of sex, pornography, and video games. As such the purpose of the literature review chapters was to consider frameworks and contexts in relation to subjectivity and positionality (especially to my own position as a gay man). The intention was to lay the structure for an exploration of sex/uality and video games through a subjective perspective, tied to the affective desires and agency of players. In short, this thesis aims to explore gay adult video games as affective sites of sexual exploration through this intersection of subjectivity in one's own play. It is for this reason that the main question this thesis seeks to consider is the extent that these games structure sexual play and agency in affective ways. As the theoretical framework and main research question are focused on subjective contexts and individual player experiences in relation to the space of (adult) video games, there is a need for a

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<sup>17</sup> Chapter 1. "Playing with Sex": Ambiguities of Sexual Play

methodological approach that compliments this “embracing” of subjective research, both for exploring sex/uality but also adult video games themselves.

To explicitly introduce its approach, this thesis employs a textual analysis of (gay) adult video games, focusing on their mechanics and in-game representations, which is partly supported by an autoethnography that accounts for my experiences with a selection of these games. The following sections of this methodology chapter will be framed around the different aspects to this method practice which composes the overall thesis exploration: studying adult video games, thesis research questions, acknowledging positionality, autoethnographic approach, and issues of sexual subjectivity and ethical considerations. With a project that is purposely framed as open to recognising subjective practices and approaches in research, the subsections composing this chapter interrogate the relevance of using one’s positionality and experience, acting as an argument for approaching (sexually) interactive texts like these adult video games, as a form of research.

## ***4.2 Scope and Limits***

Though this thesis refers to various (gay) adult video games in its textual analysis, to consider the main research question, the corpus of the games I played consisted of ten adult video games across a small range of genres: interactive narratives/visual novels, adventure, simulation games, and a mobile game. It is important to highlight that some of these games featured multiple routes or pathways and were varying in length. In keeping with the subjective approach, some playthroughs of the games in the corpus were only played once or partially, with my own desires to move on from the current text to another. This was not an attempt to collect a larger data set than focusing on a smaller number of games, as some of my gameplay experiences offer more critical discussion to the thesis compared to others. Rather, the shifts between texts in the data collection was through my own subjective wishes as a player to move onto a different game. Whilst this does mean that the length of my play accounts and their mentioning in the finding chapters have a greater focus on select few examples than others, I argue that it offers a deeper textual exploration of the texts and invites more

playing of other gameplay texts to engage further with the discussions introduced here in this thesis.

Since some of the wider examples discussed in the thesis appear to be aimed at heterosexual players, the games I played focus on (explicit) depictions of gay men and sex. This is a purposeful effort to compliment the research questions that this thesis is exploring, but also to contribute more examples to the academic discussion of adult games into more queer content. Though some of the textual analysis makes reference to games featuring heterosexual content, the analysis is mainly compromised of the games I selected for my corpus. Keeping parallel to approaching this work subjectively, the selection of materials for play and analysis was approached self-guided capacity to embody a subjective approach to the research. Through an initial search upon online PC gaming websites (Steam; Itch.io) and adult gaming platform Nutaku.net - utilising categorization and tagging systems to specify for LGBTQ+, gay and adult content - a selection of games was personally selected if they caught my interest as a player. Rather than selecting video games that were the most indicative to the theoretical frameworks, games were chosen by personal preference for its textual data - which ones they were ones I had *desired* to play. A further point should also be stressed that most of the video games being explored have also been independently developed, since there has been previous criticism of mainstream games industries traditionally targeting only heterosexual (male) audiences (Shaw, 2011), whereas there are mentions of games within this thesis that are instead targeting queer audiences. As such, the list of games comprising the autoethnography are: *Coming Out on Top* (Obscurasoft, 2014), *Rinse and Repeat* (Robert Yang, 2015), *Hurt Me Plenty* (Robert Yang, 2017), *Succulent* (Robert Yang, 2017), *Stick Shift* (Robert Yang, 2017), *The Tearoom* (Robert Yang, 2017), *Camp Buddy* (Blitz Games, 2018), *Cockwork Industries* (Digital Seductions, 2019), *Full Service* (Mazjojo Productions, 2020), and *NU: Carnival* (Infinity Alpha and SGArts, 2022)).

### **4.3 Studying (Gay) Adult Video games: Addressing a “Tricky Phenomenon”**

As is the case with other academic disciplines, games research is also varied in both the topics of focus and the methodological approaches that researchers *choose* to employ. This project is one that focuses on adult video games as a site of inquiry: games that are primarily recognised by their explicit sexual content and offering game players sexually interactive experiences (Brathwaite, 2013; Kaser, 2020; Clough, 2022). This project finds itself at a crossroads of game studies, queer cultures, sex/uality and pornography research with each featuring their own focuses and methodological practices. Some of the research conducted at the intersections of queerness, sexuality and gaming has used textual analysis for topics involving queer players (e.g., Shaw, 2009), queer content (e.g., Shaw and Friesem, 2016), romance in games (e.g., Consalvo, 2003) and ways of playing (e.g., Chang, 2017; Ruberg, 2017). Research into adult video games - whether exploring the genre or individual texts - has also seen its share of methodological approaches, some of which have already been interrogated within this thesis. For example, the text offered by Brathwaite (2013) - *Sex in Video Games* - offers a historical overview of sexual content in games, using the author's own knowledge as a game developer and interviews with other developers/players to build their narrative and arguments. Other pieces of literature have adopted more critical approaches in how they engage with this material, such as contextual analyses of erotic and explicit early console games (e.g., Mills, 2015), conducted formal analysis and offering guidance around design elements within adult video games (e.g., Wood, Wood and Balaam, 2015; Clough, 2022), or close readings of specific game texts (Okabe and Pelletier-Gagnon, 2019). For games studies, research does not appear to utilise fixed or “traditional” approaches to conducting academic work, and instead there seems to be fluidity to design and employ practices that are more suitable and complimentary to the lines of enquiry.

There are some positions that do indeed argue for games research to not remain within the confines of singular, resolute approaches. These perspectives implore researchers to adopt flexible approaches and link multiple methods together in their research design, especially when considering the myriads of intersecting contexts that posit

video games as an object of study. Mäyrä, Holopainen, and Jakobsson (2012: 296) argue that games are multidimensional, composed of a variety of different contexts and propose that the study of games and play must be able to address and explore these contexts entirely. For them, there is a necessity in adopting - and combining - diverse methods that allows for these multiple structures to be investigated in their entirety. In the view of Consalvo and Dutton (2006), there are many elements contributing to the experience of playing games from its ludic setups to the actions and behaviours of players, and so research has to accommodate such multiplicity. Similarly, Lieberoth and Reopstorff (2015: 271-272) had also argued a necessity for a mixed approach, describing games and the research of them as texts as being ‘tricky phenomena,’ suggesting that ‘if we are interested in both players and games, as well as the moments where they merge into play, a mixed methods approach is called for.’

Some previous research within games studies has indeed utilised a mixed and multi-method approaches, in order to explore contexts such as participant responses and conduct analytical commentary. For example, Fang, Lin and Chuang (2009) used multiple qualitative research practices for their data collection involving surveys and ethnographic models to explore the decision-making process of game players within MMORPGs. Carras et al (2018) used participatory approaches to collect responses around specific aspects to video games and further used these collections as case studies for critical analysis and commentary. Though these examples are useful in addressing the nuanced and versatile practices that have been employed in games studies, this thesis does not follow this mixed-method approach as it seeks to collect various qualitative data. Whilst there is an interest in players (myself) and (my own) play, this project uses a “multi-method” approach to explore my own gameplay and the game texts themselves. Specifically, it utilises a multi-method approach of textual analysis and autoethnographic practices, to critically engage with the elements of the game and recording my affective experiences of play. Having this approach allows the adoption of both the “researcher” and “player” positionalities by using a textual analysis of gay adult video games that is partly combined with the recording of my gameplay experiences together as a data collection. The examples listed in this chapter of mixed-method approaches used in games studies are relevant to an awareness of

the various ways of approaching player and play contexts. Yet, they also do not engage from a position that is beyond the “researcher.” This thesis takes a different approach to these by conducting a textual analysis of gay adult video games that is partly combined with the recording of my experiences as a game player as a form of data collection. In this regard, the adoption of the multi-method approach allows for my positions as the “researcher” and the “player” to form the academic critique, allowing for the subjectivity to be embodied within the work.

#### ***4.4 Embracing Closeness and Positionality in Researching Erotic (Video)Games***

This project finds itself situated within the academic discussions of sexuality and gender in gaming which, in the view of Shaw and Ruberg (2017: ix), ‘are finally taking their place as key subjects in the study of video games [...] and games critique.’ However, within this increase in focus on constructions and mediations of sexuality in games, retaining an extent of objectivity and “critical distance” would only further perpetuate heteronormative and heterocentric perspectives on research (Newton, 1993). Instead, in centralising sexuality in the study of games, it is relevant to address how subjectivity can inform the research and be a site of interrogation. Whilst in academic writing there may indeed be moments in which the researcher has to take responsibility for constructing the arguments and analysis, there is also a parallel issue in that by aiming to be “completely objective” can create generalisations. Retaining that intention to “be objective” or restricting the self to only a researcher position would only seek to continue separating academic spaces from the wider audiences - something especially problematic if the research is focused on or for the benefit of wider and non-academic audiences or communities. In this regard, the researcher neglects the nuances of the research process and its findings.

With a project that focuses on an object of study that is by nature (sexually) interactive - and with further questions around the meditations of gay men for which I identify - having a “critical distance” from the research would not only privilege an institutionalised position over the research and would not recognise the intersecting

contexts that are implicitly embedded in their work (Newton, 1993). By not problematising - or rather, acknowledging - the subjective positions that are within the researcher, academic work continues to promote a heteronormative guise of academic work and exploration (Newton, 1993; Sundén, 2012). For a topic of study that explores queer sexual identity and its representations within a form of media, to not interrogate these contexts may further perpetuate a suppression of queer perspectives as belonging to academic work and so there is a purpose to highlighting the “queer presence” within the research. Therefore, these questions are purposely designed to explore and express such a subjective position, adopting a (queer) player-researcher perspective and centralising the neglected subjectivity within academic interrogations.

As “readers” of culturally constructed texts (McKee, 2003: 101), we produce our own meanings and interpretations which have been facilitated by the text, offering subjective understandings and engagements (Gillespie and Toynbee, 2006: 8). There is a necessity to embrace this subjectivity to try and mitigate from making generalised assumptions, and though it may not be fully possible at every level of academic inquiry. However, as mentioned, this is an exploration of sexual play which is something that engages with personal and individual affectivities, and not something universal. With adult video games purposely designed to appeal to the sexual pleasure and gratification of its players - combined with a framework that revolves around sexual play - it seems appropriate to have this “critical closeness” to the research study. To not interrogate my own subjectivities and closeness in this regard would continue that heteronormative guise of research on these game texts but also not explore them in a way that compliments their purpose. There is a need to remain reflexive to my positions as a game player, researcher, and (white) gay male.

Burke (2014: 73) calls for a reflexive approach to conducting research, especially in relation to studying pornographic media and texts - with adult video games themselves being inspired by pornography (Lauteria and Wysocki, 2015). For Burke (2014: 73), there is a desire to know how the researcher directly participated in their exploration, their arrival and the selection of materials, and how roles were navigated in the process. Whilst to some extent, Burke is more discussing the transparency of the research

process and the practices employed, such an argument can be also applied to how the researcher was “involved,” whether as a subject or participant. This approach of “reflexive anthropology” (Newton, 1993) does not limit the researcher to the positions of “observer-as-researcher” or “observer-as-participant,” and instead allows the exploration of perspectives as benign participants, insiders or members, or perhaps even authors to the cultures or communities being studied. Realising my position as a gay male gamer within the research design allows me to interrogate how I navigated the field of (gay) adult video games, and the materials I was interested in and chose to explore. For Boellstorff et al. (2012: 41), this awareness of the subjectivity of research practices is vital in allowing greater intersectional understandings of the field or culture that we are studying. In this case, it is the gay adult video games and the sexual spaces they provide through the lens of a gay game player. By involving and interrogating our subjectivities, the researcher can also be a site of critique, allowing for a wider inclusion of analyses to be made as multiple layers of the research project can be considered from game texts to researcher positioning (Boellstorff et al., 2012: 41).

Sundén (2012: 165) finds that (video)games directly ‘involve the bodies of players in intense ways [...] rarely do the researchers themselves admit to ever being seduced.’ Sundén’s work is demonstrative to embracing and embodying this “closeness” in research, as they offer an autoethnographic account of their relationship, from within and beyond the game space. Such research shows how the researcher can utilise this “seduction” to the contexts of the text being studied as a means to make legitimate multifaceted academic interrogation. Sundén’s exploration of the self in this capacity alludes to the idea that academic research has limited - and privileged - itself as being this “outsider” omniscient entity, which has only continued to prioritise heteronormative depictions of culture. What such work highlights is the prior exclusions of intimacy that can arise within ethnographic work: how the ethnographic researcher may be led by their desires or intimate sensations that can influence their engagement in the culture or community or influence their research practice in some capacity. Whilst Sundén is speaking more to the overt intimate connection and relations between researcher and participants, this perspective can also be applied to the general research practice as the researcher will also be subjective in their design

such as constructing particular questions or selecting particular materials or communities to study.

I would argue that such work by Sundén presents how our relationship and closeness to texts and cultures has as much academic value as these traditional practices and positions and starts to attempt to negate from privileged institutional perspectives that may be exerting elements of power and generalisations upon particular communities or cultures. Further, I would claim that this “seduction” as a researcher is also something that can occur beyond our engagement with objects of study, becoming applicable to influencing the wider research design. Etherington (2004: 25) also argued that our own personal views and beliefs can guide our choices in research, from what we focus on, to materials we use and the objectives we are trying to achieve. My own selection of game materials to explore had indeed arrived through this “close relationship” to the research - *where I was “seduced” to play them*. Through an initial search on online gaming marketplaces and using their categorisation systems (tags; sections) and most popular lists, the games I had played ultimately emerged based on my own desires and interests.

#### ***4.5 Blurring Lines: Autoethnography and Embedding the Self***

The involvement of my positionality within the thesis as a player and a researcher - both within the project design and as a site of exploration - is rooted within the ethnographic approaches to researching and studying communities and cultures. Brown (2015a: 78), whilst discussing games research practices generally, offers a useful flexible definition of ethnography that can be applied to various academic disciplines: ‘[it] can be generally described as a qualitative method of knowing a social world by experiencing it.’ The difficulty that is presented to this project and thesis is the element of “experiencing” that Brown discusses, as it concerns the researcher having a “lived experience” of the space or context in which they are situated. As such, this presents a challenge for the research, as well as myself as the researcher *and* researched (the player) as this thesis is not within a “social” context like communities or cultures and is instead embodying my subjectivity within the practices of research and the study of

single-player adult video games. In regard to this, there is a need to recontextualise ethnographic methods to consider the layers of subjectivity in the area and space that I am researching and working within.

Traditionally, this notion of experience within ethnography has been often defined as the researcher “describing the world” through their observation, taking account of behaviours, emotions and experiences within a community or cultural setting. Hine (2000: 4-5) describes this “in-depth” engagement - highlighting its foundations within anthropological work - stating that ethnography ‘in its basic form consists of a researcher spending an extended period of time immersed in a field setting, taking account of the relationships, activities and understandings of those in the setting and participating of these processes.’ Hine’s framing of the ethnographic method, like the one offered by Brown, emphasises the positionality of the researcher within the “researched.” The experiences recorded by ethnographies are - historically - that of an “outsider” perspective in which the researcher places themselves within this “world” and documents their experiences and surroundings. As the outsider, the researcher’s role is simply to record what they “see” and “think,” taking stock of the communities, behaviours, identities and attitudes. Whilst there is a kind of separation as the ethnographer is traditionally “not belonging” to these communities or cultures, it does require ‘the researcher to embed themselves into communities in order to gain context and insight into the meanings and practices they exhibit.’ (Brown, 2015: 78). In some capacity, conventional ethnography provides more in-depth detailed insights into a culture or community to convey knowledge to audiences beyond the “researched” who are also outsiders.

For the study and research of media and digital cultures, some have considered ethnographic approaches to be useful, particularly for exploring video games and player interactions. In studying internet space and digital culture, Hine (2000: 4) argued that ethnographic approaches can ‘look in detail at the way in which technology is experienced in use.’ Relocating this perspective to consider video games as the space, I would argue a similar statement in that thinking of ethnographies as this recording of behaviours and experiences gives insight into players and player practices, as well as

the interaction within the video game itself. Boellstorff et al. (2012: 15) - who were writing about gaming and virtual worlds - find that games are ambiguous and constantly changing landscapes, and the use of ethnographic means to explore them allows for the research to develop as the “world” does. For them, ethnographies are useful as they complement the continual and uncertain nature of (video)game spaces, being able to explore the many layers composing games and their experience. This perspective is reminiscent of the view of games held by Mäyrä, Holopainen and Jakobsson (2012): games are multidimensional and require method approaches that give the researcher capacity to explore its varying intersecting contexts. In this regard, the embeddedness of the ethnographer in this “world” that they explore can also be seen as multidimensional, navigating intersecting power structures and boundaries within the landscape of the game and their own positionality. Brown (2015a: 78) argues that through ethnography, researchers can and have provided ‘nuance to marginalised, hard to access, or otherwise unique groups of players [and cultures].’ The uses of ethnographies then offer insight into particular - and even discrete - communities and cultures, with the intention of recording their cultural practices and behaviours, and their engagement within their space or into wider contexts.

So far, this discussion of ethnographies has highlighted that the researcher is seemingly traditionally positioned as this “outsider” or separate entity within the confines of the community or culture that they are situated within. That is not to say that a researcher themselves cannot be an insider into the culture that they are researching, as some researchers can write from within their embedded position. However, through this conventional framing of ethnography, even within this insider perspective, the researcher is still writing from this objectivist point of view, rather than including themselves as belonging to the context or their own behaviour and navigation through it. To include the researcher’s own experience repositions the self and embeds the researcher as an active participant that *does* engage with the culture or community. Embedding myself within a culture or cultural context - which in this case of the thesis is my own experience of playing gay adult video games as a (white) gay male - is a form of *autoethnography* (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Butz and Besio, 2009). This approach of ethnographic work - which recognises the subjectivity of the researcher in the space -

situates the researcher in the field to offer a “first-hand” account through documenting their thoughts, experiences and sensations (Brown, 2015: 85). This could be taking account of one’s own decision-making and choices, interactions and engagements with other members, their affective experience and other phenomena they encounter. For Reed-Danahay (1997: 2), autoethnography is at the intersection of “native anthropology” (the subjects becoming the authors), “ethnic autobiography” (personal narratives written by ethnic minority communities) and “autobiographical ethnography” (the interjecting of personal experience into ethnographic writing). There is a return here to the point I made about the “experience” element to ethnographic definitions that is a foundation to differentiating autoethnographic work from its ethnographic origins: the recording of one’s “lived experience” as research (Ellis, 2004; Bochner and Ellis, 2016). The “author” (the researcher) offers a first-hand narrative account of their observations, behaviours and what they “lived through.”

The writing of an autoethnography then is one way of legitimising the subjectivity within research, opposing the position that considers *all* research as objectivist (Newton, 1993) and embracing this “closeness” to achieve a deeper criticality. Autobiographical in intent, autoethnographies then revolve around ‘documenting and expressing personal experience in literary, lyrical, poetic, and performative ways’ (Bochner and Ellis, 2016: 45). Given this self-generative performative nature, autoethnography has no prescribed form like the traditional forms of ethnographic work (Ellis, 2004; Haynes, 2011), and so is a ‘retrospective label that groups together a variety of existing self-representational practices’ (Butz and Besio, 2009: 1664). I would argue that this flexibility to the form of autoethnography itself is indicative of the intricate insights it can reveal about a culture or community - and the researcher’s position itself - as the researcher actively chooses how best to represent and convey their experience which feels the most appropriate or comfortable. The commonality within this reflective practice is that most are expressed in first-person narratives or use personal language, though they embody the experience in a variety of formats (Ellis, 2004; Haynes, 2011). Some autoethnographers have constructed their work as novels or personal narratives (Altork, 1995; Bolton, 1995; Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 2004), dramatised commentaries (Ellis and Bochner, 1992; Bochner and Ellis, 2016), and diaries and vignettes (e.g.,

Vickers, 2007). In this capacity, the writing of the self becomes a form of performance, where the self is embodied through all aspects of the academic work from the inception to the exploration and its publication (Haynes, 2011). My openness to identifying myself in the thesis as a (white) queer/gay male gamer means that my “self-narrative” (Richardson, 1994) is embodying this position, making implicit choices and engagements that embrace this subjectivity throughout the entire research process - I am performing as myself, the researcher *and* the player.

By featuring the self as a site of exploration and critique, the autoethnographer blurs the lines between the “researcher” and the “researched,” crossing boundaries to define a ‘self-narrative that places the self within a social context’ (Reed-Danahay, 1997: 9). As such, there is a return here to the previous difficulty faced by this thesis and its research: the framing of the self (experience) within a social context. As mentioned, the project corpus features single-player gay adult video games which does not feature the social (multiplayer and interpersonal) aspects that is more indicative to auto/ethnographic methods. Therefore, whilst I am acknowledging the self within a (game) context, there is a question to the nature of it being autoethnographic if sociality is omitted. Reed-Danahay’s perspective discusses approaches that are seemingly closer to that of traditional (auto)ethnography, whereby the researcher is embedded *with* other subjects (Hine, 2000). Yet, my corpus is comprised of single-player video games, without interactions with other players. In response, I would argue that these games are framed within a socially interactive context and intent: in their design to stimulate and titillate the player (Brathwaite, 2013: 1-3), games offer (representational) sexual encounters with/through gameplay and in-game characters for the player to be embodied within and *experience*. Though there is no “real-time” interaction(s) with other participants or players, there is still some extent of (socio-cultural) navigation of game spaces through my positionality and subjectivity. In-game representations not only suggest (dominant) cultural contexts but invite my play and self to be embodied within its parameters through this subjectivity as a (white) gay male as if I were interacting with others and beyond the game. Through my “self-narrative” (Richardson, 1994), I illuminate the social and cultural phenomena (Butz and Besio, 2009: 166) of these single-player games. By repositioning myself to “crossover” into using the self as

a subject (Bocher and Ellis, 2016: 45), the (socio-cultural) contexts of my sexuality and identity as a (white) gay male becomes the site of inquiry within the play capacities of these single-player adult video games to highlight the specific phenomena, sensations and desires that emerge through their play.

Reflecting on this self is also the awareness of the researcher as an active agent within this research process, and in my position also as a game player. Etherington (2004: 32) argues that this does bridge the 'gap between researcher and researched and between the knower and what is known.' Then, as an approach, autoethnography is one encapsulating the personal knowledge of the researcher in relation to a specific context to allow examinations and understanding of the self, identity and experiences as impacted by these structures (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Haynes, 2011). Here, the single-player video game texts not only are offering a construction of (dominant) cultural contexts, but through the autoethnographic approach of them demonstrate their experiences through my own interaction. This becomes a way to present, represent and critique the self through autobiographical means as a form of academic explorations (Haynes, 2011). In the case of this thesis, this inclusion of self is from within the position of a (white) gay male, in which I am exploring my own response to gay adult video games and their material, which could evoke kinds of discourses around this position in relation to (video)games, pornography and wider sexual culture. My own approach to conducting the autoethnography is through focusing on my emotions, thoughts, responses and choices I make within the video games. Such an approach aligns with the ethnographic writings of native anthropology and autobiographical ethnography that Reed-Danahay mentions, as I seek to embody and emphasise a queer player experience, a queer researcher and the experience of the game texts themselves as research.

A further comment in regard to the adoption of the autoethnography in the study of single-player video games is that given its self-generative nature, autoethnography has no prescribed form like traditional forms of ethnographic work (Ellis, 2004; Haynes, 2011), and so is a 'retrospective label that groups together a variety of existing self-representational practices' (Butz and Besio, 2009: 1664) and reflective first person

narratives (Ellis, 2004; Haynes, 2011). In this regard, the writing of the self is a subjective practice to invoke the same phenomena and affective experience as the researcher, where the self is embodied through all aspects of the academic work from the inception to the exploration and its publication (Haynes, 2011). As I identify as a queer/gay male game player, my positionality is embodied within this research, making implicit choices and engagements through this subjectivity throughout the research process as a player and as the researcher (Haynes, 2011). As such, there is a need for the writing of my experience to best reflect this positionality and experience, yet still be within my own (narrative) authority and autonomy.

#### ***4.6 Blurring Practices: Autoethnographic Approach and Synthesizing Subjectivity and Close Readings***

Embodying the self in a variety of creative ways has allowed for researchers to explore various contexts across social and cultural life, being reflexive to the personal and insider knowledge they hold and how their position affects their navigation of these spaces (Butz and Besio, 2009). Some researchers have interrogated experiences of bullying (Vickers, 2007), careers and teaching (Humphreys, 2005), and abortion (Ellis and Bochner, 1992), to name a few examples. Explorations into areas of sexual culture - for which this thesis is aligned towards given its association with pornography and sexual interaction - autoethnographers have produced reflective narrative accounts to sexual encounters or relationships, as well as exploring how desire and sensuality can play a part in anthropological research. For example, Altork (1995) discussed the erotic dimension of conducting fieldwork and how sensuality had contributed to the experience of her fieldwork by narratively describing some erotic dreams that had occurred during their research. Bolton (1995) produced a narrative autoethnography that recounted sexual encounters with same-sex partners as a form of data whilst conducting fieldwork.

In more contemporary examples, Race (2015) had conducted ethnographic approaches to explore the kinds of “hook-up” practices occurring on dating apps within the gay community. Whilst Race does not declare their work as autoethnographic - instead

arguing it as an insider-ethnography that uses participant observation and interviews - there is a reflection to the material being initially generated as the author's own participation before becoming examples in research. I would argue that Race's own insider perspective and engagement prior to conducting the research and its declaration as being "insider" is demonstrative to autoethnographic work. Such approaches to autoethnographic work have become a way for the self-representations of researchers to (re)present "the world" (Butz and Besio, 2009) and - for spaces like sexual cultures especially - can 'provide a deep, rich account of social interactions and bonds in a community through first-hand knowledge' (Brown, 2015: 85).

In games studies, auto/ethnographic work has also been produced as a form of academic enquiry, finding presence in a wide range of focuses to approach and understand the spaces of games. Examples of ethnography in gaming have been used to provide nuance and insight into players, such as exploring online and virtual role-playing communities (Turtle, 1995; Taylor, 2006). Boellstorff (2015) conducted a focused study of *Second Life* (Linden Research Inc., 2003) by embedding themselves in the game space to look at how virtual and online environments shape identity and selfhood. In other work, Nardi (2010) used ethnographic approaches to explore gender and addiction in *World of Warcraft*. Whilst these examples demonstrate the kinds of work that has been conducted already to explore player communities, there has also been a variety of research produced to focus and centralise the player/self as a form of autoethnographic engagement. This has ranged from Dibbell (1993) recalling their experience of sexual assault during their time playing on an *MUD*, to the descriptive accounts by Sundén (2012) and Wilde (2018) in which they provide commentaries on their affective relationships to their avatars in *World of Warcraft*. Sundén's work also explores their relationship with another player within and beyond the game also as a form of autoethnographic work, discussing the sensations and experiences she felt throughout her time researching. In other examples, Fedchun (2020) uses autoethnography to illustrate the experiences of being a woman playing in the male-dominated space of *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009). Sapach (2018) takes inspiration from gaming culture to conduct "*Let's Plays*" as a form of autoethnographic practice, recording themselves to explore their reaction and relationship to video

games. Whilst these examples utilise various methodological tools to conduct autoethnographic work and so are diverse in nature, the consistent element is the centralising of one's own position as framed in and in relation to particular contexts.

However, the use of subjective positions within the research process and analysis which is common to conducting autoethnography has also been referred to in other terms, like “close readings/playing” and “close textual analysis,” or conducting phenomenological explorations of gaming. So, there is an important distinction to make in terms of how I interpret autoethnographic approaches in relation to these other definitions. Inderst (2023) approached games by “*close playing*” by which the close attentive logging of game content and experiences highlighted the reflexive nature of (digital) games. Elsewhere, the approach of “close readings” have been discussed as useful to making focused qualitative analysis of games (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011; Consalvo and Dutton, 2006), which involves ‘[centralising] the researcher’s (or the critic’s, viewer’s, or player’s) own interpretation of mediated content’ (Stang, 2022). Harvey (2020) discussed that close readings and analysis of the signs and codes of media texts provides more detailed and nuanced engagements with representation. For Stang (2022), embodying such nuance in studying video games can highlight specific moments of oppression and injustice within the academic discourse and the text themselves through centralising the scholar’s subjective position and experience, despite opening researchers up to criticisms of paranoia or projecting certain agendas. Similar to autoethnography, close readings and playing does provide nuance to understand the game space, and through the awareness of one’s subjectivity can indeed open up interpretations from underrepresented, underground or ignored groups, communities or cultures, particularly in relation to challenging hegemonic and traditionalist generalisations.

Similarly in comparison - by also presenting a subjective focus - is that of *phenomenology* which is generally conceptualised as exploring through *experience* in terms of noting our senses, feelings and thoughts (Bakels, 2020). Phenomenology calls for us to directly engage in our intimate relationship and embodiment between texts and our bodies (Sobchack, 1992). However, Bakels (2020) argues that most approaches

to studying the phenomenology of video games seems to focus on specific aspects to play experiences, rather than more comprehensive attempts concerned with several concepts of phenomenology which researchers like Keogh (2015) had considered such as embodiment, feeling and affect. Though, the lens of phenomenology does appear to be parallel to some of the approaches to autoethnography, whereby the author/researcher directly recalls and narrates their experience in artistic and descriptive ways.

However, I would argue the distinction between conducting close analysis and phenomenology in comparison to autoethnography is that the autoethnographer purposely tries to remain within that subjective position and interrogates it in relation to wider social and cultural framing. Rather than approaching texts as a “researcher,” the autoethnographer approaches as “subject” and/or participant to the culture or communities being explored. In some regard, the autoethnographer continues to perform as the self throughout their exploration and at all levels of the research process, in comparison to these other approaches that are seemingly more “researcher centric.” The autoethnographer actively chooses to reveal themselves as an entry to exploring areas of culture in more self-referential, self-narrative ways than initially interrogating from a researcher’s position (Doloriert and Sambook, 2009). It is for this reason that this thesis references to its approach as autoethnographic, as I am utilising the self (I/auto) to understand “an other” which are gay adult video games and the sexual play they offer (ethno) (Doloriert and Sambook, 2009). By utilising my subjective position as a way to interact and approach these games as a form of research, it allows for me to explore “the world” of adult video games as a gay male game player, which further provides nuance to understanding game players, games spaces and also gay sexual culture generally.

My approach takes inspiration from some of these previous iterations of autoethnographic work in gaming, such as the descriptive accounts of game experiences like Sundén (2012) and Wilde (2018) and the “gaming focused” method practice of recording one’s own gameplay like Sapach (2018) employs. As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis conducted its autoethnography first by writing my

experience down whilst playing to shifting towards gameplay recording and narrating my thoughts and feelings whilst playing (to create a transcription), in an attempt to better reflect my response and experience as it recorded my initial reactions to game content. Whilst these authors conducted research within games such as MMORPGs and game spaces featuring other active players, my autoethnography takes place within single-player games, such as visual novels and simulation-based games. It could be critiqued that doing an autoethnography in single-player games is not viable to exploring aspects of culture as I am the “only participant” within the game space in comparison to featuring other players. In response, I would argue that both myself and the text are agents in constructing the (re)presentations of culture: I am engaging within the game space as a gay male, and the game(s) features pre-existing notions around (gay) sexual culture, and so through exploring them as texts and my interaction/experience, further commentary can be made to the genre and sexual culture outside the game space overall.

As this is an exploration of a form of sexually interactive media, the recording of my gameplay is an attempt to conduct an account inspired by *evocative autoethnography*, where the communication of the experience is retold without the use of jargon or terminology and instead is more closely related to how I interact with others generally (Bochner and Ellis, 2016: 79). In doing so, I represent my lived experience of playing these single-player adult video games as closely connected to my position as possible, in an effort to present experiences that are able to be understood or related to (Bocher and Ellis, 2016: 79). Butz and Besio (2009: 1660) highlight that autoethnographic self-narratives can emerge from a variety of speaking positions and so considering the “act of telling [as] a performance” (Bochner and Ellis, 2016: 93), it seemed more suitable to narrate my experience in my personal tone and voice. This was also a key decision in the shift from creating a descriptive written autoethnographic account to instead narrate my experiences “as a gamer.” Treating my gameplays as documenting my “lived experience” as a gamer, originally writing my thoughts and feelings down whilst playing had begun to feel performative towards a researcher position. The autoethnography started to naturally be framed around academic expectations rather than something that is more necessarily reflective to my “*true*” feelings as a gay gamer. Whilst I am

embodying both these perspectives in the research, conducting the autoethnography as “the researcher” could potentially lead to certain politics and agendas to emerge, especially given some of the realist and objectivity presumptions that can be within ethnographic forms of work (Butz and Besio, 2009: 1664). By recording my gameplay and creating a transcript of my narration to my thoughts, feelings and choices, this acts as a “personal story” expressing my lived experience rather than simply being academic writing, and evoke personal connections to bring the reader directly into the action and experiences (Bochner and Ellis, 2016: 80-108).

#### ***4.7 Conclusion: Ethical Issues and Subjective Research***

This thesis was submitted to ethical review by Birmingham City University to address the ethical concerns of this research being a subjective-based exploration into sex/uality. Given some of the historical tensions around autoethnography regarding glamorising and performative accounts (Pratt, 1986), one ethical concern of this thesis is (mis)treatment of the data and process. This was addressed in the ethical review and this thesis by providing timestamps for each autoethnographic account, including the shift in research practice from written experiences to recorded gameplays and their transcription dates. To maintain transparency, the thesis also acknowledges the selection of materials and engagement with games as being within a subjective perspective to address my personal participation within the research design and process (Burke, 2014: 73). Complexities around autoethnography and performative research are a point of exploration in a later chapter<sup>18</sup>.

Further ethical concerns of this research are in relation to myself and my wellbeing in regard to the data collection and beyond this thesis. Alongside concerns of “over-reading,” (see Ruberg, 2019: 56-77), the inclusion of intimate or sexual subjective experience in research raises questions around ethics and risks (see Kulick, 1995; Bolton, 1995). These concerns revolve around issues of researcher integrity, exploitation and consent, especially regarding participants if the research is within

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<sup>18</sup> Conclusion Part II. Post-Script Methodological Complexities

social spaces. Previous autoethnographic accounts into (sexual) social spaces that have navigated such concerns (e.g., Sundén, 2012; Bolton, 1995) were used as a basis to consider the appropriate ways of conducting the autoethnography and personal safety. Though the thesis does not feature other participants as it is in single-player video games, it still carries its own risks in terms of the critique and dissemination of my sexual experience(s) within the thesis and beyond it. The concern here is that as subjective research, the data collection and dissemination of the thesis *could* lead to psychological distress in terms of accusations not retaining integrity or surrounding the historical “taboo” nature of discussing explicit sex in research. The researcher (I) may become uncomfortable by using it as a site of data and/or critique or be subjected to wider (socio-cultural) judgements. To mitigate these concerns, the thesis and autoethnographic account are transparent about its framing and construction. Practices of self-care were adopted during the play period: readiness to remove myself from collecting data if I felt uncomfortable or unsafe, validating the need to “step back” from a game experience by problematising it within the thesis, and seeking out advice and guidance from discussing the data with supervisors. This was also further recontextualised within the thesis as a point of exploration within the analysis and conclusion.

## Findings

The findings chapters that follows are a textual analysis of various themes from my project corpus that are also engaged with my own reflective gameplay accounts. The use of my accounts is not to suggest or claim my gameplay experience is the authoritative perspective for engaging with some of the theoretical frameworks explored here. Rather, their use invites further exploration into the subjective experiences of these games into wider texts and positionalities. It is also important to highlight that not all of the autoethnographic accounts are covered within the following chapters for this thesis, with some also having more prominence in their inclusion than others. This is purposeful for two reasons: (1) the limitations of the scope of this thesis; (2) my embodiment with some of these games will be an on-going process post-study. Further, some aspects of my commentary in certain games are more prominent than others. This is down to elements being more provocative to the discussions presented but also to reflect the following analysis as from within a subjective position, with the writing embodying that sentiment. However, I have included the “autoethnographic” data collection in its entirety for context and its relation to the overall study (see Appendix 1-2). Though this does mean that not all games and experiences have been discussed in equal detail, rather, it provides an initial point to engage with these video game texts and invite for continued critique upon them. Even though these accounts were not all fully discussed, they have still informed my current position that this thesis argues. In this regard, the initial engagement that follows uses elements of my gameplay accounts to analyse three themes: *avatars*, *(sexual) game mechanics*, and *transgression*.

## Chapter 5. Self-Stimulating: Adult Video Game Avatars and Sexual Affectivity

### 5.1 Introduction

The following chapter explores the “avatar” within a selection of gay adult video games as affording constructions of *the* “sexual self,” interrogating the player-avatar relationship as offering sexually affective experiences for players. Primarily, it aims to textually analyse the construction of the avatar body in relation to its sexually affective potentials, allowing the player to pursue sexual desires and attain pleasure through the play of their avatar. However, rather than interrogate this dynamic from an objective perspective, it makes use of my own documented play experiences from the single-player gay adult videogames that make up my project corpus as interventions in the discussion. What was prominent in the texts in the corpus was the presence of pre-constructed avatars or game body that were not visible on screen. In addressing my own subjectivity in relation to these premade avatars, I analyse how there is an affordance of sexual embodiment to (re)visualise the (sexual) self within a body that is framed through (dominant) cultural contexts. Here, the (erotic) body of the avatar becomes a site of fantasy play, allowing the self to be embodied within these structures *and* afford sexual affective pleasures to the avatar itself. Elsewhere in the corpus, irrespective to the presence of a *prescribed* and/or ambiguous avatar, there is an affordance for embodiment and imagined within sexual scenarios as fantasy through the performance of one’s avatar. As this chapter does acknowledge, this analysis of video game avatars does use my own positionality as a site of research and engagement. This is not to privilege my own experience as the definitive framing of understanding or exploring avatars through sexual embodiment and affectivity. Rather, my own autoethnographic experience is a facet to the nuances of player closeness with their avatar in navigating adult video game spaces with the (virtual) sexual self.

With this thesis defining sexual play as the meaningful actions conducted in the strive for sexual pleasure, interrogating the gameplay and game content only through these aspects would not consider how the player directly navigates (within/through) video

game spaces in their play: as their avatar. As I argued in earlier chapters of this thesis, sexual play is tied to the individual subjectivities and affective desires of the player, and so focusing on the avatar considers the player as agentic in their quest for pleasure. The discussions posited in this chapter are limited to my own project corpus and should not be taken as representative to all (gay) adult video game avatars. Instead, the focus on specific texts of my corpus as acts as an initial facet to unpacking this intimate relationship between the player and their game body to provide a closer and more critical understanding of the player becoming attuned with their avatar. Whilst not every game within the project corpus is mentioned here, it is not intended to privilege those that are referenced as more indicative of the avatar discourse. Rather, it initiates a contextualisation where it has not otherwise been commonly applied. Therefore, using my subjectivity and sexual embodiment within the avatar as reflective commentary, I explore the sexual constructions and performances of the “self,” in how there is an allowance to a play of a (fantastical) sexual self and the experiences of pleasure avatars offer.

