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Corporeality, Identity, and Digital Culture: Gender and Sexuality in Video Games

Corporeidad, Identidad y Cultura Digital: Género y Sexualidad en Videojuegos

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-CHAPTER 1 - Insert Coin: Introduction-

Despite the more general title of my dissertation (a title that results from the need of making my research interests more legible in the sea of ANECA and departmental establishments), this text studies the representation of queer gender and sexual identity in video games. The first chapter of this dissertation is, irremediably, the introduction. I have been fighting for months for a way of finding an innovative form of opening this book, but the evidence has shown me that I cannot truly escape from the need of easing you, reader, into what this dissertation is, and is not. As a starting point, I will begin by explaining what this chapter really is.

Due to relative recent surge of Game Studies (the studies of video games and the technologies and people involved with them) and its status as a not-so-well-known field in Spain, I believe that an introduction to this area of research is mandatory. This introduction is, then, an explanation and short historical account of what the academic field of Game Studies is, and an explanation of where this dissertation is positioned within the field. However, due to the specific topic of this dissertation (more about this on the next paragraph), I have divided the introduction to Game Studies into two sub-sections: A more general account of the field (what Game Studies is interested in, what it does, who the main authorities are), and a review of the ways the constructions of users' identities have been

studied in the field. From there, the dissertation gears up to more expansive, yet interrelated, topics[1].

Chapter 2 presents a detailed account of gay, lesbian, and queer portrayals of sexuality and non-normative understandings of gender in video games, more specifically JRPGs (Japanese Role Playing Games). For the most part, this section depends on my own gaming experience across the years and it links the emergence of historical discourses about gender and sexual norms in Japan with identity representations in Japanese games. My focus on JRPGs for this section is based on three criteria: First, the study of JRPGs allows me to delve into a genre in which gameplay and story are both important. This, in turn, lets me speak about processes of identity formation in these games in relation to the actions players must perform during gameplay while contextualizing these actions into an overarching plot. Second, the fact that JRPGs spend a significant portion of time fleshing out their stories (some JRPGs I am analyzing require more than 100 hours to complete), causes them to offer more nuanced identity depictions. Finally, I have been playing JRPGs all my life, they are the genre I know the most about, and they serve as a great example for non-Japanese audiences of the current Japanese media-mix. After chapter 2, I will increasingly pay less attention to issues of visual and plot-

[1] I am aware of the tendency to include this type of summary at the very end of the introduction. However, I firmly believe that having this summary at the very beginning of the dissertation contributes for a better layout and easier referencing of the overall structure of my text.

related identity representations in order to focus on how video games, as a technology (or set of technologies), construct and foster certain types of identities with their users.

Chapter 3 studies the relation between identity and choice. Video games are an interactive medium that seemingly provide players with choices. Choice can be understood in a literal sense (as a selection from a list of other possibilities) or in a more fluid way as each of the actions players decide to perform within the range of actions each game allows its users. The chapter analyzes the ideological implications of choice with questions such as 'What is included/excluded within/from the range of choices?' or 'To what extent can players make free choices?' The main idea in this chapter is that choice is always limited, with different degrees of complexity, to pre-configured paths, branching-like options, and scripted events. In this regard, the chapter borrows from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's ideas (1977, 1983, 1987) and aims at demystifying notions of interactivity as freedom or rhizome-like exploration and flow in order to present choice as sets of pre-established, well-defined lines. This chapter prepares readers for chapter 5 by introducing computer code, the cause for the binary nature of choice in video games, as a determining element in the construction of identities in this type of media.

Chapter 4 leaves software temporarily behind in order to pay attention to one of the main pieces of hardware used in interactions between players and games; the technologies (traditional controllers, touch screens and motion sensor devices) used to control the action during gameplay. The actual purpose of this chapter is to situate tactility as a determinant form of sensory awareness and control exertion that is as crucial to processes of identity perception and identification as the visual and aural components of games are. This chapter considers tactile control in games as a form of physical performance on rails[2] that shapes the identities of players through each act. The chapter borrows Judith Butler's idea that gender identity and sexuality do not have fixed values but, instead, are actualized though individuals' performances in social contexts. Similarly, through its emphasis on tactility, this chapter seeks to distance video games from others forms of media, such as the cinema, where most of the attention has been paid to its visual and, sometimes, aural, aspects. Both the notion of limited, scripted choices on chapter 3 and the idea of performances on rails from this chapter relate to the binary nature the computer code composing video games. The relation between code and processes of identity formation in video games is the central topic of the fifth chapter.

[2] As we will see later in chapter 4, any performance depends on what is programmed in the game during and/or after (i.e. mods developed by fans) its development .

The main premise of chapter 5 is that computer code works similarly to how social norms manage identities in real life. Computer coding is therefore studied alongside a secondary type of coding: social code. In this regard, the chapter analyzes how computer code affects and is affected in return by the social norms that surround any game during its development and eventual contact with players. My analysis of identity in this chapter goes beyond the human in order to include an analysis of animal identities as well. This move serves the purpose of exemplifying how identities, regardless of their nature, are subjected to similar process of double coding; that of computer code and social identity norms and perceptions. This chapter builds up on scholarship in Media Studies, Animal Studies, and Software Studies in order to create its own common ground for a proper understanding of the relation between code and identity.

Finally, chapter 6 continues the study of code and human and animal identity from the previous chapter and tries to find example of non-normative identities in video games. To do so, this chapter utilizes non-humanoid and non-animal examples (e.g. flower petals, sand or microscopic cells used as avatars in games) to suggest novel forms of thinking about human relationality. Taken as another coded, designed objects, I sudty these non-human, non-animal avatars in video games as one of the potential main elements that set in motion not

only alternative representations of the human/non-human (chapter 2), but also a myriad of new choices (chapter 3) which relegate the human to a more peripheral position. These avatars also implement alternative control mechanics and haptic interactions (chapter 4) that expand notions of human relationality (both among humans and the outside world in a more general way). Before moving to all these chapters, however, I will position myself in relation to the field in a broad sense.

1.1. Game Studies. What is a video game?

The attempt to formally define what a video game is has been for years one of the main concerns of Game Studies. There has been (and at different levels still does exist) an easily perceivable tension between self-presented opposed positions when it comes to defining a video game. While understanding this tension may be important to familiarize ourselves with the field, I am not particularly interested in the discussion in its pure form. This is because I believe that borrowing ideas from all positions is far more productive than positioning myself in favor of or against specific opinions.

The two main positions in Game Studies are ludology and narratology. Key scholars have positioned themselves in relation to

this divide while others have been read as supporters of one of the two sides even if they were not formally interested in either of them. Ludology defends a formalist view of video games that understands video games as sets of rules that allow and limit players to act and relate to games in specific ways. Representational aspects of games, such as the fact that the unit with the largest health pool in a game is a male barbarian or that Mario saves the helpless Princess Peach at the end of many *Mario Bros* games, become subordinated to the formal, rule-based qualities of these games[3].

The main advocate of ludology has historically been Game Studies scholar Espen Aarseth. In "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation" (Aarseth 2004), he states that the desire to analyze games as interactive narratives depends on motives which are "economic ('games need narratives to become better products'), elitist, and eschatological ('games are a base, low-cultural form; let's try to escape the humble origins and achieve literary qualities'), [or stem from] academic colonialism ('computer games are narratives, we only need to redefine narratives in such a way that these new narrative forms are included')" (49).

Aarseth, however, does not negate the existence of narratives and stories in games, they are simply optional (some games happen to

[3] i.e. How much the unit which happens to be called barbarian is allowed to move or the programmed height of Mario's jumps in relation to the obstacles he has to overcome.

include them) and forever subordinated to the simulation and gameplay a game offers through its rules. Paying attention to these narratives, in fact, seems to be a misinterpretation of the field. He states "As long as vast numbers of journals and supervisors from traditional narrative studies continue to sanction dissertations and papers that take the narrativity of games for granted and confuse the story-game hybrids with games in general, good, critical scholarship on games will be outnumbered by incompetence and this is a problem for all involved." (54) The problem is that many video games may be what Aarseth calls story-game hybrids. Studying examples that consciously relegate the story to the back or ignoring the potential narrative aspects of hybrids in order to isolate a few chosen samples to define an entire field might result in another form of *elitist* or *eschatological* thinking. Games exist and are perceived as games independently of what scholars desire them to be.

In terms of perception, Markku Eskelinen, another historical strong advocate of the ludologist approach, states that "Luckily, outside theory, people are usually excellent at distinguishing between narrative situations and gaming situations: if I throw a ball at you, I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories" (Eskelinen, 2004). That is, according to this author, there is a clear division between the act of playing (e.g. throwing/catching

a ball as part of a specific game controlled by a set of concrete rules players decide to abide to) and the act of narrating that very act of play. Game Studies scholar Jan Simons (2007) comments on Aarseth and Eskelinen's ideas and explains that these two scholars perceive ludology and narratology as if involved in a present/past opposition. Simons uses Gonzalo Frasca's (2003) ideas,[4] to claim that scholars such as Aarseth or Eskelinen like to think that ludology researches games in their present-time form, when rules are active and affect the state of games in real time. For ludologists, narratology, on the contrary, is based on the academics' memory, their personal perceptions and retellings of events within the games that may not be related to any rule[5].

This point is, in fact, one of the most interesting points ludology has to offer, but it also entails the serious risk of cornering Game Studies into a very limited vision of games. In order to understand a game, digital or not, the rules and the different states players encounter in relation to those rules must be experienced and analyzed. However, surrounding those rules there are many elements that modify how rules enter into a game and/or are perceived by players. If we return to Eskelinen and his ball-catching

[4] Even if by 2003 Frasca could be described as a defender of a ludologist approach to game studies, he has shown a very wide, and interesting range of research topics that make him hard to classify using tags.
[5] Narratology, thus, encompasses the study of plots within games and their characters, but also retellings of fan activities, responses from players to specific aspects of games or analyses of the gaming-industry.

example it would be easy to accept the most important mechanic within such a game. However, there are factors that also modify the game which are not directly related to the rules. Let's imagine that players forgot at home one day the official ball the game expects them to use and they are forced to play with a smaller or larger ball. As they find it easier or more difficult to throw or catch the ball, players decide to modify some rules. Let's imagine that one player hates another one, so whenever she throws the ball at the other player, the hating player uses additional force and/or she ignores the hated player altogether. Or, let's imagine that one player is dressed in an easy-to-spot color, so, even if the rules assume that players should receive the ball a similar number of times, that particular player ends up catching the ball more times because of how easy she is to spot for other players. There is a large number of possibilities that may modify a game even if the rules remain the same. True, we could claim that with each modification a game ceases to be what it was to become something else. Or, alternatively, we could defend the idea that there is something such as a game in its pure form and consider all the other instances of play as spawn to be ignored. With either option, Game Studies may find itself at an impasse: Talking about games might be either extremely difficult, for rules evolve rapidly causing games to change slightly each time they are played, or

it may depend on describing a game as an ideal people never actually get to play. Instead, I think it is far more meaningful to talk about video games as a rule-based medium that becomes meaningfully contaminated by elements that manifest themselves before, during, and after play.

Given the topic of my dissertation, I would be easy to classify my work as orbiting around narratologist approaches to Game Studies. Indeed, there is an abundance of approximations to studies of gender, sexuality and identity in games that focus their attention on questions of representation, visual design, or player-avatar identification (Justin Cassell and Henry Jenkin's (2000) reader, some of Game and Gender Studies scholar Mia Consalvo's works (2003, 2007, 2009)[6]. However, while I am indeed interested in gendered avatar configurations, inter-personal relations in online games, or stories about romance and love, my study of identity, sexuality, gender and videogames explores some additional areas.

Taking Aarseth's cue that games are rule-based simulations that allow players to perform specific actions to fulfill concrete purposes, I move progressively from the more representational aspects of gender and sexuality in chapter 2, to analyses that consider the code-based and choice-based nature of games as central elements in

[6] I will comment on these authors (as well as more relevant scholarly work) later in the dissertation when they become directly relevant for the topics discussed in each chapter.

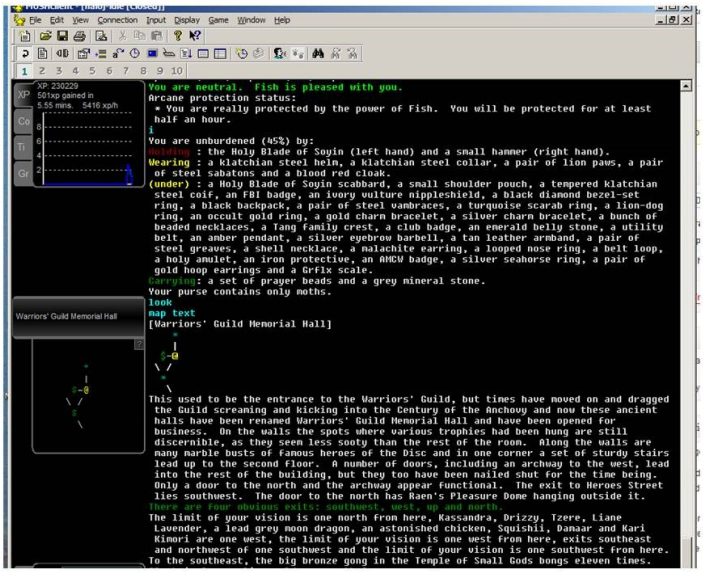
identity articulations. In addition, I am also interested in some of the more material aspects of playing, such as the haptic nature of player-controller interactions and its impact on identity. By doing this, instead of trying to define what a game is, I research the different modes video games *do* gender and sexuality while informing my discourse with existing understandings of the medium, which far from acting as opposing ends of a rope, help me tie together a better, multi-faceted analysis.

1.2 The Identitarian Machine: Playing with the Cyborg.

With *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle established what has become one of the main modes of studying identity formation in digital culture. In her book, Turkle discusses the relationship between user and machine while offering the reader examples extracted from her own experiences, as well as others', with *MUDs* [Multi-User Dungeons]. MUDs became popular in the 1980s among computer users with internet access. In a broad sense, MUDs unified the lore of pen and paper role-playing games [RPGs][7] and the connectivity granted by the net; they were text-based digital worlds (some of them incorporated basic visual representations years later) players could traverse, survive and

[7]Allucquere Rosanne Stone's *In Novel Conditions* (Stone, 1995) studies gender performance in online environments such as MUDs and chats and offers a detailed history on the transition of RPGs into MUDs with the advent of the first modems (65-82).

socialize by writing and inputting text commands. Some of them abandoned the fantasy setting of most MUDs in order to incorporate a more "realistic" one in which the worlds consisted in user-owned rooms each individual could describe through text and invite other users over. Turkle claims that users in this type of MUDs often took the textual descriptions of these spaces very seriously both as a form of personal introduction for other users and also as a way of creating space through textual descriptions [figure 1]. All types of MUDs, however, always had one thing in common: Users could construct their own virtual personas and be what they wanted to be. Turkle cites several examples of users using cross-gendered and undetermined sexed avatars, users who presented themselves as frogs, and one who 'was' a rabbit. When it comes to the formation of users' identity, the apparent freedom of MUDs can be considered as being, in some respect, more real than any form of user freedom advertised by most of the games I will be discussing during my dissertation. This is mainly due to the text-based nature of these virtual worlds. In "Live in Your World, Play in Ours: The Spaces of Video Game Identity", Sheila C. Murphy (2004) criticizes the oversimplified generalizations of new media scholarship when celebrating the capacity of computer mediated interactions to create a limitless number and forms of user identities.



[Figure 1: A screenshot from DiscworldMUD]

Text undoubtedly imposed several limitations in the way users could influence the worlds described in MUDs. Actions such as walking, jumping, or the opening of doors required that users would be constantly reading descriptions and writing commands. As a result, simple actions were performed at a slower rate than those performed in videogames where a single input, such as the pressing of a button, produces visual response users can automatically interpret. When it comes to the construction of the users' identities within virtual environments, however, MUDs have proven to be much more agile and fluid. Most MMOs and MMORPGs allow users to configure their avatars' appearance within different degrees of freedom. In this sense, users can often select their gender (male or female), their race (e.g. human, elf, gnome...), sometimes their skin color, and some or many of

other physical traits such as weight, eye color, cheekbone width, and chest size. Despite these affordances, however, the visual configuration of these avatars is always limited to the visual engine of the games as well as the options pre-implemented by its designers. When a game is released, its visual elements are entirely dependent on the designers' decisions.

One integral element of any game is choice. All games give players the opportunity to choose from a set of possibilities (e.g. the order of the actions they want to partake in, the visual appearance of their avatars, some decisions regarding the plot of the game, etc). However, the set of options players can choose from is always established by the designers depending on what elements they decided to include or exclude. Choice, in this regard, is always pre-conditioned and limited. MUDs work differently in some respects regarding choice: Text hinders some of the users' actions, but this textual dependency also grants them freedom. Users no longer depend on other people to design the visual elements constructing the characters, locales and other objects that form the world. Most MUDs contain whatever their users decide to create through writing. The limits are not based on pre-existing visual objects, but on what each individual is capable of writing.

Turkle's analysis on MUDs as well as and her discussion of the relation between users and machines rests on her conviction that users have total freedom when constructing their virtual identities. According to her, "MUDs make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion" (Turkle, 1995, 12). Turkle sees the identities that emerge from the interactions between users and machines as clear symptoms of postmodernism, understood a "the instability of meaning and the lack of universal and knowable truth" (18). In fact, when interacting with other users it seems that is not always possible to tell where are the limits between the real and representations of the real. For Turkle, "…virtuality tends to skew our experience of the real in several ways. One way is to make denatured and artificial experiences seem real" (235). Turkle does not necessarily perceive virtual worlds as spaces where one becomes something else (despite hinting at this possibility), but rather, as playgrounds for experiencing what it is like to act "as if". She does point out that the frontier between becoming and playacting is increasingly more difficult to perceive.

Since the publishing of *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle has influenced most of the works on player identity in the Game Studies field. This is mainly due to her vision of both software and users as texts that can be rewritten. Indeed, video games can also be read as

rewritable texts but, unlike MUDs where the main mode of representation is actual written text, this medium offers different degrees of "re-writeability". After all, modifying a visual element, including a new one, or altering the code that regulates the behavior of some of the characters in the game requires a number of conditions to be met: First, not all games running in all platforms offer the same type of openness to be modified and altered by users. Computer games, for instance, tend to be more open due to the fact that the technology used to run them, a computer, is also the one employed to modify them. Console games, on the contrary, are closed texts designed to be run by a particular configuration of hardware (i.e. the gaming console). Consoles do not allow their users to directly modify anything related to their games and they do not normally allow players to open, explore or access the contents of a game beyond its intended use, which is playing. This is partly caused by the fact that the hardware used to design console games (computers or development kits that functionally resemble computers) is different from the actual hardware players need in order to run these games (the consoles). As a result, there are computer games whose content can be extensively modified at several levels by its players, while console games often offer a more restrictive experience when it comes to changing elements of a game[8]. Second, modifying a video game requires either some

[8] The PC version of *Skyrim* has an extensive library of mods that change the visuals, gameplay and theme of the

knowledge of code editing or having some specific tools (e.g. some form of access to the engine of the game) at hand. The study of both the ability and inability to modify the content of a game is critical for analysing processes of identity formation in video games. Donna Haraway's claims are very helpful for this.

Some of Haraway's ideas in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (1990)[9] have become central to understanding identity and its relation with technology in the field of Game Studies. Inserting Haraway's discourse into one's own seems to have become over the years the main way of legitimizing any claim on gender, sexuality, and identity, and its relation with computers and the virtual. However, for almost every use of Haraway's ideas, there is substantial simplification of the actual scope of her work. One of her most generative formulations is the notion that the interaction between individuals and machines (computers) produces a hybrid, a cyborg, that surpasses the boundaries of its two constituting elements. For Haraway the cyborg is "a creature in a postgender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unit" (1991, 150). In this sense, many authors (such

game. Players of the same game on PS3 and Xbox360 lose, however, the option of modifying the game; limiting the game to what the designers include on the final build of the game or what they later added through patches or official downloadable content.

[9] Particularly chapter 8, A Cyborg Manifesto.

Helen W. Kennedy, Barry Atkins and Tanya Krzywinska) cite Haraway in a very thought provoking manner as the advocate of a free-flowing and ever changing identity that emanates from the interactions with computers. This vision of Haraway is true and useful. However, Haraway also offers a more pessimistic view of the person/machine union, one in which the end of identity boundaries is replaced by the absorption of means of control and management of modern societies into the body/machine. Cyborgs, in this sense, are constructs that restrict one's identity into pre-established, omnipresent, form. The end of the boundaries between the machine and the body means, in this sense, the end of the separation between the machines of power and individual agency, what Zoe Sofia (1984) calls "the final abstraction embodied in a Star Wars apocalypse" (48); a world where identities and wills are unified by the totalizing power of a central machine.

For the purposes of this dissertation, both readings of Haraway are useful. On the one hand, accepting the cyborg as a liberating agent opens the field of Game Studies to analyzing player-game interactions as enabling, potentially emancipatory, processes of identity formation. However, it is easier to tackle specific aspects of these processes each time instead of dealing with them all at the same time and as a whole. Helen W. Kennedy's "Female Quake Players and the Politics of Identity" (Kennedy, 2007) is a good example of

the study of concrete elements of game and their impact on identity. In her article, Kennedy offers an account of female *skinners*[10] in *Quake Arena* (an online multiplayer shooter) as users who find non-official forms of breaking the boundaries of traditional identitarian practices through their interactions with the computer (i.e. designing female avatars that break with standard modes of understanding gender and sexuality).

In subsequent sections of this dissertation I will also refer to Haraway's cyborg as the result of the sometimes hegemonic control held by normative discourses through technology. I seek to theorize and find actual examples were concepts such as interaction, affordances, and choice are not empowering elements in video games, but regulatory forms of discourse and identity control. This reading of interactivity is not far from Louis Althusser's ideas found in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," as it looks at both computers and software as being cultural *Ideological State Apparatuses* [*ISA*s]. According to Althusser, ISAs present individuals with accepted and normative forms of behavior; users (or addressees) of ISAs feel compelled to follow the behavior shown by these forms of discourse control and eventually reproduce what they are shown. In the specific case of video games, where players are often placed by designers into

[10] The term 'skin' stands for the physical appearance of avatar in video games. Skinners are users of a game who take on the role of designing non-official skins that are then used in-game by themselves and/or other players.

moral or identity-related dilemmas, choice acts as a form of behavior control. An example of this is *Dragon Age: Origins* [*DA:O*]. This game lets players have virtual sex with one of their virtual companions (characters in the game the player can recruit as allies). There are four potential love interests: A French-accented former female human assassin now turned into a nun; a knight male human who happens to be the bastard son of the king; a female and mysterious witch with unknown motives; and an elven[11] male assassin, with a French accent too, who has worked (and works) as both a hit-man and a prostitute. Players controlling a male character may have sexual relations (relations that may happen to be romantic too) with the witch and the two "French" assassins while female characters may court the knight and the two assassins. This means that any player may choose between gay (or rather, bisexual) and heterosexual partners. However, what may appear at first as the inclusion of a varied set of gender and sexuality-oriented choices, is not free from very specific moral connotations; particularly in the case of Zevran, the elven male assassin. Choosing Zevran as a gay sexual partners also means to establish inter-racial relations in a racist, slave driver world, to accept as a partner one of the few main characters marked as a foreigner, and to have as the sole gay option a character that embodies most of the prototypical traits of homosexual individuals as

[11] Elves are a destitute race in the game. One that is chased and forced into slavery by the dominant race; the humans.

well as most of the traits not found in most heroes (he is selfish, he lies and his motives do not align necessarily those of the player). Hence opting for gay virtual sex in *DA: O* adds additional implications that are not present in other, more neutral, options[12]. In this sense, choice and interactivity in video games may also serve to, sometimes unintentionally, promote a certain type of union between ideology and machine. Players then become ideological cyborgs encased under the restriction of ideological forms of discourse control and spread. However, as I will show later on, official discourses can be ultimately, albeit limitedly, beaten and redirected by the actions of users who, not only identify the ideology behind these *ISA*s, but also learn how to revert them. From this perspective both forms of understanding the cyborg are important as they both deal with interactivity from two different perspectives: as an enabling and as a limiting condition / potentiality.