As ways players interact and progress within their game world (e.g., Wilde and Evans, 2019: 798), the player is habiting or becomes *attuned* with (virtual) game body and world as an extension of their own body and sensations (Gee, 2008: 258; Lankoski, 2016; Crick, 2011). It is necessary to address the overlap of the avatar as affording a sexual embodied self, and the affective potentials it offers the player through play. As this chapter will overview, the player-avatar relationship has been a previous discourse within games studies, with various scholars defining the dynamic as involving insertions of identity into a (virtual) “game body,” (Crick, 2011) through to more complex discussions around an entangled self and existing across many spaces beyond the confines of the physical body (Banks, 2017). Though some of this prior discourse has focused on the self and avatar engagement - primarily through their own autoethnographic accounts (Sundén, 2012; Wilde, 2018; 2023) - rarely has the intricate relationship of the player-avatar been explored through sexual affectivity and sexual play particularly within a single-play game context designed to facilitate desire and pleasure. Therefore, the chapter seeks to further this already prevalent discussion, applying them to singleplayer, sexually gratifying game texts to consider the intimacies

and affects of the player-avatar relationship. This findings chapter is broken down into subsections that engage with some of the facets of this mutualistic dynamic: (1) the sexual affects of the visual construction of (prescribed) avatars; (2) playing as the avatars; (3) the feeling of this relationship as sexually affective as a conclusion. For the purposes of this chapter, I use the various terminology to describe this relationship of the player and the avatar: avatar, player-avatar, player-character and game body. Though these terms may be indicative to different extents of interaction between the player, avatar and game, I use them interchangeably to refer to the overall player-avatar dynamism as they are utilised to explore my subjective engagement rather than a separate objective one and feels the most appropriate to articulate that experience.

## **5.2 Affective Erotic Bodies: Adult Video games and Avatars**

Avatars have previously been discussed in game studies as a relevant element to video games design and experience (Trepte and Reinecke, 2010). Past perspectives have viewed the avatar as a navigational tool for player interaction, as well as a site for identity projection (e.g., Crick, 2011; Thomas and Johansen, 2010; Rahill and Sebrechts, 2021). Whilst discussions of the avatar are also found beyond games studies as a field - with studies into “virtual personas” in digital cultures (see Freeman and Maloney, 2021 as example) - the analysis presented here considers avatars through these discussions from games studies. This is primarily due to the avatar’s relevance in video game progress and navigation, with the player requiring the “avatar” in order to progress in the game (Wilde and Evans, 2019). For a project that is exploring (sexual) play within video game spaces, considering how the player navigates through and within the game is relevant to understanding the subjective and emergent experiences that can occur. As Wilde and Evans (2019: 798) argue, exploring the avatar body is a useful initial point to considering game navigation and exploration. As such, to understand the subjective experiences that can be encountered within gay adult video games, it is necessary to first contextualise *how* the player moves through the game: as *their* avatar.

When exploring definitions of the avatar, some have posited that the game avatar is an intermediary for the player to interact and navigate the game space or world; and how they engage with other players. For example, in the view by Crick (2011: 261), for ‘most video games, the player controls the game through an exclusive intermediary of another: the avatar.’ Giyoto et al. (2019) argues a similar perspective, viewing the avatar as a tool that players use to access the textual structures of games. In this regard, the avatar does not exist for itself but for the sole ludic navigations of the player. Through their definitions, the avatar becomes a vehicle for player interaction, limited to a ludic purpose and separate from the player. Returning to my contextualisation of games (and game spaces), through this definition, the avatar exists to perform the desired actions of the player and bring about a state of affairs within the game (Suits, 2005). Though these perspectives are indicative to thinking of avatars as ways that players can interact in the game space, they are also framed solely within a ludic context. In this capacity, the avatar is limited to a singular purpose of performing the specific actions of the player; in this regard, the player exerts an extent of “control” over their avatar. With their perspective alone, the avatar *only* functions as the entryway and *distant* game body that responds to the player’s input of controls for them to navigate the game environment.

Whilst the player does make use of an avatar to progress onward within a game, the two are also not necessarily exclusive or separate from each other (Wilde and Evans, 2019). As this findings chapter explores, the avatar has more relevance than solely the tool to “play” the game – the avatar offers engagement more than procedural as in that capacity, the player is not “playing” but “conforming.” For adult video games, not only is the avatar functional to progress the game events, but rather they allow the inclusion of the player’s desires, intentions, and *feelings* in an act of embodiment. Since the adult video games I focus on in this thesis seek to provide titillating sexual experiences for players, relying on a model of avatars that only considers them as a tool for game navigation does not address how these game environments afford the player to encounter these pleasures. Therefore, there is a need to address how the subjectivities of the player intersect with the avatar in a state of *becoming* the “sexual self.” Others have considered the form of the avatar as affirming a merging of identity between the player and (virtual) game body, allowing the player to insert their identity into this form,

becoming assimilated with it (Jin, 2009; Kim and Sundar, 2012: 1356; Wilde, 2018). Perspectives like Giyoto et al. (2019) are still relevant in acknowledging the presence of the avatar as allowing the player access to the textual structures of the game. Yet, within the play space of the (sexual) game (Huizinga, 1949; Paasonen, 2018), this intermediary takes on a new affective relevance and capacity. Not addressing the affective associations between the player and the avatar would not recognise how subjectivity is situated within experiencing play and navigating the game space. For researchers like me who are interested in explorations of the self and one's (sexual) subjectivity, the avatar is not limited to procedural contexts and instead is considered alongside these perspectives as further offering a site of embodiment within play.

Lahti (2003) explored that through gameplay and interactions, symbiotic attachments emerge that connects our bodies (player and avatar) through subjectivity in a phenomenological sense. Keogh (2015) had also considered how through the game controls, subjectivity had also emerged through phenomenology, with both acknowledging the affective potentials of gameplay. If games can afford this affective experience, then the avatar becomes the way a player navigates the game space (Wilde and Evans, 2019) to mediate and bring about these subjective attachments. In this regard, Wilde (2023) considered the avatar as affording an extension of the self, allowing a (re)articulated self to be constructed within the game space to affectively “shift” in experiencing the encounters and occurrences through the game body (Paasonen, 2018). Thomas and Johansen (2012) suggest that some of the virtual environment in which (game) avatars are located give flexibility to their form, allowing for the player to self-construct. However, I argue that this is not necessarily limited to the actual “appearance” or “aesthetic” of the avatar: though players may be able to alter avatar appearances to suit their self-concept, this self-construction also pertains to the actions that are performed and mediated through the avatar. In short, the avatar acts as the player in their identification, with the relationship of the player-avatar defined by its affective potential and connection.

In this capacity, the subjective attachment to the avatar allows the player to (re)articulate a desired impression of self, that they wish to express within the game

space, its encounters, and to other players (Rahill and Sebrechts, 2021). Some scholars have viewed the affective relationship as one affording projections of player identities, regardless of the close visual resemblance to the player (Giyoto et al., 2019: 365; Kim and Sundar, 2012; Jin, 2009). In projecting their identity and becoming represented within the game space by this game body, the player has established a connection between themselves and the character they see before them (Klimmt et al., 2010: 324). For video games, then, this game body is a virtual persona and (visual) representation of the player self which the player *identifies* with and *navigates* as when interacting in the game space (Banks, 2017; Giyoto et al., 2019; Rahill and Sebrechts, 2021). As such, this composition of the self is an act of embodiment, where the player has *become* their avatar through their exertion of agency into how the avatar *may* look or behave (Murray, 1997). This merging of the player self/identity into the body of the avatar affords an assimilation of affect, where the player becomes affectively intertwined and embodied in the game space through their subjectivity with the avatar (Jin, 2009; Wilde, 2018; Kim and Sundar, 2012). In essence, the avatar becomes the (virtual) means to (re)project, (re)represent, and (re)articulate the self (Banks, 2017; Trepte and Reinecke, 2010). Wilde and Evans (2019) had considered this relationship as one involving empathy, where the connection between players and their avatars is an immersive act. As such, through empathy, there is a creation of affective responses for the player in their embodiment: they are embodied as *themselves* within the capacities of *their* avatar. In essence, they have *become* the avatar or vice-versa where the avatar is a site to embody a/the self through player identification. Some adult video games *do* offer players the flexibility to tailor their game body or player-character to their liking: virtual worlds like *Second Life* and *Red Light Center* (Utherville Digital, 2005) allow users to create an avatar as a reflection or stylised version of their (intended) self as a point of “self-transformation” (Klimmt et al., 2010: 335). As such, there is a (sexual) play of the body, as the player is offered the capacity to author their self-concept as a form of visualisation (Jin, 2009; 2010). Yet, regardless of the avatar form, as an affective space (and body), the player is still able to be embodied within its parameters to experience the game (Gee, 2008: 258; Lankoski, 2016).

The self and its emphatic sensations or experiences is extended into the game world with the avatar being an affective intermediary. The player *feels* the phenomena of encounters and occurrence through the avatar, with the player's affective state shifting to be mediated through the (virtual) game body (Anable, 2018; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Paasonen, 2018). Regardless of form, the player-avatar relationship still allows this mediation of subjectivity: the player becomes immersed within the game, embodied in this (self-constructed) form that conducts the player's desired actions and achieves affective experiences in a mutualistic partnership (Wilde, 2018). For adult video games, then, the avatar takes on a purpose to allow the player to "access" the sexual stimulation that the games are intending to achieve (Brathwaite, 2013). The avatars in adult video games complement these avatar models that is discussed within games studies literature: (1) the avatar affords a (re)construction of the sexual self, whether through a fantastical or prescribed form; (2) affords the player the potential to attain pleasure and stimulation as affective horizons.

In the context of adult video games as game spaces, the avatar affords a sexually affective connection for the player in their play, allowing exertions of one's sexual agency (Cense, 2019) with the objective of (sexual) pleasure. As I contextually argued in chapter three<sup>19</sup>, the explicit representations and gameplay appeared purposeful for some as creating sexually entertaining and gratifying experiences, where for others were for stimulation and titillation. By playing them, players are navigating sexually, aware of the potential pleasures that await them further in the game's progression. Though the extent of (sexual) affordance within the play of these video games is a consideration in a later chapter<sup>20</sup>, the relevance here is the avatar's affordance for sexual embodiment as they allow one's (sexual) affective capacities to be mediated through the virtual game body (Gee, 2008). Rather than just identification – which Cohen (2001) had defined by the "forgetting" of a self to *become* the other – the player-avatar sexual dynamic assimilates the player's desire *onto/into* the avatar body that (re)articulate their *sexual self*. In this capacity, as posited by the contextualisation of

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<sup>19</sup> Chapter 3. The Gay Adult Video game in Context

<sup>20</sup> Chapter 7. (Un)Bound with Restraints: Sexual Possibility, Affordances and Transgressions

(sexual) affect in chapter one<sup>21</sup> as involving *feelings* of (titillating) phenomenon that changes our engagement and experience within our play (in order to pursue desire) (Paasonen, 2018; Tomkins, 2008), adult video game avatars afford sexual interactions through game space navigation.

It may be suggested that the adult video game avatar is instead a site to “project a sexual self,” where there is only one particular self that is immersed within the game space to strive for the intended pleasures on offer. I argue that this would actually limit the affective dynamic between player and avatar, alongside the game space, as a momentary performance of fleeting pleasure rather than around player sexual embodiment in video games. In short: the player uses the avatar to achieve levels of stimulation to a point of “climax.” Even if the play itself is not “realistic” to the player and a state of fantasy roleplay, the player-avatar relationship still acts as an extension of *the* self rather than being treated as something separate and temporary. In their embodiment, players navigate sexually through the game space through their respective avatar in which they experience the sensations and pleasures that occur in their performance and play. In identifying with the avatar, *becoming* them, the player has embodied themselves within the sexual world of the adult video game space, regardless as to the form and performance of the avatar body itself or its “reflection” of the self.

With this framework of how avatars intersect with adult video games as affording sexual embodiment and (re)articulations of the sexual self, the analysis that follows explores my own subjective experience of them with a selection of games from my project corpus. Wider examples of avatar presence in other video games of this nature are also mentioned for nuance and context towards demonstrating the diverse articulation of the game body and how the player may or may not be embodied within its parameters. However, the interrogation of my own gameplay experience within this corpus of games is revolved around three aspects: (1) the *aesthetics and visuality* of the avatar from; (2) the *performance and play* of the avatars through player (sexual) interaction; (3) the

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<sup>21</sup> Chapter 1. “Playing with Sex”: Ambiguities of Sexual Play

*pleasures* that are afforded by “being” the avatar in my play. Though the form and performance of the avatar may differ from text-to-text, they are still a consistent facet of adult video game experience that affords sexual pleasures for the player. Whilst there is a reliance on using my own gameplay to interrogate this discussion around avatars, it does not claim that such arguments are representative to *all* avatars in adult video games. Rather, from a subjective position as a (white) gay male playing gay adult game texts, it is one perspective to engage with the embodiment of the player during play.

In the corpus of single-player adult video games, the avatar was occasionally constructed as either a pre-set game bodies that had partial or limited customisation, or fully non-customisable in some games. Others featured an avatar that was not visible or present on “screen” during game play. Whilst the lack of avatars that allowed customisable aspects is an omission in the discussion that follows – and demonstrative to the limits of my corpus – the analysis of these (pre-made) avatars still starts to consider the intimate relationship between the player (as my “self”) and the game avatar in terms of the affective sensations and satisfactions that emerged through being embodied within them. Though my experience of playing with avatars would be limited due to this lack of customisation, they still allow a kind of mediation of sexual affects and the (re)articulation of a sexual self through my embodiment.

### **5.3 Seeing: Aesthetics and Visuality of the Avatar**

Some adult video games appear to feature and make use of pre-constructed – or rather, *prescribed* – avatars: they are relatively non-customisable bodies with static appearances. These types of avatar inclusions are suggestive to the avatar models that Crick (2011) and Giyoto et al. (2019) employed, where the player has identified with the game body (Cohen, 2001) and projected a self onto it to progress through game narrative and encounters. In the player-avatar relationship, the player is embodied within a premade construction of a body, taking on these prescribed qualities as if it was their own self. Though more of a heterosexual video game example, *Larry Laffer* as the protagonist and player-character in *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards* (Sierra On-Line; 1987) is indicative to a prescribed avatar. In considering Larry’s

construction as the avatar, he is static and consistent in his form: a balding, middle-aged, suit-wearing male whose objective is to (unsuccessfully) seduce young women in a sexual conquest. In most games of the series (1987-2020), this avatar form is reutilised, with the exception of spin-off games like *Magna Cum Laude* (2004) and *Box Office Bust* (2009) where the avatar is still a “Larry-esque” figure and continues to offer the player the embodiment of a “middle-aged heterosexual male.” As supposed sex comedies (Brathwaite, 2013; Mills, 2015), players are expected (and intended) to identify with this preconstructed body, adopting the qualities of this intermediary as if it was their own self. In short: the player *plays* as Larry Laffer, on a heterosexual conquest to pursue women for his own gratification. The player identifies with Larry, becoming connected to the game space as him and his (affective) experience as if it were the player’s own. O’Riordan (2001) had also argued a similar perspective but in relation to the titular character of the *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996), Lara Croft. As O’Riordan (2001: 230-236), Lara acts as the point of intersection of the player’s presence and the narrative of the game. ‘The subjectivity of the player in *Tomb Raider* is surprisingly complex [...] the player, that of Lara and that of the “player in action”’ (O’Riordan, 2001: 235). In playing with the prescribed avatar, the player’s self is assimilated with the positionality of the pre-made game body. I refer to these avatars as a prescribed game body as they are suggestive of certain cultural ideas and attitudes, with Larry being a misogynistic sleaze or the sexually driven body politics of Lara’s representation. In this capacity, the avatar is socio-culturally defined (or *scripted*) in terms of their visuality. Though they may not resemble or reflect the player, through the affective shifts and attachments during play (Paasonen, 2018; Tomkins, 2008), the player becomes embodied within preconceived ideas and contexts.

In my own playthrough of some of the games in my corpus, there were mainly a presence of preconstructed avatars that offered either limited or no customisation to their form. As such, my embodiment within these texts was with a static body. My play of *Coming Out on Top* (Obscurasoft, 2014) involved playing as a prescribed avatar named Mark Matthews, who was the (in-game) visualisation of myself and my choices or encounters within the game. *Coming Out on Top* is a “dating simulator” video game: a type of interactive fiction game where players navigate various pathways as their

avatar to create and pursue relationships with in-game characters (Andlauer, 2018; Ganzon, 2019; Song and Fox, 2016). In this game, the player goes through premade scenarios as Mark that feature various pathways that allows them to romance and sexually engage with a selection of male characters<sup>22</sup>. Mark is the sole playable character for the game, and thus the only game body which embodies the player and becomes the representational figure that enacts their choices and sexual encounters with the male characters of the game. What is most relevant about Mark as an avatar to the discussion here is his appearance: he is an attractive white “American” young male, and in terms of his body has a defined musculature and is well-endowed [Fig.5.1-5.2].

[Image redacted. Full thesis available on request.]

[Image redacted. Full thesis available on request.]

**Fig.5.1–5.2 – Screenshots of player avatar Mark in Coming Out on Top**

(Obscurasoft, 2014) during a masturbation scene that the player can unlock.

These also show the customisation possible within the game’s settings to allow the presence of body hair.

Customisation of Mark is minimal, with the player only being able to alter settings within the game to allow the presence of body/pubic hair on Mark (and other characters) [Fig.5.1-5.2], or to change the name to whatever the player wishes. In my own playthrough, Mark’s preconceived body became a point of desire, and highlighted a distance between myself and this “handsome male” in terms of my subjectivity and embodiment.

*“I am greeted by the identification of a handsome male, no, quite handsome in fact.”*

- *Coming out on Top* - Alex, Recorded Nov 16, 2022

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<sup>22</sup> The analysis of this “choice-style” gameplay is reflected on further in Chapter 7. (Un)Bound with Restraints: Rules, Limits and Sexual Possibilities

*“Mark (my avatar who I titled Than) is a very attractive male, the conventionally handsome figure [...] Mark and I are not the same; he is what appears to be a taller, muscular “pretty” male. So, now that I have finished playing the game, I ask myself, was I indeed drawn to my avatar?”*

- *Coming out on Top – A Final Reflection*, Recorded Nov 23, 2022

On an initial consideration, both from analysing the construction of Mark and my own personal account of playing with him as my avatar, he does not seem to fit these models of avatars being ‘visual representations of game players’ selves’ (Jin, 2009: 761) or act as an “idealised version” of my *self* (Kim and Sundar, 2012: 1357), from my subjective experience of the game. I am neither Mark, nor resemble him. Though, in the same context, he is what Klimmt et al. (2010: 335) considered as a mechanism for me to “self-transform” into him and detach from my “normal” self. Though I share no physical attributes with Mark, the avatar body is still a site for me to imprint my identity into him. Mark then becomes an extension of myself and the rearticulation of my affective experience, as we become intimately converged. It could be argued that constructing a preset avatar in such a way offers the player opportunity to experience the game within this body that is different from the player: the player’s desires and affective sensations emerging from their sexual navigation are both embodied through Mark’s appearance and through Mark’s relationship with other handsome males. Yet, conversely, Mark is a fixed identity and construction, as his physicality is limited throughout the play of the game, only being customised via the game settings to alter his appearance to showing body and pubic hair. He is a white “American” with a herculean, athletic and muscular physique [Fig.5.1-5.2], akin to that commonly found within gay pornography (Mercer, 2017a).

Thinking of the visualisation of Mark as emerging from gay porn iconographies, his “fit and Herculean” physique could be read as demonstrative to the “college *jock*” body aesthetic that one might see popularise various gay pornographic websites like *Corbin Fisher* (n.d.), or *SeanCody* (Sean Cody, 2024). This is even further affirmed by the narrative of the game itself involving sexual encounters at an (assumed) American university. As Mercer (2017: 113) describes the “jock” archetype, it is a static model of ‘athletic masculinity’ that seemingly seeks to present a very idealised, physically

“perfect” body type. The visuality of Mark then is a prescribed construction that can be traced to the proliferation of this jock body type that frequents gay pornography<sup>23</sup>. For Mark, the game presents a clear emphasis on him being physically fit, an extremely defined musculature, with an intention for the avatar to be constructed in sexually explicit representations either alone or with other romanceable characters. As such, the visuality of Mark that positions him as a prescribed avatar can be traced to the proliferations of the “jock” body type that frequents gay pornography. Emerging as a potential gay porn iconography, the visuals of Mark also become a point of sexual play, as his erotic portrayal may also garner sexual pleasure given its ties to gay pornography. Even if Mark does not resemble the player themselves, the player can still become embodied within the play of him, mediating sexually affective sensations from seeing the explicit constructions of Mark or the visuals of him engaging in sexual acts with other characters. This is similar to the use of Larry Laffer in the *Leisure Suit Larry* series in that we are expected to identify and become embodied within their construction, with our affective sensations of the game play tied to this body regardless of any shared visuality.

In this regard, Mark is a *scripted* avatar body, with his features and structure demonstrating certain dominant attitudes and conducts of the gay sexual body. As an archetypal body, Mark’s relation to gay pornography body types suggests a perception of the “desirable” for gay men, with a proliferation of a prescribed idea of what constitutes as a “hot attractive gay male.” As Dowsett et al. (2008: 128) argues, the pornographic gay male body ‘provide[s] a blueprint for the “ideal” image of what it means to be gay.’ There is a similar reflection here to my engagement with Hasbro Action Men dolls in my youth in chapter two<sup>24</sup>, in which articulations of (my) sex/uality and what I considered as a desirable male form were mediated through a similar construction of an athletic male body. Here, there is a similar affective potential, where the appearance of Mark emerged a specific (sexual) response of desire and fantasy. Though I do note of my prior knowledge of the game and the avatar (see Appendix 1.2),

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<sup>23</sup> Gay porn websites like Sean Cody even indicate their aims at offering viewers scenes involving “all-American college jocks” for pleasure.

<sup>24</sup> Chapter 2. Scripting Gay: Intersections of Sexual Scripting, Games and Gay Men

the introduction of Mark still emerged desired as an affective response from my “original” state of being to then one of attraction to my avatar (Paasonen, 2018; Tomkins, 2008).

In this capacity, the interaction with Mark draws from wider socio-cultural contexts (from pornography) as his visual construction as the “jock” body type (Mercer, 2017a) posits him as culturally prescribed by dominant ideologies (akin to a cultural scenario). Yet this pre-set appearance extends into the actual play of the game: the game narrative involves Mark embarking on sexual encounters in which Mark is (normally) perceived as desirable and erotic. Thinking through this within the avatar frameworks, the player is *actively* embodied and engaging *with* and *in* Mark’s appearance, giving a guise that the player is wanted by these characters because “they are Mark.” Though the visuality of the avatar body is static – without customisation capabilities and solely defined in as with attractive “physical assets” (Escoffier, 2003; Brennan, 2018) – Mark is representational to a series of cultural hegemonies to the appearances of (sexual) gay men. The visualisation of Mark as an identity embodied “American” ideologies and hegemonies regarding gay men (and sex) or what gay men find attractive, emerging from gay porn iconographies.

Similarly, the presence of prescribed avatars that suggested dominant scripted constructions were evident in other video games within my corpus, yet the affective sensations that were mediated had differed. In my experience playing *Camp Buddy* (BLitz Games, 2018) with Keitaro [Fig.5.3], I had not encountered phenomena that was akin to sexual desire or identification. As a construct, Keitaro’s appearance was more youthful, less muscular – reflecting on gay porn iconographies, Keitaro’s visuality was more aligning with “twink” body types, with slim, slender, and often unshaven appearances compared to the more hypermasculine bodies of the “daddy” and “jock.” (Mercer, 2017a: 100).



**Fig.5.3.** – Screenshot of player avatar Keitaro in *Camp Buddy*.

Comparatively, in the play of *Full Service* (Mazjojo Games, 2020), the player is embodied within Tomoki who whilst is constructed in a similar aesthetic to Keitaro actually features a more excessive musculature [Fig.5.4.] in which placing him within certain framings of gay porn body types is more nuanced to his position. Whilst my playthrough as Keitaro did not emerge any kind of sexually affective response (see Appendix 1.7), I had similarly considered Tomoki as attractive:

*“The game begins, and I see my character: Tomoki. He seems like a very attractive, soft-natured male. An endearing character. I realise that I cannot change anything about my avatar, no customisation aspect, he is completely set. I used to find this complex, feeling restrictive to identity with a character that did not resemble myself in any capacity. Perhaps I still harbour those same feelings, however, I also find that it is somehow insignificant all at once.”*

- *Full Service Playthrough – “I had a Dream About My Boss” (Rald Pathway),*

Recorded Dec 14, 2022

[Image redacted. Full thesis available on request.]

**Fig.5.4.** – Screenshot of player avatar Tomoki (left) in Full Service, standing next to Rald.

As such, the prescribed avatar body as indicative to dominant (sexual) hegemonies can become a point of subjective desire during play. In my own gameplay, it became apparent that I had an affective engagement of desire towards the specific body types (of the “daddy” or “jock” archetypes) in terms of my prescribed avatar. As Barker (2014) describes on sexual fantasies, bodies (and here, affective) responses could include appreciation of the spectacle as well as involving the imprinting of the self within the fantasy for fulfilment. My play as the avatar Mark (in *Coming Out on Top*) suggested this nuanced desire: affectively engaging with him as a site of desire, whilst also having reflection to potential (re)articulation of my self to be this erotic body. The avatars here afforded shifts in sexual affect, allowing an intertwining with their limits to identity with the avatar or *become* it.

Contrastingly, there is a question as to the affective engagements in locating the sexual self within avatars that you can customise or alter their appearance to suit the self-concept. Virtual social worlds like *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003) and *3D GayVilla 2* on a surface level appear to allow users to construct one’s own avatar that does allow a reflection of the sexual self or a fantasised version to sexually interact with other players. Though these games are not within my corpus, they warrant a mention, amongst others, as they broadly outline how customisable avatars can be ‘self-

transformation machines with which the players can temporarily enter states that detach them from “normal” self-perceptions’ (Klimmt et al., 2010: 335). In some capacity, these games allow players greater extents of agency to (re)articulate themselves into the play space. Whilst identifying and *becoming* their avatar, they enter an imagined, embodied state that is detached from their physical body and imprints their affective potentials onto their avatar to play and so the question emerges as to their subjective capacities. In some respects, this may be a point of further study, to explore how one’s embodiment alters with the flexibility to change how one is perceived. However, what can be said about this consideration is that non-prescribed, customisable avatars afford play agency to define the sexual self. In this capacity, there is a (re)mediation of subjective sexual desires and identity, rather than the (re)mediation of predefined constructions or bodies. Regardless as to whether the avatars are physical embodiments replicating player appearances or be a construction of an idealistic view of the self (Jin, 2009: 761; Kim and Sundar, 2012: 1357), they are still visualisations of the player(s) in which they have (re)articulated a sexual self to explore with such a body.

In the play of these mentioned games, the visuality of the avatar *can* be a facet to the sexual satisfaction or emergent desires that is mediated by the player-avatar dynamic. In terms of the prescribed avatar in my corpus, the capacity to tailor my avatar to suit my own sexual play and fantasies was limited or non-existent. Instead, the player-avatar relationship here was nuanced to constructing a sexual self, whether it was projecting identity (e.g., Jin, 2009) or actually considering a (re)articulation of my self to be sexually embodied with a form that is separate or distance from my own “lived” reflection (e.g., Crick, 2011). Even without the capacity to personalise the avatar to suit my fantasied self and being confined to specific structures, there was still some form of sexual embodiment and fantasy play, whether it was attraction to my avatar or (re)imagining myself within that body to strive for satisfaction. Having prescribed avatars that can be reflected on in terms of wider cultural contexts like gay porn bodies offered a sense of self-stimulation: to view such erotic bodies that I subjective deemed desirable in explicit sexual representations *and* a space to (re)embody myself into these (dominant) structures for fantasy play.

#### **5.4 Playing: Performing and Navigating as the Avatar**

It should be highlighted that the games discussed in relation to the visual construction of the avatar were all examples from my play of dating simulator games, in which static visual representations of avatars and characters are common for its genre (Song and Fox, 2016). As such, the discussions that they present about the affective engagements in the play of them are nuanced in relation to having a prescribed body, or one that is more personalised. Yet, in other games, the avatar body was not present, offering a game experience that was directly through a “first-person” viewpoint. In this regard, the prescribed nature of the avatar became irrelevant to the fantasy and pleasure, and suggestive to that the form of the avatar is not the sole mediation of a player’s sexual embodiment. The actual act of *play(ing)* as the avatar also mediates its own pleasures, becoming shaped by the player’s performance as them within the parameters of the play space (Fernández-Vara, 2006: 6). As such, when it comes to the (re)articulations of the sexual self, there is a reflexivity to treating the avatar to engage in forms of fantasy to achieve pleasure in terms of its performance but adhering to one’s own self-concept and conduct. It is for this reason that the games I analyse here not only feature the performance of prescribed avatars, but ones without its presence as so to consider how being able to play the game through this virtual body allows for sexually affective experiences. Specifically, performing as the avatar (as the self) engaged with wider (sexual) discourses around sexual positions and pornographic media.

Momentarily staying parallel to the discussion of *Coming Out on Top* and the use of prescribed avatars, though the avatar is a static depiction of (a) self, it was in my playthrough of the “Jed” route that had started to engage with the idea of the avatar affording sexual fantasies to be (re)visualised. As a character, Jed is an upstairs neighbour for the player (as the avatar, Mark). He is initially introduced to the player in a partly explicit sexual representation, as by picking certain choices the story leads the player to Jed’s apartment, and he meets the player fully nude. Referring to the discussion around Mark’s visual construction being referential to the “jock” body type, Jed is also similar as he features a well-defined, Herculean physique [Fig.2.5] that

parallels the gay pornographic archetype (Mercer, 2017a) whilst also featuring the appearances of piercing and tattoos in his visual construction. In the initial meeting, I had encountered phenomena akin to desire for Jed as a form of sexual affective interaction with erotic portrayal:

*“After knocking the door, I am greeted by a male, piercings on his ear and eyebrow, tattoos on his arm. I felt my eyes go wide, for his introduction is that of a muscular shirtless smirking male. [...] I did not anticipate being greeted by this sight, that I must blink to remind myself to continue progressing through the game. He was definitely an attractive male, or at least designed that way.”*

*- Coming out On Top - Jed, Recorded Nov 17, 2022*

As such, I was already experiencing phenomena akin to attraction to Jed’s character, already wanting to pursue him in my gameplay. The narrative itself at this point revolves around Mark seeking out Jed to request him to turn down his music, yet Jed mistakenly thinks Mark is there for Jed’s group sex party. As such, the player is given a choice to reject Jed’s invitation (which would potentially end him as a romanceable route) or accept his invitation to his *bukkake*<sup>25</sup> party [Fig.2.6]. In my playthrough, the desire for Jed had led me to accept his invitation in which I was also able to consider my own self (via Mark) within sexual dynamics:

*“Jed asks if I know “what the star of a Bukkake party does [...] the game is now letting me decide the kinds of sexual dynamic I “wish to experience”. I feel a sense of anticipation, again to wondering about what awaits at either of these paths. [...] I decide to “choose to be the star.” The game tells me Than/Mark has stripped, stating “You don’t know what’s come over you, but something about this guy makes you feel reckless.” I agree, I feel this sense of excitement, shamelessness, carefree nature. [...] I am witnessing a depiction of a sexual practice through which I have no lived experience with.”*

*- Coming out On Top - Jed, Recorded Nov 17, 2022*

Though I was playing as this prescribed avatar, my affective response to Jed had (sexually) motivated my play (Paasonen, 2018) to “indulge” in the sexual act, but in doing so had been given the choice on how I desired to be positioned within this sexual dynamic. In reflecting on the play of Mark (Than) as the construction of my sexual self,

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<sup>25</sup> Group set act that involves multiple participants ejaculating onto one participant.

the choice of my sexual positioning within the fantasy affords a capacity to visuality the self (through identifying with the prescribed avatar) within sexual dynamics. Here, my play of the avatar afforded forms of erotic fantasy roleplay, as the player is invited to be (re)embodied within the sexual scene in a pre-defined scenario and sexual role (Brown and Stenros, 2018b: 432). Here, the "star" that is in question was suggestive to porn iconographic power dynamics between "dominant tops" and "submissive bottoms" that is prominent within gay pornography (Escoffier, 2003; Brennan, 2018; Rothman, 2010). In this regard, the game had afforded two sexual (cultural) scenarios in representing this sexual encounter, with the prescribed intention to lead to sexual activity (Gagnon, 1990). In a gendered sense, there are cultural contexts that underpin the representation here, with *scripted* representations that engages what Brennan (2018: 913) considers sexual activeness of the "dominant" position, and the feminine "submissive" position. As such, these gendered scripts in representing this cultural scenario becomes a point of sexual fantasy play for the player, affording the opportunity to directly construct their sexual fantasy as a form of roleplay through the choices made as the avatar.

Reflecting on this more explicitly in terms of avatar models, Kang and Watt (2012: 1170) consider behavioural realism where the avatar performs in accordance with the "norms" of reality. Though I am not interrogating this in terms of transgression, rather, the "norm" becomes a self-defined desire: which sexual role did I want to see my avatar (and by extension, myself) play? As such, in terms of performing as the avatar, there is a mediation to articulating the sexual self within certain sexual positioning to achieve potential forms of stimulation and pleasure depending on the desires and subjectivities of the player. In this regard, the play of the avatar affords elements of role playing, as there is an allowance for players to engage in forms of sexuality as a point of fantasy, whilst also concurrently engage in forms that are undesirably, or even physically impossible (Brown and Stenros, 2018b: 432).

## **5.5 Conclusion: Feeling Pleasures of Being the Avatar**

Within the play of *Coming Out on Top*, at the very least, the construction of the sexual self was less a capacity to self-conceptualise in terms of avatar customisation. Yet, through playing within the parameters of the prescribed body, there were still sexually affective engagements. By being offered a pre-constructed avatar to mediate my play, I was invited to view my avatar as an object of (sexual) desire than solely the vehicle to be embodied within. In this regard, forms of intimate connections emerged in not only through viewing my avatar as an extent of sexual fulfilment, but also to be embodied within an archetypal “desirable” form for sexual fantasy play. The relationship between the player and avatar is one of negotiation, as the avatar is *scripted* to perform sexual roles and fantasies, yet it is the actions performed by the player through the avatar in navigating these game structures that actualises these sexual scenes affords varied affective outcomes (Fernández-Vara, 2006). The avatar body can also then become a point of self-stimulation, as through the mediated engagements of the self, pleasure can be attained through the avatar’s play to experience or experimentation with sexual scenarios. In terms of agency, though the game body features a myriad of cultural scripting, there is still an extent of (sexual) *embodied* agency (Cense, 2019: 248-257), as the “self” has been positioned to engage in sexual practices and roleplay to achieve pleasure.

Therefore, through a form that is featuring culturally prescribed ideas, there is a sense of multiplicity (Banks, 2017) in how the self is present and navigates this space via the avatar. Various bodies are being played with through the confines of the prescribed game body here: (1) (re)articulation of the self within (sexual) cultural hegemonies; (2) the avatar form as emerging sexual affects where the player not only is intertwined with their avatar but is also attracted to them; (3) the sexual play of the prescribed body to articulate a self-defined a fulfilling sexual fantasy and sexual power representation. There is a further question to be had and explored as to the affects that may be afforded through avatars that allow the player greater extents of self-concept, and to whether the embodied self within those parameters offers a different sexual experience. However, here, these prescribed avatars still afforded sexually affective shifts

(Paasonen, 2018; Tomkins, 2008) where the player experiences phenomenon within their bodily capacity (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Blackman, 2012) from *attraction to* and *feeling as* the avatar through their embodiment and attachment. Within the boundaries of this (subjective) sexually affective relationship, the player *attuned* with (virtual) game body and its cultural hegemonies, extending their bodily capacity and sensation to experience pleasure(s) (Gee, 2008: 258; Lankoski, 2016; Crick, 2011).

## Chapter 6. *Press X to XXX*: Game Interfaces, Mechanics, and Haptics of Pleasure

### 6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the player's embodiment within (gay) adult video game texts through the avatar, addressing the player-avatar relationship as one affording an affective intimate engagement and capacity to construct a sexual self. As I argued in the conclusion, the avatars (or lack thereof) allowed the sexual play of one's body, being able to (re)articulate or (re)present the self in accordance with one's desires or fantasy even within a prescribed form. However, whilst the discussion was relevant to the sexual embodiment of players within this site through which the player navigates, it is not the only facet that mediates sexual play experiences for players within gay adult video games. The analysis so far has considered sexual play through the player-avatar dynamism, and whilst it started to reflect on the performance of the self within the game space, it did not consider how the game itself in its play mediates sexual engagement. As such, this chapter shifts from this relationship to instead explore the more representational, content, ludic, and haptic elements of these game texts. Through an exploration of game representations and mechanics of intimacy and sexual actions, it explores game mechanics and representations of intimacy, considering how they mediate sexual actions for players within that play to create pleasurable sexually affective experiences. The analysis posited here has explored these explicit in-game representations and sexual game mechanics in two main areas: by their *design*, and by their *haptics*. The chapter is constructed to explore various game elements as mediating sexually affective experiences through its representations, interfaces and game controls.

Exploring how these texts construct and mediate sensations of intimacy and sexual interaction, the chapter's main argument emerges: these games offer sexual play experiences that not only entertain but titillate and pleasure through their gameplay to build sexual affective potentials and horizons. The previous chapter considered the player-avatar relationship in constructing the sexual self through affective engagement

in mediating pleasure. Whereas, here, this chapter considers how the game mechanics and representations within the game also afford sexually affective encounters that mediate sexual play. Representations and (re)articulations of (sexual) intimacy are explored in various contexts: encounters in game narrative/content between players/NPCs, passive and active mechanics within gameplay that are designed to stimulate, (game) haptics embodying ideas of “touch,” and emergent sexual interaction within the game space. In representing and embodying these sensations of intimacy and sexual interaction within their gameplay, (gay) adult video game texts accommodate our (player) fantasies, mediating pleasure, and the attainment of sexual satisfaction.

## **6.2 Pleasure by Game Design**

### **6.2.1 Representational in Game Narrative(s)**

Some of the game design elements of the texts in my corpus had purposefully referenced and represented ideas of sexual intimacy within their actual gameplay: players would encounter opportunities to be “intimate” with in-game characters/NPCs, or feature narratives that would articulate the player as being intimate, whether abstracted, suggestive or explicit. Though game narratives, there are *representations of* sexual intimacy that act or perform as the player’s affective engagement within the encounter of the game. The extent that game narratives are explicitly a game mechanic could be contestable. Though I would argue that for (gay) adult video games, game stories and narrative are an essential element to their game experience as they mediate the “world” in which the player is immersed in through their avatar (Wilde and Evans, 2019). For example, in *Coming out on Top*, the player (as Mark) is playing the role of a “college”<sup>26</sup> student, and so that frames the player’s embodiment as to the kind of atmosphere and environment they are navigating within. In the view by Clough (2022: 353-364) – from a game’s design perspective – sexual narratives do allow a sense of heightened engagement, causing (sexual) tensions and connections between the player, game, and potentially other players. As such, the game narrative allows for

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<sup>26</sup> University, in a UK context.

mediations of affective engagements in its progression, through the purposeful offering of sexually satisfying experiences and the building of pleasure(s) within adult video games. As discussed in chapter three<sup>27</sup>, some of these game narratives were sexual conquest stories (Brathwaite, 2013: 1-10) such as *Leisure Suit Larry* featuring a premise that involved the titular character striving to “woo” females as comedic (and misogynistic) entertainment.

I argue that the video game narrative *can* indeed be considered a form of game mechanic, specifically in its capacity to build sexually stimulating affective experiences of players. For dating simulator games, the game narrative holds “mechanical relevance” as a driving force of its play alongside their common ‘choice’ structure (Andlauer, 2018; Ganzon, 2019). As such, they are useful examples in articulating not only a consideration of game narratives as a game mechanic that engages with the player’s agency and affectivity, but suggestive of sexual intimacy between the player and the game (characters). As mentioned previously, the intention of the player’s action within these interactive fiction games is to pursue a desired relationship between the player-avatar and a “chosen” NPC/game character through its “choose your own adventure” branching narrative (Pettman, 2009: 192). Whilst conventionally gameplay itself revolves around appearing text with the player progressing between dialogues and scenarios via branching choices and narratives, some dating simulator games utilise static visual elements and representations to add further layers to their gameplay experience whether characters or environment (Song and Fox, 2016: 199). Adult dating simulators offer players this objective through the play of their narratives but alongside the pursuit of relationships is the pursuit of sex between the player-avatar and characters. Though the actual capacity of player actions is “limited” in the sense that much gameplay is solely the progression through scenarios and dialogues, the player is given the flexibility to pursue their ideal or fantasied route within the preset pathways to the characters they most desire to have a sexual encounter with.

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<sup>27</sup> Chapter 3. The Gay Adult Video game in Context

In my own documented play experiences of gay adult dating simulators, I had noted the affective qualities to game narrative, particularly in relation to its branching structure. During my initial playthroughs of *Coming out on Top*, I had encountered various phenomena that had either motivated my play or been some form of response to game events (namely, satisfaction to a “good ending” where I was rewarded for my performance by gaining my desired partner in the game). When playing through some of the various routes for this thesis, I experienced phenomena that were akin to attraction, desire and pleasure, especially in relation to the male characters I had pursued. For instance, my first playthrough involved me intending to romance a particular male character Alex. Upon first encountering him, I experienced sensations of desire in terms of his appearance, and the strive for a potential relationship:

*“I stopped short of a gasp. Tense, still, only for a moment. This was not just any man. He was broad, muscular, flirtatious [...] he was godly. Alex.”*

*“The game continues, and I am still feeling immersed in its narrative. Now I (Than/Mark) had met Alex, where will that go? What will come of it? Will there be anyone else that gets in the way? Anticipation was swarming my mind, desiring to see where this would go. I continue onwards.”*

- *Coming out on Top* - Alex, Recorded Nov 16, 2022

From this initial encounter with the character, the game narrative posited the flirtation between Alex and Mark (the player character), narratively describing the internal feelings of Mark. Whilst the game scenario itself - amongst many others in the game - had framed the encounter in a specific capacity by describing the avatar as experiencing these sensations, I similarly was subjectively affected:

*“I feel connected to this game, that by being Than/Mark, I am within the world. That it is my world. Even when the game narrates the course of actions between me and Alex (the man in the bar) – “Your eyes linger on each other. It’s just for a second, but.... it’s enough to make your heart pound a little faster” – that I feel it. The game leads me, but I still feel every sensation.”*

- *Coming out on Top* - Alex, Recorded Nov 16, 2022

With the narrative emphasis on describing an intimate encounter – between myself as my avatar and Alex – the depiction of this interaction posits the narrative as a mechanic as it intends for the player to experience some form of affective shift. Here, the “implied

player” (see Aarseth, 2007) is one that feels sensations of attraction, desire, and enticement as the game describes this sense of intimacy for the player (as the avatar). Comparatively, in a non-sexual sense, it affords an affective shift of achievement for the player to have selected the correct narrative options in their play to progress further on the route. In my own experience, the branching pathway allowed me to actively engage with an extent of agency (Murray, 1997) to pursue that pathway and eventually discover such thrills the game was intended to emanate. So, whilst representationally it was framing a particular affective encounter, it was a result of my own subjective play to pursue intimacy towards a (sexual) outcome. Though my playthrough that pursued Alex as my “romantic choice” would soon come to an end due to feelings of awkwardness<sup>28</sup>, progressing through the game narrative had still evoked these sensations of attraction and desire for Alex, and the uncertainty of attaining a relationship with him as an outcome. However, in a later playthrough in which I had aimed to pursue another male character Jed, I had reached a point of achieving the relationship with him and experienced a moment of thrill, satisfaction, and pleasure:

*“Perhaps it was thrilling because I finally reached that point where I was rewarded for persevering in the game, that I was rewarded for choosing the right options, or is it rewarded for following my desires?”*

*“Either way, I am happy and satisfied, as I have reached the “romantic” ending with Jed. [...] There is something rewarding that through the effort of trying to “romance” Jed that it has finally come to fruition”.*

*- Coming Out on Top - Jed, Recorded Nov 17, 2022*

Being able to reach the “good ending” in selecting the correct options and gaining the relationship of my chosen partner allowed me to experience pleasure, satisfaction, and fulfilment - by allowing myself to indulge in my desires, the game narrative afforded my play activity to achieve such horizons of pleasure and embody myself to feel these subjective encounters. Whilst the pathways themselves are pre-defined, there was still the capacity for me to play in accordance with my own desires, with the game offering me various scenarios to become engaged, embodied and to experience. This affective quality of the game narrative was emergent, where (through repeated playthroughs of

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<sup>28</sup> This playthrough of the game is further reflected on in relation to sensations of awkwardness and distance in Chapter 7. (Un)Bound with Restraints: Sexual Possibilities, Affordances and Transgressions.

the game) the narrative had afforded intense sensations that shifted my body to a different state of feeling than it was previously (Blackman, 2012; Wetherell, 2012). Whilst these sensations were assisted by erotic visuals of game characters, the game had afforded a scenario in which I could encounter these sensations through allowing me the fluidity to “choose my adventure.” By having an extent of control over my (sexual) agency to pursue particular desires (Cense, 2019), the game narrative still afforded an embodied capacity to feel (Anable, 2018), to discover sexual thrills and pleasures in an intense experience through play (Tiidenberg and Paasonen, 2019: 391). Though I had not known that part of my playthrough would result in sensations of awkwardness, my play of the game narrative had been motivated by bodily pleasure and desires (Bollen and McInnes, 2006). As such, by “indulging” in that fantasy, the game narrative as a structure allowed me to play with those sexual desires, and shift from a “original” state in which I was not enticed by the pathways or characters, to experiencing (thrill) sensations of desire and fulfilment (Paasonen, 2018: 27). With the reliance of branching pathways and a myriad of “romanceable interests” for the player, the game narrative does become a game mechanic to play with, allowing players an extent to continue inhabiting various fantasies and reach sexually affective potentials.

### **6.2.2 The Passive / Interactive “Sex Scene”**

Within gaming, “sex scenes” have been argued by some as being utilised to visualise relationships between avatars and characters, particularly within the RPG genre, but can differ between game texts (Brathwaite, 2013; Clough, 2022). Though a discussion of the sex scene can be applicable to other (gay) adult video game texts, and videogaming generally, the dating simulator genre offers literary and visual representations of the player’s intimacy with another character. As Clough (2022: 225-227) describes the sex scene itself can be versatile in its construction, often employing techniques to elongate the sequence and build sexual tension and create a sexually satisfying experience for players. For adult dating simulators, which do feature a prominence of static sex scenes, the player’s sexual conquest to pursue characters is to strive to achieve “the good ending/choice,” whether selecting specific options that progress through a particular route or by completing specific tasks or objectives. When “successful,” the

player's sexual conquest is rewarded by being able to see their avatar in explicit sexual representation alongside the desired character that they pursued. As described in the previous section, this is also classified as a "good ending" for certain types of games like interactive narratives/visual novels. As such, game narratives resulting in a "sex scene" reward for the player offer representations of the player's intimacy with their chosen character, *and* afford an affective experience of pleasure.

In the extent of my playthrough with the dating simulator *Full Service*, the "sex scene" was represented within two scenarios of an "intimate massage" and a masturbation scene featuring Tomoki (the avatar). Rald, the character who I was pursuing, had begun massaging my avatar (represented through static images) which had emerged some erotic and sensual sensibilities in my play:

*"Rald proceeds to massage Tomoki. This feels.... strange, that this is my characters boss, but at the same time, feels erotic and intimate? That there is an intensity and connection that comes through the idea of physical interaction, and I find this scene seems to build upon that idea. Perhaps it is that I am already immersed in the scenario, that even though I am not feeling such sensations myself, I can imagine it. Rald is still shirtless, and whilst there is no actual reason for this, I also do not mind and rather appreciate that I can continue to look at him."*

- *Full Service Playthrough – "I Had a Dream About My Boss" (Rald Pathway)*,

Recorded December 14, 2022

Following on from my choice to see the intimate scene between my avatar and Rald, the game later allows the player to choose whether the avatar masturbates over Rald. Selecting the option for the avatar to do so rewards the player with a passive sex scene depicting the act. Due to my desires of pursuing Rald, I had "shamelessly" allowed for the scene to occur:

*"Tomoki has an erotic dream about Rald and finds himself aroused. I go wide-eyed at the narrative, taken aback at what I have just read. The game asks if I would like to allow Tomoki to masturbate due to his urges that have arisen following his dream. [...] I shamelessly allow Tomoki to do [...] and furthermore I was not thinking this would be an opportunity to see Tomoki within this erotic state, but rather like some strange tribute to the affection I held for Rald".*

It is in these two scenes that sexual tension and affectivity had emerged through my experience of play. By selecting the (correct) dialogue options within the game, I was able to experience moments of sexual desire and eroticism, as the game had mediated my sexual desires. Though the sex scene itself as “passive” in terms of player actions, it is more demonstrative to what Brathwaite (2013: 13) considered as a “sex as reward” inclusion. ‘Whenever a game awards or makes sexual content available to the player as a result of his or her actions, sex is being used as a reward’ (Brathwaite, 2013: 13). By unlocking the (passive) sex scene, the player is able to indulge in their well-earned fantasy.

Sex scenes like those found in dating simulators are passive mechanics, as the player cycles through (typically) static visual images that are depicting a sex scene between characters. Through each click the player does, the scenario progresses parallel to its format as self-interactive fictions. These passive sex scenes that embody the player’s intimate engagement with their chosen character, and whilst the action itself is limited, the passivity of the sex scene still provides a pleasurable outcome as the player is rewarded for their labour. The strive to unlock the “sex scene,” becomes a design element that affords the player’s sexual motivation to pursue the outcome and watch themselves (as their avatar) engage within sexual acts.

Whilst some texts have utilised representations of intimacy and sex in a passive mechanic capacity, others have required the player’s more direct involvement in mediating engaging in intimate, and (sexually) affective encounters. Though passive sexual mechanics like sex scenes or erotic game narratives involve minimal reliance on player action within play, comparatively, others have featured more active mechanics in mediating player pleasure. Brathwaite (2013: 12) defines an active sex mechanic as allowing the player direct control over the sexual action occurring within the gameplay. For active sex mechanics, the player’s action is more prominent, offering a sexually interactive experience within gameplay than solely encountering passive sexual

phenomenon. As such, whilst the game affords and mediates the player's sexual engagement within the sexual mechanic, the player is also agentic in directing and framing part of the scenario to their desires.

For example, PlayStation 2 video game *7 Sins* (Monte Cristo, 2005), features various sexually themed interactive minigames in its life simulation gameplay that requires the player's direct input via their controls to progress through them. When playing the "voyeurism" minigame, the player is required to use their controller inputs to focus on specific body parts of female characters; for the "Lust" minigame, the player is required to use their cursor to "look for the G-spot" on an erotic pixelated image of the male avatar and female NPC to slowly reveal the two engaging in intercourse behind it. Similarly, the "Hot Coffee" mod in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* 'allows players to control the avatar's thrusting. By timing the avatar's thrusts properly, the player can please the woman' (Brathwaite, 2013: 13). For an active sex mechanic, the mediation of the player's sexual play in aiming for satisfying outcomes or pleasure is the result of the player's actions.

*Cockwork Industries* (Digital Seductions, 2019) is an example in which the player is given the option to alter the extent of active engagement (Brathwaite, 2013) as they progress through the game's erotic adventure-style gameplay. Upon first entering the game, the player is given the option to play in "simplified mode" which offers an easier experience to unlock sex scenes, removes foreplay minigames and "watch" the scenes without interacting. Or they can play the game in "adventure mode" which allows for more interactivity within the sex scenes. Primarily the game involves the player performing as Dwayne, who, by completing a series of fetch quests and dialogues can unlock animated sexual minigames and scenes with the other characters (most of were female, except for one "gay" route). In my own playthrough of this game in which I had romanced the only gay character possible, Diego, I had experienced its sex scenes in "adventure mode." Upon building a high enough reputation with Diego, the player enters a series of foreplay minigames in which Diego and Dwayne are constructed in sexually explicit constructions.

As prelude sexual scenes to unlocking the “main” sex scene, the player has to please Diego to build more intimacy between the two by clicking various “zones” on their bodies to make them more aroused, with Diego’s facial expressions indicating if he is happy with the player’s actions. My own gameplay experience of this alluded to feeling a sense of sexual intensity and connection with Diego during this interactive sex scene, despite not actually performing the acts:

*“The game tells me I have to “please” him, to build his satisfaction through “touching” him in specific areas: “massaging his shoulders,” “rubbing his chest” and so on. There’s a strange intensity I am feeling here [...] But in this intensity, I also feel pride, and satisfaction, because I feel I have, well, earned this. This was my reward.”*

*“I proceed, clicking the various “zones,” seeing Diego and his “intimacy meter” with his model and an icon of his face telling me whether or not I am “pleasing” him. There is a small part of me that feels a little sense of doubt, unsure whether I was “touching” him in the correct way or order.”*

*- Cockwork Industries Complete – Romance in the Machine Room,*

Recorded Dec 1, 2022

However, in *Cockwork Industries*, the articulation of the interactive sex scene goes beyond representing foreplay practices. Eventually, successful completion of these foreplay minigames results in a timed-rhythm sex scene between Dwayne and Diego:

*“The objective is the same as before, timing my rhythmic clicks at the right time, to “pleasure” the both of them. I do the same, timing appropriately. Dwayne continues to thrust away, with the sounds and visuality of Diego’s pleasure. The bar continues to fill – I can understand the reference here, that we are building to some climax. I finish the objective and the scene changes again.”*

*- Cockwork Industries Complete – Romance in the Machine Room,*

Recorded Dec 1, 2022

In this capacity, the use of interactive elements within these sex scenes here starts to implore the player to perform in particular ways through affective tensions and promises of sexual thrills (Tomkins, 2008). Representationally, the sex scene has initially constructed a socio-sexual scenario of foreplay, in which the player is expected to act in certain ways (Simon and Gagnon, 1986; Gagnon, 1990). Yet, with an awareness to “sex as a reward” (Brathwaite, 2013: 1-10), play becomes motivated to ensure that

the NPC experiences pleasure (and by extension, the player). As described in my gameplay, I had encountered phenomenon of pride and satisfaction for reaching this point. Unlocking the sex scene became a game objective (Suits, 2005), in which I interacted with my own desires (Paasonen, 2018: 1; Murray, 1997; Cense, 2019) in hopes of achieving it.

### 6.2.3 Intimacy Bars

Whilst some games have utilised these suggestive symbols or gestures to be indicative to the building of intimacy between avatars and NPCs/players, other texts have been more overt in their construction of intimacy, especially in relation to active sex mechanics. In some (gay) adult video games, there is the use of intimacy bars to indicate the sense of pleasure or desire “felt” by the avatar and characters. The actual construction of these intimacy bars or how the player can increase them differs from text to text. Usually, however, these bars are in relation to visualising the growing intensity from the encounter or sexual action, commonly resulting in a relationship or reaching a point of climax or orgasm by filling the bar entirely.

For example, *HuniePop* (HuniePot, 2015) and *HuniePop 2: Double Date* (HuniePot, 2021) makes use of intimacy bars (shown as a series of heart symbols) to indicate how close and attracted they are to the player. To increase the intimacy bars for the desired female characters, the player can obtain gifts to increase their attraction to a point of being rewarded with a date. What follows is a series of “match-3” style minigames in which the player’s performance within the game impacts their intimacy. By performing well, each minigame progressively shows the female characters in more explicit and suggestive representations, as the player strives to develop a (sexual) relationship with them.

The use of the intimacy bars itself is a relatively passive construct, though some texts have featured interactive elements within their sexual scenarios in conjunction with intimacy bars to visually indicate growing sexual intensities. For some, the interactive elements of in such intimacy bar minigames could be a play objective than necessarily

a sexually driven endeavour. In this regard, instead, players may be motivated to “fill” the bar to progress the game forward. However, whilst the bar is demonstrative to the intimacy between players and characters, it would not be remiss to also suggest that they are also reflective to the potential rising pleasure within the player themselves in terms of affective engagement. As the intimacy increases between the avatar and game characters, the player *may* also be experiencing that affective experience through their sexual embodiment within the game.

In my *Camp Buddy*, upon progressing through certain routes, the game requires the player to complete a “foreplay minigame” to increase intimacy with the “chosen male” and upon successful completion is able to see a (passive) sex scene between the two [Fig.6.1].

[Image redacted. Full thesis available on request.]

**Fig.6.1** – Screenshot of the foreplay minigame between Keitaro and Natsumi in *Camp Buddy*.

My play progression had led Keitaro onto the Natsumi romance route, with the two being within the foreplay minigame. The player, conducting foreplay on behalf of both characters, is required to select the particular “act” and the area of the body on both characters, in accordance with their responses to the act and pleasure. By having a finite number of attempts to interact (represented as a decreasing stamina bar), the player must choose to “pinch, kiss, lick, rub, or bite” the areas on both of the males’ bodies. By “feeling,” “groping” or “stimulating” aspects of the body, the player is expected to complete these interactions in a specific order to raise the pleasure metres

(the intimacy bars) for both characters. Upon reaching a certain level of pleasure, the player is then rewarded with more explicit representations of Keitaro and Natsumi: the minigame progresses to show them undressing to an extent of being fully naked, exposed genitalia and visual signs of them becoming increasingly aroused. Typically, the filling of the intimacy bar leads to a climax or orgasm, however for *Camp Buddy*, the player is rewarded for their “foreplay” with a passive sex scene. Here, there is a reflection back to sexual scripting, as the game has posited specific actions required from the player to progress within the sexual encounter (Simon and Gagnon, 2017). The minigame does not indicate the correct order of options for the player; by constructing it as ambiguous, there is an extent of sexual experiment within the play of the minigame in terms of sexual progression (McCormick, 2010). Though there is affordance to experimentation here, by not following the expected conducts, the attempts to “woo” Natsumi decreases, putting the player’s opportunity to unlock further sexual content at risk.

Whilst the purpose of the foreplay minigame is a form of (sexual) objective for the player in order to unlock the following sex scenes as a reward, the minigame may also afford some form of (sexual) affective experience in the intimate play representation. Though, in my own playthrough of the minigame, I did not experience some form of intimacy or pleasure, the game had still afforded me an affective experience:

*“There’s something I guess quite intimate about having a game like this that it’s sort of reminiscent to the kind of build-up of sexual intercourse, but I also felt kind of pressure to make sure I was performing well. [...] I mean judging from the sex scene that’s just technically occurred between Keitaro and Natsumi, there was a sense of...I guess accomplishment I felt because I passed the intimate minigame but again I didn’t actually personally feel much attachment to the scene itself because it’s not a character that I have been driven towards.”*

*- Camp Buddy Playthrough – On Natsumi’s Route,*

Recorded Dec 12, 2022 – Dec 22, 2022

During my gameplay, I had encountered experiences of anxiety over being required to “perform” the “foreplay” correctly within the stamina constraints, whilst also feeling a sense of accomplishment for filling up the intimacy bar and unlocking the sex scene.

My intentions were not actually to pursue with Natsumi (or rather, any of the possible romanceable routes available), having the desire to pursue other characters that were unavailable or impossible to do so (see Appendix 1.7). Yet, whilst not sexual in nature, my engagement with this particular character in aiming to fill the intimacy bar still mediated some form of affective experience, allowing me to reflect on (my own) sexual encounters and the sense of achievement from completing it correctly. Though my gameplay did not result in an experience of sexual pleasure, the use of the intimacy bar still allowed for an affective engagement, which had then altered my play interaction in response. Though these were not characters I wished to pursue, the use of the intimacy bar as a signifier for increasing sexual tensions may mediate sexual pleasure for players who may wish to pursue them. Returning to the concept of scripted sexual acts, my gameplay resulted in rearticulating the purpose of the scenario: whilst it was intended to be a point of building sexual tension for the player, my own personal desires had renegotiated the “cues of pleasure” to be more of a game objective than sexual stimulation (Jackson and Scott, 2007).

Two other games from my corpus that utilised intimacy bars in their play was Robert Yang’s *The Tearoom* (2017) and *Rinse and Repeat* (2018). *The Tearoom* is a ‘historical public bathroom simulator about anxiety, police surveillance, and sucking off another dude’s gun.’ (Radiatoryang.itch.io, 2017), where the player meets different males who enter the bathroom to entice and pleasure them through camera motions to a point of a climax (or, making the gun “shoot bullets”) [Fig.6.2-6.4]. When leading the male to climax, the player “collects” the gun as an achievement. However, whilst conducting

[Image redacted. Full thesis available on request.]

[Image redacted. Full thesis available on request.]



**Fig.6.2-6.4** – Screenshots from *The Tearoom* gameplay involving the intimacy bars and the resetting of score progress.

these acts, the player also must be mindful of the police who periodically (and randomly) appear and punish the player by resetting their progress.

In the game, the player is placed as an ambiguous avatar within their point-of-view within the public bathroom setting, with the objective being to use the camera to “look” at the other males’ “genitalia.” When glancing at the male next to the player-avatar, there is an intimacy bar that is indicative to how aroused the other male is when the player’s glances, further demonstrated by their “gun” growing. When the player arouses them enough, they proceed to conduct “oral sex” on the male, licking the gun by focusing on specific indicated areas to continue the male’s arousal to a point of climaxing. My own playthrough mediated experiences of recklessness, (sexual) intensity and motivation to make the male climax and collect the gun:

*“It feels kind of strange because I’m like – like peeking at him to sort of see if it’s appropriate to look up yet and it feels kind of strange. Oh, the police are outside already. [...] Let’s go for it. I don’t know why I – I just feel the need to just keep going even though the game told me earlier that if I see them to leave. [...] So – this tongue action is – oh wow. Um. So, the sirens just suddenly happen, and I’ve lost my trophy. Have I just been punished?”*

- *The Tearoom Playthrough*, Recorded March 14, 2023

Similarly, *Rinse and Repeat* in its pleasure-building gameplay where you need to “rub” the male’s body parts also led to instances of sexual thrills and spontaneous interactions:

*“How do I...do I... I can look him up and down but... [laughs] So, he’s asked me to get his back. Oh, so I’m clicking and rubbing his back. Do I go quicker or slower? [...] The urge to like just constantly drag the camera down to see nothing but a pixelated, like, genitalia. Although I’m now rubbing his abs. I can’t stop doing it though because there’s just something about me that just wants to see where this goes.”*

- *Rinse and Repeat Playthrough*, Recorded March 13, 2023

Aside from the (arguably) “transgressive” nature of the game setting and premise<sup>29</sup> of *The Tearoom*, the use of the intimacy bar in both mediated a form of motivated play. As such, I had become more reckless and indulgent in my sexual play. Thinking through “moral agency” described by Cense (2019: 248-257), the thrill of obtaining the male’s *gun* or being embodied (as nude) in the shower with another male body became a thrill-seeking endeavour (Tomkins, 2018). Within the confines of this (fantasy) scenario, the flirtatious glances leading to sexual playful activity became a desire that emerged further sexual interactions. In this capacity (my) playfulness had shifted (my) bodily capacity to be open to the potential sexual horizons (Paasonen, 2017), whereby I was able to experience certain extents of fantasy by being motivated to “fill” the intimacy bars.

### **6.3 Pleasure by Haptics**

Within these varied ways in which ideas of sex and intimacy have been represented through the design elements of these video games as mediating pleasure, what also became apparent is the embodying of the player’s “touch” within the game space as a mechanic of embodied pleasure. What I am indicating by this is how some texts have mediated pleasure through their embodiment or usage of tactile elements, whether representational in game content, the performance of the avatar, or indeed requiring the player to perform a physical action of touching the game, character or interface. Though this does also posit a question to ideas of “touch” within video game play, rather, the exploration is around haptics and the affective experiences that emerge through the more “physical” elements of playing these video games. The phenomenological play experience Keogh (2015) explored offers an initial framing to understand how the player is embodied affectively within their “touching” of the game, whether through gamepad, controller, or game interface. For Keogh (2015), the player, controls and game were interlinked - proposed as a kind of “*co-attentiveness*” - which offered an affective (and pleasurable) experience of play of “feeling” present within the game world without forgetting the physical aspect of “touching the screen.”

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<sup>29</sup> This game is further reflected on in Chapter 7. (Un)Bound with Restraints: Sexual Possibility, Affordances and Transgressions

However, Keogh's exploration was more focused on broader affectivities of play in terms of this physical engagement of the player-to-game interaction, whereas in this thesis I am discussing such elements within the specific context of sexual affect. Already in this chapter, I have analysed some of the game representations and game mechanics as emerging a sense of sexual interaction, engagement and pleasure. Yet, the discussion so far has not actually addressed how this affect is mediated through the engagement with the game controls or interface.

### **6.3.1 Mechanical Touch**

I refer to the "touch" that is represented through game content or performed by the avatar through controller input devices as being "mechanical touch." What I am describing here is the interactions that the player performs through game mechanics that mediate ideas of "touch": though it is not physically enacted by the player themselves, it is visually constructed and mediated by the performance of the avatar and game. Here, the quality of touch in gameplay is embodied through the game's narrative and ludic structures. Game narratives may describe or indicate that the avatar is "touching," an object, NPC, character or player. The avatar touches" on behalf of the player, performing as their sexual self with ideas of touch being narratively depicted despite it not being physically enacted beyond the game space. Already in this chapter, I have discussed game narratives within adult dating simulators as being a part of the ludic structures, yet they were also passive mechanics and not requiring a great extent of player action. Though there is no direct player engagement in the aforementioned texts, that is not to say the player still does not experience some form of (affective) pleasure. In progressing through these texts with one's avatar (Wilde and Evans, 2019), the sexual self is still embodied within the affective capacities of the game space and can still experience the thrills and pleasures through their play (Tiidenberg and Paasonen, 2018).

Though not a game (series) that features gay content, the *Meet'n'Fuck* adult game series offers a sexual conquest game narrative in which the player as (a heterosexual)

avatar progresses through dialogues with explicit and suggestive constructions of female characters, completing quizzes and object-finding missions to be rewarded with an interactive sex scene with each female. Upon unlocking the sex scene, games allow players to click through various sexual acts whilst they aim to bring the female and the avatar to climax. Though the animations and play choices are limited and repetitive, the objective is to fill the climax bar as the male avatar has to pleasure himself and the female. What these games (usually) afford the player is the option to click between sexual acts and positions, with no time restraints or restrictions to their play. As such, the player has the fluidity to play according to their own desires and satisfaction. Though the clicking of the sexual acts is not necessarily involving the player's own body or genitalia, the avatar is still the representative of their sexual self (Banks, 2017) and the way they are embodied within the sexual scene. The scenes themselves place emphasis on the bodies of the female characters, centralising them in explicit sexual representations whilst the male avatar (the player) is either partly visible, or entirely absent with the presence indicated by just genitalia or other body parts. Despite this lack of "visible" presence of the (male) avatar, the capacity to be able to select and interchange between sexual acts becomes a point of sexual play.

Whilst in these games the objective of reaching a (representational) climax is required for game progression, the player may still experience pleasure and satisfaction, being motivated to repeatedly play through the various sex animations as a point of sexual fantasy (Paasonen, 2018; Barker, 2014). The example of the *Meet'N'Fuck* series is similar to the "foreplay" minigame within *Camp Buddy* between Keitaro and Natsumi, in which the use of button-presses and options had embodied an idea of the player "touching" (or sexually acting) with the game bodies. In turn, through the actual input mechanics of the game, situated affects emerged. In a more gay-aligned example, *House Party* (Eek! Games, 2017) allows you to engage in sexual foreplay and intercourse with one of the (limited) options of male characters in the game. Through successful completion of quests, the player can engage in various sexual activities with them, choosing when to change sexual positions in a more self-driven construction of fantasy. This is a prominent aspect in the sexual interaction with the character Derek when engaging in intercourse in a bathroom. Within the rewarded sex scene, though the

player is not directly experiencing the sexual act onto them, the shift between sexual positions acts as an extension of the player's touch through a mechanical capacity.

### 6.3.2 Performative Touch

Some gay adult video games have utilised more performative elements to their mechanical design, in which the interaction of touch has been more of a simulation of touch than representational. I describe these game mechanics as being *performative touch*, where haptic feedback or responses may or may not be felt, but the player is physically performing the actions in some capacity. Though the aspect of “button-mashing” or acts of pressing controller inputs can also be considered at the player “physically” performing an action in relation to the sexual content, here there is an extent in which the action required is more physically indicative to a sexual act. Using the *GTA: San Andreas “Hot Coffee”* mod as an example, the player is required to press specific buttons in a timely manner and rhythm to engage in the active sex scene. As such the repetition of player's behaviour with their controller is suggestive to the acts of sexual intercourse. However, the player action is solely embodied and mediated through the “single button-press,” and less reliant on a more embodied physicality of the player as their play activity. In examples like “*Hot Coffee*,” intimate engagements are articulated through these minimal controls in the sexual counter. However, those texts that feature “performative touch” have a reliance on having the player physically mimic the performance of touch as a way of simulating sexual acts and behaviours to build intimacy and pleasure.

The most apparent example of simulating touch is sexual simulators: “video games” specifically designed to be used for titillation and sexual pleasure. “Sex sims” offer players various ways to stimulate their pleasure through digital capacities, with some texts providing the player a “digital body” (*virtual doll games*) to sexually interact with, emerge through player-to-player interaction (*adult virtual world gaming*), or require the player to physically perform and simulate sex acts within their (domestic) play space (*virtual reality porn games*). Though adult video games as a gaming genre have the intention of providing sexually entertaining and pleasurable experiences, sexual

simulators may be contestable by referring to them as video games, considered as more a form of pornography than “a game.” My own understanding of sexual simulators are video games that are intended to provide sexual experiences for players, as they occupy a space which requires the player to (sexually) interact and play to achieve a particular outcome.

Adult virtual/social world gaming features both mechanical and performative touch layers to their game structures, offering potentials for the player to engage in their own (limited) performance as well as be mediated through their avatars. Virtual/Social world gaming, like *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003), has been previously understood as involving the use of avatars to move about a virtual environment and interact between players in various contexts. To some extent, these online games share similarities to MMORPGs, whereby players are given more agency in their activity and actions that are not firmly controlled by the game rules or structure. Instead, for these, there is an extent of emergent play that is mediated by the fluidity of the space. The (auto)ethnographic studies of MMORPGs and virtual worlds by Sundén (2012) and Boellstorff et al. (2015) demonstrate this emergent play between player interactions and relationships. Whilst MMORPGs do have a social element to their gameplay - featuring contexts like multiplayer interaction and chat functionality - they are still more designed in the RPG genre format. For (adult) virtual worlds, there is more of an intention to provide players a social virtual landscape “to play,” where they can navigate the digital space within a virtual (sexual) self to communicate with others.

Adult virtual worlds *Red Light Center* (Utherverse Digital, 2005) and *3DX Chat* (3DX Chat Team, 2012) act as virtual “hook-up” spaces, allowing players to chat, date, and engage in sexual practices and intercoursing with other players. To some extent, these virtual games are parallel to other media texts like “hook-up” and dating apps, whereby users can converse, flirt, and engage in relationships with one another. Here, however, rather than the intention being to sexually engage “in-person” as these apps, the virtual world games act as the intermediary for players for interpersonal sexual interaction. Within them, the player constructs a sexual self (as an avatar) that they use to communicate with the avatars of other players (or NPCs), eventually becoming the way they engage in

sexual acts and play. Parallel to these are virtual sex games like *3D GayVilla 2* (ThriXXX, 2002) that allow players to construct their own sex scenes using in-game models as a form of sexual stimulation and constructing a more personally tailored pornographic experience. When engaging in sex with another figure (or in the case of the virtual worlds, agentic players), the player can choose specific sexual positions, viewpoint perspectives, as well as customise their self-representation. The use of the avatar allows a capacity of “mechanical touch,” as through the clicking of options and button-presses, the avatar performs the sexual desires of the player for their play. Yet, parallel to this embodied self, these games allow the use of chat boxes and logs in which players can directly communicate through messages as a part of their sexual play. Though not visual and more literary, these still contribute to building sexual intimacy between the players as the players have the scope to sexually message, flirt and erotically communicate akin to the sexual roleplaying of early MUDs (Turkle, 1995; 1997).

### 6.3.3 Representational Touch

Building on from both these capacities of touch is where there is a direct physical interface that requires the player’s active physical interaction with digital objects. In this regard, some adult video videogames involve the player physically touching the game screen to build intimacy or pleasure. In my playthrough of *NU: Carnival* (Infinity Alpha and SGArts, 2022), I had to repeatedly touch the body of an in-game character to build further intimacy. In turn, this had emerged a sense of intimacy with Yakumo, where I had felt satisfaction through the act of physically interacting with the game screen:

*“I select my gift and tap the screen. Hearts appear. Yakumo smiles with a blush, thanking me for my gift. His heart meter rises. I feel the urge to continue tapping, to make additional offerings to him, to continue to make him happy. There’s a strange sense of attachment I feel that the game reminds me that my characters are in need of affection”.*

*“His bar reaches fifty percent, and some of his garments are torn away, exposing his skin underneath. He’s blushing without me giving him gifts now, clearly aroused by what I imagine is my “praise” being his “master.””*

*- NU: Carnival – Yakumo and Me, Recorded Nov 24, 2022*

The act of physically engaging with the game interface to achieve a sense of pleasure is a reflection of the argument made by Jagoda and McDonald (2018: 174) in that our interactions within game spaces highlights a dynamic through which the play is also affected by it alongside their mediated actions that alter game occurrences. Here, through my direct interaction, I had not only progressed the game further (by pleasing Yakumo), but I had also become affected by the game and this action. The discussion around the haptics of *teledildonics* is useful to expanding on this shift from passive gameplay to something more (physically) active. As Arrell (2022: 590) defined them: teledildonics are interactive ‘sex toys that can be remotely connected via the Internet to other sex toys,’ allowing for distant sexual interaction to also be physically performed. Liberati (2017: 812) defined them as haptic devices allowing the transmission and reception of tactual stimulation.

Though the authors mentioned were mainly discussing the relevance of actual interactive devices that can be used for cybersex or virtual sex endeavours, it is in this interrelation of physical acts transmitted over interfaces into digital play that is most relevant here. Since the emergence of teledildonics, there has since been the development of “sex toys for games” (e.g., company *Lovense* creating sex toys that are compatible with certain video games for interactive sex experiences<sup>30</sup>), allowing for players to also receive physical stimulation in relation to the virtual sex occurring. Though the discussion on teledildonics is more engaged in discussions around the use of extra-diegetic technologies to enhance the affective experiences of video games, what is relevant is that their offering of a more tactile capacity to gameplay. Similarly, *NU:Carnival* adopted the in the use of technological devices with the body generates a form of stimulation through contact with the mobile screen. Whilst my gameplay with *NU: Carnival* was solely within the diegesis of the game and limited to the touch of the screen, an affective connection was experienced. In this capacity, through representational touch between myself and Yakumo (as game encounter/presence), I was no longer a “passive” player to the gameplay visuals or mechanics, with my body

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.lovense.com/interactive-gaming>

capacity transferring into the (virtual) game space and becoming immersed to an extent of experiencing sexual phenomena (Liberati, 2017: 813).

#### **6.4 Conclusion: *Pleasure by Experience***

In analysing the gameplay mechanics of some of these adult videogames in my project corpus, there are both passive and active mechanics that are designed to stimulate the player's sexual affective engagement with them. Some of these games provide the player an indication of objectives in order to "unlock" sexual scenarios and become a motivator for their sexual play and act an objective for the game (Suits, 2005). Others had more visually indicated the player's intimacy with another character, using intimacy bars and interactive sex scenes to increase the (sexual) tension within ones play (Clough, 2022). Reflecting back to Tiidenberg and Paasonen (2019: 391), the play of these gameplay aspects aid in the '[discovery of] sexual thrills, pleasures, and intensities.' By playing them, we become immersed in their sexual potentials, with game mechanics enticing us to progress further and attain the pleasure we are intending to discover.

This is suggestive of how Jagoda and McDonald (2018: 174) viewed game spaces as affording affective shifts (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: 1) throughout play in which we not only affect the game in our interaction, but we are affected by it *because* of our interaction. The relationship that emerges between these game elements and play involves an affective shift that motivates or implores the player to pursue pleasure. Elements are tied to personal sexual desires and practices - both individual and shared practices - and are representative of how these pleasures influence the form and experience of play regardless of being a physically lived space or an imagined virtual experience.

## **Chapter 7. (Un)Bound with Restraints: Sexual Possibilities, Affordances and Transgressions**

### ***7.1 Introduction***

In this chapter, I build upon the previous analysis I have presented in the previous chapters around avatars and game mechanics onto considering the sexual affordances and transgressions that these video game texts afford in their play. Returning to some of the game elements discussed previously alongside my own gameplay accounts, this chapter aims to analyse these games in relation to transgression. Here, there are two main aims in the analysis: (1) consider transgression as subjectively framed through my own gameplay accounts; (2) address these single-player games as affording occasional sexual possibilities through the (re)framing of transgression. Reflecting on frameworks of transgression that have considered interactions in relation to social and cultural contexts, the extent that certain player engagements are considered “transgressive” is nuanced within the play of (gay) adult single-player video games. As the sole agentic “presence” (as the single player), within the diegesis of these texts, certain extents of player interactions as transgressive are nuanced, with some representations constructed as normative within the game space as fantasy. Within these structures, the player is afforded the capacity to engage in “sexually” deviant scenarios, to (re)actualise or discover sexual thrills and horizons of pleasure through transgression. In the (sexual) play of these video game texts, there emerges a more subjective framing of transgression in the strive to attain sexual pleasure within the limits of mediated play activity.