Haraway's cyborg and the technological and ideological evolution leading to it can be explained using Jay David Bolter and David Grusin's ideas in *Remediation* (Bolter and Grusin, 2000). These authors explain that any medium evolves following two main principles: immediacy and remediation, each of them having two senses, epistemological and psychological, that are interrelated. In its

[12] In opposition to Zevran, Allistair, the knight, is handsome by western standards, seeks real love, and have noble aims in life

epistemological sense, immediacy "is the notion that a medium could erase itself and leave the viewer in the presence of the objects represented, so that he could know the objects directly" (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, 70). The psychological sense names the viewer's actual feeling that the medium has disappeared. In both senses, immediacy relates to transparency (in the first sense is a belief and in the other a sensation). Hypermediacy is, in a way, the opposite of immediacy: In its epistemological sense, hypermediacy stands for the fact that access to any piece of content depends on an ever-present medium (a screen, a speaker, a controller, a keyboard, etc.). Hypermediacy then equals opacity, or the viewer/user's acknowledgment that "the world comes to us through media" (Bolter and Grusin, 2000, 71). In its psychological sense, hypermediacy is the fact that users learn to think that the experience of the medium is indeed the experience of the real; it is the acceptance that the world can only be perceived through a mediating filter.

Immediacy and hypermediacy may appear to function as opposite forces, but instead, both work together to determine the evolution and creation of new media. For Bolter and Grusin, the media evolve in a way that hypermediacy is always the growing force, and sometimes the main motive, behind technological innovation. An example of this is the evolution of the e-mail: Starting as a tool designed for very

specific purposes (i.e. to be used at work), the proliferation of personal computers at home and portable devices users could carry at all times, means that the e-mail as well as the technologies involved with it gained more presence in the life of users. However, this technological evolution not only brings in presence, but also sensory quality. As technology evolves, better forms of representation appear, shortening the distance between users and content and creating the illusion of an ever-growing transparency, or immediacy. Hypermediacy in this sense is not contrary to immediacy, but complementary to it: The more a medium evolves, the more it mediates the world in a larger amount of contexts and situations while making its rendition more and more detailed and seemingly accurate.

Haraway's cyborgs benefit from this vision of media regardless of whether we see the union user-machine as enabling or limiting. In either case I would claim that, as technology evolves, the cyborg is both, and at the same time, less and more cyborg-like. With each technical innovation, the machine component in the user-machine union increases, expanding the areas of social life in which individuals are effectively cyborgs. Similarly, these devices also work to make their mediation more invisible or translucent, rendering the world they portray with greater degrees of detail. In this regard, the cyborg, as an enabling compound, is more of a cyborg in the sense that it

incorporates more types of media that accompany her at all time. But, at the same time, as interactions with the machine are made invisible, perceiving the union user-machine is made more difficult. Following the principles of immediacy and hypermediacy, the cyborg, as an enabling fusion, would not only break dualistic forms of understanding the self, but would do so constantly, everywhere, and more importantly, seamlessly. This would guarantee that the potentially positive functions of the cyborg would, with the passing of time, be incorporated effectively to all individuals, beyond their testimonial use of the personal computer. Ironically, this also has a more sinister turn: If the cyborg is not a liberating construct, but the realization of the regulatory forces of any given society, or an *ISA*, then the principles of hypermediacy and immediacy regulating the evolution of media would condemn future individuals into more potent forms of mechanical control that would be made, nevertheless, increasingly more invisible (á la *Matrix*). In either case, the formation of the cyborg and the identity discourses that come along with it are always based on the user's interactions with the media.

Interaction is a broad concept and it condenses different actions that must be identified and isolated. After all, interacting with a video game may signify to just play the game, to modify its

content to different degrees as modders[13] do, or to discuss the game in online forums. All of these practices put in motion different flows and exchanges of knowledge. The most obvious of these interchanges is the user-machine interaction but there is much more to it: Modifying the content of a game is not only a way of seemingly becoming the partial author of the game, but it is also a way to interact with other users. Some of these interchanges produce more direct and visible results than others, but all of them are part of larger discourses of identity that lie outside of the games. I will distinguish between the following three kinds of interactions when analyzing the interchanges between users, machines, and texts:

1. Interactions between users and video games as closed texts. This borrows from examples taken from direct analyses of the games. In these cases, video games are treated as closed texts containing specific content. My aim is not to focus my study exclusively on the most obvious traits of the games (the visual elements) but also on other aspects of interactivity critics rarely pay attention to, such as tactility— one of the main triggers of embodiment in the medium. Code will also be an integral part in the analysis of these interactions as I will show how discourse and ideology are actually encrypted as lines of texts and binary numbers. Authors such as Espen

[13] Skinners are a kind of modders. Modders are users who modify video games by changing their code, designing new visual elements, and creating new, non-official, playable content. MODs is what Modders do.

Aarseth (1997), Nick Montfort and Ian Bogost (2009), and N. Wardrip-Fruin (2011) have already shown how the study of code may lead to a better understanding of the process of designing and playing a game; I will extend their ideas to present identity discourses as being codified in video games through social norms and computer code.

2. Indirect interaction between users and games. The second type of interactions I will be looking at are cases of participatory culture that do not necessarily alter the original content of the game in any visible, direct way, but instead, create communities of knowledge that expand the way the game is interpreted, judge specific aspects of the games, or imagine new possibilities to expand the media object. The impact of these practices does not necessarily materialize in short term intervals, but instead, can be felt over time. An example of this would be the discussion forum of Bioware, the studio behind *DA:O*. Players used this forum to comment and complain about the limits the game imposed on non-heterosexual players. After having fans of *DA:O* discussing for months the sexual options of the game, sharing alternative pieces of fanfic, and giving tips on how to modify *Dragon Age*, Bioware finally said that they would be implementing their ideas on the next installment of the franchise, *Dragon Age II* [*DAII*] . In this regard, the forum did not only serve as a way of introducing new

readings into the original game, but also supposedly modified the way same sex relations were treated in future titles of the company.

This second approach to the research of the interactions between players and games takes on the lead of two classic studies on the field: Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) and Henry Jenkins *Textual Poachers* (1992). Both authors focus on communities of fans in different media, women's literature (Radway) and TV series (Jenkins), and the processes of unofficial meaning-making accruing around media objects created by fans. However, the digital nature of video games opens a third possibility beyond more traditional forms of fan-bonding: That of directly altering the code of the original media object itself.

3. Interactions between users and video games that modify the content of the game or the way it is played. These interactions are particularly useful as most of the time they represent a double re-codification of the norms contained in the games. This type of analysis borrows heavily from Henry Jenkin's views on participatory culture found in *Convergence Culture*. According to Jenkins, passive consumption of media is being replaced by convergence culture; a form of participatory culture in which, as the tile of his books preaches, "old and new media collide" (Jenkins 2006). As users consume media, Jenkins claims, they also borrow from and modify the source material

in order to create new media objects. Examples of this would be parodies or re-imaginations of certain events of a movie, re-interpretations of literary classics remediated into new technologies, or unofficial MODs of games. Most examples of participatory culture do not modify the original media object; they only spawn related texts. That is, making a parody of a film still leaves the original unmodified, and does not necessarily alter the ways in which it is seen.

In video games, however, a number of the interactions between fans and original media objects do modify the way the game is played. An example of this would be MODs[14] [modifications]. *Gay Allistair*, a MOD created by fans of *DA:O*, altered the code of the game in order to "trick" Allistair, the straight knight, into treating male characters controlled by the player as if they were female (thus, transforming Allistair into a romanceable gay option). Installing *Gay Allistair* was not compulsory in any way, in fact, only players who were remotely interested in expanding their virtual sex options in the game would create, search or install the mod. These practices, however, are important as they allow new forms of identity discourse to be inserted into the original interactions of the game. Sometimes, video games studios take full advantage of these interactions by

[14] **MOD**s are designed to modify certain elements of a game. They can alter some of the gameplay mechanics; the appearance of some characters; and, they may also add extra content (e.g. additional portions of the story designed by users).

giving players the tools to modify some elements of their games. *Neverwinter Nights* (Bioware, 2002) included a copy of its engine, *Aurora*, allowing for a relatively accessible creation of fan-based content, whereas the 2011 hit, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Skyrim* (Bethesta, 2011), has a Bethesta- and Steam[15]-managed compilation of user-created content that ranges from new weapons to improvements over the original visual and aural quality of the game. In these cases, giving the players editing tools does not necessarily originate from the developers' desire to introduce new discourses into their game, but from the attempt to improve the quality of the game itself with cheap (or rather free) labor while expanding the endgame in order to keep players interested until official, retail expansions are released.

Throughout my dissertation I will look at examples of these three types of interactions as cases of gender performance and performativity in the way Judith Butler (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004) understand the term. Butler rejects the idea of gender and sexuality having an identifiable, fixed value to instead affix a quality-bending capacity to the actions of individuals (i.e. becoming and doing hold hands in order to shape identities together). In a sense, Butler claims that individuals are what individuals do. However, it is

[15] Steam is one of the main gaming tools for PC gamers in the last seven years. It agglutinates an online shop players can pay and download digital copies of games from; it serves as a hub for mods and content generated by users; it gives indie developers a way of publishing their games; and it also provides players with forums for community discussions.

difficult to envision gender performance as a set of free-flow of actions individuals partake in without any social constraints. As Butler herself pointed out in *Bodies that Matter* (1993), there are always social ties that influence, and sometimes determine, the shape and direction of every performance. From this perspective, to perform is not to act independently of social norms but alongside *and* against them. I also understand player-game interactions as identity shaping and confirming performances in which agency is not always equally distributed.

Each of the three kinds of interaction I have presented above entails different degrees of player agency: Playing a game as a closed text involves acting along certain scripted lines under which players perform under very specific allowances and limitations. Romancing Zevran in *DA:O* is an invitation to perform as a gay character in the world of *Dragon Age*, but it is still a performance limited by a very specific discourse on non-normative sex. On the other hand, modifying the code of a game or even questioning it as part of a fan community still requires to act alongside the rules of the game by playing it, but also implies to act upon (e.g. to mod) the these very rules. Here, it is important to amplify the dual meaning of terms such as *code* gain when talking about video games and software in general: Code is present as the numerical, game-enabling structure in any video game,

but it may also be understood as the set of social discourses animating every game. In *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory*, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2011) presents code as "law" (Chun, 2011, 27). Chun explains that code is a self-enforcing law that governs everything within any situation in any piece of software. Code also adjusts itself automatically to respond to any action occurring within the digital space it governs: It does not unfold linearly, but "its value depends on intermediate results" (Chun 2011, 25), that is, depending on the actual processes occurring in the software different rules, lines of code and functions apply. For Chun, code is the ultimate evolution of "performative utterances"[16]. It is both the law that ensures that what is said is true and happens but also the utterance itself. However, outside the operating world of the code (the software itself), the law can also be rewritten and modified so that users break free of its enforcing cycle (just to create another one). Being able to read, write and re-write code is a way to make someone else's performative utterance into one's own.

This dissertation takes off from an understading of video games as coded texts whose designers, coders, artists, users, and commenters are also part of the social code within which any game is created. This is why the first step in my dissertation is to analyze the direct

[16] She cites Judith Butler in *Excitable Speech* (Butler 1997).

relation between gender and sexual identity norms and video games in order to specify what social code means. My study of video games, gender and sexuality will not be based, however, on questions of representation exclusively, but it will also consider the different elements that make playing a video game possible.

CHAPTER 2. Games, History, and Identity.

The PSVita game *Valhalla Knights 3* (2013) might not be good game. Reviewers say so, players agree and the game's poor sales support this idea as well. However, despite its poorly designed missions, bad controls, and uninteresting gameplay, the game has been consistently criticized for one specific mechanic, *sexy time*. During sexy time, players must interact with the female vendors in the game using the tactile screen on their consoles to touch, grope or kiss specific areas of the vendor's bodies in order to please them. Doing so causes the vendor to moan, blush, and reveal more parts of their bodies while continuously thanking players. These vendors remain still waiting for the players' actions, only moving to show more areas of their bodies. Succeeding during sexy time causes the prices of the vendors' goods to go down, new items become available, and, eventually, the vendor may become selectable as a fighter in the players' party.

Despite the fact that players may be controlling a female protagonist during these scenes, the vendors during sexy time are always female. Also, the screen never shows the avatar's actions directly, as it uses a close-up of the vendor instead that creates the illusion that it is the player himself/herself who interacts directly with the digital women. Because of this, female vendors in this game are, from my point of view, reified objects designed to please the players' desires or means to an end in the players' search of better

prices and items. Regardless of whether players are male or female, fulfilling heterosexual dreams, playing with their gender identities or simply looking for a discount, the fact remains that sexy time mirrors a tendency to portray women as passive objects that fulfill someone's desires (for sexual possession, release, punishment). Here, of course, I am borrowing Laura Mulvey's (1975) ideas while also expanding them: Objects of desire in video games are not only subjected to a male gaze, but more appropriately, to what I would describe as "gazes of power". This is, the objects of desire may be subjected to the gaze of anybody or anything capable of occupying an empowered position. The key, in the case of sexy time, is not only who is the gazer but also, and possibly more importantly, who has historically been the object of these gazes. In video games, as well as in other media, female characters have traditionally been portrayed as the passive objects waiting to be consumed by others.

Michel Foucault (1976) claims that both the object of desire and the subject who gazes at it are both produced by social and historical sources. This chapter follows Foucault's ideas to study the representation of gender and sexuality in Japanese Role Playing Games (JRPGs) in relation to Japan's historical discourses about these identity traits. While the rest of the dissertation focuses on specific aspects of video games in relation to identity (such as

gameplay, choice and identity, or code and identity), this chapter frames this type of media as being affected by historical and social discourses that directly shape the type of content video games offer. These discourses shape video games at all levels, such as their narratives, the choices they offer, and even the way gameplay mechanics are oriented.

Thus, this chapter shows how history and society structure new media objects and, how, in turn, these objects become tools that shape history and society in a retroactive ideological relation. This idea is not different from Louise Althusser's (1970) claims on the role of ISAs (Ideological State Apparatuses). In "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" Louis Althusser expands Marx and Engels' (1848) ideas on how the reproduction of labor power functions. For the French author, providing individuals with the means to survive (wages) or the skills to act as proper workers (education) does not suffice; for the reproduction of the labor power to function, the workers' subjection to the ruling ideology must be also ensured. The State (and therefore the State Power) is for Althusser an entity of repression and subjection. Individuals' subjection to the ruling groups controlling the State is achieved by two means: repression and interpellation. The main form of interpellation are ISAs, which can be further divided into educational, family, communications, and the

cultural ISAs. Despite this division, all ISAs function together and cooperate in order to interpellate (or call forth) each and every individual of any given society to act in specific ways while discouraging non-desired forms of being in society. Video games can be easily identified as an ISA.[17] This chapter studies JRPGs as a type of cultural object that interpellates individuals to act according to specific identities that respond to a concrete history (and histories) of Japanese gender, sexuality, and identity.

Several Game Studies scholars and compilations have established a direct relation between ideology and game content (Cassell and Jenkins 2000, Raessens and Goldstein 2005, Dovey and Kennedy 2006, Atkins and Krzywinska 2007, Bogost 2007, Wark 2007, Corneliussen and Walker Rettberg 2008, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009, Bissell 2010, Juul 2010, Sicart 2011, Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014). However, none makes an explicit connection between historical identity discourses of a specific national culture and the way these are reproduced in video games. The closest example would be Susan Napier's study of gender and sexuality in Japanese animation cinema (anime).

This chapter presents a brief recent history of Japan and it impact on gender and sexuality. The focus of this study is both the

[17] Despite being primordially cultural products, with the presence of video games in multiple social spheres, they could be placed in any of the four distinct ISAs in Althusser's division.

visibility of normative gender and sexualities in Japan as well as the invisibility of certain non-normative identities and behaviors. As this chapter will show, this historically-determined distribution of visibility and invisibility has been repeatedly reproduced by JRPGs across the years.

Scholars such as Justine Castell and Henry Jenkins (2000) claim that there is an significant absence of female characters in video games and that, when these characters do appear they do so as "damsels requiring rescue, or rewards for successful completion of the mission"(7). Alternatively, Christine Ward Gailey (1993) offers an alternative to female characters as passive objects in what she sees as erotized, evil female characters that must be beaten in punishment for their indecorous behavior. The *Valhalla Knights 3* example, in a sense, follows to an extend Castell and Jenkins' idea. Nevertheless, in Japanese video games, the role of women as passive objects and rewards is only one among many other roles female characters fulfill. As this chapter will show, there are specific gender and sexualized roles, such as the ones I have just mentioned, that are indeed pervasive in JRPGs. However, as we will also see, these games also reproduce many other identities that also belong to specifically Japanese historical discourses about gender and sexuality

and that, from a Western perspective, are much less normative[18] than identities found in Western games. This chapter unearths the history (or histories) of gender and sexuality in Japan to then analyze how these discourses relate to identities found in JRPGs.

2.1. A History of Japan's Gender and Sexuality.

Japanese history is broadly divided in periods. From 1868 (marking the beginning of the Meiji Period) onwards, each period coincides in time with the reigning of a specific Emperor who in turn shares his name with the period in which he rules (i.e. Emperor Meiji/Meiji Period and Emperor Showa/Showa Period). Before 1868, periods described broader periods in time similar to the way western terms such as *The Middle Ages* refer to a set of specific centuries.

The year 1868 is probably one the most important dates in the history of Japan. First, it marks the crowning of Emperor Meiji as the central figure in Japan's politics as well as the figurehead of Shinto beliefs. Previous Emperors were mere traditional and religious figures whose power was completely subordinated to that of the shogun's, the central national lord who ruled over local lords called daimyo. Emperor Meiji, however, unified the traditional role of his

[18] They are still normative from a Japanese perspective, though.

predecessors with the political and martial prowess of former shoguns. By doing this, Japan merged politics and religion into a single figure.

As Andrew Gordon (2008) states, whose ideas I summarize in the following paragraphs, the rise of the Emperor as both Japan's religious and political leader worked in conjunction with the Shinto vision of a nation as a giant, sacred household. The Emperor was also to be seen as the sacred father of this nation-wide family. In a similar way, the Meiji Government came to portray each family as a holy social unit in which men occupied a much local, but still spiritually sacred, position of leadership. Just as all Japanese citizens were the Emperor's loyal vassals, every member within each individual household was expected to act as the vassals of their respective home and family leaders. This included, of course, women.

The Meiji government quickly embraced the Shinto idea of women as silent, caring vassals whose role was to support their families within the walls of their homes. In order to support this vision, the Meiji Government took a very active role in producing identity discourses that reproduced this particular vision of gender.

Gordon has shown that the paradigm of female virtue was the ryōsai kenbō[19]. This figure was a paradigm of love, commitment, and wisdom. She was conceived as a silent subject to both her husband and the Emperor. Her main task consisted in supporting her husband at home and providing the nation with new loyal vassals highly instructed in Japan's traditions and values.

Shinto beliefs, including this particular vision of men as their household's spiritual leaders were not new in Japan. In fact, religion had been an important guide for the everyday lives of members of the samurai class, the only literate class during the Edo Period, for centuries. Commoners, in turn, were alien to the belief and practices of the upper classes. The rise of the Emperor as the figurehead of both politics and religion brought tradition to every vassal, making them subject to both the new Emperor, but also to a set of ideas, beliefs and practices that sanctioned this figure as their holy leader. However, 1868 brought on more changes at a national level than this expansion of existing religious traditions.

Gordon explains that 1868 also marks the beginning of a commercial treaty with the United States of America that opened the Japanese borders to the exterior. This was, of course, critical for

[19] Meaning good wife, wise mother.

the modernization of Japan in technological terms[20], but it also meant the arrival of new religions, languages and cultures. Both foreign literature and religion introduced new concepts, such as romantic heterosexual love as a goal, that were absent from Japan before Meiji times and that were all quickly adapted by the Meiji Government to create a new sense of what being Japanese meant. For women, this introduction of foreign concepts created a dual ideal: while being the ryōsai kenbō was the final goal for all women, romantic love opened new possibilities for women who were still on the way to becoming good wives and good mothers. This is, while women's goals were fairly set by social norms, the opening of the national border meant an increase in the number of acceptable, temporary (or transitional) identities. Let's study these transitional examples.

2.2. The Path Towards Good Wives and Wise Mothers: Lesbians, Dreamy Girls, and Unacceptable Sexualized Adults.

Gender Scholar and Historian Vera Mackie (2003) offers a very detail account of the role(s) of women after the beginning to the Meiji Period. The final decade of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th Century in Japan represented a continuation of the social and

[20] In fact, 1868 marks the end of the Edo Period which can be broadly described as the Japanese equivalent to the Middle Ages.

political trends established at the beginning of the Meiji Period. The beginning of Japan's war activity in China during the First Sino-Japanese War (1984-1985) and the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 put Japan in the center of a continued armed conflict that did not end until the end of World War II. In addition to the direct repercussions to the national economy of that time, the Japanese government grew into a perfected machine designed for the creation of loyal subjects.

Natural disasters, such as the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, which destroyed Tokyo and several adjoining prefectures and left over 140.000 casualties, together with human-created catastrophes such as the extreme strain caused by WWII and the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, were all used by the central government to call forth ideal subjects who were ready to sacrifice their lives for the benefit of their nation. The ryōsai kenbō is the female version of this ideal subject.

Submissive to their male household leaders, but firm in their role as educators of future generations of loyal subjects, the ryōsai kenbō was portrayed as the main and only goal for women. However, as stated earlier, the transitional identities prior to this final state were flexible and not as regulated as might have been expected. Gender and Japanese Literature Scholar Michiko Suzuki (2009) supports this

idea and explains that female identity was not portrayed in pre-WWII Japan as a two-stage transition from childhood into adulthood. Instead, becoming a ryōsai kenbō was more a process of experiencing love in several forms in order to be able to apply it later in life as a mother-wife. Among these transitional experiences, being involved into homosexual romantic love was not only tolerated, but encouraged. As Suzuki states, the general vision of homosexual love was that of a "rehearsal for entry into adulthood, that is heterosexuality and motherhood" (27). Educators tended to see this form of love as a learning experience "in order to discern true love in the future, to avoid being led astray by falsemen and their shallow promises of romantic love" (37). Suzuki points at the segregated education system as the main context where this type of love took place. However, there is at least one main place where homosexual female love: shōjo (shōjo meaning young girl) literature and manga.

Deborah Shamoon (2008) also mentions the post-1868 segregated education system were homosexual love was permitted, but she pays more attention to the also State-controlled publishing industry specialized in shōjo content. As Shamoon claims, shōjo literature and manga depicted same sex-romantic love, but it also promulgated ideals about purity, honesty and self-sacrifice that were completely aligned with the agenda of the central government and with normative ideals at

large. However, Shamoon, reading Foucault, also points that this form of homosexual love did not mean that homosexuality was seen or understood as a form identity, but was instead perceived as a temporary trait leading to something more definite: heterosexual marriage. According to Shamoon, "same-sex desire should not be read uniformly as evidence of a more or less repressed lesbian or gay persona" (139). Mizuki Takahashi (2008) also supports this idea by stating that shōjo content was, from the beginning, marketed to young audiences who were in the process of maturing and changing. Homosexual practices were thus seen as pure and innocent experimentations. Takahashi's research shows that shōjo manga, in fact, promoted "the innocence and sweetness of the shōjo [i.e. young girl] by describing her verbally as a 'fresh flower in the field'" (117). Fresh flowers, apparently, can experiment with different practices without being attached in return to specific identities. D.P. Martínez (1998) stresses the importance of understanding and analyzing representations of gender and sexuality in Japan as processes of becoming, where actions are not necessarily linked with identities but with transitions to other forms of being.

Japanese popular culture borrows from this idea and makes change and transition one of its major themes. Japan Studies Scholar Tom Gill (1998) points out the contrast between the continuity of some

traditional Japanese art forms, such as haiku, cherry blossom viewing, or sumo, and the change and transformation depicted in popular culture. Change can be found in the themes and stories told by popular media, but it is also presupposed as an inherent trait of the audience to which these texts are addressed.