In relation to these structures, the player is implied and/or expected to play sexually to progress, with the conceptualisations of sex and the transgressive apparent from within and beyond the game spaces. Considering the navigation of these contexts through player affordance, this chapter refers back to literature discussed in the thesis around play and sexual scripting to explore the power dynamics between game spaces, transgression and sexual play. Some of the game texts offer “transgressive” pleasures that the player has the agency to indulge themselves within, affectively motivating the

player to continue pursuits of these subjective desires. Others have offered cultural constructions of transgression, affording a fluid navigation of game expectations and player sexual play. Finally, there is also the presence of implicit conducts and boundaries within gameplay, hinting to “implied” sexual interactions in how the player will “sexually perform” and the consequences of being “transgressive.” In this regard, there is a *prescribed sexual interaction*: within the representations and gameplay, there are intended player actions to perform to reach the outcome of pleasure (and/or sex). Elements like “sex as reward” become a motivator for sexual play, inviting the player to pursue these sexual outcomes, attain satisfaction, and be the initiator of their own fantasies. Despite limitations to actions, the affordance to transgress and “experiment” posits these boundaries as a point of (sexual) play, allowing the embodied player to engage in sexual possibilities of their own definition. The chapter concludes by considering that through the embodiment of the player, sexual interactions with explicit in-game representations and gameplay *can* be considered as a form of sexual (role)play, allowing the (re)visualisations of player sexual fantasies and potential opportunities to be transgressive. These texts afford the player the role of fantasist in pursuing their sexual desires, with their (sexual) play allowing (the discovery of) horizons of sexual pleasure by not only intended prescribed game interactions, but the capacity to be deviant and transgression through their subjective framing.

Parallel to the constructions of the previous findings chapters that have been presented in this thesis so far, the analysis that follows continues my approach of textual analysis of game texts partly using my autoethnographic data collection for further nuance. The use of my gameplay experiences acts as provocations to engage in the discourses of sexual affordances and transgression in these games. I recount my experiences of “stepping away” from a gameplay route, “deviant” sexual play practices with in-game characters, navigating ambiguous prescribed conducts, and the context of explicit gay sexual representation as “transgressive” within some video games. Within reviewing these documented experiences - taking account of the game representations and gameplay - there are reflections to wider discourses around sexual transgressions emerging from my positionality. In considering the affordance to (re)actualise player fantasies through one’s sexual play, there emerges a further conversation as to

nuanced framings of “transgression” from these wider contexts and their application in understanding the sexual spaces of single-player adult video games.

## **7.2 Bound Spaces: *Intersections of Transgression and Game Experiences***

Elsewhere in the thesis I defined gay adult video games as interactive texts featuring explicit sexual content that is purposefully aimed at building sensations of titillation and (sexual) pleasure for the player. In contextualising them in terms of their explicit sexual inclusion, there is an extent to which these games overlap with the realms of gay pornography as a medium itself: ‘sexually explicit material which depicts the varied phases, themes, behaviours and/or performances (whether concurrent or sequential) associated with sexual intercourse between men’ (Rothmann, 2013: 25). As Krzywinska (2015) argued, sex is present within (video)games through various levels of graphical fidelity and abstraction, with the capacities to recognise sex, genitalia and sexual practices within gameplay. Though some inclusions may have been intended to be more “entertaining” (Brathwaite, 2013), some game content may be sexually pleasurable and stimulating to game players (Clough, 2022). Here, then, the intersection of adult video games and pornography meet, as games can also provide the same sexual thrill and stimulation akin to pornography, whilst also sharing an overt overlap in aspects like nudity and allowing players to partake in interactive sex scenes (Brathwaite, 2013: 10-15). As Attwood and Smith (2014) argued, the range of pornography has changed, with it now entering into wider formats beyond print and video and instead into further media formats and technologies. Lauteria and Wysocki (2015: 1) find that ideas of pornography and sex now directly intersect with the design and experience of contemporary video games, parallel to the emergence of cybersex and virtual (sexual) relationships (Turkle, 1994; 1995). So, then, the adult video game is indicative of this shift of the pornography landscape, where its presence has influenced the design of video games and what they can offer their players - promising sexual indulgence, content and pleasures. In this regard, the adult video game is both a game *and* a form of pornography, mutually offering sexual affective pleasures of pornography and the interactivity of gameplay.

The highlighting of the intersection of video games and pornography here is purposeful, as before embarking onto discussing affective emergent experiences and play affordances, defining the game space itself is relevant to understanding how player navigation is mediated. The realms of video games and porn directly meet at mediating sexual pleasure and interaction, offering forms of affective satisfactions and fulfilment. Previously, I contextualised games as locales mediating certain activities that feature (static) objectives and “rules” in order to achieve a particular outcome (Suits, 2005). Yet, as I argued, through one’s affective play engagements, there is a strive to play towards that objective, or a different outcome entirely - as such, the play within the game space is subjective and emergent. Through their subjective desires to act in a specific context or framing, certain aims *can* be fulfilled. A similar perspective can be said for pornography, in that through its subjective spectatorship, individual affective sexual pleasures can be attained. To address this intersection of video games and porn directly: these video game texts can be treated as game spaces *and* a pornographic space, offering interactive experiences with explicit media and material. The analysis presented so far has only considered player agency and sexual embodiment through the avatar, and the kinds of intimate and sexual pleasures that can be attained through game mechanics - reflected on through my own subjectivity. The sexual play framework I employ within this study considers the exertion of (play) actions as being intimately tied to one’s desires within a (sexual) space (Paasonen, 2018) and so the thesis has not yet actually engaged with the sexual space(s) itself that these “pornographic” games occupy.

As indicated in the introduction, these spaces feature the presence of boundaries and limitations that mediate one’s sexual interactions. However, my analysis has not actually explored the relationship between the player’s engagement and the parameters of the space, especially in regard to subjective play that goes against some established “normative” structures. In my chapter contextualising sexual play, I defined the concept of transgressive play as interacting in a capacity in relation to an “intended ideal player” or intended actions (Aarseth, 2007; Sundén, 2009) or engaging in play practices that were not intended by the game itself (Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018; Carter, 2022). Yet, what becomes apparent in the exploration of these gay adult video

games is a more ambiguous and nuanced framing of transgression beyond my initial contextualisation, specifically for the study of single-player video game texts. As this chapter is revolving around sexual affordances - which I will analyse as affordances of deviancy, prescribed conducts and representations of “transgressive” gay sex - it is necessary to revisit this framework of transgression to understand the navigation of the player within the game space(s). Returning to consider (video)games and transgression is needed to understand the (power) structures mediating sexual interactions, and how through them there are emergent capacities to explore sexual possibilities and horizons of pleasure. In analysing how these video games engage with the idea of the “transgressive” in their gameplay and in-game representations, their affective potentials become more evident and how the fulfilment of sexual fantasies become (re)actualised through their play.

Within game studies, transgression - or the exploration of transgressive play at least - has been varied in its scope and discussion, with discourses exploring from player behaviours in relation to rules, to emergent and harmful player practices. For example, Aarseth (2007) considered that games featured an extent of an “implied player” where the player subjects themselves to the rules and structures of the game with expected (or intended) player interactions; in order to meet the game objectives (Suits, 2005). In this capacity, the player is no longer a fully agentic figure, with their exertion of agency only permissible to an extent as they strive to reach these goals (Aarseth, 2007: 130). Parallel to this consideration, there has also been work that considers the interrelations of (subjective) player practices that are more harmful. Brown (2015b) and Linderorth and Mortensen (2015) explored the “dark side” of play where certain play activities can emerge which may involve complete disregard towards pre-established conducts within the game *and* the boundaries of other players. This has been further articulated with player practices such as *griefing* – disrupting or sabotaging the experiences for other players (Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018; Carter, 2022) – or *cheating* where ‘the cheater wants you to think you are both playing the same game but in actuality you are not’ (Consalvo, 2009: 409). Carter (2022: 7) offered a perspective of these kinds of practices as something subjective, arguing that in the case of *griefing*, in that ‘the goal of the griever is to get a negative reaction, and often to share this reaction with others.’

Jenks (2003: 2) defines transgression as going ‘beyond the bounds or limits set by commandments or law or convention [...] to violate and infringe.’ The definition that Jenks utilises is indicative to both these extents that transgression can occur internally within and *with* the game structure, as well as emerging through player interrelations. For Lange (2014) the game space features “built-in” options that could be considered unethical beyond its parameters, arguing that within the ‘fictional’ capacity of the game (Huizinga, 1949; Caillois, 2001), players can indulge in these violations. In this regard, ‘transgression is always tied to a norm violation in a specific context’ (Stenros and Bowman, 2018: 412), as when ‘entering a game, players subject themselves to a different ethical framework and thus conceivably construct alternate ethical selves that align with the moral codes present in game worlds’ (Brown and Stenros, 2018: 134). In thinking through this perspective of “conforming” to an “ideal player” and the relations to other players and their respective boundaries, the framing of transgression is understood as something socio-culturally defined, with its understanding varying ‘not only between a nongamer public and those with firsthand experience in the medium but also between gaming communities’ (Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018: 2). As argued by Pötzsch (2018: 49), the labelling of transgression is dependent on the specific boundaries in which (play) activity is taking place, and the situated subjects that perceive the boundary and their responses to the activity or practice being initiated in regard to the breaching or trespassing of (abstracted) boundaries.

To play *transgressively* is to play in a capacity that does not conform to the “ideal player” (Aarseth, 2007), and instead actively play against this intentionality. In this view, video games become spaces to *transgress* - whilst not every player would conduct play practices that go against the intention of the game or other players, there is fluidity within the structure for this capacity of emergence. As such, there is an extent of subjectivity in this emergence, where ‘numerous activities are recognized by some conceptualizations as play but disregarded by others.’ (Stenros, 2018: 17). Yet, ‘video games have a history of engaging with transgressive content, such as excessive violence and transgressive play practices [...] What is transgressive for some may not be so for others, and there are important cultural and historical factors involved in how

one responds to specific content' (Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018: 2). As such, transgression and play are both situated contexts with blurred parameters as to which transgression is present and occurring (Stenros and Bowman, 2018). To explain this further, considering transgression in *LARP*<sup>31</sup> communities, there is a consideration to where precisely the transgression emerges from: the player or the act itself. For Stenros and Bowman (2018: 412-413), deviating from these norms becomes transgressive acts, (re)appropriating the game space to be a site of subjective play fantasy, demonstrating the boundaries of the play space. The spaces of roleplay involve (social) agreements that establish norms and conducts between players that frame intended interactions (Stenros and Bowman (2018). As such, in considering the parameters of transgression, there is an intersection with sexual scripting which posits the prescribed structures of normative behaviours and (social) interactions (Gagnon, 1990; Marshall et al., 2016: 16). In this capacity, transgression then is the engagement with norms and deviances that are subjectively affirmed through one's play, whether in accordance with these paradigms, or ones that are more self-articulated.

### ***7.3 Deviant Spaces: Adult Video Games and Transgression***

In defining sexual play in terms of subjectivity - understood as the exertion of meaningful actions that are motivated towards desire (Murray, 1997; Paasonen, 2018), I would argue that playing transgressively is a form of sexual emergence, as the player embarks on playing in accordance with their own desires rather than necessarily with the established "rules." Rather than solely disregard these norms, I would argue that in the context of sex/uality, there is a (re)appropriation of the rules to achieve subjective desires and experiences. The player performs certain practices that are within and in response to the parameters of the game's structures. However, for adult video games, there is an intention for them to be played sexually or potentially afford sexual stimulation as they offer various sexual context in their design (Brathwaite, 2013). In this regard of transgression and normative structures, sexual interaction with the game text can be considered as normative given their apparent intention.

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<sup>31</sup> Live-Action Role-Playing

To Jørgensen and Karlsen (2018: 4), player engagement within a game is something subjective, parallel to my argument of play as not necessarily universal. They extend the notion to the play space itself: games as a space existing “beyond” the boundaries of “reality” and suspending what is “socially acceptable” behaviours (Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018: 4). In this regard, transgression is attributed with *deviance* (and taboo practices), as players engage with experiences that are not necessarily appropriate with social norms (Foucault, 1978). The discussion of transgression by Piha et al. (2020) addresses this deviance, where it alludes to the territories of “liberty” and “norm” – transgression becomes an extent where activity has left the confines of social normality. In examples like the discussion of *Twister* by Brown (2015c) where there is the “awkward” touching and positioning of bodies, through to more extreme and violent examples of unwanted sexual interactions from virtual groping in VR (Sparrow et al., 2020) to “cyberrape” in *LambdaMoo* (Dibbell, 1993).

In comparison to these transgressive emergent player practices, there have been some video games recorded that have been transgressive in terms of their gameplay, constructing sexual violence as part of its experience. Two extreme cases have been *RapeLay* (Illusion Soft, 2006) and *Enzai: Falsely Accused* (Langmaor, 2002). *RapeLay* is a 3D “erotic” game where the player is placed in the position of a serial rapist whereby the aim of the game is to rape three female members of a family (Pelletier-Gagnon and Picard, 2015; Galbraith, 2017). The game uses various aspects tied to sexual activity, cultures and violence as a part of its “entertainment”: the player uses a mouse to grope victims, varying sexual positions, and rape storylines and depictions for *play* (Galbraith, 2017: 105). *Enzai* is a *yaoi* visual novel/interactive narrative game that features a storyline of a young boy who is imprisoned for murder and is subsequently tortured and raped by the other male inmates (Okabe and Pelletier-Gagnon, 2019). In *Enzai*, ideas and fantasies of rape being a spectacle are evident, as the player is presented with hardcore pornographic images for their choices in the game (Okabe and Pelletier-Gagnon, 2019: 41). Both *RapeLay* and *Enzai* provide a space in which sexual violence as transgressive acts are permissible sensationalised under the guise of interactive entertainment that would be seen as criminal acts beyond the game space.

The mentioning of these is to indicate cases in which extreme (sexual) violence has occurred, within and beyond the game space, assimilating sex, and violence (and sexual violence) as forms of “transgressive play” (Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018: 2). They are further mentioned here to also indicate my framing of transgression and what is exactly being discussed here in this chapter. Regarding these cases, firstly, I share the same view as Brathwaite (2013: 37) in that such constructions are not sex, and they are instead acts of violence. There is a need to establish the difference between the violent acts presented within those texts, and the sexually explorative parameters of the texts in my project corpus. Though their mentioning does indicate an extent of transgressive gaming in terms of cultural context and their harm constructions, they are also a different form of transgressive gameplay that is occurring within these adult video games. Here, transgression is being considered in terms of representations of sexual subcultures and practices, engagements with game “rules” and other players, and one’s own subjective understanding of “what’s appropriate” player interaction in the confines of single-play game spaces (Stenros, 2018; Jørgensen and Karlsen, 2018). Sexual transgression here is not in regard to violence, but in relation to following one’s desires irrespective of game boundaries which may lead to emergent (sexual) experiences that result in representations historically perceived as transgressive.

Sageng (2018) explores transgression in terms of “morality,” which can be applied to both dialogues of understanding the intricacies of sex and violence in video games as transgressive. As Sageng (2018: 66) posits, games contain their own “moral code” that permits specific acts to progress, but the player is not obliged to follow. There is a return here to the intersections of structures Sutton-Smith (2001) and Krzywinska (2015) discussed, as games allow the affordances of sexual activity to occur in its play experience, but how we understand these should account for contexts such as the player’s own “moral code,” design of the space, and the cultural space(s) it occurs. In Sageng’s view, whilst the game does stipulate certain actions, the player is actually agentic to whether they “play” the game.

I find that this directly engages with the agency of the player, as like Sageng suggests, it is down to the player's *choice* to engage in such play, or even generate the play itself. We can view these as “meaningful actions” – parallel to the definition of agency by Murray (1997) – as the player has actively chosen to interact in these kinds of spaces, whether to experiment, explore or (re)articulate identity. ‘As a mode of action, play [with sex] takes surprising routes that are neither “good” or “bad” by definition’ (Paasonen, 2017: 4) and only becomes more defined or understood within its individual cultural context, as transgression appears to be. As there are various agents operating within the space where sex and play are located, it is arguably something that is personally defined. ‘The value of [sex and] play is the play itself and the pleasure(s) one derives from it’ (Waskul and Vannini, 2008: 242), which itself becomes dependent on the cultural structures and agents operating during the play experience.

Returning to the argument by Sutton-Smith of play needing a more intersectional perspective, I argue for their view to also extend onto understanding transgressive play: taking account of the game, space, player(s) and cultural contexts beyond the game that shift into the game space. Jørgensen and Karlsen (2018: 2) allude to this as they find that certain practices and experiences may be deemed as transgressive for some, but not for others, and so transgression must be seen in its own specific context and demonstrative to subjective emergent play practices. I argue for transgression as subjective (re)articulation of the game space to directly address how the play experience and structure has shifted from its original position to create new rules and systems of play for those “transgressing.” Video games, whilst utilising a system of rules and objectives to guide player interactions (Suits, 2005), provide a range of possible transgressions that take form through the player's autonomy and agency, whether purposely designed as a part of its experience or unintentionally emerging through the affordances of the space. Players are then interacting with these supposed “limitations” of the game which have been (re)articulated to discover or engage in new play experiences. In this dynamic of sex and play within game contexts, there is an affective capacity to play: and so, the interaction and behaviour of players shift, as too does the game, which changes the experience (Paasonen, 2018). As such, to analyse the affordances of sexual transgression within the texts of my project corpus I am

applying a perspective of transgression to be subjective emergent player actions that engage with play space boundaries and offer potentiality to deviant from norms, whether in the player's gameplay or through cultural representations.

What follows on from this recontextualization is analysing my gameplay experiences in relation to these ideas of transgression. In exploring my autoethnographic account and the games themselves, engagements with transgression are explored in three ways: (1) disregarding game intentions by “not playing,” (2) representations of “transgressive” sexual practices and activity as a form of fantasy roleplay, and (3) subjectively defined boundaries of comfort within play. What became apparent in some of the opportunities “to transgress” within the play of these games a subjective framing of transgression: both my positionality as a player and a researcher raised questions around “appropriateness” and what constitutes as “normative” in following my desires. During play, opportunities to be “transgressive” in terms of narrative and my play activity had presented themselves – such instances can be interrogated in terms of wider (cultural) ideas of sexual deviance. Some of these experiences afforded a sense of sexual possibility in my embodiment, as these “transgressive” representations as their play experiences afforded the indulgence of sexual fantasies and interactions as a form of roleplay. Other texts within the corpus raised questions around the parameters of transgression in terms of the play of the games, and recognising the presence of *prescribed* interactions in regard to player interactions and following sexual conduct. Though as the only “participant”<sup>32</sup> in the game space, my desired play actions resulted in nuanced and versatile parameters of transgression between these perspectives and what actually constituted “transgressive play” if I was the sole occupant. As such, what is apparent in analysing transgression within these games is the interplay of wider cultural ideas of normative structures, and the subjective parameters of transgression. Here, in my own play, what emerged were reflections on implied or expected actions, wider cultural ideas of sex in relation to representations, and my own personal “limits” of play. Through exploring my gameplay experiences within the confines of these single-

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<sup>32</sup> This is emphasised here as I reflect on the potentiality of reading in-game characters/NPCs in single-player gay adult video games as agentic presences due to the affective structures of these games in *Conclusion Part II. Post-Script Methodological Complexities*

player adult video games in relation to my subjectivity in defining transgression, the following analysis explores the engagement in both acts of transgression and representations of it.

## **7.4 XXX Spaces: *Transgressive Sex in Gay Adult Video games***

### **7.4.1 “Transgressive Romances”**

Before embarking on this thesis, I had pre-existing knowledge of dating simulators from my own play history; those I had mostly from within this genre of videogaming were neither explicit nor pornographic in nature with a select few exceptions. Instead, these were more representing “romantic” relationships that the genre is commonly recognised for (Song and Fox, 2016). As such, I was already aware of the branching “choose your own adventure” format of gameplay to strive towards the pursuit of (romantic) relationships with in-game characters (Pettman, 2009: 192; Andlauer, 2018; Song and Fox, 2016: 99). This also was an awareness to knowing their inclusion of often static images of characters, with choice options for narrative pathways to progress through the game. With an awareness that these games revolve around my interaction to pursue desired characters, I had approached these gay adult video games with an indication that my engagement would be with sexually explicit material and involve the pursuit of sexual relationships with in-game characters. However, the extent of the fantasied or idealised “romances” or sexual relationships that were permissible within some of these spaces was not anticipated, in which I was afforded experiences that could be perceived as transgressive beyond the game space. What I had encountered in some was the potentiality to embark on “romance” (and explicitly sexual) routes with characters in positions of authority to my game avatar (and by extension of my embodiment, myself): I was able to romance “my professor” and “my boss” within the narrative and gameplay experiences of these games. Yet, in the treatment of such content and representation in their game diegesis, this afforded experience had in some capacities allowed the fantasy to become “normalised” in relation to it being “transgressive.”

One of the video games I had these “transgressive romances” within that I will further engage in the framings of transgression is *Coming Out on Top* which had allowed for fantasised visualisations of sexual partnerships that could be considered as culturally transgressive in some contexts but more nuanced in the game space itself through subjective play. However, in my own play, it had established the parameters of transgression through my own subjectivity. In terms of content, there are six primary “romance” routes available, with the possibility of the player being able to go on “dates” with a total of eighteen males. Whilst it is possible to progress through the game without intending to romance any character - with the game narrative indicating that the player graduates with no sexual/romantic partner - there is an invitation in its play to indulge in pursuing prospective (and multiple) partners even if the “good ending” is not achieved by the end of the route. My own experience with the game had involved multiple playthroughs to account for its various routes, further documenting my experiences and feelings in relation to their narratives, characters and sexual scenarios (see Appendix 1.1-1.3). However, out of these pathways, it was my playthrough that pursued the character *Alex* that became most suggestive to narratively exploring our romance as transgressive within the diegesis, but also the emergence of wider cultural issues surrounding this form of sexual relationship. As such, my own gameplay experience of this route became indicative of wider cultural discourses on appropriate and normative sexual dynamics that emerged through my positionality, yet the game still allowed a continued pursuit of the character despite also problematising it.

I previously discussed Alex in chapter six, in which I was specifically exploring his introduction and representation as an extremely attractive, Herculean male. The narrative leading up to this point had involved me travelling as my avatar to a nearby bar - visually shown through static images whilst clicking through dialogue - which is where the route for Alex can be initiated. My first engagement with Alex upon his introduction was one of attraction and desire for this character with his muscularity and handsome appearance which eventually emerged as an initial motivator for my play progression. Considering my embodiment within the (via my avatar, Mark whom I renamed as Than) as subjecting me to the affective capacities of the play space by shifting (affective) states to be open to these sexual sensations of desire and thrills (Paasonen, 2017;

2018; Tomkins, 2008), the narrative scenario that was presented was that of a “meet-up” in a gay bar in which I was a presence within the game diegesis and that my encounter with Alex was that he was engaging directly *with me*.

At this point in the game, Alex is positioned as a stranger in the bar who the player has no prior encounter with. However, reflecting on this initial landscape in terms of sexual scripting starts to offer the normative prescribed social interactions that were being represented to me as the player. Here, the “meet-up” in the bar acts as the “cultural scenario” (Simon and Gagnon, 1986) which defines the surrounding contexts of our conversation: a social interaction that is underpinned by elements of flirtation and attraction. In this regard, the game has represented *and* presented a scenario in which potential relationships can be initiated and emerge. With Alex “flirting” with me in the bar setting, the game affords me the opportunity to exert my agency in potentially pursuing Alex with my dialogue responses. As indicated by my responses to his introduction, I had experienced phenomena that had shifted from my “original state” (Blackman, 2012) to attraction, taking note of his archetypal Herculean “daddy” physique (Mercer, 2017a). As such, my attraction became a motivator for my play (Paasonen, 2018), desiring the continue progression down this afforded pathway. The dialogue that occurs between me (as my avatar) and Alex becomes a form of interpersonal scripting (Klein et al., 2019) in which the chosen dialogue responses become a way of flirtation and sexual tension building as active gameplay (Brathwaite, 2013). As such, the *scripted* responses had mediated specific affective desires (Paasonen, 2018: 34) which influenced my play actions to continue pursuing Alex romantically and sexually as a game objective.

Here, extents of transgression are not apparent or entirely abstracted, as the game initially sets up Alex to be one of the main romance routes possible; Alex is positioned as a sole object of desire for the potential imprint or direction of player sexual fantasy. Within this narrative occurrence, attraction or arousal to Alex is normative: the setting and interpersonal interactions are suggestive to a sexually driven encounter, allowing the exchange of flirtatious remarks or comments. Despite the format of the narrative being interactive fictions (Pettman, 2009: 192) the character does not necessarily have

to engage further with Alex, choosing other options to pursue other pathways. However, in the normative treatment of this exchange, one potential argument could be made that it is “transgressive” to not romantically engage with Alex. Despite the various pathways that are available within the gameplay, there is a general assumption that romantic and sexual interactions are “normative” within the play of the game: the “expected player” (see Aarseth, 2001; Sundén, 2012) is one who *does* engage with the romanceable options. In thinking of transgression in this capacity, *not* romancing one of the characters could be classed as going against the intentions of the game as there are intended and/or implied forms of activity that is expected for the player to perform (Fernández-Vara, 2009: 3). Yet, it is a permissible action that can be taken by the player in the game, in the same capacity that the player is also not limited to particular routes of “romancing” one character and instead can attempt multiple pathways that eventually result in an ending. Linderoth and Mortensen (2018: 4) argue that ‘games [facilitate] playfulness in relation to controversial themes, games can also be deliberately designed to encourage players to connive and deceive each other.’ Though they are discussing more “transgressive” multiplayer interactions, I argue their consideration to the “intended player actions” can be recontextualised to this sexual scenario I was presented with. The game not only facilitates a playfulness in being afforded the capacity to follow my own desires, but “actively encouraged” interaction that would push the narrative further since it has represented a specific social scenario for the player to engage with, *and* as a sexually affective game space.

Reflecting the concept of ‘(player) frames’ by Goffman (1974) and Fine (1983), representationally, there is a social situation that has guided the exertion of situationally appropriate actions, based on the player’s interpretation of the scenario *and* their understanding of these adult video game spaces as sexually stimulating. The discussion of roleplay (games) as ‘ordered play’ by Stenros and Bowman (2018: 411) is also useful in understanding this representation as formulating normative social acts. In terms of roleplay games, ‘they not only have rules set down by game designers but also have social rules and cultural norms about how participation is conducted. [...] RPGs, like most games, are conceived as bounded phenomena’ (Stenros and Bowman, 2018: 411). As such, it is in this bounded nature of the encounter with Alex that the

game starts to frame the lines of transgression, as through the player's embodiment with their avatar and the affective capacities of the game space, the player (as the avatar) is "roleplaying" the scenario.

Though the initial introduction to Alex posited a normative sexually engaged response, it is actually through the continued progress on his pathway that more prominently engages with ideas of sexual transgression, and its definition from subjective positionalities. By continuing to actively choose dialogue options to "romance" Alex, the narrative reveals that Alex is the player's university professor (or college professor in the Americanised context). Initially, the reveal had garnered a humoured response from me, though upon further play became a point of complexity in terms of transgression:

*"I cannot help but continue to find the humour in that this is a story pathway, that I (Than/Mark) have "fallen for the teacher." [...] But I am now thinking to what that means exactly, and it feels there is a sense of awkwardness. He is a lecturer, and I am playing the game as a student. He is an adult. So am I."*

*"The game is still allowing me to continue on such a pathway, to continue that romance, but it does not feel right to do so either? [...] I do not pursue it; it did not feel right to do so. For me, it felt inappropriate for me to follow that pathway especially since he is in a position of authority, however for others it could perhaps not be that inappropriate, especially as an adult playing an adult game about adult characters."*

- *Coming out on Top* - Alex, Recorded Nov 16, 2022

It is within this act of stepping back that becomes the most prominent to engaging with transgression terms of "implied players" and engagement with the game space. In my gameplay, I had closed this route after feeling my play as uncomfortable (Henricks, 2008), namely in the representation of a sexual fantasy that I had felt was "taboo" or "transgressive." The game itself had afforded the continuation of the pathway, which itself suggests that within the parameters of the game, the sexual relationship between the player-character and Alex is not deviant or transgressive. Yet, within the confines of my own subjective position, I had removed myself from play. Pötzsch (2018: 49) invites the term "transgressivity," arguing that it 'refers to how concrete breaches and boundaries change over time or across contexts, how they are experienced and

negotiated by situated individuals, and how they reciprocally change their own conditions of emergence.’ In this regard, my initial engagement with the game space was allowing myself to be indulgent in my desires and fantasies – the boundaries to my own play were not immediately apparent and instead treated the play space of the game as one of indulgence. Upon the reveal of Alex’s character as a professor, these boundaries then changed once the game started representing a context that (personally) permeated the “magic circle” (Consalvo, 2003; Caillois, 2001).

As such, my own subjective boundaries of comfort then changed my interaction within the game (resulting in a stepping back from the encounter): the game presents a “concrete” boundary of sexual fantasy in presenting a romance with Alex yet in my own gameplay and subjectivity, renegotiated my (sexual) play parallel to my own transgressive framing (Pötzsch, 2018: 49). In terms of this experience, transgressive play occurred in the “stepping back” to retain my own boundaries of comfort, which was act against the game’s dominant intentionality. Contrastingly, transgressive play could have also been the possibility to perform player actions to be embodied in a fantasy not necessarily treated as deviant within the confines of the game’s diegesis compared to beyond (Fernández-Vara, 2009: 3).

To explore this scenario further in terms of transgression, comparatively in my gameplay of *Full Service*, a similar scenario had emerged in which I was able to romance Rald, who in the context of the game narrative was the boss of my player-character (Tomoki) yet I had responded differently. In a narrative sense, *Full Service* presented the opportunity to romance someone in a “position of authority” to my avatar, and so in a cultural context it shares similarities to the encounter in *Coming Out on Top* with Alex. Yet, here, I was more driven to pursue him:

*“My eyes were immediately drawn to the bulky man standing behind them, he towered above the rest, dressed in his spa uniform with his incredibly muscular chest exposed enough for me to appreciate each definition of physique.”*  
*“I smile to myself thinking at the absurdity [...] It also feels somewhat awkward, since he is my character’s boss, yet at the same time I feel this need to pursue this further and am on board with what will happen upon this choice. It feels.... careless, but in a freeing way. This is my choice, in my game after all. It is difficult to not staring at his chest.”*

Here, the framing of transgression was fluctuating, with one motivation of my play to be removing myself from the scenario, with another wanting to continue progressing out of (sexual) desire for the character. The (narrative) encounter revolves around visiting a “spa” where Rald also works where attendants are also about to have a “happy ending” (sex with the character). In constructing Rald as a sexual fantasy for the player to indulge in, it is reflective of what Escoffier (2007: 187) considers as stimulation emerging from elements of risk, mystery or transgression with Rald here being a point of transgression (for myself) and so the sexually affective experience of his suggestive representation motivating me to pursue him as a sexual thrill (Paasonen, 2017; 2018; Tomkins, 2008). Given that much of my responses were revolving around his body – with his overt muscularity suggestive of the “daddy” body trope (Mercer, 2017a) – this may signify that my subjective positionality as a (white) gay male had perceived Rald as more attractive and motivated to pursue him by equating his musculature with sexually desirable masculinity (see Lanzieri and Hildebrandt, 2011). By pursuing him, in terms of my subjectivity, I had rearticulated what I deemed transgressive with Rald’s body construction becoming a sexual motivator for my play interactions. Within the parameters of this single-player game(s), as the sole agentic figure, I was able to play toward a sexual possibility and fantasy, “without consequences” and a *(re)framing* of transgression structures.

#### **7.4.2 “Indecent Playing”**

Aside from offering players opportunities to indulge in fantasy romances – which their representations as transgressive acts are (subjectively) nuanced – some of the other games and playthroughs within my corpus had engaged more with “transgressive sexual practices/acts” in their gameplay. Within these representations, the player (myself) is afforded the opportunity to sexually experiment and (re)visualise the self into a sexual scenario that is either “(culturally) taboo,” transgressive and/or *deviant* representations of sexual practices. The two examples of texts and accounts I draw

upon here are the *Jed* pathway route in *Coming Out on Top* and Robert Yang's *The Tearoom* from their similarity in "transgressive scenes." Specifically, both texts offer representations and gameplay of public play/sex: they present gay sex scenes taking place in bathrooms that the player interacts with [Fig.4.1-4.2]. Here, the affordance to be able to conduct sexual activity within a "public" space provides players the capacity to be (culturally) "transgressive" within the ("safe") confines of the game space.

As Hennelly (2010: 70-71) described, public sex includes a various range of *cottaging* (sexual encounters between men in bathrooms), *cruising* (sex with other men in other public locales (e.g., bathhouses and parks), and *dogging* (singles and couples engaging in exhibitionism and voyeurism within their cars in secluded areas). For Ashford (2007), public spaces like public bathrooms and parks had become rearticulated as queer sex spaces, with a subculture of public sex emerging into the forms Hennelly outlined. In the two video games, it is reminiscent of such *cottaging* or *cruising* practices.

Momentarily reflecting on these subcultural sex practices beyond the game space, these have been perceived as culturally transgressive and "taboo," historically at the very least. Ashford (2007) claimed that the emergence of such acts, within the context of England, had presented police forces with particular issues and exposure across local and national newspapers. Further substantial risks have also been associated with such public (sex) play, such as potential subject to physical harm or arrests, risks regarding HIV and sexual health, and concerns over exposure and "outing"<sup>33</sup> (see Binson et al., 2001; Flowers et al., 1999; Hennelly, 2010).

As such, irrespective of the American contexts in which these two games are placed within, the mentioning of these contexts underpins how this construction of (gay) sex is culturally situated. With these (historical) associations is suggestive of 'situational transgressivity that Pötzsch (2018: 56) discussed as the idea of public (gay) sex is situated within socio-cultural parameters that have deemed it taboo or inappropriate, resulting in potential consequences for participants. The treatment of such structures within these two texts is complex, as *Coming Out on Top* allows the player to be

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<sup>33</sup> Forcibly disclosing/revealing someone's sexuality or gender identity (without their (informed) consent)

rewarded with a (static) sex scene with Jed in a bathroom stall without consequence, whereas in the gameplay of *The Tearoom* features both risk and consequence in the framing of sexual transgression. Yet, within their gameplay, transgression was also subjectively framed, as my own gameplay had reflected on the nature of the representation.

In my gameplay of *Coming Out on Top*, my pursuit of Jed had fortunately resulted in reaching this bathroom scene [Fig.4.1] (which is towards the end of his pathway) and was rewarded a sex scene for my “correct” choices (Brathwaite, 2013). However, through my own affective engagement, I had once again defined the parameters of my own “appropriate actions”:

*“I choose to “bottom” and Jed and I (Than/Mark) engage in intercourse, with the game showing a static image of Jed penetrating my character. But now I am thinking about the location – a toilet stall/public bathroom. Something that feels so...wrong...so inappropriate to be conducting such activity in a public space. I am surprised that I did not realise it sooner [...] Perhaps there was the desire to reach this “ending” with Jed, and that was so overwhelmed that I completely ignored everything else, or is it that I did not care? Was I actually thrilled by the idea of doing something deviant, or wrong to so many?”*

- *Coming out On Top - Jed*, Recorded Nov 17, 2022

Following on from *actively* choosing to pursue Jed but also partake in the scene with my “fantasy” sexual positioning (as the “bottom” in the power dynamic (e.g., Brennan, 2018; Mercer, 2017a), I had also considered the actual representation of public sex, and how it had felt “inappropriate.” As Jenks (2003: 2) posited: transgression is acting ‘beyond the bounds and limits set by the commandments or lore or convention...to violate and infringe.’ As such, the scenario itself afforded sexual play as (culturally) transgressive in terms of representing and fulfilling fantasies of performing public sex play. In my own play, I had considered the contexts that underpinned this construction, the reflection on pursuing Jed had suggested how my sexual motivations had motivated me to be *transgressive*. In being embodied through my avatar (Than), the affective potentials of the game scenario became a ‘playground for contesting, playing, and dealing with moral trials and quandaries’ (Brown, 2018: 134). As such, I was embodied

within the sexual fantasy of the game scenario as a sexual possibility, affording me sexually affective sensations through (re)visualising myself in a sexual interaction/practice as roleplay that would not (usually) be possible (Brown and Stenros, 2018b: 432-433). In this regard, without any consequences for conducting something “transgressive,” it became (re)normalised within the diegesis of the game. Without explicitly or overtly stating, sexual transgression was encouraged, with sexual stimulation emerging from a representation of an act of “deviancy” as a reward.

Comparatively, *The Tearoom* overtly engages with these surrounding contexts to public (sex) play, directly involving an aspect of game punishment/consequence for being “transgressive.” As mentioned previously in the thesis, the game revolves around conducting oral sex on male attendants to the bathroom to get them to “climax” (*shoot bullets*) [see Fig.6.2-6.4]. However, the “risk” of the game (Suits, 2005; Caillois, 2001) is that if the police catch the player conducting the act, the player’s progress of collecting the men’s “guns” resets as a form of punishment. Narratively, the game is implying a socio-cultural and political argument around the historical policing of queer/gay men and public sex in bathrooms<sup>34</sup> (see Binson et al., 2001; Flowers et al., 1999; Hennelly, 2010).

My own gameplay had encountered anxiety and hesitancy to progress forward with conducting the sexual acts of the game:

*“So – this is so strange. I do – sort of – get this feeling of kind of anxiety almost because it keeps telling me to be wary of the police [...] I mean the police are outside and I can see that the guy is waiting for me to look his way. But are they coming in? So, I’m just going to go for it even though I can see that they are outside but – oh, the door’s open. Does that mean they’re here? Can I leave the game? I don’t know, something told me I needed to stop. But I don’t know whether that was the right decision.”*

*“So, the sirens just suddenly happen, and I’ve lost my trophy. Have I just been punished? Ok, so it’s restarted again, and I’ve gone back to having zero trophies [...] This is so strange I keep feeling the need to look out the window to make sure that they are not there.”*

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<sup>34</sup> The summary of the game also describes it as a public bathroom simulator that revolves around police surveillance (Radiatoryang.itch.io, 2017)

In terms of affordance, the game allows the player to *choose* how much they would like to continue conducting the public act (with the intimacy bars<sup>35</sup> indicating the extent the male is turned on and the completion of the game objective). In disregarding the “threat” to game progression (metaphorically representing the historically lived threat to queer folks/gay men), and continued to perform the sexual act, the player is “punished.” In this regard, the “rules” of the game become a point of play: the player is required to be conducting (culturally) transgressive acts in order to proceed as its intended player action and “rules” of the game (Suits, 2005; Lin, 2013; Brice, 2017; Aarseth, 2007) yet offered consequences for being transgressive. Through this tension, it also problematises the nature of the transgression itself in terms of its cultural context in which it is situated. As such, layers of transgression are not only present within the play of the game in terms of its rule systems, but also the affective drives of the player *to be* transgressive and the surrounding discourses around public (sex) play itself as something taboo or indecent.

Stenros and Bowman (2018: 411) argued that ‘play and playfulness stay within the limits of the rules, but, at times, they overstep those boundaries [...] these transgressions can happen accidentally, but it is also possible for players to knowingly question and ignore the numerous boundaries.’ My own playthrough was aware of this potentiality, and cautious to my own actions and the potentiality of my play action becoming transgressive. As such, ‘expectations of behavior in normative social frames [affected] experiences within play spaces and vice versa’ (Stenros and Bowman, 2018: 412). Returning to ‘situational transgressivity’ (Pötzsch (2018: 56), the game encapsulates a (historically) hegemonic cultural scenario in which sexual acts within public spaces as deemed deviant and not “acceptable conduct” (Gagnon, 1990). Public (gay) sex is situated within socio-cultural parameters, with the player being able to exert an extent of agency in terms of their desired actions as transgression (Murray, 1997; Paasonen, 2018) whilst also subject to forms of governance. Yet, the game not

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<sup>35</sup> See Chapter 6.2.3 Intimacy Bars for further detail.

only affords a space for the player to interact within the parameters of a (historical) cultural context but affectively experience transgressive shifts through sexually motivated play.