The idea of transition is critical to understand identities portrayed in Japanese popular culture. As Japanese society changed, the expected roles of women within society also started to shift even if their final goal was still clearly inspired in the ryōsai kenbō. Masami Toku (2007) explains that shōjo manga evolved from a male dominated industry pre-WWII to a form of expression for female writers to reflect on their own dreams and desires. These desires and dreams were, however, for the most part always within the normative discourses of the central government. In terms of content, shōjo manga and literature evolved from a genre in which protagonists experienced romance candidly (sometimes with other young women) before WWII to a more diverse medium were female leads also experienced romance while taking a more active role in problems that affected entire sectors of society. Robert J. Smith (1987) claims that this was the result of the actual need for women to take part in the wartime efforts as nurses, household heads in families whose male members were fighting or dead, and factory workers in areas where all male citizens had been

conscripted. After the war, as Japan started to become one the leading industrial nations and a larger workforce was needed, women continued to work outside their homes. They, however, faced harsh conditions and enormous discrimination. Historian and Gender Studies Scholar Andrew A. Painter (1996) explains that "shokuba no hana" [flower of the workplace] was the term used after the war to summarize the expected role of women who worked: smiling and supportive employees capable of helping/nursing their male co-workers. Also, as explained by Painter, women were expected to work in order to support their parents and only until they were ready to get married and then help their husbands as devoted housewives.

Even if small, the changes brought to women after the war affected the ways they were portrayed in popular media. Post-WWII female leads in popular culture displayed a more active attitude towards the problems they faced and began to see themselves in situations set beyond traditional female settings—households and all-women schools. During this time, stories began to move away from the daily lives of flowers confined in secure cages to focus more on the suffering of female leads who found true love because of their virtue, servility, and perseverance. Alternatively, stories with young female children as protagonist revolved about the reunion with lost family

members or the reconstruction of family structures despite irreparable loses[21].

In addition to the changes in society itself, Toku points at two additional factors for this change in the way women were portrayed in shōjo manga. The first is the way the father of modern manga, Osamu Tezuka, broke several tendencies in the way gender, sex, and sexuality were portrayed from the 1950s onwards. Toku highlights the number of different roles Tezuka assigned his female characters as a step away from the classic vision of women as pure and innocent. This is true. In fact, even if Toku does not give any specific examples, is it easy to find some in most of Tezuka's major works beyond *Astro Boy*. Tezuka makes women the cause of never-ending suffering in heterosexual relation in *The Book of Human Insects*, the victims of rapes and brutal murder in *MW*, and the disposable casualties of warfare, terrorism and madness in *Adolf*.

This varied, and bleak, vision of women did not dominate the way women were portrayed from that point onwards, however, according to Toku (2007), it broke some taboos and invited other artists to think of new possibilities for the representations of female leads. Such is the case of an entire generation of female artists know as *24 nen gumi*

[21] These losses being often the death of the mother. In these cases, stories would revolve around girls learning how to replace their lost mothers.

[the Magnificent 24] born around 1949[22] and who, inspired by Tezuka, came to dominate the shōjo genre and changed forever the ways these stories unfolded. From this point on, shōjo manga stopped being exclusively focused on the daily lives of the female leads in favor of sci-fi, historical and magical adventure settings. Even if romance was still a very important part of the stories, as well as the main motivations for the protagonists to act in their worlds, shōjo manga began to show more complex situations with evil villains and overarching plots.

These new, young artists also brought a new major change to shōjo manga. In the works of many female artists, homosexual love between young girls was replaced by homosexual love between young boys. These boys were portrayed as pure and innocent, just as female lovers in the initial stages of shōjo were. However, this new type of pairing was seemingly based, according to Shamoon, on the idea of sameness; that is, shōjo manga artists portrayed young male lovers in ways that were easy for readers to identify with and relate to them. Mari Kotani (2002) supports this idea and claims that the use of male bodies as the medium for romance and love could be understood as "the desire of women to appropriate the idealized masculine images constructed by male-centered ideologies for themselves" (398). Male

[22] 1949 is the year 24 in the Showa Period. Magnificent 24 refers to this.

lovers were portrayed with feminine traits and delicate demeanors, and came to resemble their female shōjo counterparts in most physical aspects. However, the prospect of reading about male romantic pairs who, precisely for the fact of being male, would grow into adults unaffected by the limitations imposed on women gave female readers the opportunity to fantasize about their own lives[23].

Despite these changes, two aspects of shōjo manga remained intact (and still do) through the 20th century: First is the idea that young girls experiment with a variety of actions and practices that are just temporary. Therefore, homosexual love or desire, or habits that are not desirable for adults, such as clumsiness or sluggishness, are acceptable as long as they are understood as transitional. Secondly, the idea of the ryōsai kenbō as the goal every young girl should try to aspire to remained intact as well. This means that despite the news stories and situations, with heroines with super-powers capable of doing impossible feats, shōjo manga would circle around plots whose protagonists would come to accept their roles as protectors and supporters of their loved ones and of society more broadly. As most stories in shōjo manga progress, clumsy, childish, independent or even masculine heroines, come to accept that their powers are meant to protect or to heal others and that love is the

[23] This new vision of romantic male pairings in shojo manga gave birth to more direct, comical, and, oftentimes, explicit gender: Yaoi. Yaoi manga is a more overt genre addressed directly to women depicting love and sex between two men.

main motivation in life. While they are doing their best to protect the world, these female protagonists learn to value heterosexual love too.

This clear-cut path towards gender appropriateness for heroines greatly facilitates, in turn, the construction of antagonists: First, with the perception of non-normative sexual and gender behaviors being transitory, individuals who deviate from the social norm permanently are used as the main source for evil characters and anti-heroes (or anti-heroines). Also, as Gender and Japanese Popular Culture scholar Susan J. Napier (1998) points out, individuals who use their powers with other aims other than protecting others are also portrayed as evil or egoistical beings. These two elements (the permanent deviation from the norm and the abuse of one's own powers for personal gain or aggression) combine into a myriad of antagonists that range from revealing sexualized female characters, overtly or implied homosexual characters, or ambitious power-hungry maniacs.

This sharp division between protective coming-of-age heroines and non-normative antagonists can be found across most popular media productions in Japan during the last 30 years. Susan. J. Napier (2005) calls this type of heroines "beautiful fighting girls" and describes them as powerful female leads that choose to protect their loved ones against the egoistical aspirations of others. Napier utilizes many

examples from movies and anime (both within and outside the shōjo genre) to justify her claims. The examples she draws from Studio Ghibli's movies, the studio behind the Award Winning *Spirited Away* (1999), *Princess Mononoke* (1997) and *My Neighbor Totoro* (1989), are probably the best known.

The fact that examples of idealized female leads leading to the ryōsai kenbō can be found outside of the shōjo genre (and outside of manga, too), make it necessary at this point to answer three questions in the next sections: Is there an idealized role for Japanese men too? If there is, how do the ryōsai kenbō and this masculine role also influence other genres outside of shōjo manga? Where is the connection between manga, anime, and videogames?

2.3. A History of Japanese Male Sexuality.

While the opening of the Japanese border to foreign influences was critical for the expansion of the number of roles and identities women could adopt (despite the omnipresence of the ryōsai kenbō as an ideal), discourses regarding male identity had been historically more varied and flexible. This is mostly because of the more active role of men in all social spheres. Each of these social spheres required a specific heterosexual-acting etiquette to be maintained, however,

there were also many loopholes and exceptions were non-heterosexual practices were also accepted.

Mark J. McLelland (2000) establishes four main contexts where male same-sex eroticism and sex was a common practice until the Meiji-Period when anal penetration was forbidden by law. In most of these same-sex relations there is a relation of subordination to a superior. The first of these contexts is Buddhist temples. According to McLelland, sex between acolytes and monks was a common practice, existing various, sometimes humorous, historical records of these acts (Childs 1980, Guth 1987, Levy 1973).

Artisans and owners of small, itinerant shops were also known for engaging in same-sex relations. These men usually lived in their own shops (these shops being oftentimes mere carts) which made impossible the formation of a regular family. Instead, they would hire an apprentice to share the working and living quarters with, an apprentice who would double as working assistant, housework worker, and sexual partner. McLelland also finds proof [Leupp (1995)] of many merchants selling their bodies, as well as their apprentices', for the sexual pleasure of rich, male, customers.

Male prostitution was also a common occurrence linked to kabuki theatre. During its emergence at the beginning of the 17th century both men and women could act. However, due to the number of cases of female

prostitution, women were soon banned in 1629 from acting (and, as Brian Powell (2005) indicates, did not return until 1914). This, however, did not prevent prostitution to happen; male actors, who would already double as prostitutes at the time actresses did that too, simply continued to do the same by also adding the twist of working, both on and off-stage, as female impersonators.

The noble samurai were also prone to same-sex practices. Samurai would usually take a male, young protégée to be instructed in court affairs, literature, arts, warfare, and occasional homosexual sex. These sexual encounters were accepted as long as they did not interfere with the social obligations of the older samurai: getting married and having offspring that would inherit the noble titles. More importantly, in the case of the younger samurai, participating in same-sex practices did not define their identity as "homosexual"; instead, these practices were considered to be part of their education and were, therefore, understood as transitory. Steven Pinkerton and Paul Abramson (1997) note in fact that "Japanese society traditionally permitted a wide range of non-reproductive sexual styles, both homo- and heterosexual, so long as they did not interfere with the primacy of the family unit and the imperative to produce descendants" (70).

The transitory nature of these medieval same-sex relations is key to understanding how homosexual identities were later represented in popular culture during the 20th and 21st centuries. Similarly, the temporary aspect of these practices is not only exclusive to men: as we have seen in the previous section, as soon as women entered more complex social spheres beyond their households (i.e. boarding schools for girls) at the beginning of the 20th century, they too became involved in same-sex relations that were similarly regarded as transitory.

In addition to the temporary nature of same-sex practices, there is another key element that defines how non-heterosexual identities (or the lack of them) are understood in Japanese popular culture despite the myriad of potential contexts in which these practices were possible and/or acceptable. This crucial issue is the fact that, throughout history, these sexual practices have not resulted in the configuration of specific identities (i.e. homosexual) attached to them. That is, individuals participating in same-sex sexual encounters were not considered or labelled homosexual. These practices were in fact part of a normative social etiquette and even lacked a term to name it or group them. Homosexual identities in Japan have been thus traditionally latent in the sense that there are practices which are,

at the very least, highly homoerotic by western standards but that do not consolidate homosexual identities by themselves.

These historical antecedents have still held some influence on popular culture, which contains, as a result, a range of non-normative (non-heterosexual) identities and behaviors. According to Shamoon (2008), the national government promoted the appearance of non-normative identities on Japanese media in an attempt to offer a continuous set of counterexamples to valid and socially acceptable positions and behaviors. In most Japanese new media, antagonists are what protagonists could become but do not. This is because popular culture constructs antagonists based on non-normative practices that are no longer temporary and/or on practices that consolidate by themselves specific identities instead of being just latent.

This is further complemented by what Martínez (1998) describes as an identification of perversion with notions of “the outside”. Martínez’s idea stems from the fact that Japan has heavily reinforced the undesirability of being “outside” for both women and men (by not becoming a respectable ryōsai kenbō or a white-collar father respectively). From my perspective, this social and moral outside has however taken many forms in popular culture. Outside, of course, means “outside goodness”, hence being evil, but more literally, it may also mean an outside of the protagonists’ region, nation, realm,

plane or planet. Unsurprisingly, outside may also mean outside of the age range of the characters each piece of media identifies as good. There tends to be an age gap between main characters and their evil counterparts; this gap irremediably follows the logical order of Japan's identity discourses. If youth is a period where pure individuals experiment with a myriad of possibilities just to reach in adulthood a set moral standard, antagonists defy this by being bad examples of wrongly consolidated adults or creepy children that do not fit in the idea of being pure and innocent. In the next section, I will offer very concrete examples of this extracted from very popular anime and then I will explain how popular culture relates videogames.

2.4. Heterosexual Innocent Moon Princesses, Gay Old Geezers, and Dangerously Attractive Lesbians from Outer Space.

In the second section of the chapter, I mentioned Napier's (2005) use of the term "beautiful fighting girl". For this author, this type of girls summarizes the attributes and virtues of most female manga and anime characters since the 1980s. In her book on beautiful fighting girls, Tamaki Sattō (2011) claims that "about 80 percent of the representative anime released in Japan in 1996 had beautiful fighting girls as their main characters" (84). This is a lot. Saito puts this figure in perspective by claiming that until *Mulan* (Disney, 1998) the

West did not have a clear exponent of an independent, fighting, and yet kind, animated heroine[24]. Even if we could show some skepticism in relation to this comparison[25], the truth is that, compared to elsewhere, there is a huge difference in the number of female leads in Japanese popular culture. However, despite their number, beautiful fighting girls still suffer a common plague: Their life experiences tend to orbit irremediably around the ever-shinning Sun of the ryōsai kenbō. This means that magical powers, independent wills, and strong personalities all tend to culminate in a decision to protect others and establish a heterosexual relationship. Others possible outcomes normally end in tragedy or are represented under a humorous light. Napier refers to the manga and anime *Sailor Moon* to provide a clear example of a beautiful fighting girl heroine.

Sailor Moon is originally a manga drawn by Naoko Takeuchi published from 1991 to 1997. Most of its popularity, however, came after being adapted to an anime that aired in Japan from 1992 to 1997. Both the original manga and its anime[26] share a common general plot and similar main villains, but the anime version provides a more detailed depiction of its characters and everyday situations absent in the original. Because of this I will focus my attention on the anime.

[24] Celestino Deleyto (2003) talks about several Disney female protagonists during the 1990s as clear shift towards more an independent and assertive type of heroine; the culmination of this shift was *Pocahontas* (Disney, 1995).
[25] In addition to Deleyto's claim explained in the previous footnote, using Disney as the prime example capable of summarizing the West as a whole is a bit vague. In fact, there are many mainstream examples (i.e. movies directed by Don Bluth such as *The Secret of NIMH* (1982) or *The Land Before Time* (1988)) that escape from the prince-saves-princess animated cycle plaguing many Disney films.
[26] As of 2015 there is a new anime run that follows the manga closely.

Sailor Moon tells the story of the clumsy, lazy, and adolescent Usagi Tsukino (Bunny Tsukino in the West), a schoolgirl living in Tokyo, who discovers that she has the power to transform into Sailor Moon to defend the Earth from dark, sometimes inter-galactic, evil forces. As the story progresses, Usagi discovers that she is the reincarnated Princess of the Moon and the ruling heir to our Solar System. Other Sailor Scouts[27] representing each of the planets in our system join her, expanding the female cast and offering a wider view of young Japanese femininities.

In addition to fulfilling her duties as the guardian of the Solar System, she also falls in Love with Mamoru, an older man who has dreams of a former life he cannot remember as the Prince of the Earth. During the first season, Usagi and Mamoru learn about their former lives as the heirs of the Moon and the Earth respectively and the war between the people from both astral bodies that culminated with the two protagonists' deaths. The relationship grows during the remaining seasons as they face several problems related to normative love. During the second season, for instance, Chibuisa, a young girl from an unknown future comes to live with Usagi's family. By the end of the season, the characters discover that the child is Usagi and Mamoru's

[27] "Scout" is the general name given to the female protectors accompanying Usagi on her adventures. Depending on the specific planet each Scout represent, they are given a more specific name. The scouts of the two first seasons are, in addition to Usagi/Sailor Moon, Sailor Mercury, Mars, Venus and, Jupiter.

daughter, sent from the year 3000[28] Neo-Tokyo where both lovers reign as Queen and King. From this point on, Usagi's role is made crystal clear: Despite her clumsiness and childish behavior, she is destined to become the ever-protecting force of love and support for the entire Solar System as well as a loving mother and a caring wife. In this regard, Usagi is a universal and family version of the traditional ryōsai kenbō.

The show, however, also offers far more deviant life styles than Usagi's normative future as Queen. This comes in three main formats: Evil single women who are older than the protagonists; male homosexual antagonists; and slightly older, attractively dangerous, anti-heroic lesbians. They all counter the Japanese way of normatively understanding the transitory nature of same-sex relations and serve as examples of the dangers of pervasive queerness.

In contrast to Usagi's healing and protective powers, the main villains in *Sailor Moon* are older, evil women with a clear lust for power. In some cases, such as Beryl in the first season or Queen Nehelenia in the fourth, the villainesses act out of envy for the love or beauty they lack and/or that others have. In all cases, however, their actions are motivated by their lust for power. This desire,

[28] The anime never offers an explanation for the characters being still alive more than one thousand years after the events of the main story. The manga, however, explains that, after giving birth, Usagi develops her full powers as the protector of the Solar System and makes all citizens of the Earth virtually immortal.

coupled with their inability to perform as loving women, serves as a clear counterexample to Japanese women's expected career during the 20th century, as explained in a previous section of this chapter. It also exemplifies the predicament that women might find themselves in should they defy the normative social expectations set for them.

While both the villains and Usagi are powerful, the villains' actions depend on self-gain and self-promotion. Usagi, on the other hand, has a clear "career" in front of her: She is a future inter-planetary Queen who will protect the entire human race and, thanks to time-travelling, she is also aware of her future prospects as wife and mother. Because of all this, she is also allowed to play around while still a teenager. The show does this by allowing Usagi to mix with less normative characters.

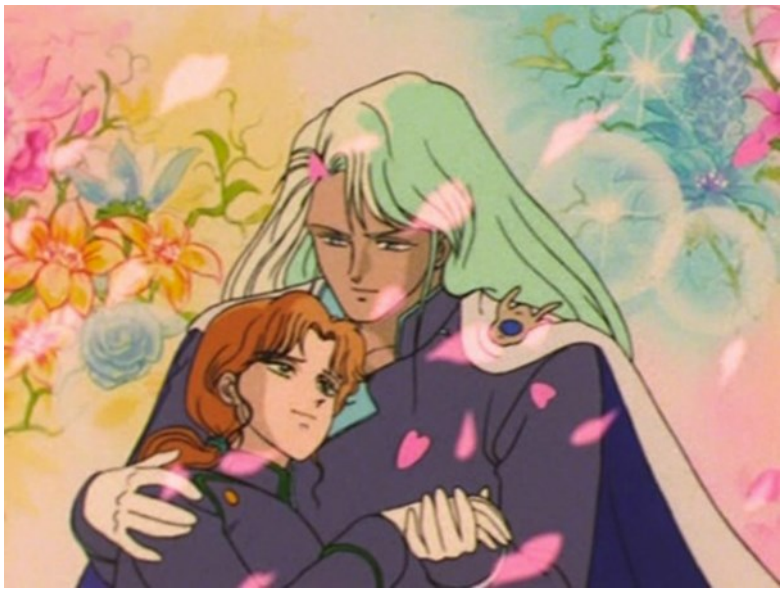
The third season introduces two new characters: the talented violinist Michiru (Sailor Neptune) and the masculine car driver Haruka (Sailor Uranus). Both characters are presented as significantly older than the other five sailors introduced so far and, unlike the other protagonists who always team up together to fight, they act on their own forming a duet. As sailors, they are also more powerful than any of the others and, unlike their heterosexual friends, they are openly lesbians.

By being older than the rest of the teenage female cast and by admitting their love for each other, both Michiru and Haruka make their same-sex actions stable enough to conform a lesbian identity. This reinforces their image as independent and powerful women. However, they are also portrayed as violent individuals who do not always support Usagi's vision regarding love and protection. Their behavior is a constant source of both attraction and mistrust on the younger sailors' behalf. This often creates and ambivalence in which independence and power are positive, intriguing and attractive, but also somewhat dangerous. In fact, at the end of the two main seasons in which they appear (the third and the last one), both Haruka and Michiru are the last protagonists left standing together with Sailor Moon during the final fight against the main villain of the season (the rest have been by then knocked out or killed because of their lack of strength). Their violent and independent way of solving problems, however, proves itself ineffective as both lovers are eventually defeated. It is Usagi, branding the power of (normative) love, who ultimately saves the day, firmly enthroning the ryōsai kenbō as the ultimate female role model.

The ultimate defeat of lesbian couples on the battlefield has a grimmer counterpart in male homosexual relations on the show. In the case of homosexual male characters, *Sailor Moon* lacks a positive, even

if dangerously independent or aggressive, equivalent similar to Haruka and Michiru. Male homosexual characters are either evil beings who remain evil, or evil characters with a comedic twist that eventually redeem themselves simply to die miserably a few minutes later. The prime example of the former is Kunzite and Zoisite's relationship [figure 1].

Kunzite and Zoisite are male generals under the command of Queen Beryl, the main villainess of the first season. Both generals are evil and effeminate. Their femininity mirrors Shamoon's idea of sameness in shōjo manga and anime. Indeed, being based on a shōjo manga, *Sailor Moon* allows its audience to experiment, fantasize or gape at non-normative forms of human love and sexuality. As I have shown before, male same-sex relations in Japan, however, were a common practice that were not supposed to result in the constitution of a specific gay identity and/or were not supposed to be expressed openly. *Sailor Moon* participates in this discourse by making both characters evil and by eventually killing them while thinking of the love they felt for each other. In this sense, the anime makes sure to offer a rosy, if forbidden, relationship with a thorny, but socially-sanctioned outcome.

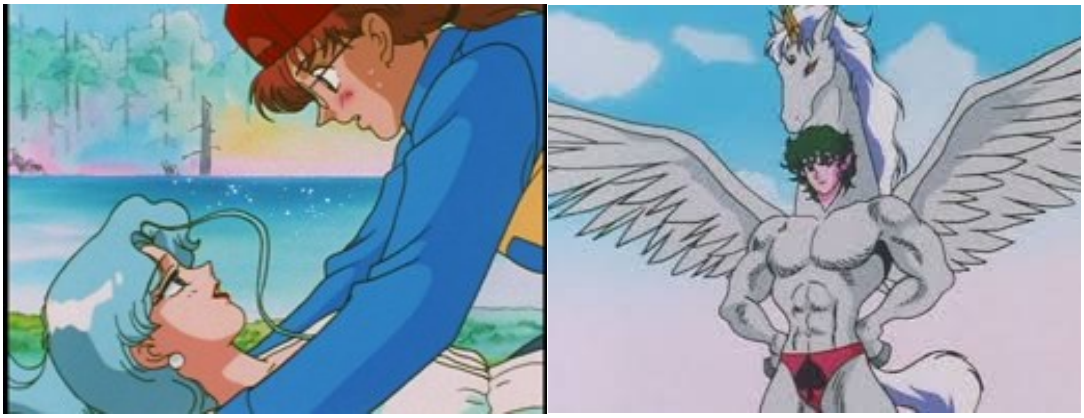


[Figure 1: Zoisite (left) and Kunzite (right) professing their love for each other]

Fish Eye is a good example of a male homosexual character who is both a villain and a source of comic relief. He is part of an male evil trio, the Amazon Trio, sent during the first half of the fourth season to hunt a mystical being hidden within people's dreams. All members of the trio have a personal fixation with a specific type of person: While the other two members love seducing old and young women respectively, Fish Eye is attracted to men. Until their demise, the focus of each episode is the attempt of one of the members of this trio to seduce and then steal their chosen victim's dream. Episodes featuring Fish Eye revolve around the villains having a new homosexual crush, crossdressing in order to seduce his target, and, after being rejected, attacking him. This rejection occurs after the victims show

some form of romantic interest for other, more conventional and, norm-fitting women.

Every main villain in all the seasons of the show does something similar. They all select a target, try to steal something from him/her and then a battle ensues with the protagonists, who always happen to be nearby. These battles do not normally pit the villain against the main cast. Instead, villains call forth some form of minion to do battle on their behalf. Contrary to the general tendency in the show to have demonic-like female beings as minions, Fish Eye commands a host of hyper-muscular but effeminate acting vassals [figure 2].



[Figure 2: Fish Eye (left) trying to seduce his victim on episode 137 and an example of a minion used by him]

The contrast between the muscular builds of Fish Eye's minions and their effeminate demeanors has a clear comic undertone. Even if they may be evil, Fish Eye and his minions are far from menacing; they act childishly, clumsily and cowardly. This comical light is further

reinforced by the way the show presents the villain's attempts at same-sex, cross-dressing love as irremediable hopeless, as if doomed by true, stable, heterosexual love. This hopelessly, comedic tone under which Fish Eye is portrayed fits perfectly, together with Kunzite and Zoisite's same-sex and evil-tainted relation, with the Japanese way of understanding same-sex acts and their repercussions on the individuals' social life.

If male homosexual sexual relations have been traditionally part of Japanese history surreptitiously, any attempt to consolidate an open homosexual identity or relationship is socially punished by presenting such an attempt as foolish (Fish Eye), profoundly evil (Kunzite and Zoisite), and/or doomed to failure (all three of them). Within *Sailor Moon* there are many other in-between identities that combine elements from these three ways of depicting homosexuality in more subtle ways, but they are also less harshly punished or laughed at. This mainly takes the form of individuals with queer appearances, whose homosexuality might be hinted at or not, but whose evil intentions are often linked to their effeminate behavior. All these options create a very diverse tree of identities and forms of being in the world beyond the protagonist's role as the titular and exemplar, socially sanctioned ryōsai kenbō.