#### **7.4.3 “Cautious Navigation”**

The exemplified gameplay discussed in this chapter so far has explored transgression in terms of sexual possibility and subjective framing of boundaries or limitations: the game texts afford the player to indulge in sexually transgressive acts or fantasy scenarios within their own subjective parameters without much consequence. Though *The Tearoom* as a text was about critiquing the punishment over “being transgressive” in terms of public sex play, overall, these texts appeared to have fluid concepts of transgression that invite the player’s fantasy play. However, the discussion has not considered the affirmation of game conducts and transgression within these games and the consideration of play becoming “harmful” when going against established norms (Henricks, 2008). As such, here, I will analyse another one of Robert Yang’s games, *Hurt Me Plenty* (2017). The game not only affords a sexual possibility and fantasy in gameplay in terms of kink and power play but expects the player to “act accordingly” with risk of punishment for breaking (sexual) conduct.

The game itself is a “spanking” simulator, in which the player is positioned in the role of some kind of dominatrix and uses motion with their mouse to repeatedly “spank” the “sub.” The speed and rhythm at which the player hits the NPC results in various “emotive” responses from them: ambiguous symbols appear in varying colours to indicate their “pain tolerance level” [Fig.7.1]. The game starts by shaking the NPCs hand (through the motion of the mouse), representing an agreement stage between you and the sub with a variety of ambiguous icons appearing that is seemingly suggestive to what the sub is consenting to [Fig.7.2]. The game then progresses to the “spanking” session, which the player is free to “finish” whenever they please, with a concluding “aftercare” stage. As such, the game features active mechanics (Brathwaite, 2013) in which the player is situated within a specific performance of a dominatrix engaging in domination/submission practices and power exchanges (Weiss, 2006: 230).

[Image redacted. Full thesis available on request.]

**Fig.7.1** – Screenshot of *Hurt Me Plenty* gameplay of the “spanking” section of the game.

[Image redacted. Full thesis available on request.]

**Fig.7.2** – Screenshot of *Hurt Me Plenty* gameplay of the “agreement/consenting” section of the game.

The main stage of the gameplay – the “spanking” gameplay [Fig.7.1] – is implicit in terms of its boundaries and transgressions. Only through actually “physically” interacting do the game boundaries (and representations of sexual consent) become

apparent. As the sub becomes more uncomfortable from the player's interactions (spontaneously, dependent on the intention and force behind the player's motion), the emanation of symbols change colour (into yellow and finally red), designed to show less enjoyment. This is at the same time that the figure writhes with excessive breathing. Already, there is a clear indication within this cultural scenario that there are expected behaviours that *should* be adhered to. Both the agreement stage and this main spanking session are demonstrative to interpersonal sexual scripting: negotiations within the context of the cultural scenario about what is "appropriate" sexual interaction between the player and the figure (Klien et al., 2019: 632). Within this performance of the dominant role, there is an element of ambiguity parallel to the fluidity of the sexual practice (which has been discussed as featured a range of consensual and negotiated interactions) (Newmahr, 2011: 9; Sihvonen and Harviainen, 2020). In my own gameplay, concerns over breaking conduct were apparent, requiring constant (re)navigation and (re)reflection upon my own actions:

*"Oh. Ok. I accidentally moved the mouse again and he immediately displayed this sort of sad face symbol which leads me to believe that this, you know, that he is starting to feel uncomfortable. [...] part of me is naturally kind of holding back from, you know, from carrying on as soon as I see those symbols because it [...] it feels wrong to carry on further [...] I was definitely almost anxious that I was going to take things too far, and even though I wondered what happens if I do take things too far, I don't feel comfortable doing that."*

- *Hurt Me Plenty Playthrough*, Recorded February 16, 2023

If the player *actively* chooses to break conduct, and play harmfully (in transgression), the game ends and the player is locked out from play for a set period of time. The affective potentials experienced within my own play was to directly avoid that occurrence (which at the time of play was unbeknownst to me until discovering during further research). Through phenomena of concern and anxiety, the prescribed boundary becomes more prominent and affirmed, affectively shifting the body capacity to alter one's play actions (Jagoda and McDonald, 2018). For Stenros and Bowman (2018: 416-417), these foundational structures bring an extent of safety, in which nonconsensual acts can make players feel unsafe even when bodies are not subject to harm or risk – by breaking the rules, the shared activity between participants will be at

risk and play for all is no longer occurring. By entering into the game, through its representations of consent/agreement and sexual practice, I subjected myself to the ethical dimensions of the game, aligning myself with the dominant moral structures of its diegesis. For a game like *Hurt Me Plenty*, there are *prescribed sexual* interactions, in which the game *does* expect an intended behaviour (Aarseth, 2007; Sundén, 2009) whilst concurrently allowing a degree of fluidity for the player to seek out their sexual thrills in the construction of the sexual power dynamic (Paasonen, 2017; 2018). With ambiguous outset framings of boundaries, the realms of transgression emerged *through* play itself. Transgression here was not affording a strive for sexual possibility to break conducts, but to maintain its parameters of play and continued (sexual) fantasist pleasures in being embodying within the scenario and attain affective experiences.

### **7.5 Conclusion: Transgressive Play as Sexual Possibility**

Whilst offering stimulating experiences for their respective players, the examples analysed in this chapter suggest transgression within gay adult video games is not a static concept. Instead, through my own gameplay experiences, the idea of the transgressive was shifting. In this regard, by encountering opportunities to transgress, a player *can* (sometimes) author their own framing through play. In some capacities, the parameters of game affordances allow the player to (re)visualise themselves within “transgressive fantasies,” becoming a motivator for sexual play interactions. They can be treated as fantasy spaces of transgression in which the player is afforded the space to be embodied as or (role)play a “sexually deviant” self in their transgressive play (Stenros and Bowman, 2018).

The confines of single-player (gay) adult video games offer some complexity to the ethical dimensions of one’s play, with transgression becoming nuanced with outside contexts permeating the game space yet certain “transgressive” constructions being (re)normalised within the play of the game. With no other “agentic presences,” or consequences for deviancy against establish contexts, the player is afforded sexual possibilities of their own affective horizons. In some of these gay adult video game spaces, the capacity to exert agentic actions (Murray, 1997; Bódi, 2021) within

gameplay also affords the possibility to play with “deviant” fantasies to attain sexual gratification and new horizons of pleasure. Whilst these games treat these play scenarios as sites of sexual possibility to indulge in fantasies potentially unavailable, parallel to that is also an affordance to define a self-concept of transgression. Other games utilise ambiguous parameters of transgression and the breaking of socio-sexual conducts to affirm particular norms within sexual practices. Yet, what transcends across these games is that the explicit sexual representations can offer indications to wider cultural taboos surrounding sex, whilst also displacing these norms by allowing the player to engage in (fantasy) play through their own agency without (relative) consequence. “Transgressive sex” is (re)realised within the affordances offered to the play, where opportunities of deviance are normalised as play. These games, representationally and as affective experiences, afford the potential of sexual deviancy or the fantasised roleplaying of it: to play *with* and *within* transgression as a (self) fantasy.

Whilst the game has an extent of prescribed sexual actions and intending for players to sexually interact within the confines of the game space, they are the initiator of their own fantasy through their own affective potentials and desires. Akin to the discussions of “frames” (Goffman, 1961; Fine, 1983), these texts also feature a degree of emergent values that enter the game space through the player’s own self in their mediated engagement. In this regard, the spaces of (gay) adult video games are not “distant” or “separate” from the lived experience of the player, with the ideas of transgression representing wider cultural discourses or allowing deviant fantasies to be played out. In the play of these games, transgression features social-cultural parameters that are (re)actualised by the player. In role-playing and performing certain fantasies or sexual scenarios, there is a myriad of contexts that frame what is transgressive for the player ‘from the represented space on the screen, to the physical space the play is occupying [and situated]’ (Fernández-Vara, 2009: 3). Players can subjectively navigate transgressive play in accordance with their own values (Costello and Edmonds, 2009) that arises from beyond the play space or negotiated within it. Therefore, transgression here is defined as intersectional: through the confines of the game space, its wider representations and discourse, and the embodiment of the player through the avatar

and their affective potentials. The “rules” or “norms” are not disregarded in the (sexual) play of these games; rather, transgression is (re)negotiated within the moral frameworks of the player to suit their subjective, emergent (and deviant) sexual fantasies.

## Extended Conclusion

### Conclusion Part I. Gay Adult Video Games: Reading, Representing, Feeling Sex and Play

With the intersecting contexts that mediate play activities, (gay) adult video games afford sexual exploration and navigation of subjective sexual desires, with an objective to provide pleasure and stimulation - presumably to a point of climax or orgasm. The definitions I contextualised in relation to (sexual) play posit it as sexual activity that is motivated by our affective desires (Paasonen, 2018: 2; Tomkins, 2008). Sexual play engages with the exertion of meaningful actions that have been motivated by one's sexual desires and strive for pleasure (Murray, 1997). Though it may be perceived as framed within its own temporality that is separate from the "lived experience" (Huizinga, 1949; Caillois, 2001), my own emergences in play suggest that certain contexts *can* permeate the barriers of the fantasy space to (re)articulate one's play and sexual engagement. It was through this openness to embody (erotic) subjectivity that informed the chapters that compose this thesis.

Chapter one examined play literature that had attempted to define play as definitely structured. In exploring the intersection of play and affect, I instead proposed play to be understood through subjective and affective capacities. Play is ambiguous because we *feel* it, and through our *playful* activities, we open our bodily capacity to experience its uncertainty and spontaneity. In willingly and actively playing, we become agentic in shaping our play experience within the space that is mediating our interactions. Rather than rely on firm contexts or structures that strived to provide fixed definitions, I argued that if we are to understand our embodiment within play, then we have to accept its spontaneity, and its ties to our affective sensations. Following from this premise, I considered playful acts within the foreground of one's sexual pleasure. Through reflecting on play within sexual contexts and sexual subcultures, and keeping within the parameters of subjectivity, I constructed its definition of *sexual play*: the practice of playing sexually that has been motivated by our affective desires that informs our action.

Chapter two explored the metaphor of the sexual script, understanding it as highlighting prescribed social interactions and sexual conducts within a sexual scenario or encounter. The chapter explored how it emphasised specific routines which were indicative to socio-cultural norms surrounding sexuality. Rather than focus on the framework within interpersonal sexual dynamics, discourse was shifted to not only engage with game spaces and *scripted* behaviours but in the scripted representations of gay pornography. As such, I considered the use of the sexual scripting in highlighting the hegemonic contexts in which (subjective) sexual play emerges and navigates within.

Chapter three engaged with the video games themselves, to offer context to the thesis where it had only insofar been theoretical discussions around play experiences. The intention here was to provide an initial insight into gay adult video games, offering a brief history that addressed the socio-cultural positioning of them within the European and USA industry context. Parallel to their preluding discourse, I further addressed game content itself, giving the thesis its definition of how it saw sex and the games themselves: as offering sexually interactive and stimulating experiences for their players.

The findings chapters of this thesis then sought to explore the sexual play experiences of its selection of gay adult video games that was inclusive to (my) subjectivity. The use of my subjective experience offered an initial perspective into the affective potentials and shifts of the play of these video games, to allow for further and wider critique upon them.

With chapter five, there was an intention to explore the constructions of the sexual self, considering the kinds of affective pleasures that emerge from playing sexually with a (re)visualisation of the self. These avatar models were indeed relevant to reflect on the affective connections to the avatar, the games within the thesis corpus had featured prescribed avatars. As such, there was an affordance for one's sexual affective to be (re)articulative in terms of the self and sexually play with the avatar body as a point of desire or fantasy. With prescribed bodies that are indicative to dominant (sexual)

hegemonies, the construction and performance of/as them allows for sexual experimentation and affective pleasures to emerge within the player-avatar dynamism, and through navigation as the avatar.

Chapter six directly engaged with game content in how it was intended to construct sexually pleasurable experiences through the versatile inclusions of sex as a game mechanics. The corpus of video games discussed here represented sex and intimacy through narrative design which inviting the players to sexually engage with the game, passive and active mechanics to create sexual tensions and motivate players to pursue pleasure, and embodied ideas of haptics to create a more sexually tactile experience for players.

Chapter seven considered the affordance of the game space itself in terms of sexual affective desires. The argument emerging from this chapter's analysis was that the boundaries of transgression were not always fixed, with the game spaces normalising certain "transgressive acts," yet subjectively they had felt as deviant in an affective capacity. However, within their parameters, players were afforded opportunities to (re)realise the self within "transgressive fantasies" which motivated sexual play interactions.

It is here that we reach the conclusion of the thesis in its entirety. As I mentioned in the introduction, the work presented here is not "complete," as there are further ways to critically engage in terms of my subjectivity in the play experiences afforded by these games. However, before I offer concluding remarks to the study, it must be emphasised that the use of my subjective position itself is its own limitation. The literature and theoretical engagement have revolved around my specific positionality in context. Whilst it has opened an initial pathway into gaining a deeper understanding of the affective potentials of these games through this closeness, there are still other positionalities that *could* and *should* be considered beyond my own subjectivity. Even further, the findings chapters are not indicative to the only ways in which adult video games can be academically critiqued. This thesis therefore proposes further studies into other subjectivities at play within the confines of these video games, to provide not

only nuance to the facets of adult game experiences but to the definition of play itself in a more individual context.

Though this is a significant limitation of this thesis, it is actually through the subjective position that I wish to articulate my concluding comments. I am a (white) gay male gamer and academic researcher and through these different contexts the *reading*, *representing* and *feeling* sex and play emerge. For the researcher, the video game texts explored here provided indications to dominant structures, providing points of engagement to hegemonic masculinities and gay sex. Through the game elements and interspersed with my own gameplay accounts, I have documented how these games emphasised the dominant cultural ideologies that surround gay sex and player interactions. These games offered representations of prescribed sexual norms, gay porn iconographies (Mercer, 2017a; 2017b; Brennan, 2018), sexual practices of domination/submission, and hegemonic transgressivity (Pötzsch, 2018: 56) in the articulations of gay sex within a gaming experience.

However, for the (gay male) player, there was the foregrounding of pleasure and desire as an aspect of playing; the bodily capacity to shift and be fluid in its affective potentials, sexually (re)articulating itself to experience new horizons of pleasure (Paasonen, 2018: 3-8). To play a gay adult video game is to play within a space that is affording subjective navigation, in which the outcomes of one's play is never set. The player is able to (re)articulate the "rules" to create emergent sexual experiences of play that is pleasurable. As Fernández-Vara (2009: 6) argues, the performance of the player 'can be shaped by game design, as a result of the rules set in motion and understood by the player, who interacts with the game.' In taking on specific roles or performances within their play, the player navigates the dynamics of play space structures, in turn experiencing what play has to offer through their interactions (Fernández-Vara, 2009: 6). The player is afforded opportunities to be "transgressive" in the strive for one's pleasure, navigating an ambiguous space in which they can (role)play "deviancies," headspaces, and roles as a form of fantasy play whilst subjectively (*re*)*framing* the definition of transgression (Goffman, 1961; Fine, 1983; Paasonen, 2018: 3; Stenros and Bowman, 2018). In turn, through sexually interacting motivated by desire, the player

exerts an extent of agency to rearticulate the game space to be a fantasy, becoming affectively engaged in its shifts (Jagoda and McDonald, 2018; Tomkins, 2008; Paasonen, 2017; 2018). In the sexual play of gay adult video games, game spaces can become an imaged fantasist landscape through the sexually motivated acts of the player who self-authors their own sexual play parameters through their extents of sexual agency that is stimulating and fulfilling (Juul, 2005: 6; Gagnon, 1990: 34; Cense, 2019; Murray, 1997). As such, through the sexual navigation of the player, the affective shifts and drives (Blackman, 2012; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010) of their interactions become apparent, allowing sexual experimentation, rearticulations of the sexual self and the kinds of sexual thrills and intensities that await them (Tiidenberg and Paasonen, 2019). Through subjective engagement within these video games, sexual play as a quest driven for intense pleasures and sensations (Paasonen, 2018: 3) expands our own horizons to discover new sexual fantasies and viscerally *feel* them as a titillating experience.

## Conclusion Part II. Post-Script Methodological Complexities

*“I went back through some of my notes today, and there was one part that keeps sticking out to me. It was in my first note - “Day 1 - Nostalgic Sensations” - which feels so long ago, so distant. The note read: “Documenting my emotions is no easy task - where do I start? Where do I stop? What’s the line, or is there a line?””*

*“These questions are still lingering in my head. The more I think about it, the more uncomfortable I feel. Am I officially done with writing my experiences, or does it never end and am I always researching? I feel worried that somewhere along the way I could’ve crossed this “line” or that my experiences aren’t detailed enough to write my thesis. I feel too frozen to type, scared to share my experiences both for my own critique and others. Now I feel shame and guilt. What if I did it all completely wrong? Can it? It feels like my attempt at autoethnography has failed, but now I’m wondering, did I fail it?”*

- Written note, made 12/10/2023

What follows is constructed as a “Conclusion Part II.,” yet it may not read like it. It purposefully does not act like a conclusion yet makes statements that are conclusive. The part has two connected purposes: to discuss an unintended finding that emerged during the thesis’ data collection, which is also a reflective extension on the methodology and beyond. It is intentionally messy, and that is the point, as the conversation posited below is a complex nuanced one. It may be apparent by now that my writing now feels more personal, emotionally charged, or perhaps “less academic” in tone - again, it is all intentional because it is to do with me, the person and the “messiness” I am confronted with my data that feels only possible with speaking from the personal voice – this part of the conclusion is purposefully subjective and personal.

When conducting my data collection, I had encountered and documented experiences of discomfort and dissonance, particularly in relation to playing these video games and acting in some form of “transgression.” What was transgressive about the content of the video game is not the conversation being made here. Rather, it was in reflecting on

that experience of discomfort and what I perceived as a “disappointing” data collection that I started to understand the complexities of both my methodological practice, and the wider discourses surrounding the research of such games. In revisiting my autoethnographic accounts, the discomfort and disappointment I experienced became more apparent to the nuances of researcher positionality and the embodiment of sexual subjectivity within academic work. If I was aware I was researching a field that is directly tied to intimacies and pleasures of the player/researcher, and I played the games in relation to my own desires, why was I unhappy with it? In reflecting on my perception of a “failed” data collection, the messy question arose as to what this part of the conclusion is trying to answer: *“is this really an autoethnography?”*

What this first part to the extended conclusion seeks to do is explore this question, subjectively. Not only am I exploring this in relation to my own methodology chapter articulated earlier in the thesis, but it also makes commentary on the wider discourses about research and writing practices, intimacy and subjectivity. Throughout this thesis, I have made repeated acknowledgements to the relevance of my subjectivity, in how it intersected with theoretical frameworks, selection of texts, or engagement within these games. Whilst some areas of my thesis used my “autoethnography” as interventions in critical analysis and made use of first-person voice in this analysis, rarely have I actually written entirely from the subjective position or voice. Beyond the use of my play experiences as interventions and a reflective consideration to my identity in chapter two<sup>36</sup>, there had not been a centralised point out of quoting my gameplay experience in my findings where I directly “speak” from this subjective position. So, really, this part of the conclusion is to consider the questions of autoethnography I encountered but, rather than be distanced from the writing, I purposefully construct it from the subjective voice. In becoming close to the research and discourse, I take ownership of my words, becoming subjectively embodied as a form of evocative and performative writing. Though part of the thesis does indeed revisit areas presented in earlier chapters, upon reflecting post-data collection, the “murky” space I was within around subjective research practices, intimacy and sexual pleasure within the field became more

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<sup>36</sup> Chapter 2. Scripting Gay: Intersections of Sexual Scripting, Games and Gay Men

apparent. Offering an initial complexity that is considered, the games I have studied are single-player video games in which there are no other players or participants, and are designed to entertain, titillate, and pleasure the player. As such, questions can be asked about the “true” nature of these being “ethnographic sites,” since I am the sole occupant. Yet, given their intentions and their affective capacities, I am meant to “read” and “experience” them and their characters as “real.” So, I reflect on this nuance in relation to autoethnography.

But these texts are also sexual in nature, featuring explicit sexual content and experiences. In researching them as “openly subjective,” and as alluded to in my documented experiences, I experienced sensibilities to “institutional expectations” and the implications of research integrity, and mistreatment of texts. All of this becomes ethically ambiguous when dealing with one’s sexual subjectivity or transgression, especially in sexual “social” (or perhaps, non-social) spaces. Ethical complexities within autoethnographic research are a prominent discourse that those conducting studies of sex in social spaces do encounter (see Kulick and Wilson, 1995). Therefore, this initial conclusion considers the methodological complexity of studying single-player adult video games, as it sits at the intersection of video games and pornography. In exploring these sensations I experienced during my data collection, I highlight some of the conventional distancing of sexual subjectivity within academic work, the (cultural or academic) taboos of embracing explicit sex/uality within research that surrounds these texts. Thinking about the “murky” environment that this research sits within, I conclude that autoethnographic is the most suitable practice to describe this research and argue for a maximalist definition of its framing, particularly for the further research of adult video games and sexual material.

### ***A Reflective Personal (Re)Start***

“Did my autoethnography *work*?”

It was a question that had plagued me for a while once I “stopped” recording my gameplay experiences. I had reached a “natural stopping point” in which I felt I had

enough data to work with, keeping elements within that guise of subjectivity I was intending for with this project. There had been no direct motivation or provocation to no longer be recording my gameplay experiences - I just finished. I had sat down to “review” the data, confident, prepared. But upon looking at my experiences, I found myself asking such a question as to whether it had worked. It felt momentarily stagnated, irrelevant, and importantly “not autoethnographic.” The question itself was asking if my approach had set out to do what I had hoped, with my data collection not following the detail I had read in other examples. As such, I froze at this question. My inability to progress from this question culminated in the note opening this part of the conclusion, where my feelings of disappointment in my data collection led to experiencing moments of uncertainty, guilt, and failure.

Taking a moment to “step back” and reflect on these sentiments has emerged a response to my data, particularly in relation to the framing of the autoethnographic practice and the researching of explicit pornographic media and video games. Reviewing my autoethnographic data collection uncovered themes that spoke to subjective and embodied research practices and their writing of them. Further, it had started to pull at the threads of researcher intimacy, erotic subjectivities and embracing sex/uality in the conducting and writing of research. I had noted experiences of dissonance and disconnect within my gameplay, where I had felt like I was not “close enough” to the video game and offering a “true” account of my play experiences. Upon changing to more direct recordings of my responses, my recounts of experiencing intimacy and desire in playing these video games brought forth their own difficulties intellectually. When encountering moments that I felt were transgressive or controversial to continue, I prevented myself from doing so even if I wanted to go further, hesitant from researcher and institutional expectations. From this, areas of my documented play experiences feel lacking, empty, vague or not as evocative as I had originally envisioned. Yet, in this awareness of this unintended impact and implication, a more provocative conversation emerged around erotic subjectivity and the researcher positionality.

What has culminated from these reflections is a conclusionary part that reads as both methodology and findings of a data collection yet finds no stable place in either of those sections. There is a degree of uncertainty in how this should present itself to you: as a part of the methodology, or part of a findings chapter. However, the consideration of the themes in the data, these dissonant reflections, and the tensions in finding a firm place for this to belong is perhaps more telling to autoethnography as a practice. An unintended and unplanned finding of the “writing of the self” and the writing of personal (sexual) experiences within explicit pornographic media that seeks to reflect on the methodology at the end, for beyond. The questions I had posed myself in the introduction to the conclusion and this subsection are suggestive of these tensions, as both my experience and these personal concerns had me re-evaluating my own “practice.” Had my autoethnography done what it had set out to do? Had it emerged something I was not expecting? Did I even *do* an autoethnography? Was it a close reading? Why had I been feeling this way? Though all my comments so far may appear to you to be a critique that is evaluating the “success” of my method and data collection, it is more speaking to the wider discourses of studying sex/uality and games through subjective, embodied practices, even in writing. It would seem my “autoethnography” offered me something that was unintentional: questions to the autoethnographic method itself in the study of adult video games.

Though an evaluation of one’s research and its applied methodology is an important reflection for any researcher to consider regarding their work, here, my reflection has instead led to further questions around the application of subjective and embodied research practices with these video game texts. As this conclusion addresses, these video games offer complexities to subjective research practices, not in terms of how they are read but also surrounding sensibilities that are perpetuated by researcher integrity. As such, there is an “awkwardness” to where this discussion I am making should be placed as I try to discover what *is* happening. It has been constructed following the methodology and data collection, almost as a kind of “post-methodology” engagement that has only emerged from attempting the practice I outlined within this site. This conclusion part, to some extent, is a continuation of the methodology, and a

revision of it. It offers a (re)contextualisation of the “autoethnographic” method in relation to my findings as opposed to describing a methodological practice.

As the rest of this conclusion part explores, I experienced phenomena during my data collection that appeared to relate to feelings of both intimacy and disconnect in attempting to research my sexual subjectivity and desire. As such, reflecting on these sensations became the catalyst for this discussion being in the conclusion, as it is not necessarily something that can be solely answered here in the confines of the thesis alone. This conclusion goes onto exploring the “messiness” that emerges with autoethnography and its application to the study of single-player game spaces and the study of pornographic/erotic media. In reviewing my own written and recorded experiences of some of the video games mentioned in this thesis, there emerges a “murky *risqué* realm” around embodied research practices that can be traced back to traditional views of autoethnography as self-indulgence or self-glamorising (Pratt, 1986: 31). Further, the layer of it being autoethnographic in nature is also brought into question: if there are no other participants and I am exploring single-player games, why autoethnography and not close reading? Therein lies the methodological complexity that this conclusion seeks to address, with a site of research that is intimately tied to affording sexual engagement and embodiment with game content and characters for players (Brathwaite, 2013).

What is also parallel to these discussions is also the ethical dimensions and general “cultural taboos” of discussing (our own) sex/uality in research (Kulick, 1995). Therefore, in this revisiting of my own methodology, it performs a “restart” on (re)considering (my own) embodied research practices in exploring (gay) adult video games. By reflecting on the intersection of a research site that is designed to offer affective shifts and experiences, and some of the prior framings around embodied practices, it highlights some of the traditional notions of critical distance and objectivist positionalities. Embracing one’s sex/uality as an act of embodiment within the research gives scope for the “researcher” to push the boundaries of their positionality into a space that validates the sexually subjective experience as research. Whilst there are relevant ethical considerations that are necessary to be considered, the act of

embracing one's sexual subjectivity within the academic work attempts to mitigate from heteronormative and generalist guises (Newton, 1993; Sundén, 2012). Instead, through this closeness and being embodied with the work, the research can feature greater criticality, achieved through considering the subjectivities at play and the degrees of challenging hierarchies of knowledge. Therefore, in this restarting of methodology at the very *end* of the research, single-player adult video games are not only a site of inquiry for studying sex/uality, but methodology and embodiment as well.

### ***Revisiting Autoethnography as the Single-Player/Participant***

As defined in the methodology chapter, autoethnographies generally involve the use of first-hand accounts of a culture or community which the researcher is situated within, making themselves a site of inquiry in relation to the surrounding contexts (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Ellis, 2004; Butz and Besio, 2009). The writing of an autoethnography is a “self-narrative,” critically engaging with the situated self that has been placed within some kind of socio-cultural context (Richardson, 1994; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Spry, 2001; Haynes, 2011; Bocher and Ellis, 2016). Spry (2001: 711), who considers the act of *performing* autoethnography, argues that it provides the capacity to position the self ‘as active agent with narrative authority over many hegemonizing dominant cultural myths.’

As a reflexive research practice, it is defined by its exploration and critique of the self by the researcher describing their experience in an open and transparent capacity, taking account of observations, thoughts and feelings. My own articulation of the autoethnography was primarily concerned with noting the kinds of sensations the game had made me feel and think (Bochner and Ellis, 2016), as well as the choices I made in navigating them. Whilst the intention was to conduct the autoethnography from within the confines of the video game text itself, it has also emerged as commentary to the research practice and process itself, with the opening statement to this conclusion and parallel themes experienced in the data collection as exemplifying this. Already, in my thesis, I recognise and acknowledge how my own subjectivity is embodied within the research design process in relation to the choice of game materials I desired to play, as the self can be embodied at all layers of research (Haynes, 2011). However, what was

unexpected was how the aim to do an autoethnographic account of my sexual embodiment in gay adult video games also became a critique of the methodological practice and studying sex/uality in games itself. This awareness not only took account of the effectiveness and relevance of my “autoethnographic” game experience, but also how my subjectivity as a gay male *and* academic researcher was engaged within the research process.

If autoethnography has been considered to be involving the self as positioned within a certain context or space (Reed-Danahay, 1997), then practices that could be deemed as autoethnographic data have been conducted prior to playing the games, within the experiences of play, and beyond the games themselves. What I mean here is that I have exerted behaviours and agency that are demonstrative to my multiple positionalities at play, indicative to (socio-cultural) contexts whether they are as an “academic researcher” or a “gay male gamer.” This starts to invite the question as to the boundaries, limits, and context in which autoethnography is taking place: a question of where is ‘the field’? Did this become an autoethnography of these game texts, or of being a researcher studying explicit sexuality? Autoethnography contextualises the embeddedness of the researcher as “entering and exiting” the space in which they are researching (O’Reilly, 2009). Yet, within my own embodied practice, I did not “leave” the site of research.

When reflecting on some of the existing auto/ethnographic games research, there is little presence of exploring the researcher within a game space in which they are the “sole presence” and subject as is the case with my thesis – an autoethnography of a single player video game. Instead, these have been conducted within multiplayer game spaces, having clear set boundaries as to where “the field” is within the context of the game environment. O’Reilly (2009) defines ethnographic fieldwork as establishing where participant observation is being conducted, gaining access to the space and establishing an “insider” role to conduct the research. For O’Reilly (2009), the ethnographic researcher is transitional, stepping into the field to document observations and “getting out” to avoid “going native.” In this regard, the parameters of the ethnographic field provide a clear distinction as to the “researcher” and the

“researched,” where the researcher enters the field to conduct the work and eventually retreats back to an “objectivist” position. Whilst I did provide a short overview of some of the ethnographic work that has been conducted in multiplayer games, there are a few I will again refer back to here, especially as they engage with this notion of a clear distinction to the “field” being researched. For example, Boellstorff (2015) offers an anthropological account of virtual world *Second Life* in which other players’ behaviours and actions were the site of inquiry. For this study, Boellstorff observed other players and their social interaction within the game space to consider ideas of identity and society.

For these researchers, the focus was primarily on the social dynamics and interactions of other players. Whilst there is a degree of the self/researcher involved - through their respective avatars - the “social” context of these multiplayer spaces frames the boundaries of the ethnographic field. Later posited by Boellstorff et al. (2012), these multiplayer spaces represent a complex exchange between the goals of the designers, and the participants (or “inhabitants”) of these games who have their own agendas and agency. By embedding themselves “inside” these online communities and multiplayer cultures, the researcher “enters” the ethnographic field to explore the social dynamics and interactions present within the “communal life” that is occurring (Thomas, 1993; Boellstorff et al., 2012). Taking the previous point into account, the ethnographic field is defined by the presence of required agents (in this regard, other players) (Boellstorff et al., 2012), where the participants are already present within the space irrespective of the researcher themselves. As such, the characteristics of ethnography are defined by people and their respective practices (Hine, 2000), in which there are social and cultural exchanges (Brown, 2015). Therefore, the lines that distinguish the ethnographic site that is under interrogation and the embeddedness of the researcher are prevalent within these multiplayer spaces, given their ties to the study of social and communal life. However, for my thesis, complications emerge when applying such practices to single-player game spaces in which there are no other agentic players and no social parameters to define the “field.”

Further exploring later work into ethnographic-based research into these multiplayer spaces is where there is a shift into exploring the subjective internal experience. Rather than solely rely on a “distant” ethnographic lens within the social dynamics and framings of these spaces, instead, researchers have considered how they can also be affected by these game experiences. For example, Fedchun (2020) offers an account that provided an “insider/outsider” insight into behind a woman playing in male-dominated game spaces (in Fedchun’s research, this was within the game *League of Legends*). Fedchun’s autoethnographic account explored hegemonic masculinity, failure and subversive play, arguing that embracing her femininity allowed her to challenge patriarchal structures. Other autoethnographers who have conducted their studies within multiplayer spaces have also considered the constructions of selfhood and subjective experiences that are not solely limited to the engagement within the game space. Autoethnographic work by Sundén (2012) and Wilde (2018; 2023), for example, focus on such subjectivity as emerging within the game but also beyond it as to where they have situated and embedded themselves as their ethnographic site.

The documented account by Sundén (2012) is one of the more effective examples that show the intersection of personal experience as a form of research within multiplayer contexts. What Sundén offers is a first-hand account of being a player within the paradigms of *World of Warcraft*, describing her game experience and her encounters with other players. Sundén details her experience playing as her avatar, Bricka, as well as being a participant within a guild to the kinds of interactions and behaviours that would occur. Furthermore, Sundén also provides a transparent narrative of an intimate affair between her and another player from within and beyond the game. Brown (2015a: 86) argues that the autoethnography that Sundén provides is a key example in the benefit such reflexive work has, being one of the first-hand accounts directly exploring the intersection of desire, play and technology. I concur with Brown’s opinion of Sundén’s account, as I further argue that it is not only indicative to the overlap of (emergent) sex/uality and gaming but also that researchers can only discuss their own sex/uality as a valid site of research engagement. Furthermore, this autoethnography highlights the affective potentials of video games, in which certain phenomena and sensations can emerge for both players and researchers alike - in this regard, the

researcher's subjectivity is legitimised as sites of inquiry and *can* belong within research. What is specifically relevant about Sundén's autoethnography in relation to the points argued here is that it is demonstrative to the shifting boundaries of the field of inquiry. Whilst it is a study within a multiplayer space, Sundén addresses her various positionalities as a player and researcher, shifting the parameters at where the research field and her own embeddedness is situated. The research is occurring both within and beyond the game space as a form of knowledge-making.

In a similar regard to Sundén, Wilde (2018; 2023) also approaches the experience of gaming through an autoethnographic lens, also focusing on her experience within *World of Warcraft*. Where Sundén focuses on personal experience emerged through the sociality elements of the multiplayer space, Wilde engages more in the construction of the self and relationship to one's avatar as a point of autoethnographic account. What is prominent within the discussion Wilde posits is the entanglement of the player-avatar, with intersections of the self as emerging from beyond and through the game in an affective engagement. For Wilde (2023), the entanglement and empathetic relationship between the avatar, player and game space is demonstrative to something posthuman, in which there are removals of hierarchies and humanist confines. Wilde's work as highlights how this (autoethnographic) selfhood can be explored within the frames of a multiplayer context and spaces. As Wilde's exploration suggests, the entangled self is not just assembled by the game itself but is also a 'network of many different things that are linked across spaces [and things]' (Banks, 2017: 423). Parallel to Sundén, despite Wilde's game experience primarily interacting within the boundaries of a multiplayer space, I consider the actual "field" she was researching was the more intertwined self with not just the game space, but the space beyond it that she was occupying. I view the terms of her entanglement as defined by her embeddedness inside and outside of the game. Thus, her autoethnography had considered elements of her play environment alongside the gameplay of a game space with agentic players as the borders of her research field.

Both Sundén and Wilde are effective examples in demonstrating the breakdown of separation between the researcher and game, blurring the lines in terms of positionality

to embrace their subjectivity as a form of research (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Haynes, 2011). In turn, they demonstrate that despite playing within a multiplayer space, the framing of “ethnographic” research is not solely reliant on featuring the inclusion of other agentic entities and can turn the lens to focus more inwardly. Their approaches do recognise the self and subjectivity in relation to the game world itself, except these boundaries of autoethnography are still positioned within community sites, even if the exploration is around selfhood and individual experience. Therein, I return to my main question I posited in the introduction of this conclusion: for a study in single-player gay adult video games, *is this really an autoethnography?*

Still, the answer to this question evades me. If the parameters of auto/ethnographic work have been characterised by the previous work mentioned as the researcher positioned within a social or cultural dynamic in which there is the presence of other entities, what can there be said towards being the sole subject within an independent space? Therefore, the complexity arises to whether autoethnographic work *can* be done within (adult) single-player video game spaces. The autoethnographic accounts in games already mentioned - like those offered by Sundén and Wilde - are parallel to some of the characteristics of this embodied practice, with the researcher crossing boundaries that places the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997: 9; Bochner and Ellis, 2016: 45). The self is a participant within a socio-cultural framing. However, to turn solely to the self as a sole participant within context does start to murky the waters of these characteristics. One of the complications that arises is the overlapping framing of “close reading” which centralises the researcher’s interpretation to unpack the meaning of embedded and encoded within a text (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011; Stang, 2022). Occasionally also known as a close textual analysis, it considers, examines and deconstructs all the (textual) layers within this subjective lens the researcher is “reading” within (Consalvo and Dutton, 2006).

Like some of the critiques that autoethnography has encountered like “self-glamorising” narratives, the close readings of games have also been discussed as carrying their own extent of “controversial” material. Ruberg (2019: 56-77) highlights that with close reading, there are bountiful accusations of “over-reading” a game/text

that continues to perpetuate researchers approaching games with subjective methodology. It would be relatively simple to frame this research within the practices of close readings: I have considered all layers of these video games from their design, to interpreting content, and their play experiences, mindful of my own positionality in my analysis. This is even more apparent in the awareness that auto/ethnographic practices have been employed in social spaces rather than exploring something that does not feature interpersonal engagement. If the “clear” characteristics of ethnographic-based work are these social or communal parameters, then what I have conducted within this project does start to redefine itself in the territories of close reading practices. What characterised my own practice was that I was the sole participant in a single-player space as a player, whilst also taking account of the different interpretations of the game text within a researcher positionality. As such, there is an apparent overlap with my practice in this thesis that intersects with close textual analysis.

In my methodology chapter, I explained my initial response to framing this thesis as autoethnographic as opposed to a close reading or solely phenomenology. However, since the conversation I have posited here has started to unpick some of the intricacies around the definitions of these practices, I will expand on that discussion here. Whilst these definitions of autoethnography do posit it as a researcher actively engaged within a social space, the study of single-player adult video games complicates these definitions as it is not necessarily clear as to whether these games are “social spaces.” Here, then, is where I can start to articulate an answer to my long-running question as to whether this research presented before you can be seen as autoethnographic or not. In the research, I was the only agentic presence within the game space, with no other players present. The data collection itself was collected through my own mediated gameplay experiences, rather than what could be manifested through personal observation or embeddedness within interpersonal social dynamics of a game space. To describe the framing in an essential manner: I am the only player within a game space with no other players or participants being studied or involved. In this regard, the project seems to fit the framings of close readings, as I utilise my subjectivities to interrogate the various layers of game texts. Yet, as I have previously articulated in the thesis, these single-player adult video games offer affective sensations and

connections in their play, where the player becomes intimately and sexually embodied within the game space - I am invited to become affective intertwined within the game and understand it as an interpersonal space with my (sexually fantasised) interaction with game characters and encounters.