The reason why I have talked so much about *Sailor Moon* is because it showcases the behavioral diversity of Japanese sexual cultures: *Sailor Moon* condenses the main Japanese forms of depicting normative and non-normative sexual tendencies and practices in a single media text. If we understand each role within the show as an archetype that reappears in many other Japanese media texts, then it will be very easy to analyze each video game I present in the next section in relation to the social norms discussed so far.

2.5. Magical Princesses, Same-Sex Teenage Breast Pinching, and Wicked Succubus: Female Japanese Identity Discourses in Video Games.

Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (2000), claim that the number of female characters in video games is infinitely inferior to the amount of male ones. They link this fact to social constructions of gender that result in media texts: "women rarely appear in them, except as damsels requiring rescue, or rewards for successful completion of the mission" (7). While I could agree with their statements in relation to most commercial Western games, they misrepresent Japanese games. While Princess Peach in Nintendo's mascot *Super Mario* games might be the prime example of both a damsel in distress in need of rescue and a reward for completing the game, this section seeks to show that there is more to gender and Japanese games than Peach and Mario. In fact,

there are dozens of examples of Sailor Moon-like female protagonists with an active role in the games they appear in.

The *Final Fantasy* series is, together with Dragon Quest[29], one of the most iconic Japanese RPG franchises of both Japan and the West. As of January 2015, the series spans fourteen main entries and dozens of spin-off games (from music and rhythm games such as *Theatrhythm Final Fantasy: Curtain Call* to racing games such as *Chocobo Racing*). Within the main fourteen titles, numbered using Roman numbers, both *Final Fantasy XI* [FFXI] and *FFXIV* are MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online RPG), while the rest are console games (sometimes ported to PC) that share common mythological traits and references, but are set in different worlds populated by different casts of characters. While the villains and heroes are always different, there is a common recurrent plot in which the world is put in danger by an evil, nihilistic force and is ultimately saved after going through different apocalyptic phases. *Final Fantasy* games articulate two of the main identity discourses discussed so far: The first is the ultimate role of women as protectors and devoted lovers, and the other one is the confirmation of a heterosexual identity after being tempted by a proto-homosexual influence.

[29] Both franchises belong now to the same Company, Square-Enix after the fusión of Squaresoft (*Final Fantasy*) and Enix (*Dragon Quest*) in 2003.

Final Fantasy VI (1995) is quite unique within the franchise for its lack of an indisputable main character. During the first hours of gameplay, players control Terra, a young female magician suffering from amnesia[30]. Terra's titular protagonism is short lived as the game soon splits its relative large cast into several, divergent paths players must complete in order to advance. Around the middle of the game, Kefka, the main antagonist of the game, causes a major cataclysm that claims millions of pixelated lives and plunges the world into utter chaos. Within this disastrous world, most main characters scatter through the world and have lost their will to fight. Players must traverse the world in order to find all the missing characters.

Terra, in particular, has taken refuge in a small village where all the adults have perished, leaving small kids as the only survivors. When players first arrive at this village, Terra refuses to leave claiming that she must stay with the surviving children. However, after being attacked by a powerful abomination, Terra realizes that her role in the world is not to hide within the walls of her new-found home, but to fight in the open for those she loves. This change of heart actually marks Terra's entry into adulthood as she discovers her true goal in life thanks to the love she feels for others.

[30] Amnesia and self-induced amnesia are common traits among the franchise cast of main characters.

In the closing scene of the game, once Kefka has been defeated, Terra decides to spend her last remaining strength to guide her friends into safety, seemingly forfeiting her own life in the process. However, just as she is about to die, she remembers the children back in the village, and teleports back into safety, losing her magical powers in the process but keeping her own life. Terra's will to protect others as well as her mother-like relation with the orphaned children not only make her a valid adult female example, but also give her ample magical powers an acceptable sense of purpose and direction.

Final Fantasy VII offers another example of a magical girl willing to sacrifice herself in order to protect others. In this game players control Cloud, a giant-sword-wielding amnesic soldier, on his journey to save the world from the evil plans of his former superior, long-gone mad, Sephiroth. Early during his adventures Cloud meets Aeris, the last surviving member of an ancestral human-like race capable of wielding and nurturing the natural energy of the planet to protect the world, and together they set off on multiple, polygonal adventures. Almost halfway through the game Cloud and his friends discover Sephiroth's plans to destroy all life in the planet by summoning a giant meteor. At this point, Aeris, knowing that she is the only person alive capable of countering Sephiroth's meteor, runs off to a former temple of her ancestors in an attempt to summon the

force of the planet to protect the world. Just as she is about to be saved by Cloud and his gang, Aeris is killed off by Sephiroth. However, even after her death, the ending of the game shows that Aeris' sacrifice allowed the planet to protect itself from the meteor and, in the very last second before being destroyed, humanity is saved. Aeris is, just like Terra in *FFVI,* a woman with immense powers that she uses protect others. In addition, Aeris' protective nature is further emphasized during gameplay due to her role in battles.

All party members in *FFVII* have a Limit Break gauge that fills every time they attack or get attacked. When the gauge is full, characters can use a particularly powerful attack called *Limit Break* that normally kills any normal monster the party may encounter and deals a significant amount of damage to bosses. Among all controllable characters, Aeris is the only one without a damage-dealing Limit Break. All of her Limit Breaks revolve around healing[31], removing debuffs, and protecting or empowering her allies. In this sense, Aeris' powers are perfect for the tasks socially assigned to a ryōsai kenbō.

In addition to Aeris, *FFVII* also offers other examples of Japanese discourses about female identity. Yuffie is a teenage ninja with a wild and mischievous spirit. Upon the players' first visit to

[31] The only character with a Limit Break capable of healing is, the also female, Yuffie. Yuffie's other limit breaks deal massive damage.

her hometown, Yuffie steals all the materia (precious stones players need in order to cast magic) from the player; leaving them partially defenseless. Despite of this, players soon discover that Yuffie's traitorous act was caused by the ninja's desire to protect and reconstruct her village, which was severely damaged in a war. Yuffie has, in this sense, the correct motivations and objectives that a socially-sanctioned woman should possess (protecting and helping her community), but lacks the proper means to fulfill them (for she steals). Her improper methods are, however, easy to justify as she is still a teenager with plenty of time to out-grow her mischievous nature and refine her altruistic goals.

Scarlet, on the other hand, is one of the executives of Shinra, an evil mega-company that controls economically and militarily the entire planet by stealing its life-energy (a form a pulsating force both the planet and all living beings are tied to). Scarlet is older than the main cast, dresses in a luxurious, sexualized and revealing manner, and is an immensely power-hungry woman. This combination of age (age confirms her identity as stable), a sexuality not oriented towards male-devotion or chastity, and her lust for power, makes of her the perfect opposite of what a Japanese woman is expected to become. Scarlet is, of course, evil and remains so until death.

The two main villains, the witches Edea and Artemisa, in *Final Fantasy VIII* are similar to *FFVII* Scarlet. Both villains are powerful, evil females who are older than the main cast and whose sole purpose seems to be the dominion and/or destruction of the entire planet. Edea is, in particular, a very interesting female model. The evil witch was originally the benevolent head of the orphanage where most of the protagonists grew up. However, when the protagonists defeat Artemisa in the present timeline, she travels back in time to a point in the past when the heroes were still kids living in the poorhouse and possesses Edea. The then-good witch resists Artemisa's control initially but, knowing that she will eventually succumb to the evil witch's powers, she sets up a plan in which she enlists all of her protégées into an anti-witch force squad. Back to the present, the protagonists, all members of this anti-witch squad, but unable to remember Edea as the caring mother she used to be, set off on a journey to thwart the now fully possessed Edea-Artemisa. *FFVIII* thus offers a sharp contrast between a positive, protective foster-mother (who also happens to be married), with the depravity of a female identity fully possessed by power and desire with no interest whatsoever in love or protection.

The opposite of this use of immense powers for personal gain would be *Final Fantasy X* protagonist Yuna. *FFX* is set in the world of

Spyra, a largely tropical world that is periodically destroyed by the onslaught of a gigantic monster called Sin. In order to defeat Sin, members of the clergy with the ability to summon Aeons, mystical beasts with enormous magical powers, are sent on a journey in search of Braska's Final Aeon, the only creature capable of destroying Sin. The catch is that in order to summon this final Aeon, the summoner has to sacrifice her own life and also has to use a person (the closest emotionally the sacrificed person is to the summoner the better) as the vessel of the summoned entity. To make things even worse, once defeated, Sin's essence is transported inside the Final Aeon who then lays dormant for a few years until transformed into a new version of Sin.

Players follow Yuna's journey through the world and towards the young summoner's martyrdom in their attempt to temporarily destroy Sin. Tidus, the other main character in the game, being Yuna's heterosexual love interest and the person closest to her as the story progresses, grows to be optimal vessel for Braska's Aeon. The story is thus focused on this couple's desire to protect the world and on their apparent sacrifice waiting for them at the end of the journey. Gameplay-wise, the game also maintains the connection between the characters' social disposition and their abilities in battle. While

Yuna's abilities revolve[32] around protection, healing, and on her ability, obtained on the path to her sacrifice, to summon monsters that fight on her behalf, Tidus focuses on direct and fast damage dealing.

In addition to Yuna, two more female characters compose the main cast. The first is Rikku, a hyperactive teenage girl who fills the role of "everything is valid while you are still very young and have not found a husband/boyfriend to support and protect" and Lulu, a fully-fledged black wizard adult. Lulu's case is particularly interesting in relation to the gender discourses condensed within the game.

Being older than the Yuna and Tidus, Lulu [figure 3] is also a distant and seemingly independent female characters that shares many physical traits with what decades of anime and games (e.g. Scarlet in *FFVII*) have taught audiences to perceive as dangerous: She is dressed in a sexually assertive way and, with her cold demeanor, shows no interest towards protection and sacrifice (even if during the game she slowly and coldly proves herself otherwise). In battle, Lulu deals massive damage using elemental and black magic spells, but being a

[32] With the exception of the beast-like Kimahri, characters have a pre-established set of abilities they can develop. Once they have completed their own ability chart, they can move on to other characters' charts. By doing so, their roles in battle may change. For the first two thirds of the game, however, each character's role in battle is pretty much fixed.

woman (and the wizard of the party), she has the lowest health and physical strength within the party.

[Figure 3: From left to right, the official artworks of Yuna, Tidus, and Lulu]

The game makes a sudden turn during the ending and shows that, months after the final confrontation with Sin, Lulu inexplicably decided to marry Wakka (a physical-oriented male character players can control) and to have a baby with him. By doing this, the game sets Lulu's seemingly happy ending within the structural system of normative heterosexual consolidate *love*. Yuna's fate, on the other hand, is a bit different. After Tidus' quasi-death (he evaporates into nothingness while still existing as a remnant of an encapsulated memory), Yuna, reverts back, to an extent, to a teenage-like and single state where everything is valid until becoming adult and

heterosexual. Together with the also teenage Rikku and the new cold and distant female Payne, who substitutes the now married Lulu, Yuna starts in an all-female trio of protagonists in *Final Fantasy X-2* [figure 4]. As the story progresses, the trio gets closer to a world-saving plot and, in Yuna's case, to her reunion with Tidus and her inevitable return to her consolidated heterosexual self.

[Figure 4: Official artwork of Yuna in FFX-2]

Lulu's temporary independence as well as her initial lack of motherly behavior during most of *FFX* has two similar examples in *FFXII* with Fran and in *FFXIII* (as well as *FFXIII-2* and *FFXIII-3*) with Lightning [figure 5]. Both characters are strong and independent and can be physically very strong[33], but while Lighting grows to accept

[33] The levelling system in FFXII allows players to configure each character the way they want. The same character can be a fast-paced damage dealer for one player and a healer for the rest. All characters, however, start with some abilities that suggest the way they could take and behave in-story as if the game is assuming a particular ability

that her powers are meant to actively protect those she loves, Fran shows a motherly side towards Balthier (one of the male protagonists). Also, the fact that Fran belongs to a semi-bestial race of amazon-like humanoid demi-rabbits gives the character a somewhat otherworldly aura, and makes her subject to a different set of social norms (those of her own non-human race) that allow her to act different from regular female humans[34].

[Figure 5: Fran (left) and Lightning (right).]

Exploiting a sense of "otherworldliness" to evoke female identities that step outside of social norms is something Japanese popular culture does really well. While *Sailor Moon* had evil, demonic queens as the epitomes of what a Japanese woman should not be, in many

growth. Fran in particular is always portrayed in official artwork and cutscenes as an archer as well as hand-to-hand combatant.

[34] This dissertation explores this topic in depth later (chapters 5 and 6).

videogames, however, this type of character is not necessarily evil and/or antagonistic. In fact, the use of the non-human "other" (e.g. Fran) allows for the creation of interesting novel identities while also the consolidating other certain, perfectly normative, practices.

Disgaea is a tactical JRPG series developed by Nippon-Ichi that spans four numbered titles (plus four revised versions of these titles), a direct sequel of the original game and several visual novels and spin-offs. In most of the numbered entries, the games have a male teenage[35] demon who has to learn how to act as the ruler of his realm by learning how to be a reliable leader despite his own egocentric, egoistic and deeply maniac personality. In terms of story, the games follow the protagonist's path from self-gain to self-gain *and* some occasional altruistic behavior. These games also contain high doses of parody as well as continuous allusions to Japanese popular culture with continuous and, mostly, easy-to-identify references to anime and manga tropes and characters as well as meta-comments about JRPGS in general[36]. The result is a very curious, sometimes grotesque, and humorous mix that fulfills a similar function of what Mikhail Bakhtin attributes to the carnival and the grotesque: A way of commenting on a particular plot of reality (in this particular case,

[35] Most of them are around 700 years old. Adulthood, however, comes much later for demons.
[36] Characters tend to make reflexive comments about frequent story twists, game design choices and expectations the game they star in fails to fulfill.

Japanese popular culture) under the protective cloak of humor, grotesqueness, and fantasy.

Disgaea (2001), is the original title in the series and the game that set the basics (both gameplay and story-wise) for the other games in the series. The game has a trio of protagonists led by Laharl, the teenage prince of a demon realm (the world in composed of hundreds of demon realms called Netherworlds, one Heaven and the human Earth) who tries to rise into power after a two-year-long nap during which his father passes away. Laharl basic path to the throne follows the typical progression of most male protagonists in anime and manga: Immense latent powers that must be used to lead their communities to victory while opening one's heart to some form of heterosexual feelings and/or love. Laharl's lack of aptitude at the beginning of the game is reinforced by the number of stronger-than-Laharl demons populating the game and by other characters' continuous mockery of Laharl's short stature.

Similarly, the game reinforces the sense of relative moral progression by portraying Laharl's growth through tiny heroic acts (still camouflaged by self-gain and random reasoning) and stronger abilities. In addition, the best ending of the game can only be achieved by playing in a way that shows Laharl's care for others: Most attacks in the game cover big areas of effect that may affect,

damage, and kill allies and enemies alike. Through careful positioning and skill management, it is perfectly possible to avoid damaging allies. However, this approach sometimes also means that players need more turns to finish the enemy team and that they also receive, in return, more damage from them. Should players complete the game without killing a friendly unit, they achieve the best ending possible in which Flonne, one of the other two protagonists and Laharl's coveted love interest, survives.

Two more main characters accompany Laharl in his quest. Both of them are teenaged females, and neither shares the same moral compass. One of them is Etna, a young succubus who loves domineering and abusing those below her; the other, Flonne, is an angelic and exacerbated parody of everything Sailor Moon represented as a role model [figure 6]. While Etna embodies the image of the powerful, dangerous, and sadistic women (similar to most villainess in many JRPGs and anime before her), Flonne is a self-proclaimed defender of love and justice who elevates her passion to the extreme. In fact, the comedic tone of game prevents Etna and Flonne from becoming zealots of their respective moral positions: Etna learns to support her friends in spite of her aura of selfishness and maliciousness while Flonne manages to make love bloom in Hell while attaining some demonic traits

herself. The mistakes both characters make during the game seem to be part of teenage, demonic/angelic mischief.

[Figure 6: Etna (left), Laharl (center), and Flonne (right).

In battle they also perform very similarly to what social expectations dictate in relation to their chosen attitude in life. Etna is a weapon expert excelling at lances who uses advanced techniques that revolve around the exploitation of her allies while Flonne has healing powers and attacks revolving around the ideals of love and justice. In terms of abilities and attitude Etna is, in fact, the most interesting of the pair.

While retaining her anti-heroine status for most of the game and appearing in a similar fashion in the other numbered Disgaea games[37], Etna serves as the main villain and quest provider in the series spin-off *Prinny: Can I Be the Hero?* The game, an action-platformer, puts

[37] With the exception of *Disgaea 2*, where Etna actively participates in the main story, Laharl, Flonne and Etna appear in the other main entries as hidden characters players can unlock after completing the main storyline.

players in control of a horde of one thousand prinnies (the basic penguin-like minion human sinners are transformed into after death) in their quest to obtain the ultimate dessert for Etna. In this game, Etna returns to her selfish self (that she never really abandoned) in order to act as a very real menace for the prinnies: They die trying to serve her, they die failing to serve her, or they die serving her. However, just as in the main numbered titles, the humorous atmosphere that surrounds the whole game mitigates Etna's position as a villain to reduce her to a parody of pre-existing similar female roles in Japanese popular culture. This comic undertone also contributes to lower the usual sexualized and dangerous behavior of the succubus, demons that steal their victims' souls through a kiss. In fact, even if Etna's general comments, behavior and abilities in battle are clearly associated with sadism and dominion, she is still a teenage demon who gets easily flustered when anyone comments on her *flat chest,* a situation that happens to be quite frequent.

What the game does by making Etna's juvenile physique a theme is to portray this succubus' behavior as part of her normal, in social terms, development. She is, after all, a naughty girl whose antics can be associated to her non-human origin and who will, hopefully, outgrow this phase by learning to love her friends. What would happen, however, if a game were to remove the age factor to

create a much older version of Etna? Games such as *Cross Edge* and *Project X Zone* mix characters like Etna with older, demonic, and sexualized female characters in order to make them cooperate in crossover games. Both games are tactical RPGs that combine a turn-based system with a real-time action approach while putting together characters from different sagas to create a convoluted story where different realms, planes of existence, and universes are endangered.

Broadly speaking, these games use four main type of female characters that can be categorized following to two main factors: Age (teenage or adult) and morals (interested in protecting and/or loving others or interested in pleasure and power-gain). This is something we have already discussed in terms of good heroines, mischievous adolescents, dangerous but attractive anti-heroines, and power-hungry evil witches. The game creates a convoluted cross of social discourses by putting all of these categories together in the same group of protagonists and trying to add some cohesion in terms of how their roles within the story match together or the way their abilities function during battles.

[Figure 7: Official artwork of Morrigan]

X Edge, for instance, mixes in the same party Etna and Morrigan, a hyper-sexualized, sex-obsessed succubus from the fighting game series *Dark Stalkers* [figure 7]. The game exploits the contrast existing between teenage characters who become blustered by comments concerning their physique and fully-grown demonic beings who like to talk about sex in a carefree and constant manner, and does so by creating situations were the latter abuse the former. Morrigan, for instance, insists on groping the breasts of the rest of the female cast, offering herself for sex with both males and females alike, while commenting on her own voluptuous shape (much to the suffering of pre-pubescent characters such as Etna). The game even goes a step beyond by including the viewing of special, secret events where the female cast bathes together in hot springs disseminated throughout the

world [figure 8]. These scenes have nothing to do with the main story, they do not trigger any special kind of battle, and they do not require any specific type of skill to unlock. However, if players wish to access the best ending in the game they are forced to find these hot springs and watch the scenes from the perspective of some members of the male cast (who spy on the bathing females from a distance).

[Figure 8: A still taken from one of the hot spring scenes in Cross Edge]

As shown in figure 8, there exists a sharp contrast between Etna's (left) and Morrigan's (center-right) attitudes. Both in this scene and in the other five hot springs events, Morrigan is portrayed as having an active role in sensually interacting with the other female characters. Etna, on the other hand, looks appalled or intimidated by the curves of the other characters (something she admits during the game). The key factor lies, however, in the fact that all of them are subjected to the gazes of male spies and to situations that presuppose

a similar interest in the players or that force their gaze to adopt a similar position. What this suggests, however, is that female bodies, particularly those deemed as not fully human, can be subjected without question to processes where their bodies, identities, and desires can be fully exposed (i.e. Morrigan) or act as the recipient of mockery, embarrassment, or awkwardness (Etna). In both cases, Etna and Morrigan are not valid female models according to social norms. Etna for not being an adult yet (so she has many things to learn and to correct) and Morrigan for being an adult who has not learned her place as a useful member of society. Their devilish traits serve as a marker of their non-normative status. Similarly, the reification they are subjected to serves as a social punishment and marker for their specific status.

Things become a bit more complex if we take into account the rest of the female cast in the game. Even if their attitudes and designs are not as sexualized as Morrigan's, they still participate in scenes such as the ones triggered in the hot springs. Therefore, they are still subjected to the same reifying gaze; a gaze that likes to pay special attention to women.

Project X Zone shares many elements with *Cross Edge*. Both have very similar game mechanics. The combat system in both games is based in attacks that combo together while depleting an action bar which,

upon reaching zero, marks the beginning of the enemy's turn. In addition, they have several characters in common (e.g. Morrigan) and similar art design—combat utilizes sprites while narrative sections use static 2D illustrations and text. Also, while *Project X Zone* lacks something similar to the hot springs events, it adds some animated portions that are specific to women.

During combat, players control several teams of two characters. By linking attacks together, players may fill a special bar that lets them use each team's special attacks. During these attacks the game simulates a close-up of the characters by showing a brief animation of their bodies up-close. During these animations, the hair and clothes of male bodies bump or move a little. Female bodies are, however, a bit more generous in terms of bodily dynamics. While the close-ups for men tend to focus on the characters' upper body in general, the animation for women takes a much closer look at their breasts and backsides. Their gestures and positions are also less related to fighting and more to *modelling* if compared to those of males [figure 9]. Regardless of whether players are male or female, the game still treats female characters in a differentiated way by sexualizing them.

[Figure 9: Kaguya (left), a female character in *Project X Zone*, readying her special attack and her male battle partner, Haken, (right) doing the same]

This is not, however, specific *to Project X Zone*, as many others JRPGs do something really similar. *Demon Gaze*, a turn-based first-person dungeon crawler, put players in control of a male demon hunter tasked with defeating Arch-demons to subdue them and use them in battle. These demons are female, dressed in a revealing manner, and act demonically. When subdued, however, they possess a more submissive nature, they dress in a more measured form, and, unless overused, they follow obediently the protagonist's call for action. This transitional change from free devil to submissive pet follows a similar path to the one found in social expectations for women in Japan where young girls can act within a certain degree of freedom until a proper heterosexual and stable relationship is found. The act of being defeated and submitted to the protagonist's will mirrors for the demons in this game the entry point into adulthood and normative heterosexuality.

The game explores the idea of female submission even further. After one of the first main dungeons in the game, players find the main quest giver in the game (Fran, the female owner of the inn where the protagonist and his team reside) riddled in bed with high-fever [figure 11]. After completing a series of short quests, players concoct a special medicine to cure her. After administering the salve, Fran, still feverish, grabs the protagonist's arm and asks him to spend the whole night with her. Sex is not explicitly shown but players are clearly invited to imagine a sexual encounter. In any case, the explicit visual availability of Fran's semi-naked body, her request, and the gender mechanics posed by the demons, all create a relationship where female characters make themselves available to the male protagonist almost by default.

[Figure 11: Fran sick with fever in Demon Gaze]

Other JRPGs include submission as a core mechanic. *Conception II: Children of the Seven Stars* is a great example. The game puts players

in control of a male student living in a military academy devoted to the creation of young warriors fighting a war against extra-terrestrial monsters. The protagonist happens to be the male student with the highest level of Ether in the academy. This allows him to mate with the top seven female students to give birth to star children; magical baby-like beings both the protagonist and one of the seven female students bring to war to fight the evil monsters. "Giving birth" is not strictly literal here. Instead, the protagonist and his chosen mate hold hands, focus their ether energy together and a matryoshka doll emerges containing a star child. The scene, however, shows a close-up of the mating heroine's naked contour (her body is painted in a single color hiding any bodily lines or features) as well as her face with an orgasmic gesture.