Using my own positionality explicitly here to explain this, I will re-establish this position: I am white, gay, male, a gamer, and a researcher. Though there are many other threads that I could draw upon to truly declare my position, these would arguably be the most essential of intersections in which this thesis is explored though. Each of these elements respectively are connected to some sort of cultural form or context that features its own (hegemonic) tensions or sensibilities. Previously in the thesis, I mentioned how the positionality as a white male (British) gamer affords layers of privilege in gamer cultures compared to other non-white and male positionalities (see Nakamura, 2019; Malkowski and Russworm, 2017). Similar tensions can also be located in other aspects to my identity around being white and gay: I am a white gay male whose experience in socio-cultural life is not necessarily similar or parallel to another gay male, yet all these positionalities compose an understanding of “gay culture.” For example, Han (2021) writes on the centralising of whiteness and racial erasing of non-white gay men in queer social worlds and sexual cultures. So here, facets of my positionality afford different sensibilities to being situated and navigating social and cultural contexts. Even as a researcher, we are embodying “researcher culture” and academic ethos, with particular patterns and attitudes we adopt and employ in our action. These threads that compose “me” belong to and are situated within to wider cultural contexts, and considering them and myself as being culturally framed, the exploration is something “ethnographic,” becoming (re)situated. Adams (2011) is a useful example of how autoethnography work can be conducted without layers of sociality, as he uses personal narratives and autoethnographic accounts to reconsider “the closet” following the death of his partner. Here, one’s sexual identity is the site of autoethnography, considering interactions within wider situated socio-cultural context. As such, Adams has situated the personal experience *as* intersecting with wider socio-cultural structures, and whilst there are reflections to hegemonies, the actual study is the self and its capacities. Adams studies the self *in relation* to sexuality

as *autoethnographic*, rather than through its *sociality* to document the direct experience. I argue that the treatment of the self as a site for research that Adams explores is also something that can be adapted for the study of (single-player video games) as I am embodying these cultural contexts within the video game space, interacting with the game environment through them. My engagement is *in relation* to these wider (hegemonic) structures. My positionality in all its forms becomes the point of exploration, reflecting about my interactions in relation to these contexts within a space that is culturally defined (the game) and their wider place.

### ***Revisiting the Intimate Self in Autoethnographic Research of Sexuality and Pornography***

Unfortunately, it appears that the same complexities and critiques could be made of autoethnographic work within sexual culture and pornography, as many has also been done in social spaces (e.g., of dating apps, bathhouses, kink community, hook up culture) and the autoethnographic study of pornography itself seems to distance the inclusion of subjective experience. The latter is more provoking to this dialogue, as the distancing of personal narrative seems to carry more taboos and ethical dilemmas. The admittance of being seduced by one's "object of study" - in most previous cases, a researcher's participants - naturally carries risk and concerns of researcher integrity and exploitation. Such critiques are understandable given the concerns of exploitation and the potentiality to take the autoethnographic liberties too far<sup>37</sup>. However, what I think is the provocative conversation is the distancing from speaking openly around one's sexuality within research.

Like the autoethnographic research of games, there has been a primary focus on research within social and interpersonal spaces as to be expected from its

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<sup>37</sup> Though it has since been redacted and can no longer be cited for obvious reasons, I would like to note a paper had been previously published within *Qualitative Sociology* had claimed it had used the autoethnographic method to "conduct research" into explicit Japanese child pornographic literature, arguing this under the guise of "researching the fandom of such material." A further point to this infamous example is that the paper had also been researched and published without any form of ethical review.

ethnographic origins. Previous autoethnographic research into sexual cultures and communities - heterosexual and queer alike - appears to focus on interactions within wider communities and sexual lives, both of participants and researchers themselves. For example, Race (2015) conducted an in-depth insider-ethnography into “hook-up apps” in the gay community, documenting some of the participant practices and conducting interviews. Whilst Race does not explicitly state the exploration as autoethnographic, the author does reflect on aspects of the research as being the result of their own engagement in the community and space itself. Race (2015: 258-259) openly expresses that this is from an insider position, with some research material used originally being from their own personal participation rather than solely for academic criticism. Though this has been a facet to ethnographic writing and the engagement of the researcher within their embedded site. However, though Race is indeed approaching it from a reflexive position, it is more the participants themselves under exploration than Race’s own interaction. So, whilst Race’s engagement is essential in “generating knowledge,” it is not the researcher’s own behaviour under interrogation and so, again, this becomes an example of autoethnographic reflexivity within a social space than solely revolving around the “researcher self.” That is not to say that the exploration of Race is not a useful one, as it does indeed provide a transparent close insight into the dynamics between community members by using the researcher’s own subjectivity to engage further. However, Race is still situated within an active social parameter and so does not put much emphasis on the “self” to that context.

Bolton (1995) wrote narratively about his experiences with same-sex partners whilst exploring Belgium, documenting their encounters with other members and the emotional engagements he felt during his time. Bolton is extremely transparent in the nature of his autoethnographic account, declaring that his actions of engaging in sexual interaction and intercourse with partners was not the original purpose nor was intentional to collect data. Really, Bolton’s openness actually emphasises the emergent nature of autoethnographic work and speaks primarily to my previous points of researcher reflexivity. In the words of Bolton (1995: 114): ‘Although one of the goals of my research was to understand gay male sexuality in Belgium, my personal, intimate

interactions were not conducted with that goal in mind.’ Though he aimed to rather focus on other members of the gay community and “cruising scene,” Bolton’s autoethnographic account actually became a provocation to exploring methodological concerns in terms of erotic engagements and intimacy in conducting research. For Bolton, intimacy has emerged organically between him and participants and so the autoethnography was the result of this encounter that had not been previously planned or considered. As the author also emphasises, the inclusion of researcher intimacy opens up extreme dialogues around ethics and risk.

As such, the interplay of researcher subjectivity, and the explicit discussion of one’s sexuality connects to this “murky” realm of autoethnographic reflexivity, especially in relation to sexually engaged environments or spaces. Bolton’s account alludes to the cultural taboos of researching sex and embracing sex/uality as researchers (Kulick, 1995), as it addresses academic work as platforming this supposed “critical distance” and reaffirms research as often been through what Newton (1993) referred to as a heteronormative guise. Akin to the erotic subjectivity critique that Newton made, Bolton (1995: 107) argues: ‘the taboo on sexual involvement in the field serves to maintain a basic boundary between ourselves and the Other [...] Sex is arguably the ultimate dissolution of boundaries between individuals.’ In regard to closeness and subjectivity, embracing this closeness both emphasises these “taboo contexts” *and* embraces them, negating from the supposed “objectivist” guise of research that only maintains a distance between “us” and “them.” For researchers like Newton and Bolton, the inclusion of sex/uality and intimacy in the field seeks to strip away these separations, to “truly experience” the field in which they work. Whilst Bolton’s work is effective in interrogating the intersections of sex, research and ethics, it is reminiscent to Race’s piece on “hook-up” apps in that they focus on social and interpersonal contexts - though Bolton’s does make more of an attempt to provide an autoethnographic account since it focuses less on the context and more upon methodology.

However, when it comes to the study of pornographic texts and media, the adoption of autoethnographic methods appears to offer a complexity to this dialogue around the researcher embracing intimacy and pleasure in the field. When thinking about previous

autoethnographies of sexual culture like the example from Bolton, the complexities of ethics and risks are more apparent, as the intimacy emerges in a social and interpersonal space. Here, the breakdown of “distance” between researcher and “participant” through emergent intimacies becomes conventionally more problematic, as whilst the researcher is providing a “true lived experience” amongst this culture, there are these concerns over exploitation and power imbalances in some capacity. Whilst these previous examples have, in essence, navigated and mitigated these ethical dilemmas, the little autoethnographic work that has been done does not seem to focus on interrogating these mitigations nor the methodological complexities. However, what distinguishes such discourse between these examples and this thesis is around this extent of sociability within the research field. Previous “intimate” autoethnographies have been of these social spaces, for which the same concerns that are apparent in conducting research into sexual cultures and communities may not be something entirely applicable to a scenario in which the researcher is the sole participant. Compared to the autoethnographic studies into sexual cultures and multiplayer game spaces, the study of single-player explicit video games offers other ethical paradigms that are more nuanced and abstract. If the researcher is the sole occupant engaging within cultural contexts or structures, and in terms of ethics and transparency can appropriately justify it, then in terms of pornography (and adult video games) why can a researcher not write about the visceral phenomenon they encounter?

For Kulick (1995: 2-3), ethnographic and anthropological work has spent decades being concerned with the (sexual) lives of others yet remained fairly silent towards their own positions - especially that of sex/uality. In this aim for objective observations, the biographies and positions of the researcher were not important, and ‘textually, ethnographers have achieved this pose of not mattering by making themselves invisible’ (Kulick, 1995: 3). In reflecting on my subjective gameplay accounts, I made the self (the player, researcher, (white) gay male *visible*), interacting within the game space through these paradigms explicitly. Newton (1993: 4-8) specified that the fortification of heterosexual male subjectivity continues to silence women and queer perspectives. Kulick (1995: 3), parallel to the critique by Newton, added that this lack of recognition and acceptance of one’s subjectivity in research also seeks to conceal

racist and colonialist lenses upon the discourse of culture and sex/uality. Though nowhere in my thesis did I interrogate implicit colonial or racial contexts, that could still be a further interrogate made. Yet, by bringing in my positionality to the forefront of my experience and analysing it within socio-cultural contexts despite being the sole-occupant, it start to opens the research up to illuminate intersections of queerness, homosexual desire, and emergent intimacies that occur when researching a text revolved around pleasure.

I return to the work of Adams (2011) in writing an autoethnography about sexuality and the self, being the sole participant within the realms of the research. In using the self-experience, Adams (2011: 36) frames it as not a universal resonance but to make the experiences more ‘humane, tolerable, and meaningful for others.’ One of the prominent reflections Adams (2011: 156) makes is around the spatial metaphors for ethnographic work, which Jackman (2010) criticises as being problematic for studying LGBTQ+ cultural forms. For Adams (2011: 159), whilst there are fields of LGBTQ+ cultures, the tie of the “phenomena” of such culture or subjectivity to physical fields limits its place and experience. In this regard, Adams (2011: 159) defines their work as being ‘about personal experiences that stem from, or are made possible by, being a part of a culture and/or from embracing a particular cultural or personal identity.’ In thinking of such work in relation to this study, there is a precedent to critically reflecting on the self within intersecting contexts; how the self with its subjectivity navigates certain landscapes that have been culturally defined or socially situated. Perhaps what establishes the autoethnography for the sole participant is the extent to which it is re-engaged with wider cultural discourses. Before even playing these games, I considered my own articulation of sex/uality as a subjective experience in relation to cultural forms (the *Action Man* doll and *pornography* for example). Within gameplay, I experienced attractions to prescribed avatars, critically reflecting on them as indicative to gay porn iconographies. I considered my own play of sexual experimentation and transgression as providing fantasy in relation to dominant structures that surrounded the encounters. My sexual play as a gay man has been situated within and in reflection to wider socio-cultural contexts. Though the parameters of the work *and* autoethnography are not entirely clear or defined explicitly, I conclude that the autoethnographic practice

appears the most suitable to describe this work with the (re)situating of (gay sexual) experience back into cultural contexts. As such, I argue for a maximalist definition of the autoethnographic framing, particularly in the further research of adult video games and sexual material from sexually subjective positionalities.

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## Appendices

### ***Appendix 1 – Autoethnography: Game Playthroughs***

#### **Appendix 1.1 - Coming Out on Top – Alex**

[Recorded November 16, 2022]

I am greeted by the identification of a handsome male, no, quite handsome in fact. It is a face I have seen before, upon a previous playthrough although it has been some time since then. Detailed memories of what awaits do not come back to me, but this face is familiar. Although I do note his conventional look, the good-looking young American, I still cannot fathom his appearance even though it is just a small ID photograph. Mark Matthews. My avatar.

I realise this time that I did not choose him, he was waiting for me, or at least that is how it felt. But it asked if that what is how I wanted to live out this new life in the game – Did I want to be known as Mark? Become this attractive male that I see before me? The “name” had always gotten to me in games. A conundrum. Do I name myself, claim my virtual life as mine as if it was real, or do I keep it as default and ‘become’ Mark? The male I see before me is nothing like me, not in any physical relation. Or is it that I wish I was Mark? I usually play games in a default setting as I had done here before, aiming to get a sense of what was “intended” as I had done the last time that I had played this game. But, this time, I feel that I should not leave it that way, that by leaving it as Mark I am still distant from him. This time I will change the name, become the avatar, become Mark – perhaps it is that I did wish to be him, to be this “attractive young male.”

I use my gamertag, a term I had since become used to clarify as me within the “virtual world.” My name is “Than.” I often feel more comfortable using that name than my actual one. The reason as to why is unknown to be as of this moment, but there was something safe about using this other identity I possess separately from my real life.

The game begins and I am immediately smiling. A game around a university (well, college given its American setting) student, conducting their finals and nearing graduation – nostalgia hits me again. I think back to my undergraduate days, all the memories, all the mistakes, the “true” feeling of being an “adult.”

I have two best friends in this world I am now inhibiting, but I take note of the one, Ian. There was always something that fascinated me about him, even now. Sure, I feel like he is attractive too – as to be expected from a game where you are surrounded by good looking men – but at the same time, I feel nothing. I remember being attracted to him before, but now, it seems to escape me.

I announce (or rather the Mark himself as the story dictates him to do so) that I am gay – I am provoked by thoughts towards my own proclamations of being queer, revealing these hidden and oppressed feelings to those I was most close with. It feels therapeutic to relive such sensations again, within this apparent warm space.

Upon such revelations, I am questions as to whether I wish to celebrate with a “night on the town.” I feel overwhelmed by this carefree euphoria I feel at the thought. I vaguely recall that I did not pick this option, for I am quite the homebody. I wonder if I should be different this time. I think to myself “Yes, I should celebrate” – but I am also feeling hesitant. What if this is the wrong choice? What if I should stay at home? It feels conflicting.

I choose to go – as I had done in my own university days. Than (the now representative of me and in some regard Mark) goes to a gay bar in the game’s world. I am reminded of my own times within such spaces, surrounded by those like me. During my time there, I am approached by a man, and I went slightly short of breath. I stopped short of a gasp. Tense, still, only for a moment. This was not just any man. He was broad, muscular, flirtatious. As the game revealed his image, I kept noticing all aspects to his design. A soft machismo seemed to be his intention. A clean-cut image, slightly buttoned-down shirt as if inviting a peek, a muscular herculean physique hinted through his shirt. He was godly. Alex.

I remind myself that this is a game, with characters that do not physically exist, and are drawn in their creation. I am amused at myself for how my immediate reaction was that of appreciating the beauty of a virtual figment, that I allowed myself to be vulnerable to my imagination. Yet at the same time, I feel connected to this game, that by being Than/Mark, I am within the world. That it is my world. Even when the game narrates the course of actions between me and Alex (the man in the bar) – “Your eyes linger on each other. It’s just for a second, but.... it’s enough to make your heart pound a little faster” – that I feel it. The game leads me, but I still feel every sensation. I do wonder, is it that I am imagining myself in Than/Mark’s position, that perhaps I get to indulge in these fleeting sensations of joy or fun as this handsome guy is speaking to me? I am reminded again of my own experience meeting other men in bars, whether queer-friendly, gay, or not. I think back to those experiences – some I remember with a pleasant feeling, whilst others are the opposite. Even so, I feel a sense of pride with those memories, my ego and confidence heightened at the time as it is now with this very attractive man taking an interest. Except now I remind myself that it is not me, it is Than/Mark that he is interested in. But...it is also me?

The game leads me to continue a conversation with Alex a little while longer – I do not remember this pathway. Perhaps I had deviated from previous times now? We exchange numbers and I return to my “dorm.” It then provides me with another choice. It narrates that I – well, actually, Than/Mark – is feeling increasingly aroused which I assume is from the narrative encounter with Alex, and asks if I (again, Than/Mark) wished to masturbate; I do not share the same sensations as the game indicated my avatar did, as after all it is indeed a game, and immediately reject the option as it was not “something I wanted”. The choice to do so though does garner a laugh from me. I do smile at its directness, its immediate provoking of following one’s desires. However, a thought enters my head that is the game asking what I think my avatar wants or myself? The game is giving me an opportunity to have my character indulge, and in turn I am indulging in my own imagination and self-gratification? Whilst I have rejected the idea, there is something not only humorous but also comforting about a game that is open to embracing one’s sexuality and how these feelings can emerge, even if it is virtual.

The game continues, and I am still feeling immersed in its narrative. Now I (Than/Mark) had met Alex, where will that go? What will come of it? Will there be anyone else that gets in the way? Anticipation was swarming my mind, desiring to see where this would go. I continue onwards.

I am in a lecture theatre, well Than/Mark is, but I am there, nonetheless. The story tells me that the “professor” walks in and I laugh. Alex shows up on screen – my professor. I cannot help but continue to find the humour in that this is a story pathway, that I (Than/Mark) have “fallen for the teacher.” The irony of him being a teacher.

But I am now thinking to what that means exactly, and it feels there is a sense of awkwardness. He is a lecturer, and I am playing the game as a student. He is an adult. So am I. There seems to be a sense of disappointment that I am feeling now; that now I have learnt that he is my educator, I am disappointed that a romance pathway has been lost? Just gone? The game is still allowing me to continue on such a pathway, to continue that romance, but it does not feel right to do so either? I feel welcomed that the game allows me to explore that possibility, but I do not wish to do so as it does not feel appropriate yet at the same time, I feel disheartened that this opportunity is now lost to me. I can no longer pursue it. I do not pursue it; it did not feel right to do so. For me, it felt inappropriate for me to follow that pathway especially since he is in a position of authority, however for others it could perhaps not be that inappropriate, especially as an adult playing an adult game about adult characters. To me, I had no desire to continue that path, but I cannot help but think that the game allows me to do so, and yet my mind cannot help but wonder where that path would have exactly led to?

I take a break from the game at this moment, saving and closing it down. It feels strange to think about the last few events. The game is allowing me to be shameless, to indulge in my own desires and what I want, to follow in accordance with my own sexuality. But the narrative so far has distilled an awkward sense in me that I cannot seem to pin down in exact words. Plagued by questions of what if, and what is appropriate, what is not. Am I turning away due to responsibility, regret, guilt, or lack of desire? Approaching this narrative scenario has been overwhelming, in that I question is it “right” to do so, as a player and a researcher, within the confines of a virtual space and my own home, which all I have is the game and my imagination. It feels...awkward. I have a sense of agency in this game to choose to follow my desires, my own “way of life,” but to an extent through which I am navigating this space of what is appropriate and acceptable to do? Is that something I am wishing to do? I stop and think about this a little bit more.

## **Appendix 1.2 – Coming Out on Top – Jed**

[Recorded November 17, 2022]

I am now Mark again, well, Than. From the beginning.

I have chosen to start a new playthrough of the game. My previous attempt had me confront a dilemma regarding the character Alex. I had taken a break from the game initially, thinking about the game providing a space to explore a side that I had deemed inappropriate to do. Upon returning to that playthrough, I had continued with the game, but I was plagued by these thoughts of “what if?”

Bombarded by them, I struggled to connect to the game, and suddenly found myself not interested in pursuing any other romantic pathways. Thinking back to it, I ended up performing a “model student” role, simply studying, and studying again. Every opportunity I had to deviate and begin another romantic and sexual path, I refused to do so. The “Alex conundrum” had me shut down, that I later started to question about the acceptability of even indulging in the game overall let alone that scenario. I took that break to gain perspective, reflection – to discuss my emotions and feelings around a game designed with such elements in mind is no easy task. It is daunting and nerveing for a myriad of reasons. Rejecting all those pathways for what I can only think was due to feeling a sense of guilty resulted in my playthrough ending with a “friendship” ending. I had graduated with no romance in my “future.”

At the time, I had felt comfortable with such an ending, down to this sense of uncomfortableness I was experiencing. But, stepping away, and thinking about it more, whilst I found it sweet and happy, I was also disappointed. I did not realise it when I finished playing, but instead after. I was dissatisfied that I had not taken up the opportunities the game had provided me, that I had instead stuck to this “safe space” from the pressure I was feeling to do an autoethnography. So, I am disheartened that I did not fully give myself over to the flow of the game. And it was for that reason, I have started a new playthrough, but this time will be different. The Alex pathway is of no interest to me, and this time I will instead “indulge” in the opportunities the game offers me to see what will occur.

I go through the same motions as before, openly admitting that I am gay to the best friends Penny and Ian. However, Penny asks the same question of if I wanted to hit up a gay bar – which I know will lead me down the same path towards Alex – but this time I do not feel the desire to do so. I affirm that I want to stay in – much like myself, the homebody.

The game progress as before, but this time, Penny asks if I want her to set me up with her cousin, Phil. Normally, I am not one for the so-called “blind date”, but curiosity is getting the better of me to see where that pathway goes, so I accept.

After a few days, I (Mark/Than) am in my room studying. But there seemingly is some noise happening upstairs. I choose the option to investigate.

After knocking the door, I am greeted by a male, piercings on his ear and eyebrow, tattoos on his arm. I felt my eyes go wide, for his introduction is that of a muscular shirtless smirking male. It was difficult not to notice all the aspects of the partly naked spectacle in front of me. A defined physique partnered appearance of body hair across his chest, stomach and arms. He introduces himself, Jed. I did not anticipate being greeted by this sight, that I must blink to remind myself to continue progressing through the game. He was definitely an attractive male, or at least designed that way.

The game offers me a choice: to tell him to keep the noise down, or instead engage in his bukkake session. I am well aware of what that would entail – I am familiar with the term. I tell Jed that I am just here to ask him to keep the noise to a minimum. He asks again if I wish to engage in such activity. I think to myself on what the game will portray to me? I shrug. “[---] it” I said to myself. I accept his invitation.

Jed asks if I know “what the star of a Bukkake party does” – again, I am well aware of such practices. But the game offers me a choice that I was not expecting – whether I wanted to be the “star” or not. Jed’s introduction had given me this impression that he was quite the dominating personality, but the game is now letting me decide the kinds of sexual dynamic I “wish to experience”. I feel a sense of anticipation, again to wondering about what awaits at either of these paths.

I decide to “choose to be the star.” The game tells me Than/Mark has stripped, stating “You don’t know what’s come over you, but something about this guy makes you feel reckless.” I agree, I feel this sense of excitement, shamelessness, carefree nature. Perhaps it is the thought that I am engaging in an activity that is nothing something I do in my actual life, that I am witnessing a depiction of a sexual practice through which I have no lived experience with.

The game continues to describe the sexual activity in detail, offering a literary depiction of what the characters are doing, touching, feeling. It is strange to think that the game is guiding this “sexual journey” that I (Mark/Than) am on. In some way, the game is almost making it seem that I am indeed feeling these things myself, or that I should be feeling them. Giving me the option to decide the kinds of dynamics I wish to occur in this

imagined scenario feelings quite liberating and personal, I can cater to my own sexual tastes and thrills.

The scenario continues and I am greeted with a static visual depiction of the bukkake activity, as the game depicts me – well Than/Mark knelt down, Jed dominantly standing above. He has Than/Mark's hair in his hand, his erect penis towards Than/Mark's open mouth, waiting for what I can clearly tell is an upcoming climax through which Jed and Mark/Than will orgasm. There is oddly something investing in the scene, both in terms of its entire erotic nature and explicitness, but the dynamic it is expressing. I have voluntarily given myself over to be dominated in some form. I think now to the game itself, that I have given myself over to be dominated by the game, and its outcomes. It facilitates my journey, my choices. Right now, in this moment, I am the "star" of this sexual fantasy, even though it is not me, it is my character. But I chose this? I chose to follow this pathway? So, it is me, just virtually and in my head?

I (Than/Mark) get cleaned up and leave. There is something that feels satisfying here, that such a casual fleeting moment just happened. It did not in reality of course, but there is a sense of pleasure and gratification that I am feeling that I chose to pursue it, that I followed what was (sexually) exciting or inviting. I think of the ideas of casual hook-ups, the fleeting moments of pleasure, that can occur out of nowhere and spontaneously.

The game tells me I sleep. I awake to Penny calling me, requesting I pick up Phil. I agree to do so as I had done earlier. I meet Phil, and immediately I notice a similar muscular physique to that of Alex and Jed. Even though Phil is more clothed, and covered, that his bulging biceps are prominent that it is difficult to not notice them. He is clean-cut, and both intimating in his expression but at the same time alluring because of such.

On our travels to meet Penny, he informs me that he is a military man – I think this would explain his physical stature. After our meeting I head home.

I am contacted by a tutoring service, which I am given the option if I want to accept the job. Something tells me that this would open another pathway for me. But, I do think about where the Jed pathway will go, and if that is something I will be returning to down the line. Given that it was a sexual experience that "was new for me," I wonder if that was only a momentary activity. Curiosity and the desire to follow that path is quite overpowering in this pathway, to see what other "new horizons" are await me and what thrills will I discover. I reject the job opportunity.

The game continues, and I have multiple conversations with my friends.

It comes to a Tuesday night and the game tells me my character is feeling aroused and remembers that Jed engages in his “activity” on such a night. It gives me the option to ignore it and sleep, or “to hell with it. Go upstairs.” I choose the later, as I am desiring to see to what extent this pathway will go to.

The game tells me that my character is visually aroused, already bearing an erection. I laugh. There is something comedically absurd about this, that the game is so unapologetic in portraying sexuality. I get to Jed’s apartment, and I laugh again as his sister answers the door.

The exchange that follows is one where the sister confronts the character and berating him for turning up to the apartment in such a state, to the point of feeling embarrassing. I sympathise with my character, albeit it humorously, that the game presented a kind of punishment for picking that pathway. I return to my room, but I still giggling at such an occurrence and do not feel any guilt for picking the option. Perhaps it is the carefree nature I am feeling again.

The opportunity to see Jed again arises soon after as Penny and Ian complain about the noise for a second time. I pick the option to go see him faster than I did previously, despite the comedic awkward encounter that had happened. It almost felt like I needed to see him, that I was so invested in the story his pathway offered, but also the kinds of sexuality it may express and Jed himself.

I meet Jed again, still shirtless. We exchange in a conversation in which he continues to flirt. My character expresses his dissatisfaction at the previous attempt. I laugh again as his sister returns, mocking me for my previous actions. Seemingly, the game is not letting me live such a memory down. I can only find the humour in being so shameless in this game.

I return back to my dorm. I continue playing the game, progressing through the conversations. Truthfully, the desire to continue the Jed pathway becomes more and more powerful, that I have to see him. Through all these attempts and fun failures that continuing to push towards him will reward me in some way.

It becomes another Tuesday night, but Ian and Penny tell me it is silent upstairs for once. Our door rings, and it is Jed. I giggle at the sudden reversal, the irony. But there is some sense of anticipation and excitement in this humour I feel. That all the attempts to be shameless at his place were denied, and now suddenly on the “night” in which I would indulge in another attempt, he shows up at the door. I feel invested in this game with this light-hearted approach.

This time Jed is more clothed, dressed in a ripped vest, a backwards cap. I still cannot help but notice that he has a broad physique on him.

Jed and I (Than/Mark) converse a little more. He invites me out on a date. I grinned. Finally, my perseverance has paid off and the fruits of my labour have come to fruition. I am officially on Jed's pathway. I feel excited, confused, joyous, but there is a small sense of dread as to what else this game will throw in my direction that it has not done so already. I accept the invitation.

The night comes where I attend the date with Jed, where we meet at this venue where a band are performing. He makes an appearance, dressed without a shirt but in a pair of suspenders. The sight was appealing, and strangely seemingly more enticing than his first encounter even though there is not much difference. Of course, Jed is in the band. There is some strange satisfaction I feel that I am within this "dating the Rockstar," the "fan dating the idol."

There is a moment in which the narrative has Jed has a racist and xenophobic comment shouted at him from a member of the audience, which in turn results in a brawl.

I could only laugh at the continued events of this story: club brawls, mosh pits, the audience stripping all together at a performance. The absurdity, outlandishness, and unapologetic space this game gives is comforting, giving me this escapism in which I feel, in a strange sense, free.

The narrative continues and Jed is entering a piano competition to support his band. I (Than/Mark) go along to the competition to support him. I (Than/Mark) find Jed in the bathroom, and states that he is nervous, and I have to choose to give him a pep talk or kiss him. I choose the pep talk, it cheers him up, but then he pulls me (Than/Mark) into a toilet stall. I can tell where the story is going: my character and Jed are going to engage in intercourse in the bathroom. Except, I can choose to "top" or "bottom" him. I know these terms well – for me, it expresses the particular dynamic within intercourse, denoting positions and performance. I appreciate the option it gives me to decide what position I would like to see – or in an odd sort of way, experience.

There is something rewarding that through the effort of trying to "romance" Jed that it has finally come to fruition, and I get the freedom to decide what performance I would like to embody. I choose to "bottom" and Jed and I (Than/Mark) engage in intercourse, with the game showing a static image of Jed penetrating my character. But now I am thinking about the location – a toilet stall/public bathroom. Something that feels so...wrong...so inappropriate to be conducting such activity in a public space. I am surprised that I did not realise it sooner. I was aware that we were in a bathroom in this

scenario already, but at some point, I seem to have not connected the thread between conducting sexual activity and a public space. Perhaps there was the desire to reach this “ending” with Jed, and that was so overwhelming that I completely ignored everything else, or is it that I did not care? Was I actually thrilled by the idea of doing something deviant, or wrong to so many? Or am I thinking towards my own culture and community as a gay man. Once again, I feel nostalgic, thinking back to meeting other men in public places, or more generally be they bars, saunas, or the fleeting sensations of “hooking up” or the innate shamelessness that comes with only following one’s desires. It does feel thrilling, but also humours, that I am involving myself in this imagined space to fantasise about something I would never do in my actual life.

Perhaps it was thrilling because I finally reached that point where I was rewarded for persevering in the game, that I was rewarded for choosing the right options, or is it rewarded for following my desires? Is that what this game does, reward me or punish me for following my desires, pleasures or urges?

Either way, I am happy and satisfied, as I have reached the “romantic” ending with Jed.

### **Appendix 1.3 - Coming Out on Top – A Final Reflection**

[Recorded Nov 23, 2022]

Another pathway completed; another sense of eternity felt.

I have been playing this game multiple times, motivated to ensure I reached a “romantic” ending. It was not just a must; it became a need.

Each opening of the game, each click through of the scenario, I became engrossed, attached, connected to each character I had come across. Through every choice, every option, I became inspired to see more of where the story would go, what awaited for me – would he be mine at the end?

There had been a few moments in which I had failed – I felt disappointed, dissatisfied – but I tried again, and once again, and a few times more. It was no longer a must – researching the game became a secondary thought, remembering that I was playing this for a doctoral project was just a distant memory. It became a need – I became so invested in dating the characters, being offered the opportunity to shamelessly indulge in sexuality, to give myself over to the ebb and flow of the game. I was rewarded for my commitment, my time, my labour, with these glamorous spectacles of me (well, my avatar) engaging in acts with the other “handsome” and “attractive” males that played on – or rather, inspired – my imagination.

Mark (my avatar who I titled Than) is a very attractive male, the conventionally handsome figure. Playing as him was a surreal experience, whereby he lived all the desires I was imagining, or wishing to have. He was living the life I never got to live, being sexually liberated and shameless. Yes, I made the choices for him, but he got to “experience” them. Mark and I are not the same; he is what appears to be a taller, muscular “pretty” male. So, now that I have finished playing the game, I ask myself, was I indeed drawn to my avatar?

Alex was one of the first pathways that I had encountered in the game – one which I had originally ended quite quickly once I discovered he was the player’s Professor. At the time, it did not seem appropriate. However, I did return to trying to “romance” him out of curiosity. It was difficult not to take note of how “macho” and “manly” his character was – it was something that I did find attractive about his character. To me, he had been made to embody the “hot teacher” trope, with his overpronounced, hypermasculine body. Every time I encountered him, there was some sense of intimacy, and I could not help but glance over his overtly muscular physique, especially when the game rewarded my choices with him and Mark having sex. Whilst I had still felt the feelings of it being “taboo” and “inappropriate,” I could not look away or “seek” him out.

Throughout my playing of his pathways, he always felt like the more “masculine” of the two of us, full of machismo and completely dominating with his physique. It was overpowering.

Jed was the second character pathway that I had found myself upon, and one that I thoroughly enjoyed. It was initially surprising to me how immediately sexual his pathway was – offering me the reward of a sex scene (the bukkake scene) upon our first encounter. I found myself being attracted to Jed, both in terms of his looks, his physique, but also his nature – this carefree, sexually liberated persona. Jed was a character who shamelessly indulged in his sexuality, engaging in sexual activity in whatever suited him, whether group play or public play.

Phil conjured many the “military man” fantasy, with his Herculean-built figure and “straight to the point” attitude. As his storyline continued, it began to feel more heartfelt and romantic, and became all the more satisfying when it came to being rewarded with a sex scene with him. He had this alluring, intimidating look about him, made all the more powerful when it came to his dialogue. I appreciated that you were able to choose to “top” him or “bottom” for him, and it provided me space to indulge in various fantasies which a character I was drawn to.

The pathway with Amos was an unusual pathway, that I did not know how to feel about it, given that it was a mixture of romantic cliches and absurd narratives where you end up within some sexual wrestling subculture. I liked how I had the same ability to choose what dynamic I wished to see between being the ‘active’ partner in the scene or not. I appreciated that he was not of the same body type and structure to the others, as it gave him his individuality in comparison to them, which added to his attraction.

Ian, as the best friend, had felt like the “easy” option, but yet I was still swept with the emotions of “realising your love for each other.” Ian was also very attractive, and I could not help but glance over his musculature whenever the game had presented him to me. I became invested in the sex scenes the game offered me with Ian, sometimes even more so than the others. The route with him featured scenes involving kink practices as bondage and others, which allowed me to experience and imagine moments that I may not have ever experienced in real life or perhaps even never experience.

Brad, the “straight athlete” – the fantasy authored itself. It did not surprise me that there was an athletic character to date. I had always thought that it was some well-known “gay fantasy,” that there is a desire for a character that is “not available” or to engage in activity otherwise “taboo.” Brad was very attractive too, embodying the same hypermasculine and super muscular as the others. I was drawn to his muscular

physique whenever it was on display, that perhaps the “macho-man,” the broad muscular hulking figure was something of a taste.

The game experience in its entirety was a unique experience, in which I had felt myself be drawn to various different paths, finding my desires were attached to different characters at varying times. Each character was extraordinarily attractive, offering multiple fantasies and moments of nostalgia. I had thought back to past experiences and relationships, my wants and desires. Did I mind that most of the characters featured a different body type to me, and mostly were all muscular, herculean, ‘perfect’? Not at all. Rather, I was even more invested in the game, into them, their performance. They were desirable. I wonder now if the game has provided me a game to explore my sexual tastes, my fantasies and desires. Had the game indeed changed me now? Through its structure of choice, had I learnt or discovered something new about myself in the process?

Playing the game was not just a must. It became a need.

## **Appendix 1.4 - NU: Carnival – Yakumo and Me**

[Recorded November 24, 2022]

I open the application and am greeted with the smiles of Yakumo – one of the characters in the game. He was waiting for me, standing there on the home screen, welcoming me to playing.

I had chosen him to be the character that would appear, after managing to attain him through the gacha mechanic. I have unlocked a few characters since then, but Yakumo was one of the ones I came to appreciate the most.

I had been on some of the journey quests with some of my other “allies,” composed of a team of those I liked the most: the soft-natured “serpent” Yakumo, the muscular priest Olivine, the intimidating dominating Dante, the flirtatious demon Morvay, and the seductive “fox” Kuya. The game does not describe them in this way, but this is how I came to know them, with each having their own personality and aesthetic.

The game informed me that it was “time to be intimate” again with the characters – a way to “bond” with them, making them stronger. I press the intimacy button, knowing that it is time to “gift” things to a chosen character. Yakumo was the character I had bonded with the most, followed not too far by Dante, Olivine and Kuya. Perhaps it was that I was drawn to their appearance most, or just them as characters? Was I attracted to their look? Was it the slender-constructed appearance of Yakumo or Kuya, or the broad-shouldered muscular body of Olivine?

I continue to bond with Yakumo as he was the most that that I had bonded with so far. I choose the “room” that I am currently progressing through, with my gifts all read that I had attained through questing.

The game takes me to a bedroom, a fancy one at that. I feel a sense of happiness and pleasure emerging from within me, as I know what is going to happen, as I have already been doing so far.

I select my gift and tap the screen. Hearts appear. Yakumo smiles with a blush, thanking me for my gift. His heart meter rises. I feel the urge to continue tapping, to make additional offerings to him, to continue to make him happy. There’s a strange sense of attachment I feel that the game reminds me that my characters are in need of affection.

His bar reaches fifty percent, and some of his garments are torn away, exposing his skin underneath. He’s blushing without me giving him gifts now, clearly aroused by what I imagine is my “praise” being his “master.” I continue to offer gifts, as there was an urge

to see where this would go. I do so, and upon reaching a hundred percent, more of his clothes are torn away, showing a greater amount of his body beneath his clothes. He is now appearing to moan from some form of ecstasy from the gifts, telling me that he “needs” it. I know what “need” he is implying.

A scene unlocks thanks to achieving a full heart meter, and having Yakumo enamoured by it.

The scene begins and I click through the dialogue. The game shows Eiden (the main character who you play as), mostly nude and being embraced by Yakumo (who himself bares no clothing). The scene continues with Eiden beginning to masturbate Yakumo, complimented by the sounds of the characters gasping for breath and moan as they go about their activities. I feel a sense of accomplishment as this progresses to a point where Yakumo is thrusting into Eiden.

Through all the labour it took to reach this point, I feel a sense of pride, that I was being rewarded with seeing one of my most liked characters in this intimate and graphic scene. I wonder if at this point, that I have somehow built an attachment to Yakumo, and the others – that through the tapping of my screen that I was somehow physically “touching” them, actually being with them in the present moment. There were times in which I felt a sort of joy getting a notification that it was time to continue being intimate with these characters, that I got to share my appreciation to them and “feel” them. I could not do much outside of tapping them, but there is a strange sensation whereby I can tap them wherever I see fit, and their responses slightly alter depending on the location of the touch. It is an unusual sense of attachment I feel, that the characters have become a part of my life through the repeated return to the game, and the constant cycle of sharing affection and intimacy, resulting in such scenes even though it is not me experiencing them. But, at the same time, it is me experiencing them – I am the one making them happy, choosing them to be the most intimate with. The consistent tapping of the screen, the building of excitement and arousal, the reward of something sexual – I know all of this, yet I keep going, motivated to see these intimate moments with these characters I was drawn to. I feel the need to quest some more, to gain more gifts, and praise my characters more – it almost feels like I’m inspired to see more, to find further satisfaction and pleasure through the game. A sense of sexual achievement.

Yet despite all this complexity that I feel, I feel excited for the moment I receive a notification telling me that my characters are waiting for me and wanting “my affection.”

## **Appendix 1.5 - Cockwork Industries Complete – Romance in the Machine Room**

[Recorded December 1, 2022]

It has been around fifteen minutes since I started this game, and everything about it has been...glossy. I play as a character named Dwayne, who has been invited to this place called Cockwork Industries. I have been introduced to the female characters, all with overpronounced breasts, flirtatious personalities and clothing designed to be appealing. Dwayne also flirts back with them too. Of course, none of this is of my interest – I knew going into this that it was a game more focused towards those with an interest in women. But I had come across this through word-of-mouth in some online areas I follow, who mentioned that the game did have a character who was gay and romanceable. Curiosity had gotten the better of me, so I did decide to venture forth and find out. Even so, I can understand why audiences different to myself may find this game satisfying if that is their “taste.”