As the game progresses and both the main character and the seven female students fight stronger enemies and level up, they are also able to create stronger children with better abilities. The weaker ones are given "independence" (they are expelled from the party permanently) while the new ones occupy their post. The game thus becomes a process of reinforcing the heroines to create better babies, getting rid of the weaker ones, and mating once again to better the fighting skills within the family tree.

The energy required for mating can be obtained by interacting with one of the seven potential mothers in order to raise their affinity level with the protagonist. These interactions, however, are limited to the selection of a response among two or three options that normally revolve around the female cast's absolute devotion towards the protagonist. Also, reaching a high affinity level with two or more heroines allows the players to form mating trios (two female students plus the protagonists) that result in even stronger babies and, sometimes, twins.

By looking at the video games analyzed so far it can be concluded that female characters are not a rare occurrence in JRPGs. They appear frequently as protagonists, co-protagonists or as companions of a male hero. They are, however, usually also treated in a more sexualized way than most male characters and are used as the objects to be consumed by presumed heterosexual male players. The number and types of female characters appearing in video games are directly linked to social and historical discourses about women's identities in Japan. However, constrictive and socially dependent as the range of female characters might be, do JRPGs offer more variation when it comes to identity discourses for men? Does the main character in *Conception II* have a choice when it comes to having dozens of fighting babies with relatively unknown ladies? No, he does not.

2.6. Don't ask, don't tell: The Closet is Evil.

In addition to priest-acting heroines and power-hungry evil witches, the *Final Fantasy* series is also well known for its copiousness of male teenagers discovering the world on their path to adulthood, and evil, gender-bending-looking male antagonists who love to show them the wrong path in life. Both heroes and villains also tend to have a past history together, which makes things very interesting considering the Japanese history of homosexualities.

Cloud, the main male character in *FFVII*, has a past serving under Sephiroth, the game's antagonist and a being artificially created by injecting the cells of an ancient evil monster, Jenova, into the womb of a regular human. Before turning into the evil mass murderer he is during the events of the game, Sephiroth was regarded as a hero and the best soldier to walk the planet. Cloud was also injected with cells similar to the ones used in the creation of Sephiroth and, up to a certain point in the story, he also believes himself to be a clone of the villain. This resemblance causes Cloud to question whether he is doomed to follow Sephiroth's path or if he has his own role in life to fulfill. By presenting Cloud's dilemma, the game creates a very specific male role (Sephiroth's) that players are invited to reject because of the antagonist's twisted morality. The fact that Cloud and Sephiroth had a past together as comrades in

arms[38], as well as Sephiroth's former status as a war hero, sanctions the two protagonists' past relation as something perfectly acceptable. As Sephiroth grows mad and Cloud tries to find his own path in life, their relationship shifts from one of hero/admirer to mad villain/protagonist. This shift in fact marks Cloud's first steps into adulthood by leaving behind the idealized image of Sephiroth as a male figure in order to find his own place in society as a fully-fledged male individual. During these first, tentative steps Cloud finds, of course, heterosexual love. Finding himself attracted to Aeris (the planetary ryōsai kenbō of the game) and loved by Tifa (Cloud's childhood friend and the woman who takes care of him in his times of need), Cloud's desire to protect others and be a reactive, positive force in society truly activates once he finds someone to heterosexually care about. Sephiroth, however, assassinates Aeris, curtailing Cloud potential romance and casting a shadow of male dominion over another male.

Cloud and Sephiroth's relation mirrors in more than one way homosexual relationships in Japan through history. First, there is a clear master-pupil relation between the two characters similar to the ones described at the beginning of the chapter between monks, adult and young samurai, and artisans and their apprentices. Second, the

[38] At the beginning of the game Cloud introduces himself as a former soldier with a slightly inferior rank than Sephiroth. As the game progresses, however, it is discovered that Cloud was a mere low-rank security soldier who was experimented on only after Sephiroth went mad.

former hero (Sephiroth)/fan (Cloud) relation is meant to end as many inter-male sexual encounters where considered to be part of a young male development. And finally, just as same-sex male sexual relations were known to happen in Japan as part of specific social exchanges but did not constitute homosexual identities by themselves, Cloud and Sephiroth's homosexual undertones are equally tacit and derivative instead of explicit and/or explained. Sephiroth is thus a menacing shadow cast over Cloud that questions the protagonist's validity as an independent male individual by playing a crucial role in Cloud's failure to protect his heterosexual love interest from the evil clutches of a former master-disciple relation.

Sephiroth's role in *FFVII* as the male figure the male protagonist must overcome in order to reach maturity finds several equivalents both across the *FF* series and in many other JRPGs. In all cases, these evil characters not only serve as the icon of the phantasmal, potential homosexual relation protagonists must learn to abandon, but they also have a distinctive, more feminine appearance. Sephiroth's non-muscular body and long, limp hair sets him apart from Cloud's spiky, perfectly messy hair (similar to that of most JRPGs and anime male protagonists). Sephiroth's lack of interest in anything heterosexual and his treatment of Cloud suggests not necessarily a homosexual identity but, at least, an identity that

borrows many elements from historical (homosexual) practices in Japan and that acts as a proto-homosexual force Cloud must reject as part of his entry into adulthood.

Similar in looks and overall attitude are Emperor Mateus [figure 12] in *Final Fantasy II*, Kefka in *FFVI*, Kuja in *FFIX*, or Seymour in *FFX*. These characters are perfect examples of feminine looking villains main characters must punish while oftentimes discovering adult heterosexual love. They all share a nihilistic view of life that leads them to desire the complete annihilation of the world. This attitude is coupled with a complete lack of interest in marriage[39], heterosexual love or the desire to have offspring, which contrasts with the protagonists' more socially productive (both sexually and morally) attitude.

[39] Seymour does kidnap Yuna to marry her. But this is only based on the villain's desire to secure a better political seat by marrying the world-famous summoner.

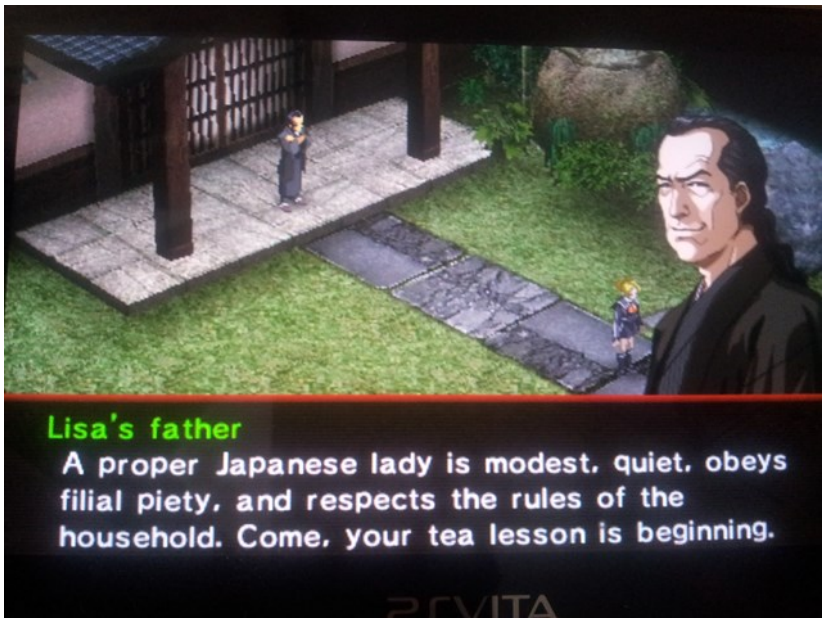
[Figure 12: Mateus (upper left), Kefka (upper right), Kuja (bottom left), and Seymour (bottom right)]

In some other cases, the lack of interest in a heterosexual adult life and the thirst for destruction establish a cause/effect relation. After Faize, the most gender-bending party member in *Star Ocean: The Last Hope*, is struck with grief after the loss of a group of tribesmen among which he found a potential heterosexual love interest, he accepts hopelessness into his heart and allows an ancient being whose entire purpose is the creation of a lifeless universe to possess him. In this particular case, it is hardly a coincidence that the most feminine looking teenager in the main cast is the one to experience the impossibility of attaining a socially sanctioned heterosexual relationship and, as a result, ends up transforming into the ultimate harbinger of death. At the other end of the spectrum, the other two protagonists (Edge [male] and Reimi [female]) and Faize's initial friends, not only grow to oppose him, but also to love each other.

Outside of the tentatively gay evil characters, JRPGs have a few examples of references to gay relationships and identities. These instances however are frequently relegated to secondary characters; possess a comedic undertone; or both. *Shadow Hearts: Covenant* and *Shadow Hearts: From the New World* are the second and third entries in a trilogy of JRPGs which were presented, particularly the first and second games, as a good alternative to *Final Fantasy*. These two games had an openly pair of gay characters. Pierre and Gerard, the shopkeepers players could buy weapons and armor from in every town they visited, acted as a couple, openly declared their homosexuality, and even provided players with quests revolving around collecting "stud cards"(cards with muscled men on them). The games, however, also made sure to portray this pair in a comedic light, in a way that players could not take them too seriously as a way of acknowledging the existence of such a pair of individuals in real life but never presenting them as a serious alternative in life.

The *Persona* series mixes the gameplay mechanics of dungeon crawling JRPGs with daily life simulators were players must follow the daily routine of the main protagonists (this is particularly true for Persona 3 and 4) and establish social relations with the rest of the cast by interacting and helping them. The series, in spite of its occasional light-hearted atmosphere, largely explores the fears and

anxieties of its largely teenage cast. *Persona 2: Innocent Sin* has Lisa, a half-American, half-Japanese female student facing the social expectations of her Japanese ancestors who expect her to grow into the supportive, submissive, nurturing wife and mother I discussed in the previous section [figure 13]. The game also has a male homosexual character, Jun, who is, unsurprisingly the antagonist for the first half of the game. It is, however, *Persona 4*, the game that explores the anxieties of being gay in greater detail.



[Figure 13: Lisa being reprimanded by her father in Persona 2: Innocent Sin]

Throughout *Persona 4*, the party members in the game face their inner fears and repressed feelings in the form of shadow versions of themselves. These shadows express whatever their human counterparts feel unable to admit about themselves. If left unaccepted, shadows can end up killing the humans they were born from. Kanji, one of the main

characters in the game, fears to be homosexual as well as being rejected as a result. This fear is not necessarily based on Kanji being attracted to men (which is not to be the case), but on his great ability sewing, embroidering, and knitting (something he perceives to be unmanly). When faced with his own shadow self [figure 14], he is assaulted by a gay-acting, muscle loving, men-flirting, parody version of himself Kanji quickly rejects. Once he accepts his fears, however, and even if the protagonist learns by interacting with him about Kanji's real reasons for doubting, the game still puts this character in situations where he is questioned or made fun of because of his identity. By doing this, even if the game manages to question at certain points identity discourses related to gender and sexuality, it still follows the flow of presenting not fully consolidated identities as a valid target for social assaults, even if this, of course, could also be seen as a critique of how society works.

[Figure 14: Shadow Kanji (back) questioning the real Kanji (front-right)]

Making homosexuality a subject for ridicule and laughter is not limited to in-game content. George Kamitani, the artist behind the designs of Japanese studio Vanillare's *Odin's Sphere* (2007), *Muramasa: The Demon Blade* (2009) or *Dragon's Crown* (2013), was critized upon the release of Dragon's Crown for the sexualized designs of the female cast compared to those of the male characters. As a response to the criticism, he quickly posted a drawing of three dwarfs [figure 15] on his official Facebook site and publicly questioned the sexuality of Jason Schreier, a writer in the gaming blog Kotaku.com who initiated the criticism, by stating "It seems that Mr. Jason Schreier of Kotaku is pleased also with neither sorceress nor amazon. The art of the direction which he likes was prepared. [Referring, in a sort of broken English, to the drawing of the three dwarfs and Schreier's potential homosexuality]"[40]

[40] Source: http://kotaku.com/the-real-problem-with-that-controversial-sexy-video-ga-478120280, last visited March 3, 2015.

[Figure 15: The official artworks for the female sorceress and male wizard and Kamitani's drawing (bottom) used to question critics's heterosexuality]

If we go back to *Conception II* and its mass-producing baby story and mechanics, we also find instances where homosexual identities are

hinted at but never presented as a serious choice in life. In one of the many interactions the male protagonist has with the female cast and Chlotz, his best male friend, Chlotz offers to share some of his cola with the protagonist. All written interactions in the game consist of dialogues in which players can choose from time to time one response out of three options. In this particular interaction, players can only reject Chlotz's friendly offer; and they have to do so by choosing on the following options [figure 16]: "No thanks.", "I'm not sharing your spit" or "We're not girls, you know". Even with the most neutral response ("no thanks") players have little choice but to reject the cola. Through interactions such as this one, the game forces unto players a very particular form of male-male interaction that is already framed by the continuous heterosexual simulated mating and reproduction mechanics of the game. As a socially sanctioned protagonist who likes dating girls the main character can only reject his best friend's offer. Players can choose, however, how rudely heterosexual their response ends up being.

[Figure 16: Chlotz offering Durant (one of the many default names players can choose from for the protagonist) some cola and the three possible response]

Choice is thus a powerful tool for the reproduction and enforcement of specific identity discourses in video games. Players in Valhalla Knights 3 can choose not to interact sexually with the female shopkeepers, but if they do so, they stop accessing the best weapons and equipment the game has to offer. By doing this, the game lets you choose between two approaches to the female body: Treating it as an object of desire or ignoring it at the cost of losing several advantages during gameplay. Other games, such as *Conception II* or *Cross Edge* and its bathing scenes, leave very little choice even if sometimes they let players select one among three equally heterosexual responses (with different degrees of politeness). My next chapter explores choice as a powerful tool for doing gender and sexuality in video games. I will, however, expand my range of games to include titles designed outside Japan.

Chapter 3. Games let you choose what they want: Choice, Gender and Sexual Identity in Video Games.

While I was playing *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware, 2009) some of the ideas presented by Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media* (Manovich, 2001) came to my mind. For this author, one of the main characteristics of new media is what he calls 'automation', understood as the invisible (to the human eye) and programmed nature "...of many operations involved in new media creation, manipulation, and access" (Manovich, 2001, 31). In the specific case of computer games, Manovich claims that automation works especially well as the characters presented in these games tend to respond effectively to the player's demands within the affordances and limitations of the computer game itself. For Manovich, computer games look to players like a responsive and intelligent medium by "tricking us [players] into using a very small part of who we are when we communicate with them" (33). However, this is not always the case. When Zevran, a companion for the player's character and the only option for male homosexual sex in *Dragon Age: Origins* asked me if there was something in my tent that needed assassinating (an indirect way of asking me if I desired sex) after I flirted with him, I felt as if the game was not using a very small part of who I was to address me but rather, I felt as if the game was trying to mold what I was. Why couldn't I tell Zevran that I like it soft? Or, why couldn't I tell him that the ones I really wanted to receive assassination from were the heterosexual

Alistair or the depraved and drunk dwarf Ohgren? Access to homosexual sex, once a rarity, ignored in most computer games, is by itself something to be celebrated; an advancement for the recognition of a social minority and an opportunity for a larger number of players to identify with their characters. However, what are the implications of having a not-so-masculine elven rogue perform as the only option for gay sex available in a game such as *Dragon Age: Origins*? This chapter seeks to explore the nature of choice in video games as both an enabling and a molding/limiting tool for the production and reproduction of identities.

3.1. Molding choices.

In *Games of Empire* Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) claim that computer games are machines of subjectivation. Computer games remove us from our own subject positions in order to invite us into pre-produced digital identities. These identities derive from the actual social formations that flow around the creation of a game. For this reason, most computer games present their users with forms of identity that are in fact "normalized subjectivities of a global capital order" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009, 192). These normalized identities are couched in products characterized by the presumed freedom of the players to make choices. The sense of freedom

created by the ability of players to interact with a game intensifies for these two authors "the sense of free will necessary for the ideology to work really well". That is, perceptions of freedom foster the players' willingness to accept certain embedded messages about subjectivity in some computer games. The larger the number of apparent choices players perceive, they easier they will readily accept the social discourses embedded within these choices. This idea works in conjunction with how video game scholars J. Yellowless Douglas and Andrew Hargaden (2004) perceive the evolution of video games. These two authors perceive a constant growth in the complexity and number of choices video games offer. Not only video games become richer in the kinds of gameplay interactions and the complexity of the rules they implement, but they also seem to incrementally include more complex storylines and narrative tools in which players have more agency. The expansion of choice and agency seems to lead, at least theoretically, towards freedom.

Richard Schechner (2004) responds to Yellowless and Hargaden by claiming that choice in video games is similar to the act of choosing from a menu; regardless how many elements to choose from there are on any given menu, freedom is always restricted to the items listed on it. A long and varied menu may make costumers-users feel like their personal needs and tastes are being addressed with greater care and,

yet, the end result is the same: Increased number of choices lead to a more readily consumption of the goods for which the menu mediates. In agreement with Schechner, I see choice as a powerful ideological tool that promotes some particular identitarian options, roles and behaviors deviously.

Miguel Sicart (2013) offers a very interesting vision on choice and its potential impact on ethical thinking and decision making in video games. Sicart recognizes the importance of understanding games as a form of media that addresses players as moral beings and, sometimes, forces them to act accordingly by asking players to make decisions that entail ethical thinking. While this author is not explicitly interested in questions of gender or sexual identity, his work on the ethical nature of some choices in games is extremely relevant for understanding the relation between ideology and choice. For Sicart, even if video games are primarily systems of rules that enable specific instances of play, there is also a secondary layer that is related to the metaphors games enact to make gameplay possible (e.g. the setting of a game, its story, its characters, etc.). In fact, for Sicart, "games can be seen as complex interrelations between a system [the rules of a game], the metaphors used to communicate with players, and the way that players interpret these metaphors as cultural and embodied beings who are socially situated in

the activity of play" (Sicart 2013, 39). The PSVita game *Freedom Wars* (SCE Japan Studio, 2014) is the perfect example I myself can offer for explaining the relationship between systems and metaphors in games Sicart points at.

Freedom Wars is a third-person action game that shares similar mechanics with the famous hunting-game franchise *Monster Hunter* (Capcom). In these games, players have to create an avatar, select a weapon type and start hunting and defeating increasingly powerful monsters. Each of these monsters drop materials players may use to upgrade their current equipment or create new and more powerful sets. Due to this materials-drop system, this type of game ensures that players are always ready to face stronger monsters by offering them the means to craft better equipment in order to be ready for more difficult challenges. Hunting games often make use of some sort of story and character development to justify their increasing difficulty. While the *Monster Hunter* series often proposes a narrative in which the player's avatar is one of the many hunters trying to gain notoriety in a world entirely focused on the art of hunting, *Freedom Wars* fully utilizes its setting and story to justify to players (and sometimes force upon them) its rules and system.

Freedom Wars is set on Earth in the distant 102014. In the game, the word is ridden by wars and conflict between *Panopticons,*

dictatorial and militaristic city-states forever at war with each other that internally function as a futuristic version of an Orwellian *Big Brother*. In the game, players control a denizen of one of these Panopticons charged with a 1.000.000 year prison sentence for the cardinal sin of being born into the world. Upon birth, all humans are automatically branded as sinners and charged with the same sentence. In order to get true freedom (freedom in a dictatorial and militaristic world is always rather relative, of course) and be regarded as citizens of their cities, sinners must partake in missions to destroy other Panotipcons' units and facilities as the only way to reduce their sentences. Similar to other hunting games, after each defeated monster, players obtain materials that must be used to upgrade the characters' weapons and items (thus making them ready for more difficult tasks). However, unlike other hunting games where only later enemies drop materials for truly powerful weapons, Freedom Wars has even relatively weak enemies offer advanced crafting materials. Players, however, are frequently forced to let these spoils pass (something counterintuitive to the core mechanics of the game) because of the premise of the game: Only sinners who have reduced their sentences up to certain pre-set levels are considered worthy of keeping advanced materials. Ignoring this rule allows players to keep all the materials dropped after a mission but at the expense of having

their sentences further increased as a punishment for their anti-social behavior. Players need, however, to continue reducing their avatars' sentence in order to unlock new missions and keep on playing, which usually forces them to only pick the materials the Panopticon/system considers appropriate for their sinner status and ignore the most advanced ones. By doing all this the game actually does from a gameplay mechanic something very similar to what most hunting games do: giving players materials and prizes in accordance to their progression and skill level. But, by making visible to players prizes they cannot (or rather should not) yet obtain, *Freedom Wars* creates a metaphor of oppression in which many limitations are as visible as the affordances the game offers. This, in fact, runs contrary to what most games usually try to do: They camouflage limitations (or that which players cannot do) within their systems by bringing to the front whatever players *can* do.

At the beginning of most games, designers limit the actions players can perform and let them progressively unlock better abilities, commands, or equipment, which are subsequently used to face challenges that also scale in difficulty. The fact that players must learn to drive slower cars in a driving simulation game before unlocking better vehicles does not simply result from a plot-induced story of becoming a famous (or infamous) driver within the fiction of

the game, but it is primarily a conscious decision at the designer's end to make players learn how to respond to the game system (i.e. players progressively learn how to play). Thus, unlocking new cars, unlocking new abilities in an adventure game (such as jumping higher or running faster), or getting better armor and weapons to vanquish strong foes, all serve, first, as a way of rewarding players for playing the game, secondly, as a way to progressively teach them how to play, and, finally, as a way of creating a fiction of progression that facilitates some degree of plot or narrative. In a game series such as *Monster Hunter*, in which the narrative premise is that the protagonist desires to become the best hunter in an hunting-centric society, unlocking better gear does not only makes accepting tougher challenges possible. This progression also contributes to the development of a narrative that revolves around the desire of the main character to succeed in the world the game simulates. By overlapping the system progression of a game with its narrative, players tend to focus on what they can do in order to progress, while all the locked aspects of the system remain invisible for them. Even if choosing what to do is limited to a specific set of elements which are progressively expanded as the game progresses with new elements, the union of a locked, expanding system with the narrative makes players stay focused on what they can do. Not being able to jump higher, run faster, buy

better cars or wield a better sword is not frequently accompanied with situations in which players actually need any of these elements to succeed. Instead, the game offers challenges to be completed with what players already have and based on the actions they *can* do. If the challenges of a game in which all the players' characters have to do is jumping are finely adjusted to said jumps, why would players desire to fly? This is the core premise according to which games are perceived as a medium that presents players with choices. Choice is, of course, never infinite and is always limited to what the game system lets players do. However, since both the gameplay and the narrative usually work together to direct players' attention to what they *can* do, all the limitations games also impose unto players remain largely unnoticed. The limited, and oftentimes unnoticed, nature of choice during gameplay also has a counterpart in choices that deal with discourses about gender and sexuality during gameplay.

Dragon Age: Origins and the options players have in terms of romanceable characters[41] are a good example of limited choice designed to not be perceived as limited. On the one hand, the presence of Zevran as a potential gay love interest amplifies the number of players that can feel addressed or identified with the choices they are being offered. Yet, Zevran is also marked with many traits that

[41] They are the elven bisexual male rogue Zevran, the heterosexual witch Morrigan, the bisexual rogue Leliana, and the heterosexual knight Allistair.

make him into a stereotype of non-normative sexuality: feminine manners, a slender build, and a profession (assassin) that places him outside of the norm both because of his sexual preferences and his way of life. Zevran's non-normative sexual orientation goes hand in hand with a whole set of non-normative social traits; something absent in other characters such as the straight Alistair, whose normative sexual orientation is coupled with a normative social disposition (he is a sworn knight who believes in social order and fights for the survival of his world as he knows it). *Dragon Age: Origins* gives players the opportunity to have virtual gay sex with a male companion. But, to what end? Zevran, a stereotype of male homosexuality may become accepted as *the* model for gayness as he is presented as the only gay option and may be assimilated as such by players eager to see queer sex recognized as a possibility due to the fascination of some gamers with the option of having male-male virtual sex.