That being said, the glossiness of the environment, the erotically dressed characters I have met so far, the jazz-like soundtrack filling my headphones – I can already tell that this is meant to be “sexual,” that it is purposely decided as an erotic experience.

This is a game in which I have to move around the map to collect certain items, bring them back to the correct characters, and I can already tell it will reward me with some sexual experience with the characters. There is this sense of anticipation I feel, that I can tell it will lead to some sexual outcome, yet I am still unaware to the “gay outcome” that awaits me.

I am told that “Diego” is down in the Machine Room. A “total gearhead” they referred to him as. Excitement settled in, as this was the moment. But I am wondering how he will appear – all the characters so far have been these sensationalised, glamorous bodies. How will Diego appear?

I travel down to the Machine room.

I gasp, and my eyes have gone wide. There he is, standing there, alone. He is sensationalised, but yet I am still surprised at the sight. It is not his face I notice first; it is the body. He is standing there, shirtless, donning jeans and suspenders. He is glistening in sweat, covered in speckles of what I imagine is either dirt or oil given the machinery of the room and his character, casually tapping a wrench in his hand. It is quite a blissful sight to see – full of machismo, allure, and flirtation. I could only notice his muscularity – his body is defined, herculean. I finally looked up to see a face that was even more flirtatious: a chiselled jaw, a neatly groomed stubble, a subtle smirk. There’s a sense of pleasure and satisfaction I am feeling, knowing that this attractive

and erotic male was available to romance. A thought popped into my head: “I may actually enjoy this.”

I spoke to him, with him informing me he was gay, asking if I was comfortable with that. Well, I guess he is asking if Dwayne is comfortable with that, and I choose on his behalf. I answered yes, to which Diego asks if I (Dwayne) am gay myself. Myself as the player, absolutely. But for Dwayne, the game gives an option that states that he has never really thought about it, but is seemingly open to the idea, or not at all. There is a strange feeling I am getting here, that there is not really an answer that clearly affirms whether Dwayne is gay or not, that I am unable to “inject” myself into the game that specifically declares that I am a gay male playing this game. But also at the same time, I am appreciative to that the game has given an avatar that could be curious, bisexual, pansexual or more. There’s an element of comfort I feel though at the same time, that the game allows me to be gay, but also be not if I so wished, that if I wanted to, I could experiment and “be straight” or something more for example. Either way, at this moment, I have no interest in seeing the outcomes with the female characters, I am only here for Diego now.

He tells me that he is in need of some coffee (with some comedic subtle gag about liking it “full of cream” – I picked up what he was implying), as well as needing the code to a locked door. These are clearly the objectives I need to complete to have an ending with Diego, now the top of my agenda in this playthrough.

I continue playing, completing requests for Diego and the other characters.

Whilst I am completing these objectives to progress the story, there’s some kind of anticipation I am feeling, that with each interaction with Diego I am building our “intimacy,” to hopefully lead to some satisfactory conclusion.

It has been a while since I had started, and Diego and I have gotten closer. Well, he is closer to Dwayne, but I am still feeling the personal investment in this blossoming relationship. I have completed his objectives and with a smirking smile, Diego invites us to be intimate with him.

The screen fades to darkness and in that moment, anticipation and a sense of pride hits. This was THE moment. It returns with Diego, sitting down on the ground, completely nude. He continues to glisten from the heat and sweat, grinning away. The game tells me I have to “please” him, to build his satisfaction through “touching” him in specific areas: “massaging his shoulders,” “rubbing his chest” and so on. There’s a strange intensity I am feeling here that I know I am not physically in the “world” and instead conveying this through the use of a computer mouse. Said object is the

extension of my feelings, thoughts, and intentions. But in this intensity, I also feel pride, and satisfaction, because I feel I have, well, earned this. This was my reward.

I proceed, clicking the various “zones,” seeing Diego and his “intimacy meter” with his model and an icon of his face telling me whether or not I am “pleasing” him. There is a small part of me that feels a little sense of doubt, unsure whether I was “touching” him in the correct way or order. I also feel...involved. It feels like this is the build up to something greater, that there is this appropriate path to our sexual relationship. I have to pass this test, to be given permission to continue. But I also like that I must do this, that I build this connection with him first than simply be thrown in at the deep end.

I complete this quest, Diego his happy. The scene changes and our roles are reversed, as Diego is now performing oral sex on Dwayne. I am unsure how to exactly feel here, that I have immediately been placed in some role within our sexual dynamic, but I am curious as to where this game will take this. It has now become a “timing” objective – I must click once an indicator is within a specific area, again building up an intimacy bar. I click away.

I time my clicks well, hitting the right sections each time, at their varying degrees of speed. Diego continues his activity upon Dwayne. There is not much else I can do beyond this, and it continues to repeat. This is clearly the intended sequence of events and actions. A thought enters my mind, that this repeated rhythm of clicking and the varying degrees at which I am supposed to do it, is reminiscent to that of the repeated rhythms of sexual action. The timing, the motion, it is constantly building to something. Diego appears to be happy with my performance.

It changes again – Dwayne is now engaging with intercourse with Diego, with Dwayne in the role of the penetrating partner. Both of them, nude. Diego is on his back, all aspects of his completely exposed to my view. Dwayne is holding Diego’s legs, thrusting into him. The scene is fairly erotic in nature and rewarding as the player to research this point. But I feel this complexity that I am not entire sure how to fully articulate into words or describe it appropriately. I am immediate the “top” in our dynamic, and I do not get to choose to be the other, that I am the dominating partner. Had the game intended this? Is that the intention of the makers behind it, that they wanted the player to experience being the “top”? Although, despite these questions, it is difficult to not be drawn into the scene that is in front of me, as the complete spectacle that the two are, with both their muscular bodies acting in such as erotic display.

The objective is the same as before, timing my rhythmic clicks at the right time, to “pleasure” the both of them. I do the same, timing appropriately. Dwayne continues to thrust away, with the sounds and visuality of Diego’s pleasure. The bar continues to fill

– I can understand the reference here, that we are building to some climax. I finish the objective and the scene changes again.

Diego now takes up most of the screen, laying down. Dwayne is behind him, still continuing to thrust away, but this time he is also physically touching Diego intimately. He masturbates Diego for the latter, whilst Diego is being swept by the pleasure he is experiencing. Again, I feel that same complexity, that I am taken by the visual sight in front of me, satisfied that I have attained a sexual outcome with such an attractive male, but unsure to how I am placed in a set performance. For a third time, it is another timing game, for which I continue to do so. I am finding this slightly difficult, as the motion of Dwayne pleasuring Diego draws my attention that is difficult to concentrate on the objective itself. Perhaps that is the point – that I should be appreciating the scene occurring in front of me, finding nothing but erotic satisfaction instead of the pleasure of completing the objective? It is hard not to take notice of this close-up view of these men that are in a repeated motion. I time my clicks well, hitting the button at the correct moment, and filling the bar completely. The scene fades again.

It returns, Diego lying on the floor, still exposed, and Dwayne has very clearly reached a point of orgasm, evident by Diego's body. But Diego does not look happy. The game tells me that I (well, Dwayne) had finished too quickly, leaving Diego without his own climax, and he is dissatisfied with my performance. I feel, well, disappointed. Where have I gone wrong? I made sure to time all my clicks well enough and did not miss a single one. Was that not what I was supposed to do? Did I need to be quicker? Was I supposed to view the depiction of sex in front of me more rather than the objective? Or had I accidentally missed a few and was indeed distracted by the two of them and did not realise? All the effort I had placed to get there, to please Diego, and he is disappointed. I feel a bit of shame that I had "delivered" for my avatar, and by extension myself, but not my partner. Although now I am thinking has my own performance been rated by the game? Was I an inadequate sexual partner?

I know it is only a game, but I think now that I have completed this outcome, I am thinking to my own sexual performance and practices. The game has made me think towards them. Perhaps I was more engrossed in the scene than I had originally realised. It is true that I was drawn to gaze at Diego and think about him in this fantasised view of "what would be." I find him attractive, erotic, and satisfying. His appearances have provided nothing but a pleasant feeling and have given the space for imagination. The game had given me the space to do that, but to have my performance in essence ranked, or even place me in a particular performance at that? It is strange and I am not sure what to make of it.

## **Appendix 1.6 - Full Service Playthrough – “I Had a Dream About My Boss” (Rald Pathway)**

[Recorded December 14, 2022]

It is another dating simulator/visual novel I have turned on – I am starting to become a fan of these. There’s something rewarding that I get to choose my pathway, and work towards an outcome I desire.

This one is Full Service; one I have seen recommended through Steam and Twitter. It follows the story of an office worker who goes to an all-male massage parlour. I can see where this story will lead, although I am now thinking to the existence of gay saunas, where folk will meet up for anonymous casual sex, for fleeting moments of pleasure and desire. Was that their main inspiration for this setting and narrative? To represent as aspect to gay culture and history?

The game begins, and I see my character: Tomoki. He seems like a very attractive, soft-natured male. An endearing character. I realise that I cannot change anything about my avatar, no customisation aspect, he is completely set. I used to find this complex, feeling restrictive to identity with a character that did not resemble myself in any capacity. Perhaps I still harbour those same feelings, however, I also find that it is somehow insignificant all at once. I think to the purpose of these games, and I ask to the necessity of having to inject myself into the game aesthetically, to live in the world with an avatar reminiscent to how I appear in life, when the game is designed more for my emotional and mental satisfaction. Do I really need to see myself in the game, when it is based around my imagination and fantasies? Or are these lack of customizable avatars a way for me to retain some distance? I am unsure to the answer to these questions.

There is an advert that shows up on the screen (in the game story), featuring a very attractive male – muscular, athletic – a model. My eyes were immediately drawn to glance at the spectacle before me.

I continue along the narrative, and Tomoki meets another male: he is tall, muscular, red-haired, and flirty – his name is Kovit. Some maybe even describe him as a “stud” – to me, he seems more fitting of the “jock,” dressed in a vest that exposed his bulging arms. A fit, athletic, and very muscularly defined male. He gives Tomoki an advertisement for the spa (titled Full Service), for which Tomoki absentmindedly accepts the flyer. Even though their conversation continues, I have suddenly had to remind myself that I was playing a game as I was seemingly too focused on the handsome male on the screen.

Tomoki proceeds to head to his workplace, greeted by his work colleague Hisami, who similar to my avatar, is seemingly another endearing character. Tomoki is then greeted by his boss, Rald – a large bulky towering man. I take note of his broad shoulders, tall height, well-dressed appearance – he seems to dominate the screen. Despite all this, I do not seem to care much for his presence, but he seemed pleasant enough. My noticing of his characterisation fledged soon after his arrive and I became re-immersed in the story.

The story continues. Tomoki takes a trip to the Full Service spa upon finishing his work duties. A sense of anticipation fills me – I can tell this is where things will “heat” up, but I am curious as to how, and in what way?

Tomoki proceeds to be welcomed to the spa, by Thara who runs it. She then requests the other masseurs to introduce themselves. A group of men show up on screen and I gasp at their presence. There were a few I immediately noticed and could not stop glancing up at them whilst the text continued. My eyes were immediately drawn to the bulky man standing behind them, he towered above the rest, dressed in his spa uniform with his incredibly muscular chest exposed enough for me to appreciate each definition of physique. He looked familiar for some reason, but I am not entirely sure as to why. I recognised Kovit who, wearing his own uniform, still seemed to emphasise his athletic body. The third I noticed was the male who I was introduced at the beginning of the game on the advert, Remi – he was more covered than the others, and smaller in frame in comparison to the large Herculean males that I was eyeing, but still as attractive. There were other characters, but I did not find myself much interested in them.

The bulky man introduced himself, he is Tomoki’s boss Rald. “Of course,” I said, laughing at the trope that I had already found myself in: “in love with the boss” kind of thing. I’m asked to what type of massage I would like Tomoki to receive – there was various options I could choose. I appreciate these kinds of games that give me the options to choose a pathway for a character I may like. I did not know which choice represented which character, but I am well versed in these games by now to know that this is the first step to leading to this “sexual outcome,” even more-so with its setting being within a “spa.”

I chose the “deep tissue massage.” It is revealed to be Rald’s specialty. “Seriously” I said with another slight laugh to myself. I smile to myself thinking at the absurdity, that I had been drawn to my avatar’s boss. I did not experience much upon his first introduction but seeing him dressed in such a way at the spa has clearly made me think otherwise. It also feels somewhat awkward, since he is my character’s boss, yet at the same time I feel this need to pursue this further and am on board with what will happen upon this choice. It feels.... careless, but in a freeing way. This is my choice, in my game

after all. It is difficult to not staring at his chest. I notice that he smiles at one of Tomoki's responses in their dialogue, and I am overcome with this sense of joy – it almost feels like some nostalgic crush. Those positive feelings for the males I used to have feelings for growing up, finding out about myself and coming to terms with my sexuality. It feels similar to those, a giddy sense of romantic satisfaction. At least this time it is heading in a direction I want, that I am partly in control of where this will go, even though I am aware it is a preconstructed game and that the character is interested in my avatar and not actually me.

The game continues and Rald tells Tomoki to get himself prepared for his massage, requesting Tomoki to undress into his underwear. Tomoki does so and I note that Tomoki is also just as muscularly defined as some of the other characters – with visually defined arms and chest. He was not hulking like Rald, but very athletic – it made me think to the “twink” and “jock” types that, for me, popularise a lot of queer media, particularly those that I seem to consume. I feel more distant to Tomoki now that I was before, even though I know it does not matter in the grand scheme, but such feelings of distance leave pretty quickly as I am just imagining myself in the scenario as I clearly have chosen Rald as my aim of the game and my playthrough.

Rald proceeds to massage Tomoki. This feels.... strange, that this is my characters boss, but at the same time, feels erotic and intimate? That there is an intensity and connection that comes through the idea of physical interaction, and I find this scene seems to build upon that idea. Perhaps it is that I am already immersed in the scenario, that even though I am not feeling such sensations myself, I can imagine it. Rald is still shirtless, and whilst there is no actual reason for this, I also do not mind and rather appreciate that I can continue to look at him. I think I have definitely decided that Rald's pathway is the one I wish to explore in this playthrough.

Rald asks Tomoki if he wished for a “happy ending” – I pick up on the subtext, going wide-eyed at the question. The thought of being able to reach a “sexual outcome” already feels exciting, and I feel motivated to pursue it as I have now chosen Rald to be the one I wish to romance. But I also feel against the idea, that I to immediately thrust myself into a scenario in which I have not gotten the opportunity to build the intimacy between us. I feel...conflicted, and I sit here thinking about what my desires truly want? It is reckless to immediately follow the desire of “being with Rald,” or is it better to build the tension between us to a more satisfying climax? The game is giving me the option and opportunity to indulge. My mind thinks to the idea of casual sexual relationships, the fleeting moments of intense pleasure and desires – is that only something within the moment? Is it instead me being driven only by lust, and not actual attachment? Am I only drawn and attracted to Rald's body and what may occur, or am I truly attracted to his entire being?

I choose not to continue the “happy ending,” as I want to experience the building of romance and desire between us – well Tomoki and Rald, but I think now is the point at which I do feel connected to Tomoki and it is much easier to imagine myself as the character despite our differences. There is something that feels quite exciting about waiting for “the moment” in which these carnal desires “take over” in a way.

The dialogue continues and I learn that Rald works at the spa on Fridays – I will remember this towards my quest to romance him. Although I cannot help but wonder about what may be with the other men as options – what satisfaction would I get from choosing Kovit, or Remi? What pleasures will I discover through them? Tomoki returns home and the “day ends.”

I complete the workplace minigame, earning myself some money. It is now a “free period,” and the game gives me various locations to choose from, displaying which character is currently at which location. I am filled with a sense of happiness seeing that Rald is currently “around,” and I choose to return to work to spend time with him. Tomoki meets Rald back in their workplace, and I am given an option to talk or gift them something. I was not aware that providing gifts was something available in this game and although I do not have anything within my inventory at the moment, I will be certain to make sure I provide Rald with a gift. I choose to talk and Rald very gladly accepts Tomoki’s (and in a way, my own) presence. The day continues.

It is the evening now, and another free period. I do not see that Rald is available right now and I feel disappointed as I was going to choose his location – it seems obsessive for me to pursue him in such an elaborate manner, but I cannot deny or restrict myself from the “pull” to his character I am experiencing. I choose the “Central City” location and am given three more options: to stay on main street, explore the café, or go to the bookstore. Curiosity has gotten the better of me, so I elect to stay on the main street. I am greeted by two men, one who is Kovit, and the other a large muscular buff blonde male dressed in tight-fitting clothing with tears in them to flash his muscles. He certainly was appealing to the eyes for sure, the true definition of the “jock” or indeed much more the “himbo” type of male I see frequented in some of my inner circles on the internet. Curiosity got the better of me again, and I was interested to see what would happen if I spoke to either of them. I chose the blonde male, having already been aware of Kovit’s character from earlier – to my surprise, he sells gifts that I can use to show my affection to the romanceable men. I feel elated, as I can now buy Rald something to “show my feelings.” I chose a luxurious watch, hoping he will appreciate that I have decided based on his role as Tomoki’s boss. As Rald is not available to me at this time, I choose to simply spend time with Kovit.

It is now the next day, and I continue the workplace minigame. It becomes the free period – of course, I choose to spend it with Rald. I choose to give him the watch gift. He loves it. I am overcome with this “giddy” feeling, that I am officially on the Rald route. I continue to Central City to spend more time with him.

The day ends and Tomoki returns home. Tomoki has an erotic dream about Rald and finds himself aroused. I go wide-eyed at the narrative, taken aback at what I have just read. The game asks if I would like to allow Tomoki to masturbate due to his urges that have arisen following his dream. I laugh aloud to this choice – the outlandishness, its carefree approach, and in some regard, its humorous relatability. I shamelessly allow Tomoki to do so – I felt a drive out of my own sense of humour, and furthermore I was not thinking this would be an opportunity to see Tomoki within this erotic state, but rather like some strange tribute to the affection I held for Rald, still within this humorous intent. I laughed to myself throughout the entire sequence as it played out, with Tomoki feeling somewhat embarrassed following it – for myself, I did not feel the same whatsoever and had some sense of pride for choosing that option.

There is something intriguing about this shameless feeling. Almost liberating? By choosing, am I acknowledging that I am attracted to Rald? Or now that I think of it, is this another moment where I have been driven by some deep desire in my feelings for him?

## **Appendix 1.7 - Camp Buddy Playthrough – On Natsumi's Route**

[Recorded 18-12-2022 to 22-12-22; Transcribed between 25-01-2023 to 11-02-2023]

### **[START OF 18-12-2022 RECORDING]**

So, I've decided to use this new approach of recording myself playing these games as what I found was that I was having a bit of dissonance trying to keep myself engaged in the game as an object and the experiences that it was offering me vs writing down those experiences and I don't think it fully captured the entire catharsis that I was really feeling at the time.

So I've gone with this new approach to try and capture a more immediate and natural response while still retaining the narrative approach of my autoethnography, as one of the things that I've noticed was that doing it where I was playing and writing experiences sort of took away from my embodiment and broke the illusion I had with the game. Not in every case, but I felt like it was struggling to fully encapsulate the entire sensations that I was feeling and so with this game here, Camp Buddy that I've never played before and don't really know much about, I thought it would be appropriate start of this new practise I'm doing with the autoethnography to see how things go with it.

So, I'm very excited as I've obviously played quite a few dating simulators and visual novels now and I know this is also one of them but other than that I do not know anything about this game so there is a little bit of anxiety but at the same time because now I think that I'm a fan of these games that I kind of know what to expect and that in terms of like choosing my path and going after what I want, well that kind of excites me even more so.

I click new game. How does one preserve treasured memories. I wonder who is speaking here. Oh, this must be my character then. I did not expect it to be voice acted. I'm just going to slow it down; I've got it on auto but so I can fully see what I am doing.

He seems like every like anime protagonist. I'm sort of, I'm sort of. I have a strange feeling come over me a little bit as the whole summer camp concept is not something that I am naturally used to, and I've never had that experience before. That freedom that sort of comes with it. So, I'm intrigued to see how this might end up making me feel, if anything at all.

He certainly seems like a very happy-go-lucky protagonist. I used to think that I kind of prefer avatars and characters that are customisable but I think with something like this because you're playing as the character it's quite easy for you to identify with them and that was something that I had actually realised when playing Full Service, another game

that I had done for this research, that I wasn't entirely sure about identifying with Tomoki, but by the end of – by the end of it, it felt like I was living that life, so I imagine the same situation will happen here. He certainly seems nice though.

I will say as I sit here playing this, I am reminded of the sort of mischief that I got up to with my friends. It isn't necessarily in this camp scenario. There's a weird sort of nostalgia that I'm feeling regarding getting up to the kinds of adventures and, or misadventures rather, with my friends.

These both seem very precious individuals **[Keitaro and Hiro]** almost like that I feel sense of protectiveness over them but I'm not sure whether that's over them as characters or is it more protectiveness of myself. That's – I am – I'm being wary of what may lie ahead and what the outcomes may be.

Oh, I see so not all of it is voice acted.

Oh, well he seems a very attractive male.

Yoshinori Nagira. Well Yoshinori is quite handsome I do have to say. He seems much older than the other two, not in that he's much more of an adult. I guess it's much more down to his stature.

I'm assuming that all the characters I meet are, or at least most of them, are going to the romanceable routes?

Natsumi seems like a very polite individual.

I will say that even though the scene has changed now and that I am in a conversation is Keitaro talking to Natsumi, I still have the scoutmaster's image in my head so I'm thinking that potentially that maybe a romanceable route to head down but I'm not fully invested in doing that and I think that is potential down to that I don't know the other characters yet. So, there is still a little bit of hesitation and excitement to see who else there is for me to choose from

Oh, somebody seems quite angry. This character **[Yoichi]** seems very wolf inspired. I think it's the hair.

I feel like I'm – I'm getting – I'm getting flashbacks to the days that I would read manga and watch a lot of anime in my younger days. It's pretty obvious to me that these characters feel younger than myself, and on the flip side that if these are also characters are romanceable, I don't feel any drive to them.

I will say that as this what is apparently the prologue in the opening to the story, I'm sort of overcome with this feeling of what I can only describe as youthfulness that I almost get to be a past self and I feel like it's being stemmed from the realisation that I am playing as Keitaro, that I get to live out some kind of fantasy that I would have had for my younger days that I wouldn't now at my current age.

Oh, upon exploring the settings, I did not realise that there is a profile section. That's really fascinating to me, although strangely my head kind of went to thinking about the dating apps and similar sort of websites that I have used in the past. For now, though I think I will come out of this profile section as I'd rather learn the characters as the game played out rather than looking at them now but I'm wondering if something that may come in use maybe later on in the game.

It's fascinating to me that this has a day mechanic, similar to how Full Service lets you do things in the daytime as well as the evening.

Ah, Yoshinori has returned, and I feel a little bit strange upon his re-arrival. I don't know whether it's because the characters are positioned together but you really notice Yoshinori's stature more, like out of the group of them I still only looking at him. He seems very overpowering in terms of his appearance in comparison to the others just from the stature part alone.

Oh, so now I've reached the point where I actually get to decide what I want to do. Wait aren't we missing someone is option 1. Option 2 let's play some games. Option 3 You relax for a moment. Option 4 I want to try all the food. Well, it certainly seems like these are like the initial decisions by which route by which route would take.

Aren't we missing someone sounds like it would be Hunter. Play some games would be Yoichi. I want to try food is probably Hiro. But I don't really have to drive to interact with any of those at the moment so I'm going to select that I want to relax for a moment. I've chosen that decision because it's something that I enjoy doing myself and I think I want to try and embody myself in it and insert myself into the game's world as much as possible.

**[END OF 18-12-2022 RECORDING]**

**[START OF 19-12-2022 RECORDING]**

So it's the next day and I've returned to playing Camp Buddy as I had planned on doing some other activities this morning to do with my thesis but I kept thinking about game

last night, and the hesitancy that I was feeling or the excitement for the unknown and decided to change up my plans to play this instead today.

Whilst this scene is playing out between Yoshinori and Yuri, I still can't help but think of Yoshinori as very attractive.

Yuri shipping Keitaro and Hiro together I guess the context behind their friendship and whether or not that's a kind of fantasy that I want to go down in the sense of romancing the best friend kind of narrative but at the moment that's not something that I'm invested in and I think that's because I'm more waiting to see if Yoshinori is actually a character I can pursue.

Oh.

Um. Wow. Ok.

I don't know who – Oh. Wow.

So, his name is Aidan?

I'm not entirely sure why he's not wearing any clothes but an apron but... wow. He's a very handsome character and also, I can definitely tell he's more muscular in terms of his stature. Part of me is now really hoping that Aiden is something of a pathway to pursue.

That position **[Aiden Poses]** is certainly to me reminiscent of a lot of male models in magazines.

He's very pretty though.

I'm still staring at Aiden, I will admit.

So now that's two characters that I hope to pursue in this game.

**[reading game options]** ok it's alright you should ask for permission first, it's a private matter, it's kind of rude. I'm going to say you should ask permission first.

I'm not sure if it's a bad or a good thing but even though they're all these are the characters on offer I'm still in my head only thinking about Aiden and Yoshinori

**[reading game options]** all we need to rely on its our instincts which sounds like Yoichi's route, food always comes first sounds closer to Hiro, everything is equally important sounds closer to Hunter, let's not forget to bring a map and guide.

I do like the fact that the choices that this game is giving me but also I think, which is similar to other types of these visual novels, is that the choices you get offered are both obvious to which character that they are leading you towards but also sometimes quite ambiguous, that you're uncertain with what choice to make and who will be the outcome of that choice.

With this one I think I'm going to choose "let's not forget to bring a map and a guide" as if how I feel about the other choices being into the specific characters I've outlined, I'm not very drawn to any of them and don't really desire to pursue them so I will pick the last one.

So I've reached the point of my next choice and a few of these are again quite obvious to certain characters but there are a few options that I'm not entirely sure on and again I think this might stem from the fact that I'm clearly already drawn to pursuing characters like Aiden and Yoshinori if they are even available that is. But there's a slight hesitancy that I'm feeling with making these choices that I'm unsure what characters that I am on route for if they are not the characters that I am truly after.

I can tell that two of them are more inclined to some of the core group already but the other two that I can see are not very clear as to who they might mean.

So, as I choose this option, the option of "I wonder what made them just like me so much", I'm sort of hoping that this hasn't ruined my chances, as I'm feeling almost anxious over it.

I'm kind of appreciating more and more that these choices are more ambiguous than previous visual novel that I've played because I think it's keeping me on edge and making me truly think about what it is that I want to occur in the game.

**[reading game options]** Um. Hmm. Use a compass.

So, I'm at a scene with a campfire with myself as Keitaro and Natsumi and it's giving me four options which one of them is to compliment Natsumi. Because I don't feel a drive to pursue him as my end goal for this game, I won't be picking the option that compliments him. So instead, I think I will choose "it feels so warm."

To a previous point I made regarding the ambiguous nature of some of these choices, there's also nothing in the game implying that I am building a kind of intimacy with these characters which in a way seems to provoke me to continue playing and put more effort into hopefully pursuing the characters that I want to. That perhaps it might be a bit of a giveaway if I knew what characters that I was already getting closer to.

So, this next option where Hiro is coming in with what I think is clearly jealousy, there's an option to respond a particular way regarding our friendship or potentially relationship. Again, it's the same with Natsumi, I don't feel the desire to pursue that as my outcome for this but the options that it gives me are still quite ambiguous too so I'm a bit caught on what I would like to choose.

I'm going to select "you'll always be my best friend" as that's kind of a cannon that I feel like has been set up in this game already.

I've seemingly picked the option that establishes that I would prefer to stay as friends with Hiro than anything more judging from his dialogue.

Oh. Wow. Wow Goro is...well, I'm a bit lost for words if I'm honest.

I wasn't anticipating seeing like a new character, but I'm also kind of glad that I have now. He was a very attractive older male.

**[about Goro]** That's a good look. I mean I can't help but stare at the open shirt, it's pretty hard to not look in that direction but now that I can I guess see more of him, I kind of feel more attracted to him.

Wait I thought they were their friends. Wait, go back go back, can I go back? I guess not I didn't actually mean to select that one but it's ok.

**[reading game text]** Oh. Ok. I didn't realise there was a mini game. Sure. Arrange the letters to find out what word Keitaro is... well that's buddy. Hints can be found in Keitaro's chat bubble. Make sure to read them to find the answer.

**[playing mini game]** Yes. The sassy guy with the curly hair. Am I missing letters here? Eduard that was it. That's not how you spell it. Hiro. Oh, there was a time. Right.

I mean despite that, Hiro's now entered this scene not wearing much, I don't really feel anything.

**[END OF 19-12-2022 RECORDING]**

**[START OF 20-12-2022 RECORDING]**

These choices are difficult to make. I think with not having any indication on who it is I'm actually heading towards with these choices it makes it harder to pick them, but also still retains that feeling of excitement about it.

Oh. I wasn't actually expecting this scene to arrive if I'm honest **[Yoichi sleeping scene]** this seemed to arrive if I'm being completely honest but...I mean I am obviously initially drawn to Yoichi's body as it seems to for me anyway have more prominence and I suppose that's because they've established him as a muscular character.

But at the same time despite that I'm seeing all these romanceable characters in front of me basically without any clothes I don't actually feel any attachment or any actual sexual satisfaction. Any kind of sensation like that is not something I'm experiencing and I think that might be because I'm now so far into this game and I'm still attached to characters like Goro and Aiden and Yoshinori whereas these characters even though these are the group as Keitaro mainly hangs out with, it's quite strange that the game has offered me the sort of erotic look at them but I don't actually feel any attraction to them.

So, whilst looking at bodies like Yoichi that because I am not attracted to his character that I don't feel that gratification from viewing. Perhaps it now that I am just to set in my heart on trying to pursue what is clearly the older characters in this game.

Yeah, I wasn't anticipating this kind of shot where you could see all their different physiques. Um, again my eyes are initially drawn to Yoichi first but I think that may be because he's already been established the most sort of athletic and also as I look at all the others that there is obviously similar definition amongst them all but he seems the most defined.

So, I don't know whether that's what has drawn me to him first but again my point still stands that I don't actually feel much for them at this point at all still and I think a lot of my attachment lies with more of the older characters.

So, I, um. Hmm. Okay. I wasn't anticipating such a choice to be given to me. Um. And I guess it is actually asking, albeit to Keitaro, asking about my own personal preference here. Hmm. I mean these choices do depict a specific extent of body physiques, I guess. Judging from my experience of previous games, and who I'm drawn to in Camp Buddy, but I guess also my own articulation, and what I see as desirable for me I guess

is...hmm... this is actually quite difficult choice to make because I also know that it's indicating for specific characters. I'm just going to go with whatever suits I think my preference...which...hmm. "Thick and Muscular".

Yeah, I think I feel contempt with making that choice because I think it matches myself and the characters I've been drawn to in these games already.

Um. Did that option indicate that I was into Yoichi?

Intriguingly they have covered certain parts to these characters in this scene **[bathroom/shower scene]** There's something I find kind of uncomfortable about the discussions happening in the scene where they are comparing dick sizes. Whilst I appreciate the casual nature of the scene, I think there's I don't know something performative about it to me and I think it does come back to the stereotyped view with you know the size of the man weighs up his masculinity which isn't true in my opinion.

So, I'm not entirely sure how to feel about such a kind of scenario. I appreciate that light-hearted tone and the embrace of sexuality and it also has a kind of positive effect on me as a player because in such a light-hearted approach I feel more at one and accepting of myself in this kind of place.

that you know there's kind of something liberating about this game which is you know very welcoming of sexuality that I can just enjoy the experience and always be lost in its fantasy without a kind of care in the world even though I do have some sort of misgiving [sic] and reservations about the discussion regarding you know male bodies and such but at the same time it also allows me to choose and follow my own preference and what I see is desirable for me.

Oh, right ok wow. I was not anticipating this **[Keitaro masturbating in the shower scene]**. I wasn't seeing this at all.

Oh, wow ok. Um. I'm a bit lost for words actually if I'm honest. Truth be known this scene with Katara in the shower with him masturbating, the first thing or obviously was drawn to his penis on show. I wasn't expecting you to be animated.

I don't actually personally have any investment in that scene or gain any kind of pleasure from it, but I think that's because the context around it is based on the other characters, and I don't feel that way about the group of friends.

I suppose if I was then it would be quite humorous, I suppose and maybe relatable but at this point we got to see Keitaro and his own physique and what not.

So, I'm struggling to really piece together how I feel about it because I don't actually feel any sense of gratification through it maybe that is because I don't actually have an attachment to it in that kind of extremity so it has seemed has seemed quite maybe difficult to appreciate that scene in such a way because it's not something that I am finding myself in but I would not anticipated for it to be animated anyway.

Interestingly though in that scene there that I think about it, after its over and moved on that it's pretty vague on who the "him" is talking about and I think this again has come back to previous choices that I have found that I have encountered where it has been obvious which character its more leaning me towards in the games playthrough but then there are others where it's completely ambiguous and unknown so it keeps me invested to see where this goes and I guess I'm still hopeful that even though it hasn't become obvious whether or not characters like Aiden and Yoshinori and Goro are romanceable that I'm still holding out this kind of hope that they are possible in this game and thinking about how it said that Keitaro was thinking about "him" but didn't actually specify which character still continues to give me that hope.

Oh, speaking of said characters I cannot help but smile to the characters that I have just been thinking about then appear on screen and again the first one I notice is Aiden and I think it is because he's there, shirt open, chest exposed that I am immediately drawn to that.

The characterisation of Goro though is making me not like him he seems a very harsh character, so I think my attachments for him at this point is very...based on his appearance than his actual character.

Hmm. Again, this seems like another choice that might leads to some characters or not. I'm feeling a little bit hesitant to actually pick one. "Let's do some chores."

Oh. Ok. I didn't realise I was picking this but, seemingly choosing the option that I chose in which leads to a scene with Natsumi. Involved him now stripping in front of Keitaro and therefore me and again it's the same point I've been making for me as the player and maybe it in my sexual tastes and articulation of sexuality that I don't actually feel anything for him but I'm still gazing upon his physique and appreciating the musculature of his body.

So, the dialogue that Keitaro then speaks is "I can't concentrate on what he is saying, I'm just helplessly staring at his body", I feel myself doing the same thing because there is nothing on screen for me to do other than that. So, I think in this kind of scene maybe that it's designed for me to just gaze upon the character in such a pleasurable manner.

Even though that even though that I don't feel attached to his character and don't actually wish to pursue him there's also just a natural attraction I have to the visual on screen.

There are another four choices here which one is to say "Natsumi is tall and skinny," another one is to say "I wish I had muscles too," another one is a term used to describe his penis and the last choice is "you have a nice body." I know that the nice body comment will be something that probably furthers our route with him even more. So, part of me doesn't want to pick that option but at the same time out of all of the characters despite that I have reservations to them and don't wish to pursue them I would have probably said that Natsumi would be the character that I would most likely choose instead. For now, I think for this playthrough I'm going to say, "I wish I had muscles too." I don't know whether such an option did further our route, but I still think that my motivations are more towards the 'staff characters.'

At least at this point there is something kind of enjoyable that after having such a long prelude where it hasn't actually given me anything to become sexually invested in that it's starting to almost tease these moments and I'm wondering if that is actually something that is intentional with this game that it unlike some of the other adult games I've played already that are just immediately designed to be pleasurable in that view from the initial start of it that this one prefers you to actually get to know all these characters in further detail and then slightly tease you with these moments of pleasure rather than giving you from the very beginning and so I'm wondering if that actually instead makes the game more rewardable when it gives you those scenes.

So the scene has switched after my previous choice to now a sit-down chat with Yoshinori and I'm kind of smiling because whilst I could tell that he was physically larger than the other characters, this scene that has given to me where Keitaro is sitting next to him, you can really notice it more and it was where my eyes first looked at and seeing his broad structure is made him more attractive that I was feeling before that I'm also struggling to encapsulate the words as they continue to look at him.

Wait, what. I. So the scene that has just taken place between Natsumi and Keitaro which is after the sports competition is clearly like set up to allude to having a sexual scene with Natsumi of some kind and I picked the option... and Natsumi starts to describe something that the other characters informed him of which is masturbating. And as Keitaro I got to choose how I approached that and I picked the option that was that I thought Natsumi has the wrong idea and I got to choose how I approached that and I picked the option that was that I thought that he has the wrong idea about what it was thinking that this was establish what the other members were actually indeed implying and instead it's immediately gone into to a sexual scene in which Keitaro is

performing oral sex on Natsumi which is not something that I am actually wanting. I had thought that by pressing that option that he was just going to establish what it was and that would kind of closed off the roof, but it seems I've accidentally unlocked this scene.

So, despite that scene, I still continue to not personally feel invested in it, so I think again this comes back to tastes and the characters that I'm invested in. So, I clicked through this the animated scene without any actual pleasure occurring or any sort of erotic sensation that I was experiencing because I don't feel that way towards Natsumi as a character. But even so I appreciate that the game gives me these pathways I think to almost have fun with my sexuality, I think.

**[END OF 20-12-2022 RECORDING]**

**[START OF 21-12-2022 RECORDING]**

Oh, so this is the first time that we actually get to see Goro in I guess the Scoutmaster's uniform and you can see how physically larger he is in comparison to all the others now. He...is a very handsome man. Wow. I don't really have the words to be honest. He...yeah. Wow. I'm very much looking at the biceps.

Oh. Wow. Um. I'm feeling a tad flustered seeing that Yoshinori has just come up on screen. I'm looking up and down his character and now I can actually see the true definition of his body type...wow.

Now Aiden appears on screen. Wow. Um. Struggling to find the words, there is a lot of shirtless bodies on the screen at the moment.

**[END OF 21-12-2022 RECORDING]**

**[START OF 22-12-2022 RECORDING]**

I do find it slightly funny there's a I guess a carefree humour to this in the fact that you can make out Aiden's penis or potentially apparent erection amongst this entire scene which has just full of pretty much all the characters except for the female character Yuri just topless males.

Oh wow. I wasn't anticipating seeing Goro be topless. Well with his shirt open but it was most definitely the chest I noticed first and as I looked down it's a similar situation with Aiden that it seems like they are purposely showing Goro's penis size and other factors that add to his I guess manly stature and design. But I've also just noticed that he also

seems to be the only one that has the appearance of body hair, with respect to Yoichi, but this is more on his actual chest for Goro. Um. Wow. It actually has kind of made him more attractive in that I sort of can't stop staring.

I think seeing Goro, Yoshinori and Aiden in such a way has just made me feel more attracted to them.

I'm still slightly grinning overseeing the three of them that I've basically been lusting after in the very beginning of the game in such a manner.

Oh, right ok. **[reading game text]** a foreplay minigame. "Help Keitaro and his partner heat things up before getting to the real deal. Time to get into the sexy mood. Stimulate the character by applying certain actions on specific body parts. Choose from a variety of exciting actions..."

Oh ok. Um. I wasn't anticipating there to be some sort of intimate...intimacy minigame. I mean I don't again I still don't feel anything for Natsumi, so I think I've accidentally ended up on this pathway which isn't a problem because out of all of the characters that I'm mainly around, I probably would've picked Natsumi anyway. There's a weird pressure that I'm feeling here about like not performing well in this minigame. Um. I guess I'll start with this.