Other games, such as the titles belonging to the *Grand Theft Auto* [GTA] series have always offered players a wide range of options to spend their time when playing: Driving around, bowling, buying clothes and food, flirting and having sex with women, etc. Several prominent authors have spoken about the virtual urban space and its impact on the choices available to players in the GTA series (Bogost, 2007; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Frasca, 2003; Tavinor,

2009). Some of them have also highlighted that the extensive maps available to players in the *Grand Theft Auto* series[42] offer players interesting choices that are, however, associated and limited to predefined stereotypes about class and race. An example of this can be found in Ian Bogost's analysis of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* in *Persuasive Games*. Bogost (2007, 116) explains that CJ's, the player character in *GTA: San Andreas*, has access only to a few types of food (sold in fast-food chains) and this frames the character, a black lower class young man, into a specific social and ethnic stereotype. Following Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's logic regarding the impact of apparent freedom in the consumption of ready-made subjectivities, we can argue that all the options available to players in the virtual urban space of San Andreas diminish the impact of assumptions about class and race by cloaking certain limitations as freedom.

Something similar happens with sexuality in these games: both CJ and Niko Bellic (the protagonist of *Grand Theft Auto IV*) are individuals marked by their ethnicity (Niko has a distinct East European accent). The games offer these characters the opportunity to engage in sexual intercourses with dwellers of San Andreas and Vice City. Their sole choice is, however, heterosexual sex. The fact that their heterosexuality is a given, since the player cannot have sex

[42] Miami-Vice City in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (Rockstar Games, 2002), San Francisco-San Andreas *in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004), and New York-Vice City in *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001) and *IV* (2008) have received the most attention.

with men even if he/she wants to, contrasts with the freedom GTA offers its players in other aspects of the game). The game mechanics allow CJ and Niko to perform as selective hit men, as mass murderers, as taxi drivers, compulsive consumerists, petty thieves, lonely drivers with no intended destination, heavy drinkers, dart players, stunt performers, junk food devourers, bowling experts or tank and aircraft pilots. In contrast to this, players do not have the option to perform as something other than male heterosexuals. Sex is present in the game, but players are given limited freedom when it comes to performing their characters' sexuality and gender. Judith Butler claims that gender and sexuality should not be understood as rigid categories determined by biologicial make-up. Instead, gender and sexuality traits are defined by the ways people perform them. By presenting oneself as a man one can embody masculinity. Gender and sexuality are therefore fluid concepts that vary in specific instances of each person's performances. Similarly, being forced to perform as a heterosexual character in a game where choice is abundant not only solidifies the sexual orientation players are allowed to act out, it also coerces players to participate in normative discourses about race, gender, and sexuality. The extensive map of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, with its ample options for leisure and fun, conceals a commodified and hetero-normal vision of desire; a normative vision that may not be

regarded as problematic for the *implied player*[43] of this game (i.e. player who identifies with or desires the heterosexual options *GTA IV* offers), yet it may turn choice into a freedom-depriving tool for players who try to venture outside of the identities this game is designed around.

This becomes particularly evident if we look at specific instances of these games. During a mission in *GTAIV* called *Out of the Closet* Niko is requested to contact and kill French Tom, a man who owes money to Brucie, one of the supporting characters in the game. In order to meet French Tom, the players must use a fictive gay portal. After a few messages, the pair meets at a café and after talking for a bit, the player is given the option to interrupt the conversation and draw Niko's weapon to attempt to kill French Tom. Alternatively, the player can also wait for a bit. If the player chooses the latter option, Niko grows tired of the conversation and tells French Tom his true intentions (killing him). This results in French Tom attempting to flee from Niko. Regardless of what the player decides to do, he/she is given two options: Niko either kills French Tom or he lets the gay man escape and consequently fails the mission. Liberty City's apparent freedom is suddenly reduced to an instance of an either/or

[43] See Ewan V. Lauteria's Ga(y)mer Theory: Queer Modding as Resistance for an extensive analysis on the relationship between implied players and gender/sexual relationships in videogames (Atlus' *Persona 4* primarily).

dichotomy as it is not possible to keep on flirting with French Tom, kiss him or convince him to pay his debts.

Other sandboxes outside of the GTA series do something similar. In *inFAMOUS* players are presented again with the ample virtual space of Empire City; a city resembling New York City. Empire City is divided in three main areas that become available as players complete certain story missions. Similar to, but a bit more limited than, the GTA series, the virtual urban space of this game gives rise to an ample number of actions available to the player. However, *inFAMOUS* frequently forces players to choose between two distinct ways of solving missions that are labeled as either morally good or evil. Again, the charm of the illusion of freedom caused by ample virtual game spaces contrasts with the limitations of the morality imposed to players. Being good or evil is defined by clear-cut lines, and the player is made aware, most of the time, of where his/her actions stand in the hierarchy of predefined morals. True, games need to give players affordances and limitations for the game to be a game. This includes the ways games give players feedback about their actions. However, computer games tend to present a limited vision of subjectivity, and more specifically desire, masked under a promise of free exploration and fun. That is something we should be wary of.

3.2. Unlocking Desire.

For French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1983), the flow of human desire resembles a rhizome. Desire is composed by an infinite number of lines of flight that depart and converge. Capitalist societies, in an attempt to form specific subjectivities, mold human desire by presenting certain wants and needs as the only acceptable and desirable ones. Capitalism in this sense needs for its own subsistence to promote certain forms of desire (e.g. the drives that compel people to consumerism) while repressing others. Certain forms of desire (e.g. non-normative sexualities) that escape the normalizing wave of Capitalism are either discarded as socially stigmatized options or are transformed (*re-territorialized*) and brought back to Capitalism's own flow.

CJ's and Niko's compulsory heterosexuality in their respective games is buried in an urban sea of flashy choices (such as the range of fashionable and sometimes peculiar clothes and cars available to him) while certain non-normative forms of understanding desire are simply non-options. *Dragon Age: Origins*, on the other hand seems to open up sexual choices to players. It uses a theoretical non-normative character, a feminine bisexual elf in order to lure some players into a sense of freedom and choice. However, the limitation of allowing players to flirt and have sex with Zevran and only Zevran invites gay

players (or players interested in pursuing virtual gay relationships) to experience homosexuality in a rather regulated way. Homosexuality is then re-territorialized, marketed and reproduced under the terms imposed by the game. Desire is therefore restricted to a set of well-defined labels embodied by a set of easily identifiable characters. The final product is ultimately marketed as choice.

However, games are not closed texts. They are open to interpretation, discussion, and modification. Specific choices in videogames charged with very concrete ideological implications create communities around them devoted to comment, criticize, and expand the discourses found within games as well as around them. Because of this, even limited forms of choice do create communities of players around them. These communities sometimes try to implement new options which address a wider range of sensibilities and identities that have been traditional ignored by companies. Characters such as Zevran serve as the spearhead of many non-normative users to expect and demand more from the kind and number of choices they are offered. In their quest for integration, communities seeking changes in the video game industry are formed that either (and sometimes both) directly transform the choices given to them by the games (e.g. communities of modders) or contact the creators of the game with their demands through more officials means (e.g. Bioware Social forums).

Dutch historian Johan Huizinga described play as a free activity separated from ordinary life (2008, 13). The rules that govern play do not affect the real world and, in a similar way, play seems to be separated from the seriousness of everyday life. When playing, a magic circle or a sacred spot is created that separates the playful from the serious sphere. However, the distinction between real/serious and playful (or virtual, if referring to computer games) is challenged by Edward Castronova (2006) who claims that the distinction between real and virtual is becoming increasingly difficult to establish. In fact, the rules in a computer game are always written by a human hand determining what can and cannot be done. This means that the sacred spot created by a computer game, far from being set apart from real life, is influenced, right from the start, by a number of subjective structures and ideological constraints: Those of the people designing, producing, and marketing the game. Shooting a virtual character in the head while playing a computer game does not have the same consequences as shooting someone in the head in real life, true; however, ideas about ethnicity, gender and sexuality may influence the way certain affordances and limitations are set in a game as well as the players' responses to them. In the specific case of gender and sexual choice in computer games, circulating normative ideas about gender or sexuality enter the game and produce works that, despite their desire (or need)

to give interesting choices to players, limit these choices to a range of socially controlled options. Does this mean that normative texts always produce normative responses in players? Not necessarily.

After looking at Janice Radway's (1991) and Henry Jenkins's (1992) ideas on the ways receptors of romance novels and television form their own identities by consuming media in specific ways, Sherry Turkle (1995, 241) discusses the modes in which users of Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) adopt positions of resistance against certain normative ideology. Turkle's ideas can also be applied to my analysis of normative sexual and gender-related choices in computer games. First, just as Radway claims that readers of romance novels do not necessarily read in order to escape their daily lives but rather to construct realities less limited than their own (Turkle, 1995, 241), some players may use the examples of sexuality and gender found in videogames to explore areas of human life that are most of the time restricted to them. A woman playing as CJ may learn about certain aspects of performed masculinity just as a normatively married white man may found in Zevran a way to externalize certain aspects of his non-expressed or realized identity. In both instances the experience could be empowering even if rooted in normative discourses about being in the world and may even generate non-normative responses to these social norms. On the other hand, similar to the agency given by

Jenkins (Jenkins, 1992, Jenkins, 2006) to fan-based communities, computer games are also subject to interpretation, scrutiny and modification by their users.

Two examples of the concern of these communities with topics related to gender and sexuality are the online magazine focused on gay issues, GayGamer.net, or some sections of the BioWare Social Network where players discuss their ideas about the inclusion, exclusion, and nature of choices about gender and sexuality in the games developed by the Canadian company. In some cases, fans' demands in official forums play an important part shaping the future of a franchise in regards to sexual and gender choice. A clear example of this are the changes introduced by Bioware with *Dragon Age 2* [*DAII*] (Bioware, 2010). In this game, the divide between companions who were available as heterosexual partners and those who were also available as same-sex options was broken by making every single romanceable character bisexual. From one perspective, it could be said that with this change the *Dragon Age* series distanced itself from stereotypical representations of gay identities by effectively expanding choice beyond the stereotype embodied by Zevran. However, a closer look at the actual new choices offered by *DAII* reveals that more than an overcoming of sexual and gender stereotypes, there is an expansion of their area of influence. In addition to Zevran (who makes a cameo

appearance during which players are given the option of having a one-timer with him), there are four members of the player's party that are available as partners. Unlike Allistair in *Dragon Age: Origins*, this time, none of the romanceable options can be considered as being fully integrated in the societies they live in; they are all potentially queer because of both their sexual and social practices. Among the four party members who are made avaible for sex in *DAII*, two are mages (something feared and punished in the universe of *Dragon Age*) with dangerous interactions with the spirit world (one is possessed by a vengeful spirit while the other merrily chats with an evil demon trapped in the mirror she has in her bedroom), one is a pirate/thief who already appeared in *Dragon Age: Origins* inviting players into a threesome (or a foursome, if some cards were played right), while the last one is a former elven (the most discriminated against race in *Dragon Age*) slave with a deep hatred towards mages. All four bisexual characters are thus also social outcasts. And, while the range for homosexual sex is expanded from the rather limited choice found in the first game, DAII still presents the same ideological association between queer sexual practices and social status as *Dragon Age: Origins*.

In this respect, the amplification of sexual availability in *Dragon Age 2* seems to be justified by the fact that most of the

protagonists were cast-outs to begin with. Sexual choice is then directly tied to specific social contexts as well as with notions of class and race. Several fan-based voices were raised in Bioware's forums in regards to this pan-bisexual approach taken by the company in *Dragon Age 2*, as many gay and lesbian players felt that the game fell too short in its attempt to write a character who was primarily gay or lesbian[44]. Having the four romanceable characters to choose from was still perceived as an empty choice; an enticing option that was not necessarily backed up by the gameplay and/or the narrative of the game.

With *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Bioware, 2014), the third installment of the game, the concerns of fans were heard once again and the game offered two bisexual options (Iron Bull, a beastly male *qunari*[45] and Josephine, a refined human diplomat who works for the protagonist as his/her head diplomat). But, also, two exclusively homosexual options: Sera, an elven female archer who loves to question, mock, and rebel against social injustice and Dorian, a castout mage from a rival nation who abandoned his high-social rank due to family pressures regarding his homosexuality.

[44] This notion of a clear separation between heterosexual and homosexual identities can be, however, interpreted in the light of queer theory as an essentialist attempt to understand sexual and gender identity.
[45] The Qunari are a race of horned, muscular individuals who faithfully follow their own, half-religion half-social code, vision of life called the Qun.

With Iron Bull, the game links again the characters' sexual orientation with his social status: He is a member of a race in continuous conflict with the rest of the world, he is a mercenary (thus, he initially does not fight to defend any particular noble cause), and his view on sex and love revolves around physical needs[46] and mental benefits (the qunari conceive sex as something the body needs naturally and act accordingly openly). In Sera's case, while Bioware seemed to have listened to many fans asking for fully dedicated homosexual characters, she is still portrayed as a social outcast a who is step away from madness and whose sexual orientation seems to be just one of her many eccentricities. In this sense, *Dragon Age Inquisition* seems to reproduce similar message to those contained in the previous two games.

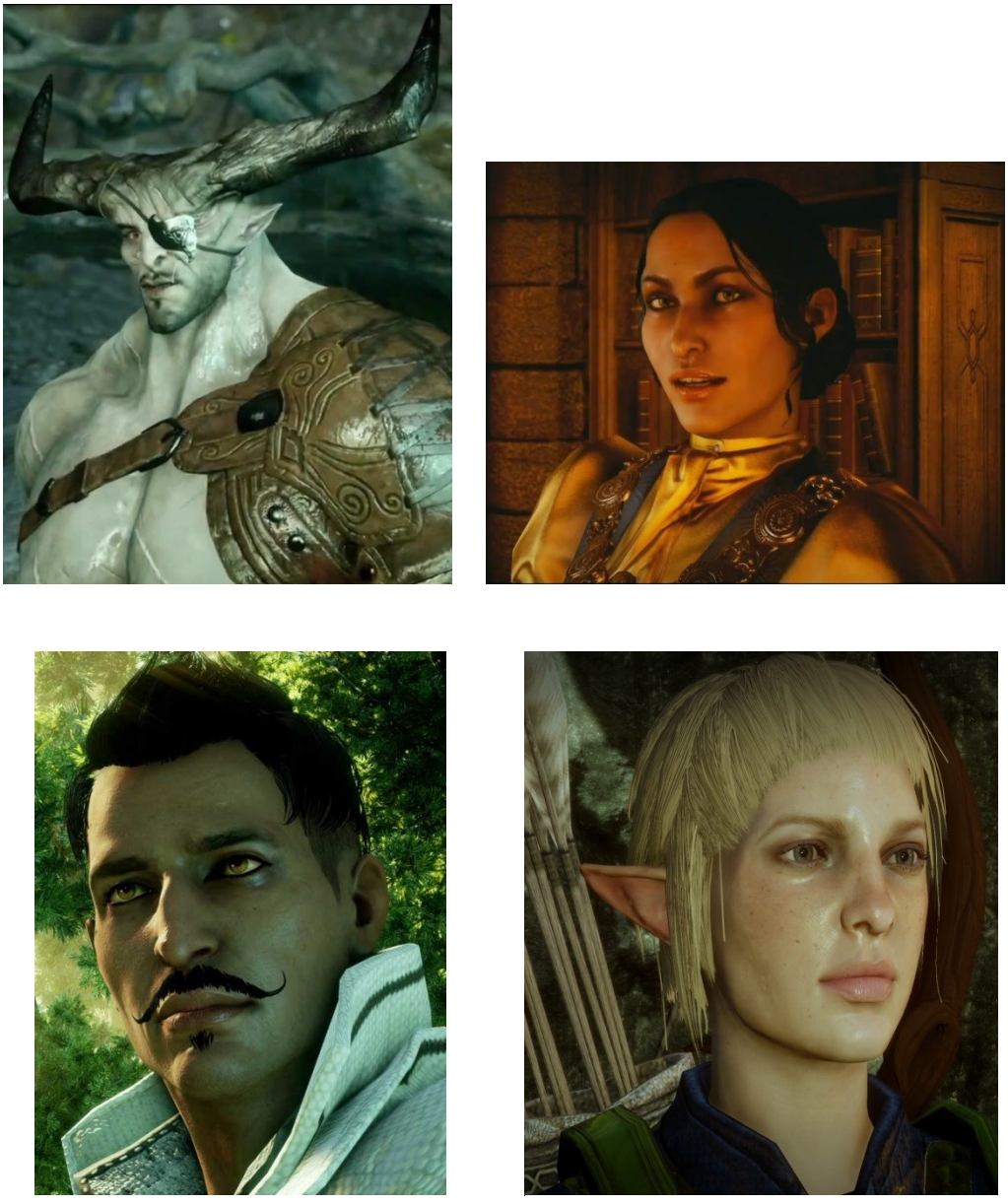
Things change slightly with Josephine and Dorian. Josephine is the protagonist's list to everything social within the game. She is a respectable noble, she establishes crucial links with powerful people and advices the protagonist in all matters regarding diplomacy and social etiquette. The fact that she is available for sex for both male and female protagonists does not seem to produce any kind of friction: High nobility in Orlais (the country Josephine is from and a clear reference to France) seems to partake in sex freely, leaving prejudice

[46] Iron Bull spends some time explaining this...and then, a few cutscenes later, the game makes sure to make players aware of the character's enormous penis.

to commoners. Thanks to Josephine the game establishes, for the first time, a connection between power (even if it comes from a foreign source), social recognition, and potential non-heterosexual sex.

Dorian, on the other hand, offers a more nuanced relation between homosexuality and social rejection. Just as Sera, he is also a social outcast, but, in his case, he comes from a powerful and noble family from Tevinter (an Empire ruled by mages bordering the setting of the game on the north) who wanted him to marry in order to carry on the family legacy. However, Dorian's desire to live his homosexuality openly (contrary to his father's wishes for him to stay closeted forever) made him leave Tevinter and become an outcast. Also, far from Sera's wacky attitude, Dorian's main desire is to be accepted on his own terms by the society that rejected him and to eventually help in the democratization of his oligarchy-ridden country of birth. Thus, far from being a marginalized individual who eventually rejects society, he is embraces that very same society in an attempt to heal it from its corruption and bigotry. While many fans rejected Dorian appearance [see figure 3.1] for reproducing many of the physical clichés that seemingly plague homosexual characters in video games (those very same fans also had words for Sera's haircut), many others commented on the enlightening nature of Dorian's story and their

personal experience in relation to homosexuality, rejection, and the longing for social acceptance[47].



[Figure 1: Iron Bull, Josephine, Dorian, and Sera.]

[47] The online blog dedicated to video games and gay interests, *Gaygamer.net*, dedicates a very interesting article to Dorian: http://gaygamer.net/2014/12/a-different-kind-of-sophisticated-gent-a-look-at-dorian-pavus/

Regardless of whether Dorian looks or his complex struggle, the fact remains that through the three games in the Dragon Age series, Bioware has expanded the range of choices for romance. This expansion may result from an actual evolution in the way the industry perceives homosexual characters, a commercial-oriented attempt to please fans, or a conscious effort to expand the number of players that feel addressed by the identities portrayed in games. In all cases, however, the direct connection between ideology and choice in video games becomes apparent. Fans have been sometimes quick to pick up this connection and act accordingly to expand the range of choice games offer in order to cater to players' interests.

Fan-made mods (modifications and patches that change, and oftentimes improve, one or several aspects of a game) can be seen as independent attempts of fans to rewrite the original choices inserted by the original game designers without their intervention. *Equal Love* [48] is particularly relevant for the purposes of this chapter. By altering the code that labels the player's character as either male or female, this mod erases any restrictions or limitations that made some characters in *Dragon Age: Origins* impossible to romance when approached by the "wrong" gendered character. That is, once Equal Love has been applied, the player's character is coded as being both

[48] Available at: http://www.dragonagenexus.com/downloads/file.php?id=429

male and female and, thus, romanceable characters respond as if approached by the specific gender they were written to respond positively to.

Baldur's Gate (Bioware, 1998) and *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* (2000), as well as their expansion packs, *Tales of the Sword Coast* and *Throne of Bhaal* (2001), reflect particularly well the contesting power of fan-based actions against the regulatory power of computer games. These games, considered by most critics and users as among the best examples of great Western RPGs, have been for years also supported by a dense community of modders and mod-users. The mods created for this saga vary from patches unifying the four titles into a single game (with better transitions between the ending of one title and the beginning of the next; a better, unified engine, a unified battle and pause system, etc.), new encounters and items, as well as completely new side missions that included new characters players could recruit and, sometimes romance. Several of these added characters expanded the somewhat limited choices players had in regards to sex and romance in the original titles[49] by adding gay and lesbian love interests. The co-habitation of mods that focus primarily on gameplay changes (e.g. the engine of the *Shadows of Amn* being applied to the first *Baldur's Gate*) and those that circle around

[49] There were four potential love interests in Baldur's Gate: Shadows of Amn: Three heterosexual females and one heterosexual male.

identity affordances and limitations suggests that choice is important at both the ludological *and* identitarian levels.

Sometimes companies pick up these efforts. In 2012, an official remasterization of *Badul's Gate* and *Tales of the Sword Coast* was released. Most of the changes introduced to this remasterization, however, were already added free of charge to the original releases through fan-created mods and patches. The remasterization was, however, prized at launch $19.99. This proves that even fan based practices that amplify the social, technological and identitarian impact of any given text and/or technology is not safe from the re-territoralizing power of capitalism.

3.3. I Willingly Choose to End This.

I began this chapter invoking automation, the third characteristic of new media discussed by Manovich to talk about the modes in which computer games try to address portions of who we are. I will now use variability (Manovich, 2001, 36), the fourth characteristic, to finish this chapter. The fact that new media can be altered and be presented in different forms guarantees that users can potentially adapt some of the content handed to them in computer games to suit their desires and needs. However, the creation and

modification of new content will never be completely accessible. First, while mods such as *Equal Love* are not difficult to apply to PC versions of game, console games are much less susceptible to modding, acting more as closed texts than their computer counterparts. Thus, unless game developing companies start to favor technologies that allow for the opening of the interaction between users, texts, and technologies, a significant portion of players (those who play on consoles) will be always partially subordinated to the choice menu made for them beforehand. Secondly, no matter whether Deleuze and Guattari are right and desire is indeed and ever-expanding rhizome unportrayable by branching choices, representations of desire in video games will always be incomplete due to the very nature of the technologies involved with them. The very act of writing code is an act of choosing beforehand; of deciding what is included in a game and how. Choice, in this respect, might never be the channel through which freedom is exerted by players, but the path players follow in order to willingly submit to the rules of any game. For this reason, choice will always be a crucial field of research not for what it promises players to do, but for the social discourses and practices (both at the designer's and the user's end) it incorporates and generates. In the next chapter I explore how tactility and haptic input are related to choice, and the ways in which touching is often subordinated to

seeing and hearing when discussing video games and identity discourses.

CHAPTER 4. Push, Press, Become: Tactility in Video Games and its Impact on Identity Discourses.

During one of my occasional nights playing *Rayman Origins* (Ubisoft, 2011) with my friends I began to hear several complaints related to the incapacity of some of them to follow the action on the screen. It was not a problem of not being able to locate their avatars within the vast visual richness of the game, but rather, to follow the relation between their actions and the events on the screen. The problem was not due to my friends' visual acuity, the size of the screen or the distance between our couch and the TV; their deciphering capacity seemed directly dependent on their actual skill with the game. Something similar happened some time later while I was playing *Soul Calibur V* (Namco Bandai Games, 2012) with my partner. This time, however, he complained about not seeing the actions on the screen but only did so whenever he failed to pull out a specific move or when his attacks did not connect. These two examples are not too far from my personal experience and the reports of some self-proclaimed seasoned players in online forums[50] in relation to the impossibility of "seeing" some elements of the action during Quick Time Events (henceforth QTEs) in action games such as *Bayonetta* (Platinum Games, 2010) and *God of War 3* (SCE Santa Monica Studio, 2010). However, what

[50] Examples: Gamefaqs forums (http://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/946346-bayonetta/53411787), Giant Bomb forums (http://www.giantbomb.com/bayonetta/61-20710/so-is-it-normal-to-die-a-lot-in-bayonetta-or-do-i-just-suck/35-388697/), and Gamespot forums (http://www.gamespot.com/bayonetta/forum/cutscene-qtes-are-ruining-my-life-52309778/).

does "not seeing" mean? Is it merely an issue of visual representation?