Oh, is it on Keitaro? Or have I got to drag it? Oh, ok so that's no that's wrong. I tried using the rub option on Keitaro's neck but... ok so that one's better. Do we do it again? Oh, I see. Oh, it swaps between the two of them. Um. Do I do it again? Do I...I'm not sure how I feel about the fact that I have to move the mouse. Uh. Wait. Oh, right ok. Now they're undressing. Like you have to click to undress once reaching a certain point on the pleasure meter which I wasn't anticipating. Do you...ok that was wrong. That's also wrong. And again. Did I, do it?

There's something I guess quite intimate about having a game like this that its sort of reminiscent to the kind of build-up of sexual intercourse, but I also felt kind of pressure to make sure I was performing well.

I mean judging from the sex scene that's just technically occurred between Keitaro and Natsumi, there was a sense of...I guess accomplishment I felt because I passed the intimate minigame but again I didn't actually personally feel much attachment to the scene itself because it's not a character that I have been driven towards which is making me think that the characters that I would like to romance aren't actually available. But I still feel the sense of accomplishment that I've managed to choose the right options and complete the minigame successfully to lead to such a scene.

I'm having a bit of a dilemma here with this option that I get to decide what activity gets done at the beach now which is consisting of a survival challenge, a scavenger hunt, a strong man contest, or swimsuit showdown and part of me is really wanting to pick like the strongman contest just because it involves Aiden so...but then the scavenger hunt might also be a good choice because its Goro's option. Strongman contest.

I know this doesn't actually have anything to do with Aiden but I think it was because it was his suggestion and because I'm obviously still attracted to him, Yoshinori and Goro that it sort of...in my head it felt very much like I was picking Aiden's option because I wanted to romance him even though that might not actually be possible.

Um. Wow. Ok. So, the game has progressed and Keitaro has been framed for taking a prank photo of Goro and is about to be expelled and I choose the option to help as the group of friends investigate who might actually be behind it and now there's a scene which is a flashback and it involves Aiden and Goro **[Misspoke: Yoshinori]** naked in their tent. I wasn't anticipating that to say the least. But I guess there's some kind of pleasure and enjoyment I'm getting by basically finally seeing two characters that I have been attracted to in the game early on in this kind of erotic state.

So through the choices I made, there was the sex scene that, an actual sexual intercourse, scene that's happened between Natsumi and Keitaro which I can still feel the same sense of achievement for basically been rewarded with the same for picking the right options but, the same time I'm also kind of disappointed because it's not with a character that I actually feel drawn to and so I think that the characters that I am drawn to being Yoshinori, Aiden and Goro that those aren't actually romanceable characters and considering that those three are quite similar in the fact that they are the staff at the camp and exhibit a different appearance in terms of like musculature and physique and-and-and so on and so forth that part of me feels awkward because I'm technically playing as Keitaro who is just one of the Scouts at the camp but me as the player is lusting after somebody that is in technically a position of authority.

But I think that point there is something there in that I'm not playing as Keitaro, I'm not engaging the game as the character of Keitaro, I'm engaging the game as myself and what I see as desirable and what attractive to me so that's potentially why I feel not really much sexual satisfaction with the-the characters like Natsumi and actually film things more for Aiden and Yoshinori and that also might be down to the fact that I am as at currently recording this a 24-year old male so I'm-I'm almost playing it with that kind of investment and mentality but on the most part I think it is because for me and my preferences, I find characters like Aiden and machinery more attractive.

By the looks of it but I'm also give me another opportunity to engage in a sexual act with Natsumi as Keitaro and at this point I think because I...clearly, I'm not able to romance the characters I want to, I'm also kind of feeling a bit careless. A very much a... ah [---] it I may as well at this point just to see where the story goes, I guess.

Oh. Another foreplay minigame with Natsumi again. So, um. Do I start with that?

Oh. Well, that performance went better than I expected. It seemed like this time that this is now the second opportunity I have to do the foreplay minigame that I seemed to do it without thinking which makes me feel like that I guess I sort of learnt the flow or the order of things from the sort of confusion I had at the previous initial time I had to do this minigame.

So, it looks like I got what is known as bad ending of the game which is that I didn't choose the correct options and it didn't...it didn't allow you know a romantic ending so I'm...feeling kind of disappointed despite the rewards that I got. Um. Now that I've actually finished a playthrough I'm also like I guess disheartened that I didn't get to romance the characters I wanted to but by the looks of it the game did not allow those characters to be available anyway but were available to look at, I guess. Um. A lot of the characters, mainly the adults consisting of Yoshinori, and Aiden and Goro, all had sort of similar body types and I was attracted to their characters more than the actual romanceable ones which even though I had sort of gained a sense of achievement through unlocking the erotic scenes with Natsumi, it still didn't get my attachment, so potentially that might be why I haven't had the best of endings as I was still playing with this illusion that characters like Yoshinori and Aiden were romanceable but clearly not. But I do like that the game gives me the option to pursue that endeavour with Natsumi and in some respects the other characters and the scenes themselves.

The foreplay scene...uh...minigame was interesting to me as I quite liked the idea of how you have to build up and perform in order to unlock the actual scene but there is also the-the pressure of not doing the correct steps. So, whilst I am disheartened that I wasn't able to romance the characters that I was more driven towards, it was still in some respects a pleasurable experience from a sense of achievement that I had unlocked these sexual rewards even though I felt nothing for them. So, I'd be interested to see how the other routes go, and I wonder whether or not I would make the same choices and end-result with the same bad endings or would they be a more sexually satisfying ending to the story.

That being said, I do think there is something intriguing perhaps that the characters that I was more lusting after were the-the characters of authority in the game story, and even though they weren't available to me, I was still hoping that that would have been an

option for me in the game. But that certainly didn't stop me from appreciating their look, their body their appearance, their character, and characters like Yoshinori and Aiden who were muscular and defined in larger and more masculine...they became more attractive to me than the characters that I mainly spend my time with in the game which is the group of Scouts.

So, I guess it comes up to a further point I have made around that I wasn't actually playing as Keitaro, I was playing as me.

So, I will be interested to see how the other playthroughs go but also the follow game that I am aware that the developers have recently released which may actually allow the scoutmasters to be romanceable which I would be quite excited to experience. I am hoping now that I've come to the end of this game though and either playing again or moving to the follow-up game has been made that I will have a chance to romance these I guess big buff men so to speak and hopefully get myself a good ending on that as...as I said they were characters I found most attractive and often find myself smiling and appreciating their presence on screen whether or not that was them fully clothed or completely naked.

So, I think that when it comes to the follow-up game, if those scoutmasters are romanceable, I can already imagine that they will be the main motivator for me as whilst having the scenes with Natsumi in this playthrough in this game, whilst they were fun in the sense of the achievement I felt, I didn't find them as pleasurable or gratifying for myself as I wasn't attracted to Natsumi. But I look forward to seeing where other playthroughs will go and also the experience this follow up game will provide.

**[END OF 22-12-2022 RECORDING]**

## Appendix 1.8 - Hurt Me Plenty Playthrough

[Recorded February 16, 2023]

So today I am playing the Radiator Two short games collection by Robert yang, who I know as a developer had created some games based around intimacy and gay male subculture and queer cultures and whilst I know these games are not necessarily entirely explicit, I decided to choose them because that they have the intention for things like intimacy and, um, I am aware that some of the games in this collection are based around things like consent and slowly building intimacy as much alike his other works which I have planned to play.

So, this first one that I'm going to be playing out of Radiator 2 is going to be the short game Hurt Me Plenty. I do know of this game already as it came up on my radar during my time on this thesis and so I do know that it is a spanking simulator. But beyond that I don't actually know too much else about it and it'll be a first proper playthrough that I've done of the game. So, this one will be my experience of Hurt Me Plenty.

Ok, so the games telling me sound is important and use a mouse or a gamepad and I'm in this room that seems very atmospheric, that I can hear sort of voices in the background but it's very muted, almost like I'm the only one here.

Ok, let's see. So, I can see in the back there's a poster here that says something like all power exchanges has to be negotiated and then there's like a symbol with – that's in the shape of a heart that's two hands and there's a vibrating phone. So, if I – Oh. Ok. There's a hairy male chest on this phone, clearly ringing me. So, uh, can't seem to do anything else. I guess I just have to answer it.

Ok so I click the answer button.

Ok. Oh. Confronted with a bare-chested male here. There's like a, uh, bassy soundtrack that's in the background that's really repetitive, and I think the symbols on it – on the screen are trying to tell me to move my mouse up and down whilst clicking. Oh, ok so this is actually simulating the sort of shaking of hands stage, which is filling up a bar, um, it's come up with some kind of symbol which I'm not entirely sure what it means. Some kind of spikey object, then there's a second one that's a red X as I'm shaking this guy's hand, it feels kind of weird actually that – but in a sort of, not in a negative way, it's a weird sensation that's like an extension of myself. I'm shaking this sort of figures hand whilst I'm playing, that the mouse is an extension of my arm. And the last symbol was what looked to be a jockstrap.

Oh. Ok. So, he is now wearing a jockstrap, and I have to – I have a clock here, I guess I just – Oh. Ok. So, with a swing of the mouse is how I spank him as he moves. Ok. So, there's a bunch of symbols that appear on the screen that range from a smiley face to a feather but, I'm speeding up with my mouse because I'm not entirely sure what this mean. It feels unusual as I do this because this is not actually something I've ever experienced and clearly, I'm supposed to be some sort of dominatrix in this, um, scenario. But I'm not entirely sure how much I'm supposed to do this. Do I hold the button. I keep swing – oh ok. I didn't mean to do that – is that part of the game. So I've just moved my mouse quite rapidly from side to side to in essence spank him quicker and it made him go red and more sort of – he started to writhe in front of me and the symbols started to change colour and I could also hear him sort of breathe heavier and immediately I've just stopped because – I don't know — I felt like maybe I had did it too much.

So, I've returned to the speed I was at before. There doesn't seem to be any actual progress here, just the clock that I have to finish. I wonder if – so, I keep doing it. I'm getting sort of it a lot of smiling faces and love hearts. Ok. So even though I continued the same rhythm, the same scenario happened again where he started getting red and there's all the heavy breathing and the symbols started to change colour into more of a yellow than like the greens and blues that I was getting that seemed more positive. So, I stopped again just to let him, I guess, regain himself. And I've continued again. Uh. Not that I want to but part of me is kind of wondering what truly kind of happens if you carry on past that point. So, I will continue this same motion thus far, now almost five minutes in, to see if there is anything beyond that point that actually tells me to in essence stop.

So, he seems to – Oh. He seems to I guess kind of not sort of wince out in pain necessarily, but there are some sort of symbols that appear that makes it seem like he's uncomfortable. And then it's sort of seemingly just holding off ever so slightly puts him back into a more comfortable state, and then I'm back to having positive sort of symbols appear.

Interestingly, for me, there's not really much else to look at bar his behind really. Like he is very central to the screen and you have nothing else to really look at as you do this, bar his behind, which to me kind of makes sense as that's the only area that seems to give a clear indication other than the symbols that, you know, maybe I'm taking this too far.

So, I carry on with this same motion, and I can hear him – his heavy breathing come back again. So, he's started the same wincing of potential pain and heavy breathing, so I've briefly stopped, and I've returned again and I'm seeing if its – that's actually a

constant, that he wants me to do. Thinking to the symbols as I continue this same motion again, that I was shown at very beginning when we, I guess, agreed, they're not entirely clear as to this character's limits. But interestingly, I can change my sort of rhythm and pattern here.

Ah. Ok. Yeah, so I accidentally moved my mouse and slapped him again during this sort of period where he's regaining his composure and immediately the yellow symbols started up so this is clearly the game telling me to hold back and uh restrain myself a little bit to respect this said partner here. And I'm almost sort of nine, no, eight and a half minutes in, and it seems like this is in essence just the main objective that you simulate this entire sort of spanking dominatrix individual.

It seems like there's a difference when I just move my mouse though compared to when I hold, uh, the click button down and move the mouse, it seems to generate a harsher slap. So immediately I heard him sort of wince out slightly in pain and it was telling me to carry on so what I did was sort of hold back slightly and then immediately swung my mouse quite quickly to hit him hard and he didn't seem to mind that at all.

Oh. Ok. I accidentally moved the mouse again and he immediately displayed this sort of sad face symbol which leads me to believe that this, you know, that he is starting to feel uncomfortable. So, there doesn't seem to be much else to do and part of me is naturally kind of holding back from, you know, from carrying on as soon as I see those symbols because it – there's a feeling inside that when this seems to happen, that it feels wrong to carry on further. But it doesn't seem to actually indicate, you know, how far – so again we've reached the yellow symbols. Oh, okay so hitting him whilst the yellow symbols are on continues more so that's clearly when he starts to feel uncomfortable. And so, I can see the character sort of breath whilst he's readjusting himself to feel comfortable again before I carry on.

So, I imagine there is a point at which, you know, you make him so uncomfortable in some form if you just continuously carried on. Yeah. Ok. So, this just seems to be a constant, um, almost a backwards and forwards with this entire thing. So, I'm going to end it here and click the – the sort of end session button to see what happens.

Oh, I see so now there's a kind of shoulder rubbing sequence where I move the mouse from side to side to rub the guy's shoulder which is very reminiscent of, you know, the aftercare I guess of these sorts of things. So, you have the agreement stage, then you have the actual play stage, and then there's this aftercare stage. And again, there's some more symbols and the first symbol that's come up as this bar fills up whilst I rub the shoulders of this character is a skull, but it doesn't actually tell me what that means. And the next symbol is what looks to be a sort of bomb or explosive, and the

final symbol is a star. So, I'm not entirely sure exactly whether or not I've done well, um, I don't know whether these are actually just a signifier as to my kind of performance in the game but I was kind of drawn into a moment where, whilst playing, I felt a kind of concern that I was going to accidentally take things too far or move my mouse in a way that slapped him too much. Um. So yeah, it definitely made me take kind of caution on what I was doing and being aware of what I was doing, I guess.

Even though I don't know how well, um, how well I did as said dominatrix, um, but having those symbols even though I weren't really clear on what they meant at the beginning and those symbols that appearing in the game, sort of kept me in check, it kept me following the comfortable – the comfortable levels of the participant, so, yeah, I can see how this is a game around that kind of consent and aftercare and negotiating power. But I was definitely almost anxious that I was going to take things too far, and even though I wondered what happens if I do take things too far, I don't feel comfortable doing that. But this was most certainly a kind of a game I've not really experienced before but it definitely made me be aware of my – my actions in the game. And I will return to the main menu to play one of the other minigames next.

## Appendix 1.9 - Stick Shift Playthrough

[Recorded February 17, 2023]

So, this next minigame of this Radiator 2 collection that I am playing is Stick Shift which from what I learnt when I first came across this collection, I learnt that it was something to do with a car's gearstick. Other than that, I am, you know, not the most clued up on it at all so this again will be a kind of new experience for me.

So, there's two split screens here. One with a male and the other with the gearstick.

**[reading game text]** Use the mouse or gamepad, sound is important.

Oh. Ok. So, by clicking, he's starting the car. So, if I hold it. And the car's started, so, oh I see so moving it – moving the mouse up and down moves the – sort of revs up the car and I've changed gears.

**[reading game text]** An autoerotic game by Robert Yang. Stick shift.

So, oh I see, so moving the car as it revs is basically symbolising that it's turning it on, and I can see that its gauges indicate like a certain period of when to change gears as they are colour coordinated. So, I can – I can go as – ok, so I need to – Oh I see so I've changed gears now to go to gear three and the guy seems to also enjoy it. Can I go – can I move up and down with the mouse quicker. I can and so I need to go to gear four.

Ok so the guy's world behind him on his side of the screen is now spinning around as he clearly is visibly turned on. Wait. What. There are police. What did I do – so, the car stopped, and I'm now being spoken to by two police officers. And I can only move the guy's head with my mouse, nothing else is – Oh. Oh. I accidentally clicked it, and he blew a kiss to the officers and there's seems to be a timer on the screen that's counting down.

So, I'm guessing I can start it again till after this timer has gone down and because he's blown a kiss, the timer – albeit me accidentally clicking – the timer went up by another ten minutes. I'm not sure what it is I may have done wrong but for now I guess I'll just have to wait for this timer to go down and see if I can work out what happened again.

I'm assuming judging from this symbol on this timer that its sort of symbolic to a car overheating and maybe without realising I was a bit too head of myself – that I went too far, and this is a kind of punishment. But I think I'll return to trying this minigame again after this timer has gone down.

## Appendix 1.10 - Succulent Playthrough

[Recorded February 17, 2023]

This next minigame of the Radiator 2 collection is Succulent.

Ok so there's three very much almost naked men on the screen and I'm assuming all three of them are in their underwear or wearing some kind of jockstrap. My eyes kind of immediately were drawn to that the atmosphere seems very warm so I'm thinking that this is kind of reminiscent of like a gay man's sauna. Just because it seems like there's, you know, apparently – uh an apparent presence of sweat and heat over them. And the mouse I'm moving is moving this frozen ice lolly or popsicle stick object near the guy and as I move it upwards, he puts it kind of erotically in his mouth.

**[reading game text]** Succulent. A deep game by Robert Yang.

So, do I just move it around. I mean the icicle stick is clearly getting shorter and as I move it further into his mouth the camera zooms in. Do I just continue this motion.

I'm moving it around and it seems like the setting is getting brighter as I'm assuming he's getting more and more I guess turned on by it. Do I move it up and down or do I move it side to side. Do I go quicker.

So, the game's starting to, like, shake a little as are the two men in the background. Very awkwardly though I might add that they're sort of moving in a very jerky way and it's also getting a bit blurry.

As I'm kind of continuing this motion of going up and down which I can tell what its immediately kind of symbolising – Oh, I guess I came to the end of it. That its – it's pretty obvious that it's a game reference the act of giving a blowjob.

Um, and it's, sort of, just – it's just reset itself so I'm assuming it's done now. I'm going to try it again and just do a continuous constant I guess quick motion of up and down to see how the game reacts.

This actually feels kind of difficult to do with a mouse but like again like I'm feeling this sort of strange sensation that this is also an extension of myself in this regard.

So, the game's doing the exact same as it did before so – clearly it – it's sort of just symbolising the act of giving a blowjob and this kind of movement that I have with the mouse is it – it – my head's kind of connecting it to the motions associated with sexual acts in the first place.

The strange thing is though that as – as the game is getting more and more chaotic and shaking and blurring, it makes me feel like I've kind of moved faster with – yeah, I have, I've noticed I'm kind of moving faster with the mouse here that I'm kind of – knowing that I'm reaching this – this – this climax so to speak. Yeah. I didn't realise I had done that till I noticed – physically noticed that my hand was moving up and down with the mouse a lot quicker than it had done on previous playthroughs.

So, I think, thinking now that I've completed a second time of this game, that I clearly must've been so immersed in what was happening that when I could tell we were building up this kind of tension, I guess, that I immediately started performing quicker to try and get to that point of, you know, what is the game's climax.

So, yeah, that was definitely an unusual one – I've – I feel like such a game does kind of have that intimacy that I seemingly was quite lost in playing and immediately started getting more and more kind of intimately connected to the game and that then affected how I actually performed the game, in that I started moving a lot quicker because I was sort of having this sensation of this is it we are getting to the end point again and sort of put more emphasis and more, perhaps even, confidence in what I was doing.

So, it certainly is – uh – an unusual one. I will say though that during all this, the actual – the look that the game has given with like, you know, the three very much evocatively dressed men, um, that's all you have to kind of look at really which in some regards has actually added to the kind of appeal and I guess – uh – engagement I had with it. So perhaps because I had gotten lost in the game just now and found myself actually moving my mouse a lot quicker that perhaps I found the actual environment of the game alluring or – or kind of attractive in – in this kind of sexual way through this intimacy.

So, yeah there's a lot of – I feel like there's a lot of elements here that have kind of worked together to make this, forgive the pun, but make this steamy minigame. And that is the end of my playthrough for Succulent.

## Appendix 1.11 - Radiator 2 – A Post-Play Reflection

[Recorded February 17, 2023]

Just as a point now that I've had one playthrough of each of these three minigames that make up the Radiator 2 Collection, I can kind of see quite clearly how intimacy seemingly plays a part, that, you know, especially for Hurt Me Plenty and Succulent which were both games that I kind of had an idea of what I was doing, that I felt connected to the figure that was on screen and I think that's where the intimacy might lie.

So, you know, with Hurt Me Plenty, it – I felt very almost concerned for what is, you know, my in-game partner, as the spanking dom, and very much anxious that I was going to take things too far and it almost, you know, I think in some regards I started to think of them as a real-life counterpart, to almost respect them and their desires and their wishes. And so, because of that, I felt, you know, no compulsion to – to do whatever [I] wanted in the game because that would make said partner uncomfortable.

With Stick Shift I will see how my next playthrough goes once the countdown has, um, reached zero and I can play the game again. But it is kind of fascinating that there is such a, uh, mechanic in there. That, you know, game as well is something to do with intimacy in that it's about a guy very homoerotically being intimate with his gearstick so you know there's an allegory here about masturbation obviously but, it seemed difficult for me to really get a sense of it because I weren't clear on what it is I was supposed to be doing and I was more focusing on making sure I hit the correct gears and the correct colour coordinated points. Uh, perhaps that was the wrong approach, I don't know, but I became so focused on that, that maybe I wasn't paying an awareness to other things going on in the game's world that could've attributed to that kind of ending. So, I look forward to playing that one again, uh, to see maybe even reflect on what I've just done in comparison to – to a new playthrough for it.

With – with Succulent it's, you know, it's pretty clear to me that it is this, sort of, steamy game around, sort of, blowjobs and kind of has this motion of sexual acts with how you use – use the mouse, and now realising that my performance in the game immediately started speeding up when I realised we was reaching a climax is very surreal that I was – like Hurt Me Plenty – that I became so intimately connected to the in-game bodies whilst not necessarily actually being erotically drawn to them, there was still a sort of intimate interaction I was having with the game, that I seemingly, kind of, forgot myself and what I was doing and just went with – with the dynamics and the rhythm of the game.

So, I can see how all three operate around intimacy and I will say just as a – as a point that I find this – the game's opening, uh, menu screen of a bare-chested, a sort of, hairy bare-chested male visually appealing, um, so immediately I'm kind of already, sort of, engaging and thrust into this, sort of, homoerotic atmosphere which I quite like, so.

I look forward to returning to this at a later time and date, to maybe, you know, play some of these minigames again, but especially Stick Shift to see if I can maybe do something differently.

## Appendix 1.12 - The Tearoom Playthrough

[Recorded March 14, 2023]

So, this is Robert Yang's The Tearoom. Another one of his games that explore — kind of intimacy between queer identity and queer men and from I learnt about this, it was a sort of — I believe — described as a kind of historical game. So, I'm not entirely sure what this game will entail but we shall see so – here we go.

So, we are in 1962 and we're in a bathroom stall, and yeah it does say a historical bathroom simulator. 8 achievements. Look around, click and drag.

Ok so there's a lot of — sort of — graffiti in this that I can see. I can't really make out what some of these things may say but I can open the bathroom stall, so we'll see. Oh, I see so it's a click and drag type motion.

Ok so I can see a brief sort of graffiti on the wall that says, "fuck cops."

**[Reading game text]** if you see cops then leave the game.

Do – Do I move like this? Ok so somebody's just walked in, and I can flush the toilet, and I can hear the man next to me urinating and I can do that myself.

Um. Oh, ok, so I can look at the guy urinating, but his penis looks to be in the shape of a gun. It seems like he stops and that's when I'm supposed to look up.

I mean his — what I guess is supposed to be his penis getting longer with every look. This is very unusual.

Oh, so now I can — apparently lick it.

**[Reading game text]** click and drag.

Am I supposed to move up – Oh. Ok. So, I move it up and down as I am clearly giving this guy – you know simulating oral sex on him.

Oh – and by the looks of it he just ejaculated, and I've collected a gun. Ok.

That is – um – interesting. Ok.

Do I continue peeing or, do I wait around. Or do I go back into the stalls.

I've got the same message again. If you see cops, then leave the game.

So, the guy's just walked in and I feel like I'm supposed to pee first and – thing is now that I know that this is the kind of objective, I kind of feel the need to constantly look up at him. Though by the looks of it he wasn't interested as he's just left already.

So – this is so strange. I do – sort of – get this feeling of kind of anxiety almost because it keeps telling me to be wary of the police and even though I know that looking at these men are clearly my objective – clearly me looking at them peeing at the bathroom stall is a turn on for them – um – that's a very big gun.

I mean the police are outside and I can see that the guy is waiting for me to look his way. But are they coming in? So, I'm just going to go for it even though I can see that they are outside but – oh, the door's open. Does that mean they're here? Can I leave the game? I don't know, something told me I needed to stop. But I don't know whether that was the right decision.

So that ends the game. Huh. I wasn't expecting that. Um. Let's do another round, because part of me really wants to just see what happens even though the police were outside. It still says I collected one gun, so I guess that's something. Um.

So, let's start peeing again as somebody's just walked in. It feels kind of strange because I'm like – like peeking at him to sort of see if it's appropriate to look up yet and it feels kind of strange. Oh, the police are outside already.

Let's go for it. I don't know why I – I just feel the need to just keep going even though the game told me earlier that if I see them to leave.

So – this tongue action is – oh wow. Um. So, the sirens just suddenly happen, and I've lost my trophy. Have I just been punished? Ok, so it's restarted again, and I've gone back to having zero trophies. Um, let's try it again and see.

That – I mean he – I'm kind of struggling for words a little bit here because even though the game told me that if I ever saw the police to kind of leave the game, that was just – I kind of had this sensation to just go for it. But by looks like I've been punished for doing that.

It is quite comical though to see them use guns as their penises and the guns get increasingly – sort of – bigger the more you look at them. So that's guy's getting turned on quite a lot. I don't see the police outside so it should be ok. This motion of – like — moving up and down is quite comical.

It's kind of like a – I can feel my – oh wow. I – um – I was about to say I could feel my – sort of – hand quicken up as I was just trying to get – I guess – the guy to ejaculate in some form by firing his gun and now I come back to one trophy out of eight. Ok.

Can I flush this at all – what does flushing do?

I want to see how long it may be for the police to wait outside. They are not out there now – still not there. The door is still open though.

This is so strange I keep feeling the need to look out the window to make sure that they are not there. This is – ok I don't see them. I'm going for it. This one has a very long licking criteria with like twenty. But I still constantly feel the need to check.

That one took a while to complete, and I've attained a new gun so – um, yeah, two out of eight. Still no police as of yet, but I can feel like this anticipation and that one just now where it took a lot longer that I was sort of rushing myself through because I wanted to get to the end of it. So, there's kind of like a – a sort of anxious – sort of urgency I had.

I don't see the police on this one. I guess he's not interested.

So, there was no cops on the last guy, and I don't see any on this one but – Oh ok so there's cops outside on this so I'm going to play it safe on this I think and just – not act upon it because I'm kind of nervous that it will do the same again. Does he leave though? Ok so he's not very happy with me for not engaging in the activity but – and then the police have drove off now.

I still feel like this – sort of urge to continue looping through this but I am conscious of how long this game goes on, but it was quite difficult to not engage in the activity with the guy then, because part of me did want to just to – to complete more trophies.

I am like feeling kind of nervous though that I am having to keep looking out the window.

I don't see any police yet on this one. Ok I don't see them so we will go for it. And that makes three out of eight. There's a weird sensation though that I'm feeling like because this is the objective of the game that I'm sort of waiting around for the next guy to come to set e if it's possible to engage in such an activity with them – and I feel kind of weirdly excited to see if it's possible to do.

I don't see any police officers on this one, but it looks like that he's not engaging in such an activity.

There's like a – I feel there's a kind of conduct and way of – like a progression of events with this that like you have to look at them and kind of nod in a sort of agreement to build up a kind of – I don't know, an intimacy of some kind. But I don't have long on this so this is – kind of making me feel pressure, and I don't see any police officers outside so.

So that one I feel like such a strong drive to get the deed done because I was like on a time limit, but I was also really nervous that like a police officer would show up.

So, I think now that I've — sort of — played a few and can see the aim is to do this I will leave this playthrough there as I've — sort of — gotten a good grasp of what this game – sort of – is about and, yeah, its – I can feel all these kinds of emotions around like anticipation and anxiety but also I kind of felt motivated to, in essence, try to get the guy off because the game had – sort of – given me a kind of objective in terms of getting the eight trophies and also to get it within the time limit so I could've chosen not to but every single time a guy came in I was kind of hoping he would want to do that kind of activity so I could then pursue that objective. It is quite – sort of comical – but sort of investing that when I was urinating as the character, I kept peeking to see if it was possible to start building that connection with the male that would walk in, in kind of hopes that I could achieve that activity. So, yeah, it – it's an unusual one. It's also very, kind of, nerve-wracking because I was really worried that a police officer would show up and my progress would go back to zero again.

So, I think, yeah – next time I play this I will have to see if it is possible for me to get to the eight trophy mark without being caught. I may have to be a bit more careful in my activity.

### Appendix 1.13 - Rinse and Repeat Playthrough

[Recorded March 13, 2023; Transcribed April 13, 2023]

So, this is Rinse and Repeat. It is another one of the games by Robert Yang and others by the looks of it. Already this kind of menu is giving me a good idea of what this game probably entails as there's two naked men showering so I have a sneaky suspicion that this is most likely going to take place in a kind of bathroom, but we shall see.

So, I'm in the bathroom and... oh okay so there's a group of men that's just walked in and their areas are censored, and I can look around, and that's clearly me in the shower.

Oh okay. Oh right. This sort of slow-motion slick soundtrack as this kind of hairy chested slightly muscular guy walks, like, to me.

How do I...do I... I can look him up and down but... [laughs] So, he's asked me to get his back. Oh, so I'm clicking and rubbing his back. Do I go quicker or slower? This is very, um, I mean I'm feeling a strange kind of way that I'm touching this random male's back as he's telling me to carry on.

99%? and I've gained a heart? Is this like an intimacy Builder? The urge to like just constantly drag the camera down to see nothing but a pixelated, like, genitalia. Although I'm now rubbing his abs. I can't stop doing it though because there's just something about me that just wants to see where this goes.

I've got a second heart now, but do I stop in any way, or do I have to... and now he's asked me to rub his.... Oh, I went a bit quick. I'm alternating between the two because it looks like that I have to do, like, both at the same time as this guy is clearly getting more and more turned on.

Oh, I only got 70% that time this is very — I'm really nervous to like... I'm going to like [---] it up. I did just slightly bring the camera down [laughs] um and that's it. He's left. What now?

There's like clock that's appeared that's...says 26 hours 48 minutes and 20 seconds. Oh. Oh, wow, okay so on the wall there's actually a sort of calendar that — it's got today's date and the clock is now saying that it's 10 past 7 and on the calendar it says that March the 13th between 6 and 7 was Death Pilates with Hunter and then it's got Tuesday March 14th from 9 till 10pm. I wonder if this is actually the — the times that I'm supposed to play the game?

Yeah, it doesn't look like I can do much else, so I guess what I'll have to do is see what happens if I play this game tomorrow between 9 and 10pm.

Yeah, that was, um, that was interesting. I didn't really know where to look but there was a constant urge to constantly look — look up and down the guy as he was sort of telling me to massage him. Um, yeah, I guess I'll just have to see what tomorrow brings. I am... I don't know a little bit disappointed I guess because I wanted to carry on to see where it would go but looks like I have to wait. Okay. I guess I'll play tomorrow and hopefully it goes maybe slightly further.

## ***Appendix 2 – Autoethnography: Practice Reflections***

### **Appendix 2.1 - Day 1 – Nostalgic Sensations**

[Recorded November 9, 2022]

It is mid-afternoon when I write this. I sit at my desk, calmed, supposedly conducting my thesis business as normal – but there seems to be something else, something slowly increasing. I recognize this to be anxiety, perhaps I was not as calm as I had thought. Perhaps it is not a “normal day.” No, today is a day in which I begin a personal exploration into the world of adult gaming.

I feel nervous – or is it exciting? Am I thrilled, or hesitant? I smile realising that that I’ve been building to this moment, so perhaps it is excitement I feel? From my Masters to now, I have slowly been heading here – the day I begin to see these games for myself.

I look at the space in front of me: my desk, my laptop, notepad. I am struck by anxiety, or is it anticipation, but either way it is ethereal. I am overcome with these complex emotions. I think to how I got here, realising that I had been conducting my thesis work subconsciously, always moving from one state to the next instead of reflecting to me, myself, and I. Since the beginning, I had always been prepared to think about “me” in this thesis, but now it has finally come. I think to “me”, and I slightly find myself short of breath, tense, foot tapping on the floor. Perhaps it is indeed anxiety.

I smile again, reminding myself about how this moment came to be. It is both anxiety and excitement I feel, with all the literature I read and the games I have come across, I am ready. An epiphany hits my mind, and I am flooded with a euphoric sensation of acceptance, for I realise that adult video games have now become a part of my life – even more so, I feel a sense of warmth, recognising they have been beside me for some time. Can I refer to myself as a “player of adult video games”? I feel uncertain, or is it nostalgic?

I laugh ever so slightly to myself, thinking of my journey. My Masters where I got my first “taste” of such media, even more so gay adult video games as I am a gay man after all. I ponder on the assignment that provided me the space – it was broad in scope for a young researcher to choose their topic. My nostalgia is mixed with thrill, as I compare it towards now. Both moments feel the same.

I think back to why I attended university in the first place – a screenwriter – but thinking of my aims back then feels awkward now. Like it does not belong in my life. I feel no attachment to it. I did not know that video games were on the cards for me, as an avid video game player. But finding something to focus on? I remember feeling

disappointed. No motivation for anything I was a “geek” over when it came to video games. I further remember asking what it was I could explore? What truly sparked my interest? Nostalgia mixed with disappointment runs through my body – I remember struggling to find anything I could explore.

Then, my memory reminds me of a headline I had come across in a gaming publication about a dating simulator game – a visual novel – one which allowed you to pretend to be a “dad” and “date other dads.” As the same was then as it is now, I am overcome with a sense of drive and motivation. I remember laughing with friends at the absurdity and uniqueness of its concept – dating other dads? The premise sold itself. For me, in comparison to them, I laughed at something more, as “Daddy” was a term I came to know and describe a particular male form and performance within gay pornography. The older, masculine, and occasionally muscular, male. Excitement and anticipation – as it is the same now – I found what I wanted to explore.

Dream Daddy is not explicit or erotic in comparison to some of the material I have discovered during my time within a PhD – the game made and still makes me feel warm, happy, comforted in its light-hearted free presentation. But another game I had come across soon after motivated me even further: Coming Out on Top.

Another dating simulator, but way more erotic, explicit, and crude. The contrast had struck me as shocked then, but “normal” now. Coming Out on Top is more sexy, alluring, and spectacular. It was the first game I recognised as “adult.” I love that game – thinking to it to it now, I feel the same thrills. I remember feeling intrigued, and even allured, to the advertising images that expresses all these (albeit it) drawn men who were all topless, athletic. Then as the same now, I am enticed by the eroticism, their display of their muscularity and masculinity. Is it that wrong? I ponder on this, and perhaps feel a bit of shame, but as I think more – no, I feel secure and realise that I do not care. I enjoy this game and that’s what matters.

Such a question though provokes me to remember the previous times I felt shame, and guilty, when it came to studying this material – at least, that is how I could describe it. I remember asking myself continuously: was looking at such explicit material wrong, such a taboo topic for many, was it wrong of me to do so? How would it be perceived by others? My family? I realise now that I was feeling guilt then, but no longer now.

I am still feeling unsure as to where this guilt truly came from? What had made me feel guilty? Was I ashamed to look at such material, or even know of its existence? Was I uncomfortable to potentially play these games? My upbringing was a safe and open environment, where exploring my sexuality and gender was welcomed. Discussing sex is not frowned upon in my family, we just do not speak about it. I think about whether

this might be down to me still making sense of my sexuality, although it feels a little comfortable to focus on that now. I shift that thought away. But I remember thinking the need to know about these games was too overwhelming. It feels silly now to feel so guilty back then, as I feel such acceptance with having these games in my life now.

Each key I press continues to think of the nostalgia of playing them during my Masters, completing more work around them, and I am smiling. The guilt has since been no more. The shame, entirely gone. Studying these games, and being around these games, are now who I am. I enjoy these games – both as a researcher and a player. They offer me a wealth of research material and an escape from reality into something completely different and occasionally absurd. I feel a sense of pride, claiming my interest in them, providing me with laughter, sexual and emotional thrills, and an imaginative space to forget my day. I ponder if my nostalgia will return when I go back to replay them...

I think about what they offered me, realising I felt liberated. A complete freedom that allowed me to shamelessly indulge in my sexuality. I wonder if my interactions with them have indeed shaped myself in some way, that by finding “me” in the game, I had discovered or even rediscovered myself? Had I taken something from the game, or had the game given me something?

I feel a sense of anxiety again, or perhaps thrill? Right now, with these last few words, I am struggling to work out what it is I am feeling. I have picked the games to play that most intrigued me, maybe even inspired by my short time with Dream Daddy or Coming Out on Top? Will I have the same experiences again? Will I discover myself again? Will I learn nothing? Will I feel the same sense of shameless embracing of my sexuality, being attracted to the characters, events? Will I find myself embracing the same sense of thrill, euphoria, and emotional pleasure they once gave? It is nerve-wracking to open myself up in such a way to research, or is it exciting and relentless to do so?

All these sensations continue to flood my mind. Documenting my emotions is no easy task – where do I start? Where do I stop? What’s the line, or is there a line?

I feel a sense of security and safety knowing how it is I have gotten here. All these questions I have, ones that I am taking with me, still uncertain as to how I feel.

No. I am excited. That is indeed the feeling. Joy.

## **Appendix 2.2 - A Change in Approach – Doing Autoethnography Through Playthrough Recording**

[Recorded February 9, 2023]

A brief update to how I conduct my autoethnography.

Since the start of my PhD, and the beginning of this data collection period, I had proposed to conduct an autoethnography that required me to narratively write down my experience playing these games, focusing on my emotions/feelings and thoughts. This is how I have had indeed conducted my autoethnography for those games I have already played and documented to this blog.

However, as this data collection has continued and I still have plenty more games to play, I have reached a point in which I felt like it was difficult to remain immersed in the world of the game. Up until now, I had been having to play the games and then once a point I wanted to say came up, I would then have to, in essence, “pause” the game and shift to a separate document to construct my thoughts. But it had started to feel like I was almost writing more as a researcher than a player as my mindset had already shifted from being immersed in the game to writing something academic. Therefore, it started to feel a bit inaccurate to my actual experience and was not capturing effectively capturing the initial reactions to the game’s content as I was hoping.

Following from conversations and another ethical review, I have since been conducting my autoethnography by way of recording playthroughs, using a microphone to generate a recording of my stream of consciousness whilst playing and utilise a transcript from that. Conducting the autoethnography in this way has proved to be more appropriate in keeping me positioned as a player (I guess taking inspiration from all of the YouTube and Twitch gamers).

So, my autoethnography has been updated in its approach to now utilise a recorded gameplay practice capturing via microphone my thoughts and feelings as opposed to “pausing” and “writing.” I have used OBS Studio and its closed capturing system to generate a transcript whilst playing these games.

All future posts around games I have played during this autoethnography has been conducted using this new practice, with the transcript “proof-read” and then posted. This will be the continued approach going forward throughout conducting my AE.