In Ann Friedberg's view (1991), the postmodern condition is best described as the moment in which space and, more importantly, time, have been displaced. Subjectivities are no longer exclusively rooted in the present, but are also mobilized through the gaze into a different space and time. This displacement is defined by Friedberg as a *mobilized gaze*; a form of looking in which past (e.g. the time and space of the moving images in cinema) and present (the world media users inhabit) are merged. Friedberg's ideas have been applied extensively to media where visual images are one of the main ways of conveying meaning. However, with the rise of video games and, more importantly, with the arrival of formal game studies, new questions have emerged that are specific to this medium. From my perspective, video games also mobilize players into different spaces and times; the difference with other media lies, however, in the way this mobilization is triggered and functions as something not merely visual and aural, but also tactile and corporeal.

This chapter analyzes the centrality of tactility to the perception of most components, visual and non-visual, in video games. As a result, my aim is not to ignore the importance of the visual and aural aspects of video games, but to bring them down to a level in

which the tactile aspect is at least just as important. It is important to note that I will be using the term "tactile" in a broad sense in order to describe not only situations in which players are in direct contact with traditional controllers and touch screens, but also forms of control that utilize the user's whole body (i.e. games using peripherals such as Microsoft's *Kinect*). I will end my chapter by analyzing how tactile perception transforms discourses of sexual and gender identity.

4.1. Space and tactility.

American new media scholar Henry Jenkins (2004) has highlighted the importance of space to video games by claiming that game design has more to do with the construction of these virtual spatial environments than with storytelling or the implementation of rules. From this perspective, it would be reasonable to say that playing video games is closely related to playing with, and moving through virtual space. This analysis does not invalidate any ludological or, even, narrativist approaches to the study of video games; instead, these approaches find an ally in Jenkins' vision of space as the prime manifestation of the code, the rules, and/or the story of any game. Navigating and understanding space, however, are both visual and corporeal experiences. Let me start developing this idea with the

following examples. In the *Practice of Everyday Life*, French philosopher Michel de Certeau (1984) explains that individuals of any given society understand space by acting/living in it (92-93). As he explains, walking involves more than motion; it offers the chance to experience the forces that shape society. Conversely, a society can be understood through bodily interactions with the spaces it creates. The merely visual apprehension of space (de Certeau uses the example of looking at a map) provides just a limited attempt at understanding (120-121).

In video games a similar phenomenon can be observed: moving through and acting within virtual space provides a completely different experience from the one obtained through visual analyses of this medium. Walking close to a precipice in *Tales of Graces F* (Namco, 2012) plays out as a very different experience from navigating the distorted urban spaces of *Bayonetta* and *Dmc: Devil May Cry* (Capcom, 2013). While the three examples manage to create a sense of danger through visual representations, the way players understand space through play is quite different in each of these games. *Tales of Graces F* uses invisible walls[51] to limit traversable spaces (thus, removing any danger of falling from precipices or high places),

[51] These invisible walls prevent avatars from continuing walking past certain areas of the spaces represented in a game. Players are protected from falling by these walls. These barriers are also commonly used in video games in order to prevent players from entering areas of the map they are supposed to visit later (in which case, a message is displayed stating something close to "We don´t really have time to go there now").

players of the other two titles have to continuously act on the menace of falling. Thus, a precipice in the first example is little more than a visual prop players could walk against indefinitely should they want to. A precipice in *DmC* and *Bayonetta,* however, is an obstacle that must be overcome through tactile input (i.e. by moving away from it, jumping over it, placing the camera in a certain position to calculate the distance of the fall, etc). In these three examples, the way players must tactilely respond to space (i.e. the fact that they have to touch their controllers to move a camera in order to obtain a better look at the space represented on the screen) modifies the very perception of it. Space is something players look at, true, but it is also something they indirectly touch and tactilely experiment with.

Acting on space seems a prerequisite to understanding both the virtual space of the game and the game itself. In his book *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Alexander R. Galloway (2006) claims that action and acting are the key defining elements of video games. For this author, contrary to the images in photography or the cinema, where the actions "transpire before or during the fabrication of the work" (2), video games need to be played to run, or rather, they depend on the complementary work of two actors: the machine running a pre-existing code and the player playing the game. For Galloway, "the operator and the machine play the video games together, step by step,

move by move" (2). However, he insists on not equating his idea of video games as an action-based medium with interactivity, focusing instead on his view of this medium as being determined by a continuous instigation of "material change through action" (4). Regardless of whether they can be subsumed under the notion of interactivity or not, Galloway's ideas do indeed identify the specificity of video games while also providing one possible framework for a critical and ideological analysis of this medium that goes beyond mere issues of visual representation. By mixing Galloway's ideas with De Certeau's analysis of space one could conclude that in order to understand and interpret the virtual space of video games looking is not enough. Players need to act on this space. This may sound simple at first, but my idea does not simply imply that in order to play players need to act, but that in order to see, players also need to act. On the players' end, acting is frequently related to tactility, that is, touching/pushing/pressing specific parts in a controller or screen in order to move an avatar around or select options from a menu.

Prior to the development of any gaming skills, and prior to the capacity to decipher visually the space of a game, there is a stage at which seeing and looking at a game is determined by the way players interact with, or act in relation to, it. This goes beyond the idea that in order to play a game players just have to learn its controls,

but rather, that in order to perceive what really happens within a game, players need to become involved tactilely with it. From my perspective, when playing a game, visual elements are not only mapped with the eyes, but also through the physically absorbed potential actions that can be executed through bodily and tactile inputs.

This idea is already familiar in the study of other human activities where visual inputs require some degree of tactile and corporeal response. One of these activities is driving. Several studies on hazard perception while driving link experience with a better capacity to discern potential dangers. What does 'better' mean? The authors of "Alternative methods of measuring hazard perception: Sensitivity to driving experience" (Michelle I. Whellan et al, 2002) suggest that experience marks the distinction between the general area drivers look at as well as the objects that stimulate greater degrees of risk awareness and attention. Novice drivers, when compared to experienced ones, pay more attention to stationary objects than to moving ones and their focus tends to shift more often to other lines on the road. In "Visual search of driving situations: Danger and experience" cognitive psychologists Peter R. Chapman and Geoffrey Underwood (1998) analyzed the eye movement of seasoned and amateur drivers and discovered an inverse relation between experience and the amount of time the eyes remain fixed at any given visual cue. In both

cases, experience is understood in a broad sense to include all the actions and potential events drivers may face while driving (from knowing when a moving object becomes a threat, to measuring the direct relation between pedal and steer wheel manipulation and motion). The relation between perception and experience goes beyond driving examples. In *Inattentional Blindness* (1998), Arien Mack and Irvin Rock show evidence that "there is no conscious perception without attention" (14). For them, what is perceived first and foremost is difference--difference in shape, texture or color between the element human attention foregrounds and a more homogenous set of objects that serve as background. If we go back to video games we can ask ourselves the following questions: Does experience play a role in the perception of elements while playing? What stands out as different and therefore gets the player's attention first?

In his influential study on incorporation, Game Studies scholar Gordon Calleja (2011), draws on American urban planner Kevin Lynch's (1960) idea of "imageability", which Lynch defined as the quality a space has to invite "the eye and the ear to greater attention and participation" (Lynch in Calleja, 2011,88). Calleja claims that imageability in virtual space results from "the absorption of spatial characteristics into consciousness" (89). The player's perception of virtual worlds depends on an interpretation of external stimuli which

in turn relies on pre-existing *gestalts of experience*. Calleja links the capacity of players to perceive the world to their existing experience on perception, and ultimately, to incorporation. To put it rather simply: players perceive more the more they perceive, and the more they perceive the more they feel as if they were *there*. Despite the optical connotations of a term such as imageability, it is important to note that both the absorption of spatial characteristics into consciousness and the formation of gestalts of experience depend on, both, visual and, very importantly, tactile inputs and outputs. That is, perception while playing is not based solely on visual difference alone (Mack and Rock). Difference itself comes from the player's experience of which visual elements on the screen can potentially demand a tactile response (e.g. which elements are just part of the background/scenery and which are actual obstacles players must act upon to overcome). If difference comes from the union of the visual and the tactile, then perception itself would depend on the player's experience with this type of difference. This phenomenon becomes particularly evident when observing players who are not familiar with video games, or players who are not familiar at all with the game mechanics of a particular title or genre; in these cases, their inability to respond to the visual outputs of games lies in their inability to respond to the game both visually and tactilely.

Knowing the potential actions mapped to different tactile and bodily gestures (e.g. tapping a combination of buttons in a fighting game or raising one's arm when using a motion controller such as Sony's *Move*) allows players to analyze the virtual space of a videogame based on what can and cannot be done within it. In "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame", James Newman (2002) claims that characters in video games would be better understood as a "suite of characteristics or equipment utilized and embodied by the controlling player". This is, characters are what characters allow players to do; everything else, such as the avatar's appearance, is an accessory that eventually tends to take a backseat during gameplay. Something similar happens with the visual elements of virtual space that are not essential to gameplay, such as the background scenery. Despite the fact that they can be observed and even admired at certain points, visual elements that are not relevant to gameplay due to the impossibility of players to interact with them become almost invisible in favor of the elements players have learnt to pay attention to. It is not the appearance, but the potential actions they can perform through tactile expression what oftentimes determines the importance of a visual element. Newman's idea can be further complemented by Sheila C. Murphy's (2004) article "Live in Your World, Play in Ours: The Spaces of Video Game Identity". In her article, Murphy claims

that "control within a game and the controllers used to play a game are actually quite crucial factors in facilitating a player's identification with an avatar and establishing a connection between the physical body of the gamer in front of the television or computer screen and one's identity with the narrative world of the game" (230). With this, she clearly identifies a connection between the tactile aspects of video games and processes of both player-avatar identification and identity formation.

The importance of controllers, the manual gestures associated with them, and their impact on the player is emphasized by media scholar Graeme Kirkpatrick in "Controller, Hand, Screen" (2009). Kirkpatrick's article is relevant for at least two reasons: First, he stresses the link between the experiences and feelings of players/ gamers[52] and their ability to assimilate all the skills associated with the use of the controller completely. Secondly, the author describes the actual use of the controller as resulting in fluctuating states of *tension*. Here, tension is to be understood as both a set of bodily states users adopt as they play (e.g. tensing the muscles in the hand to press a button) as well as the dynamic relation between what is shown on the screen both at the level of visual representation and

[52] Kirkpatrick makes a clear distinction between these two terms. What separates a player from a gamer is that the former has yet not acquire the mastery and skill level of the latter.

ideological encoding. As I am about to show, my use of the term *encoding* is completely intentional.

Garry Crawford and Jason Rutter's reading (2006) of The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies sheds an interesting light on Murphy's idea on the connection between physical bodies, their identities, and screens. As these two authors explain, The Birmingham School, making use of the ideas of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, defends the idea that "the shared values and the culture of society are those based largely on dominant (that is, ruling class) values an ideologies" (152). Crawford and Rutter then explain Stuart Hall's use of the terms *encoding* and *decoding*. For this author, cultural products are *encoded* within dominant discourses and beliefs. Users/consumers of cultural products engage in a process of decoding, where the *encoded* ideas are not automatically assimilated as they are, but are negotiated on the basis of each individual's own needs, identifications, and desires.

Kirkpatrick, however, rejects analyses of video games where discourses interpellate[53] users into specific identities as the result of processes of production, subversion and re-modification of social discourses. For this author, video games are not texts that should be

[53] Kirkpatrick makes use of Louis Althusser's concept of interpellation. According to the French philosopher, cultural practices are the product and the catalysts of ideology. In their portrayal of dominant discourses, cultural products do not only show users' specific modes of behavior, but also, invite them to behave according to the shown models. By doing this, users are interpellated into being subjects of the discourses they consume.

read and contextualized following traditional means. Instead, their "real sociological significance lies in the dynamics of their corporeal appropriation by players" (2011, 195). Following this logic, *encoding* and *decoding* do not take place following exclusively representational means, but result and are the result of the instances of *tension* established between a game, a controller, and the player. In this sense, the bodily actions players are made to repeat while gaming carry a strong ideological significance. The importance of the relation between repetition and bodily actions is something I will revisit in the last section of this chapter.

Before that, however, I will take a step forward from my initial position at the beginning of this chapter: I began this text defending the idea that tactility plays a crucial role at assisting players to see the visual elements of the screen. However, drawing from Kirkpatrick's ideas, we can add that tactility (or the actual bodily gestures players make when playing) also plays a critical role in decoding the encoded ideological discourses of video games. It may seem that I am defending here two different ideas at the same time. However, the position defended in this chapter is just one: Visual and ideological perception in video games depends on the tactile relation players establish (and are forced to established) with this medium; it

is all part of the same process. The following examples will shed more light on this idea.

4.2.Dying as a witch, killing as a male.

Bayonetta is a hack ’n’ slash game in which players control a powerful witch who is also called Bayonetta. As in most hack ’n’ slash games, players can move Bayonetta in a 3D world as she traverses the virtual space of the game and fights and dodges enemies. The usual weapons that tend to be common to this action genre (such as a katana, pistols, shotguns, etc.) also make an appearance in the protagonist’s arsenal, but with a twist. As Bayonetta attacks using weaponry, she also shapeshifts her hair, grown to gargantuan proportions, in order to create additional sources of damage, such as an overgrown heel made of hair that pierces her enemies or a demonic, and also hairy, bird that eats her enemies’ entrails. As she uses her hair to attack, part of her attire (a black leather suit made with her own living hair) also disappears, leaving the character in a state of semi-nakedness. These attacks are also accompanied by several finishers with overtones of torture during which Bayonetta often mocks her opponents sexually. Bayonetta’s attitude throughout the game is ambivalent, though. On the one hand she is continuously making sexualized and contortionist-like poses in front of enemies during cutscenes and during some combos

and attacks. But, at the same time she is always licking a lollipop and taunting her enemies' masculinity (with two exceptions all of her enemies are either male[54] and/or beasts). However, most segments of the game are not designed to be solely watched. Even during cutscenes, players are forced to remain tactilely focused while their gaze is not necessarily directed at the visual object in front of them, but put at hold by the tactile actions the game demands from them. This is not surprising for the action sections of the game in which players control Bayonetta directly, but it is a bit more so during cutscenes. Boss fights also include frequent Quick Time Events [QTEs] during which spectacular battle scenes are displayed reminding players to actually stay focused on their controllers. however, even during more traditionally looking cutscenes (e.g. cutscenes that seem to exist originally in order to advance the plot of the game) QTEs may also appear, forcing the player back from a more spectatorial position into a more active one. Because of this, *Bayonetta* continuously blurs any separation between instances of play where players actually play (what Newman [2002, 2002b] calls *on-line states of engagement*) and passive instances with no active player input (Newman's *offline*). Instead, players must remain focused tactilely at all times as QTEs may pop up

[54] Bayonetta's enemies are not human, but angels that often take some animalistic traits. Their bodily features, design and voice actors are most of the time male. The game thus creates a division between a female group of witches (that of the protagonist' and her now destroyed clan) and the forces of heaven who try to impose their own order led by male figures of power.

at any point in the game suddenly interrupting a cutscene or acting as an integral part of a platforming section.

Bayonetta's approach to the hack 'n' lash genre finds a curious counterpart in the recently released *DmC: Devil May Cry* (Ninja Theory, 2013). *DmC* is a reinterpretation of the *Devil May Cry* (Capcom, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2008) saga originally created by Hideki Kamiya. In *DmC*, players take control of Dante, a young nephilim (the cross-breed of a demon and an angel) on his quest to defeat the Demon King and world banker Mundus. Dante has access to both angelic and demonic-themed weapons to get rid of his foes. Unlike *Bayonetta*, whose enemies are frequently male, Dante fights demons that vary from genderless mannequin-like abominations, to female demon harpies or hulking, presumably male, brutes. Also, just as Bayonetta displayed a very particular take on female sexuality, Dante's position is made clear from the outset. This becomes particularly obvious at the very beginning of the first mission: Just as the protagonist wakes up after a torrid night of three-way sex with two female dancers, he is attacked, while still naked, by a gigantic demon hunter who uses a grapple hook to grab and hurl Dante's caravan, where the protagonist's clothes are, at him. Just as the caravan is about to hit him, Dante jumps inside it still naked and, while in the air, somehow grabs his clothes, manages to put them on, and lands safely

outside. This sequence shows a close-up of Dante's slow-motioned nakedness. His penis, however, is hidden first by a baseball bat (a metaphor of Dante's virility?) and secondly by the crust of a pizza slice that, for a few seconds, resembles a flaccid virile organ. Regardless of the ulterior motives of this sequence, it becomes clear after watching it that there is a playful attitude towards what can and cannot be shown in a close-up while still keeping a PEGI +12 rating. The image of the baseball bat as a substitute of his penis, his muscular body, as well as his apparent success with women, seem to point at the protagonist's unquestioned masculinity. However, unlike Bayonetta's, Dante's attitude towards his enemies is, for most of the time, void of any sexual references or insinuations. Because of his responses and demeanor, he is more a young punk rebel than a hypersexualized male hero. While Bayonetta was a hyper-sexualized heroine fighting hordes of male angels, Dante is a youth who fights against a social system controlled by demons through debt (the main antagonist is a banker), preacher-like news reporters and will-consuming soft drinks. Mass-monitoring technologies such as demonic security cameras and data bases play a large role in the story of the game, both as a thread and as something the protagonists can take advantage of to some extent. In addition, it is important to note that controlling Dante is a relatively easier experience than the one

offered by *Bayonetta*[55]. Combos are easier to initiate and maintain, enemies are less aggressive, and failing in certain sections (e.g. platforming sequences) is punished much less severely. Also, *DmC* lacks QTEs in the traditional sense. Video sequences are just transitions the game uses to make the story advance where the danger of timely responding to a button press that results in death is absent. Figuratively speaking, Dante has a much easier life than Bayonetta.

Analyzing these two games in tandem raises some interesting questions about them. Does the witch behave like an object of desire for the pleasure of the player's gaze? Is Dante a good example of male rebelliousness and individuality sanctioned by his own phallic power? Are players exposed to an innovative form of understanding gender and sexual conventions through repeatedly slashing, smashing, and amputating hordes of Patriarchy-aligned enemies? How do these ideas transfer to other type of games? In my view, all of these questions are irrelevant if we only play attention to the visual component of games (i.e. Bayonetta's insinuating poses or Dante's metaphorical hard, long, phallus). What ultimately confirms or refutes the ideological content of any element in a video game as a portion of a much larger ideology is what players tactilely do with the game.

[55] One of the main critiques *DmC* has received from fans of the hack 'n' slash genre and the gaming press alike is its relative lack of challenge in its initial difficulty level when compared with other titles of the *Devil May Cry* saga and *Bayonetta*.

In the particular case of *Bayonetta*, the protagonist's potential role as an object of desire that shows herself in front of a theoretical male gaze is defused by the mandatory state of attention to other cues the game imposes on players. The danger of having every cinematic scene interrupted by the button prompt of a QTE forces players to swift their attention from Bayonetta herself to the areas of the screen where QTEs tend to appear. With QTEs the flâneur and the arcade that inhabited traditional cinematic sequences are placed on a highway , in which speedy traffic continuously interrupts the viewing process. Dante, despite his presentation as an empowered individual, lets himself be treated as something to be viewed as cinematic scenes are designed to be watched without any prompts or interruptions. If we were to pay attention to actual instances of combat and analyze the actions the game expects players to do, we would also find that specific discourses seem to be reinforced. *Bayonetta*, being the harder game of the two, forces players to combine combo strings (pre-made combinations of button presses that result in specific attacks and finishers), with evading maneuvers, and ever-present popping QTEs. However, given the difficulty of the game, combos are frequently interrupted while the chances of failure are relatively high. Comparatively, *DmC* is easier. Pulling out combos is easier as there are safe zones[56] players can use to act uninterruptedly. The different

[56] *DmC* favors aerial combos (i.e. combos that launch the enemies in the air and keep them there while being hit by the

flows both games impose onto the players' hand gestures place the experience of playing as a female witch and a male nephilim apart. Following Newman (2002), if we were to define what these protagonists are in these video games, they would be an interrupted, often beaten character (Bayonetta) and a comparatively free-flowing avatar (Dante). Thanks to offline moments of play (e.g. looking at the artwork of the game or watching a cutscene) the capabilities of each character become linked to other traits: Bayonetta is a female witch while Dante is a male angel-demon hybrid. Bringing now the words male and female, thus alluding to gender as a significant trait of these characters' identities, may seem arbitrary. However, it is not. As Mia Consalvo states in "Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances: Studying Sexuality in Video Games" (2003), video games always tend to represent sexualized/gendered relations in the stories and forms of play they present. Following this idea, it is difficult to ignore the fact that Bayonetta, being female, receives a much significant punishment from male enemies than Dante[57], an empowered male who fights a more varied

protagonist's attacks). As a limited number of enemies can hit Dante while he is airborne, it is easier to perform longer strings of attacks that are not interrupted by the enemies' attacks. Additionally, Team Ninja decided to limit the number of attacks enemies can initiate while they are off-screen. This makes focusing on specific groups of enemies, the ones that are appear on the screen, easier while safely ignoring the enemies that surround Dante but remain outside of the player's field of vision.

[57] Readers familiar with the *Devil May Cry* series could claim something like "What do you do, then, if you compare *DmC* with the rest of the *Devil May Cry* series (games that are significantly more difficult than *DmC*)?" While I have chosen for my chapter gender as one of the main traits forming character's identities in video games, there are other identity traits that are also relevant and are materialized through tactility. One of them would be age. The *Devil May Cry* series establishes a direct relation between age and the actions (and fluidity when performing these actions) each character performs. Thus, the game with the youngest Dante, *Devil May Cry 3* is also the hardest, followed by *Devil May Cry 1* and *4*. The fourth installment goes deeper into this representation of age and its impact on gameplay by introducing a new, young main character, called Nero, who replaces Dante for most of the game. Dante, being more experienced has more abilities and weapons, and deals more damage than Nero from the beginning. *Devil May Cry 2* ranks among critics and fans as the easiest (and the worst) game out of the four original titles of the *Devil May Cry* series. It portrays an older and more capable Dante.

set of gendered foes. Playing as Bayonetta often implies having sequences of button presses interrupted while often evading attacks. The impact of gender representation on the actions players are allowed to perform (as well as in the way these actions are performed) is applicable to other games.

The following examples will serve to illustrate this idea better: *Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm 2* (*UNS2* henceforth) follows the second part of the running[58] manga and its anime adaptation *Naruto*. The game is primarily a 3D fighting game with some sections of quasi-free world exploration. *UNS2* follows the events described in the manga, making players control characters of the series, fight enemies, and explore certain areas in a specific order. The game also has visual effects (cell-shading) that mimic those used in animation. Fighting segments are divided in two main types of fights: fights versus conventional opponents (AI or human controlled) and fights versus bosses. While conventional fights follow mechanics similar to other fighting games, boss fights are divided in different phases during which the enemy often transforms and changes its attack pattern. The transition from one phase to the next is dynamically accompanied by Quick Time Events (QTE) in which players have to press a set combination of buttons shown in the middle of the screen within

[58] The manga series began in Japan in 1997 and ended in 2014 after 700 chapters.

a short timeframe. During QTEs players no longer control any character directly, but instead, a cinematic event is displayed as the player keeps inputting buttons. Failing a quick time event means that the cinematic event stops and must be repeated either partially or on its entirety depending on the situation. Completing each time event, however, allows the scene to continue and eventually reach its ending, which in turn inaugurates the next phase of the fight and depletes a portion of the boss' health bar. The relative visual simplicity of the QTE interface (a set of buttons and a time bar) contrasts with the visual finesse and spectacular events being portrayed in the background. However, these scenes are far from being designed to be passively consumed, but to be acted upon. Players not only have to focus on the visual input that prompts them to press certain buttons, but also, in order to succeed, their tactile sense must be completely focused on the controller. Knowing where the buttons are without looking at them is also needed as the game does not give players enough time to look at both the screen and the controller. Thus, the game assumes that players have memorized tactilely the button distribution on the controller and have learnt exactly where to look at and stay attentive to. This moment of what we could call *tactile focus* does not only determine what players do with their hands at

specific instances, but also, what they look at during gameplay and how they look at it.

Unlike *Bayonetta* or *DmC*, *UNS2* allows players to control a wide range of characters of different ages and gender. Because of this, it could seem hard to situate the game as the carrier of specific discourses about gender or sexuality. However, taking a look at the characters' tiers[59] reveals a significant contrast between the number of male characters in the upper tiers (characters that are used more frequently in competitive play) and the rest of the female cast. Among all the lists consulted (over ten), all five characters listed in the upper tier are male, while female characters have some presence in the middle tier and crowd the lower one. This, in part, coincides with how the manga[60] in which *UNS2* is based portrays the strongest characters, who are male, but also, with how fighting games tend to establish a divide between male and female fighters. In other mainstream fighting games such as *Tekken 6*[61] (Namco, 2009), *Super Street Fighter IV: Arcade Edition*[62] (Capcom, 2011), *Ultimate Marvel vs. Capcom* 3 [63] (Capcom, 2011), *BlazBlue: Continuum Shift Extend*[64] (Arc System Works, 2012), and

[59] Tiers are usually user-made following character usage in tournaments, controlled match-ups where each character fights against the rest repeatedly, and forum discussions.
[60] At the time of writing this chapter I had read up to chapter 623.
[61] None of the characters placed at the top are female.
[62] Two (C.Viper and Cammy) out of the eight highest ranking characters in the game.
[63] Out of the six characters ranked at the top (Vergil, Magneto, Nova, Dr. Doom, Zero and Phoenix) there is only one female character. Magneto and Phoenix tie at ranking the lowest out of the six.
[64] Only one out of the six top fighters is female (Taokata).

Tekken Tag Tournament 2[65] (Namco, 2012) the tendency is the same: female fighters are weaker and less used than male ones. The fact that these tiers are made following the success of characters in controlled matches, and not based on the players' preferences, ensures that some characters are not dumped to the lowest sections due to prejudices. Even in games such *Soul Calibur IV* and *V* (Namco, 2008, 2011), where female characters occupy the highest tiers, the costumes, attires and clothing complements female fighters use seem to sexualize these characters by dressing them with short skirts, huge busts, and thin, proportionate bodies. But, how important is a character appearance during moments of play?

Despite a character's appearance, something that may be important when players first choose which character they start using, what becomes really important is the way he/she moves and attacks, the moments or areas (hit-box) where he/she becomes more vulnerable, as well as the button combinations that result in successful combos. All these elements are tied to tactile gestures. Being able to perceive what to do in each instance is directly tied to being able to tactilely associate each potential movement with a combination of gestures. Thus, the importance each visual element has depends on a set of functions and capabilities that are filtered through tactility.

[65] One out the nine characters ranked at the highest tier is female (Nina).

In this respect, the way a character responds as well as the options she/he/it gives players operate within specific, real-world ideologies. The fact that, oftentimes, female characters deal less damage, have worse combos, or offer less efficient tools (all of them related to tactile gestures) is as important in the construction of their identities as the visual representation of these characters. The implications players may reach by being subjected to this type of discourses (i.e. women are weaker) do not only arise in retrospect, when players think about their gaming experience, but also in the course of playing. That is, through the speed and duration of their button presses; through the interruptions they are subject to; or through the way the game links a priority system according to which when two characters attack simultaneously, one attack connects while the other is cancelled by the rival´s move.

4.3. Tactility and identity.

Approaches to the relationship between video games and the production and reproduction of identity discourses benefit from analyses that take both the visual and the tactile components of the medium into consideration. From this perspective, the convergence of Gender Studies and Game Studies is an example of good synergy. This clearly does not mean that discourses about gender and sexuality are the only

identity discourses present in video games; they are just the type of discourses that interest me academically the most.

According to American philosopher Judith Butler (1990), gender is not a predefined human trait with a constant value and character. Instead, the meanings attributed to gender depend on its performance; that is, the way an individual "acts" gender. Gender is fluidly shaped, as individuals stick to or transgress pre-existing gender norms. Theoretically, individuals may potentially assume and step-out of different gendered roles through their actions. If we were to apply Butler's original ideas to video games, we would probably face a serious challenge: Video games are often presented as an interactive medium in which players can potentially act with different degrees of freedom. This idealized concept of free interaction would, in fact, give some room for different kinds of performances to take place. However, video games are also defined by sets of very specific rules; virtual spaces with their own properties; and sometimes, stories that end up unfolding in quite specific ways. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to talk about gender performance when the boundaries of the medium are oftentimes so well established. Following Galloway (2006), one of the defining characteristics of video games is the requirement for both the machine and the player to act on the game. However, these acts are never free in the way Butler envisions gender

performance but depend on a pre-existing code[66]. Performance, as something mechanically coded and controlled, is not far from Kirkpatrick's idea of tension (the relation a game establishes with players, controllers, and their bodily gestures) or even Ian Bogost's (2006) *unit operations* (specific components that elicit a response in the machine or/and the player). Both Bogost and Kirkpatrick envision a model of identity formation in which very specific social messages and identity discourses are transmitted to (and sometimes forced on) players through the bodily actions that games *invite* them to perform while playing. In video games, Butler's performance, if controlled by an external machine, would not necessarily be a liberating act of defiance of social norms; depending on the way the game is designed, it might very well be a mimicry of mainstream roles. However, before unjustly condemning video games for their normalizing effects, let us analyze specific games that defy or yield to social norms.

But, where should we "look" for such acts of gender performance? In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Laura Mulvey (1975) argues that commercial cinema has historically assumed and satisfied a form of looking and a form of desire that are always inherently male. Images are thus designed to appeal and attract male spectators. Video games are populated by muscled men, girls with big

[66] True, players can also mod the game a rewrite the code partially. But their actions during actual gameplay will also be limited to the code written beforehand (even if they themselves are the coders).

boobs, boy-saves-girl narratives, as well as some obvious cases of unbalanced distribution of body armor across genders. To some extent, a big portion of video game iconography and visual content seems to be designed to please male audiences. In "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?" Helen W. Kennedy (2002) acknowledges that visual representations of women in video games as objects of desire are complicated during gameplay. The actions Lara Croft is allowed to perform could potentially empower her and make her shed her status as object of desire for male audiences. Controlling a female character, however, poses for Kennedy an ultimate problem: The act of controlling a female avatar may serve to prolong male players' desire to not only look at objects of desire but also make these objects do their bidding. From my perspective, however, during gameplay Lara Croft is not a visual object whose perception may be altered afterwards once she is controlled by a player. On the contrary, the way of visually perceiving Lara during gameplay is always determined beforehand by tactile perceptions of her potential actions.

If we go back to *Bayonetta*, it is true that the player controls a representation of a female body whose acts seem to be always full of sexual connotations. During the cutscenes of the game and in its artwork the character is often shown adopting what could be described as somewhat sensuous positions. This could make the witch a visual

object of desire designed for male audiences. However, the player's actions during gameplay are always directed at destroying the character's enemies, which are, for the most part, male. Despite Bayonetta's pin-up looks and demeanor, the player's bodily actions are directed towards the punishment of male bodies. In this sense, assumptions about gender contained in the images of the game as well as ideological discourses that emanate from them and are absorbed by the player's gaze are different from the ones implied in the potential actions of the avatar. Discourses passively absorbed through the player's eyes are modified by the player's actions linked to players' tactile manipulations. A character such as Bayonetta is not only perceived by her looks, she is also a set of potential actions mapped in the player's hand. Thus, while players look at conventional gender icons, they also participate in acts of gender transgression carried out through tactile manipulation.

True, anyone could argue that a game such as *Bayonetta* is a prime source of *sadistic* and *masochistic* pleasure in Freudian (Sigmund Freud, 1905) terms. After all, male players controlling Bayonetta would irremediably participate in acts serving as sources of masochistic and sadistic pleasures. In this sense, destroying the largely male-identified angels through a female avatar would position

players as both agents and receivers of punishment.[67] On the other hand, as she delivers punishment, Bayonetta is also punished in return. The game is difficult, and completing it without Bayonetta being hurt or killed several times in the process is a nearly impossible task. In these moments of failure, and even more so during game over screens in which players see Bayonetta being dragged to hell by several demonic arms, male players would be converted back from agents of masochistic pleasure into observers, or even sharers in, sadistic punishment. The main flaw of this analysis, however, would be that in most cases the objective of players is to play the game. Even if the one who is carried to hell during a game over screen is Bayonetta, and not the player, the transition from actor to spectator does not happen so easily during gameplay. While players might be doing nothing but watch during a game over screen, their capacity to act on the game is also being temporarily suspended through a reminder (the game over screen) of their lack of skill. This would be a kind of punishment that places the player back on the masochistic seat. Also, if Newman is right and the crucial part of an avatar is not its looks but the actions it allows players to perform, the pleasure players could experience from having their avatars being killed or hurt would always be masochistic in nature, as it would only reflect their own lack of skill in the game. By using *Bayonetta* as an example of how

[67] Here, the game would assume a male player identifying with the (also male) angels.

tactility complicates analysis of identity discourses in video games I do not try to suggest that any normative discourse presented in visual form gets diluted thanks to the tactile interactions of players with games. In fact, the players' tactile actions while playing a game such as *Bayonetta* seem to oscillate between moments of gender defiance (i.e. destroying male enemies) and adherence to gender norms (i.e. Bayonetta being weaker, or facing a more difficult quest, than other heroes of the genre such as Dante). Other games make this oscillation less obvious.

Despite much of the praise *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North, 2008) received for the relative freedom it grants players, at times the game also forces players in very specific and pre-established ways. Hours of wandering the streets of Liberty City with apparent freedom, contrast with situations in which the game forces the player to kill certain characters whose deaths are central to the main storyline and some of its sidequests. The requisite of acting on their deaths for reasons that escape the player's desires makes the players adopt tactilely a bodily position, that of its protagonist Niko Bellic, who until then was only available to players through visual and aural means. Given some of the limitations imposed by the game, playing *GTAIV* is not only about acting *on* the game or acting *through* Niko Bellic, but also acting *as* him; doing so means following a

racialized and sexualized set of actions that are executed tactilely by the player and repeated throughout the game.[68] In this case, tactility does not run counter to the visual encoding of the game but, on the contrary, transposes many of the normative discourses found in the game onto the players' bodies.

Even games such as *Rayman Origins*, seemingly enveloped by an aura of carefree fantasy and super-imaginative naïveté, have moments that make players act in very specific and ideologically charged ways. *Rayman Origins* is a platform game where up to four players can team up to complete the over sixty levels of the game. *Rayman Origins* follows many traditions of its genre: At the end of each world (levels are grouped by world/land) there is a boss. Players unlock abilities as they progress through the game. Each new ability helps them to overcome new kinds of obstacles and situations. And finally, similar to *New Super Mario Bros Wii* (Nintendo, 2009), when an avatar dies while in multiplayer, they become a bubble other players may pop to make the deceased avatar come back into action. The difficulty of the game ranges from easy at the beginning to more difficult as it progresses. The art and sound design, abilities characters display, and situations players are placed in, make it difficult to establish a

[68] Among these racialized and sexualized sets of actions we could list dating women following a rather traditional idea of heterosexual bonding (the man picks the girl at her apartment, they go out, the man pays, they return to the girl's house for sex, the man leaves...until next time when the whole process is repeated), killing specific characters that deviate from the norm in order to complete certain quests (such as killing the gay nonpayer French Tom), or completing criminal tasks that are commonly associated with specific racial origins (drug-dealers who are African-American, Italian gangsters, etc.).

connection between this game and any type of identity discourses; fantasy might erroneously seem to operate outside these discourses. For the most part, players are invited to traverse each level at the pace they want[69]. There are two main exceptions to this: First, there is one optional level in each world in which players chase a fast running chest. These levels are considerably harder than the other, compulsory levels in each world, as they force players to complete them at the pace of the chest (i.e. running). This forces every jump and obstacle-avoiding action to be precise and fast, as any doubt or mistake results in death[70]. Alternatively, there are also other compulsory levels in which players chase a running target: Near the beginning of the first five worlds, there is a level in which players chase a black blob-like monster that flees from players while trapping in its mouth a fairy[71]. These levels introduce two uncommon elements into the game: first, the only human-like female characters in the game, and second, the only compulsory chase sequences. By doing this, the game not only situates players into the dialectic of (seemingly) male avatars saving a female character, but more importantly, it does so by forcing players into a specific pace and order of button pressing (that of the speed of the fleeing blob and the obstacles of

[69] In fact, the game promotes exploration by hiding away some areas that are crucial for completing the game in its entirety.
[70] Players have then to repeat the entire *race*.
[71] Fairies are the most human-looking creatures in the entire game. They are scantily dressed and possess curvy bodies.

the level). Because of this, the potential message of "females need a savior" is not only conveyed visually; it also becomes engraved though the actions players are forced to perform. However, this gendered message accompanies throughout the game other gender-less or potentially non-normative discourses. Once rescued, far from throwing their rescuers a kiss, fairies smack irreverently the protagonists into the air while giving them access to a new skill.

What might be then particularly important when discussing players' performances and the shaping of their identities through their actions in video games is the fact that tactility may contribute to analyses that escape from dualistic forms of thinking. While Bayonetta acts as the ideal bimbo of a hyper-sexualized heterosexual dream, she is also a set of potential actions defying gender and sexual conventions. She is not either one or the other; she is both one *and* the other. In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) uses the term *beside* to think beyond the logic of dualistic thinking, standing for "a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating…" (8). That is, *beside* describes sets of relations along multiple, rhizomic planes that escape from dualisms and dichotomies. While the different planes might oppose or complement each other, none of them takes preference over the rest but works

alongside the others. Because of this, understanding any plane in isolation is impossible as its existence and meaning depends on its relations with other planes.

In order to better understand the role of the tactile component of video games it might be useful to apply Sedgwick's *beside* and think about tactility as a plane that works alongside the player's gaze and multiplies the potential meaning that any element, visual or not, may have in a game. The crucial question of whether this proliferation of potential meanings expands the kind of discourses players are exposed to, or if instead, the combination of visual and tactile output leaves players in situations in which normative identity discourses are doubly reinforced still remains. In the latter case, both the players' visual and tactile perceptions would be so absorbed into the game that discourses on identity would be bodily accepted as true. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *On the Line*, we could wonder: Is tactility a form of rhizomic expansion of the kinds of discourses players are exposed to through visual input? Or does it linearize and regulate the potential meanings that can be extracted from a video game through the player's body? In the case of most commercial video games, following Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's logic (2009), it can be argued that video games do foster identity discourses and forms of desire aligned with those of

the societies in which the games are created and played. However, by analyzing the players' tactile actions we can also claim that this alignment with mainstream norms and discourses is fluid, and acts *beside* others. Under these circumstances, tactility would not only determine what players see or pay attention to during gameplay, but would also map various ideologies onto their bodies. Just as different cadences and rhythms when pressing buttons result in different actions being executed, the way games invite players to act also guides them through performances of differently aligned discourses.

CHAPTER 5. (Re)Coded: Animals, Genders and Sexualities in Video Games.

FFVI Illustration by Amano

5.1. Introduction: On Ticks and Talking Companions.

Years ago, when I was a fourteen-year-old teenager in his first year of high school, I started playing the, then, newly released *Final Fantasy VII* (Squaresoft 1997). Having grown surrounded by the consoles of the previous generation (Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo), *Final Fantasy VII* was my first introduction to the disc-based games of the PlayStation era. I was caught in the mechanics of the game, its story, its visual style, and the fan based communities that mushroomed around it. One of my favorite characters was Red XIII, a 45-year-old talking wolf with a spiky mane and a flaming tail. Due to his age and apparent connection with nature, I regarded him as one of the spiritual leaders of the party. During the first third of the game, however, I did not only discover that Red XIII's true name was Nanaki, but also, that according to the standards of Red's species he was actually a teenager (45 human years equal 16 years in the species' standards). When the name Nanaki was first mentioned, Cloud (the main character of the game), being oblivious of Red XIII's true name, asked a villager who Nanaki was. The response of the villager was "Red XIII is Nanaki". Once I finished the game I decided to replay it and, when Red XIII joined my party again at the beginning of the game, I renamed[72] him as Nanaki. By substituting Red XIII default name with his

[72] Every time a new character joins the player´s party the game offers the option to alter their names.

actual one (a name I was not supposed to know after much later into the game) I was secretly hoping to get some form of puzzled response from him (something close to "Hey! How do you know my actual name?"). Of course, nothing of the sort happened. I kept playing and, once I reached Cosmo Canyon (the place where Red XIII's true name, age, and past are disclosed), I was terribly disappointed after reading the answer the villager gave to Cloud: "Nanaki is Nanaki". Only then I realized what Red XIII truly was: lines of code reacting in predetermined ways.

At a first glance, this chapter analyzes the ways animals and animal-like characters are represented in video games. Attention is paid to how each of the animals studied in this chapter relates to specific forms of understanding animal (and sometimes human) identities. However, the true purpose of the chapter is not to analyze or delve on representations of animal identity, but to deconstruct them in order to show how video games codify identities. More specifically, what I would like to show is how any representation of identity, regardless of its complexity, is always dependent on code. In a similar move to Jakob von Uexküll's (2010 [1934]) interpretation of animal identities as being based on processes of meaning interpretation and action, I intend to frame any identitary representation in video games within the logics and possibilities

granted by computer code. Each of the representations of animal identity I will study offers a different degree of complexity (e.g. more and less versatile A.I.s), grants players different levels of agency, and carries a different weight in the general story of the game. All examples, however, can be reduced to a series of material inscriptions that are based on binary relations. In this sense, just as the tick's existence in Uexküll is based on the perception of very specific meaning markers and the automatic bodily responses to them, identity representations in video games are based on pre-existing relations established by code that become active as responses to binary values. 0/1 sequences and the absence or presence of a mammal's odor of butyric acid are not too distant from each other, as both provide and anticipate automatic responses to specific markers. Just as a greater number of meaning markers-response relations is what separates simple animals from more complex ones, more complex animal representations in video games result from the adding and writing of additional lines of code.

In my view, computer coded animal identities are not different from other forms of coded identity, including sexual human identity. Both forms of identity, when represented in a video game, depend on the same running processes (code) as well as similar processes of *re-codification*. What do I mean by this term? I will explore this idea in

greater detail during the second half of the chapter. On broad terms, however, we could understand *re-codification* as the name I give to the capacity of video games to render identities through two uses of two types of code. Computer code on the one hand, and identity discourses (understood as a social code) on the other. Computer and social codification follow similar patterns and complement each other well. As we will later see, code is widely regarded by scholars as a form of language that is irremediably performative or, if you prefer, a language whose execution always entails changes in material states and machine behavior (even if these changes are not always visible)[73]. Thus, by splitting code into computer and social code, we can say that code becomes doubly performative. First, because of its very machinistic nature and, secondly, due to the representation of a set of discourses that are already, by themselves, performative (they delimit and create the contexts for individuals' performances to take place).

Another way of understanding this re-codification of identity discourses in representations of animal and sexual identity in video games is through Gilbert Simondon's theory as explained by Muriel Combes (2012). As explained by Muriel Combes, Simondon invites us to think about the emergence of the individual as "the resolution of the

[73] N. Katherine Hayles, (2005). *My Mother Was a Computer*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

tensions between potentials belonging to previously separated orders of magnitude" (4). These tensions are part of what Simondon defines as the pre-individual; a set of potential relations that precede, determine, and accompany every identity through its process of individualization. Using Simondon, we can understand any representation of animal or sexual identity as an object-individual whose preindividual relations depend primarily, but not exclusively, on the nature of computer code as well as the influence of existing identity discourses. Any representation of identity is always defined by its relation to its own coded nature. In this regard, code, understood as a preindividual aspect of any representation of identity in a video game, never abandons the individual it helps to shape. Similarly, every representation is, from the outset, determined by an existing social code that shapes the way identity is understood. The types of virtual identities players are exposed to, as well as the process of coding these identities, depend on existing identitarian ideologies.

It is important to note that the preindividual resulting from the union of computer code and identity discourses in a video game is only partially visible to players; code itself remains, most of the time, invisible. Glitches and bugs are not part of the representations as individuals-objects, but derive from some of the relations video

games establish (here, representation itself would be part of the preindividual potentialities of the glitch). This chapter seeks to analyze the visible elements of any rendition of sexual and animal identities as an opening introduction to understanding what, oftentimes, remains invisible (or less visible): the coded component (where code stands for computer code and social code) of identity representations in video games. In the next two sections, I will present a number of depictions of animal and sexual identities in video games in order to understand them not only at the level of visual and narrative representation, but also as objects subjected to re-codification.

5.2. From swarms to animal companions: Animal identity in video games.

This section approaches the representation of animal identities by looking at seven examples extracted from six RPGs[74]. The reason for choosing RPGs over any other type of game is simple: as a genre, RPG games offer more opportunities to configure some of the elements of gameplay, such as choices regarding party configuration, stat and skill point distribution, or the selection among several storyline paths. RPGs also tend to offer a superior emphasis on plot development

[74] *Dishonored* stands as the only game on the list that is as much of an RPG game as a shooter/stealth game. It retains, however, many of the characteristics that have made opt for RPGs for the purposes of this chapter.

and character writing[75]. Put together, each example stands for a different point in an imaginary line that extend from views of animals as mindless automatons to animals as beings with human-like capabilities. The examples I have chosen are the following: The packs of wolves in *Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011); the swarms of rats in *Dishonored* (Bethesda Softworks, 2012); Interceptor and Mog from *Final Fantasy VI* (Squaresoft, 1995); Koromaru from *Persona 3* (Atlus, 2006); Quina from *Final Fantasy IX* (Squaresoft, 2000); and, Red XIII [Nanaki] from *Final Fantasy VII* (Squaresoft, 1997). Of all the examples within the list, only *Skyrim* and *Dishonored* are first-person action-based (i.e. not turn-based) RPGs. Also, they are the only non-Japanese games, and are developed by the same company, Bethesda. Consequently, both games also deploy a similar approach to animal identity.

From a narratological and ludological perspective, wolves in *Skyrim* are poor in world. The reference to Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1927) in this statement is, of course, intentional. As we shall see, the more animals resemble humans in video games, the more complex their roles become in the games. Compared to the other examples, *Skyrim*'s wolves are the farthest from what video games seem to understand as virtual humans. Wolves in this game often travel in packs and attack the player's character cooperatively. Their actions,

[75] Also, I am an avid player of RPGs, and it is the genre I know best.

however, are limited to three interrelated states: searching, moving, attacking. First, if no other non-wolf character is in their vicinity, wolves remain motionless waiting for other characters to enter into their radius of action. Once they detect a potential objective, they approach it and, once they are close enough to the target, they attack it. Wolves go back and forth from these three states dynamically (i.e. should a character walk away from the attacking range of the wolves, they would then resume moving towards their objective). These animals lack language, do not use weapons or spells and are, consequently, one of the weakest enemies in the game. As players may encounter wolves anywhere in the map of the game while traversing outdoor areas, the game seems to suggest that these foes do not depend on a specific ecosystem to survive[76]. Players will be attacked by wolves when detected, and it often happens long before players spot the wolves (i.e. wolves are better at detecting the players than the reverse). Wolves, however, offer a certain degree of pack recognition towards players whose avatars have been inflicted with the werewolf curse and will not attack them. No matter the case, interactions with wolves are always limited to antagonistic (in most cases) and neutral interactions.

[76] Other animals, such as snow tigers are frequently found while exploring mountain peaks while giant spiders are normally found next to and inside caves and abandoned buildings.

Rats in *Dishonored*, while similar in some respects to *Skyrim*'s wolves, possess some very distinctive features. Just as wolves, rats move and attack in packs. However, it is the amount of rats in a pack what determines the aggressiveness of these animals. In a sense, rats only attack NPCs and the player when they "feel" they can win. Their presence and number, however, serves as a special marker of the moral choices players make as well as the level of malice of Dunwall (the main city of the game). *Dishonored* is an action RPG that gives players two main ways of completing objectives: Through stealthy and less-lethal means (from hiding from potential enemies, and killing only very specific foes, to bribing other characters to do the dirtiest, most bloody jobs) as well as to more aggressive-oriented approaches that involve more deaths and exposure. As deaths pile up, more rats start to occupy the streets of Dunwall. The game uses the amount of rats as a physical manifestation of the way players approach the game. This means that aggressive behaviors are punished with larger amounts of more aggressive rodent enemies. Players, however, may find the presence of rats useful. Corvo, the main character of *Dishonored*, has several different powers players can use to hide, move, and attack in the game. One of these powers is "Possession". This ability allows Corvo to possess any living being in the game for a limited period of time. Possessing a rat permits the player to cross small pipes, holes

and crevices undetected as well as go past other potential foes. Human enemies, however, seem to have some knowledge of the way rats in the world of *Dishonored* behave, as they will be suspicious, and eventually attack, any rat that does not move in a pack. Rats also have a secondary use as Corvo's attacking tools in the form of his "Devouring Swarm" ability. When players use this ability, Corvo summons a pack of rats that attacks the protagonist's closest enemy. When compared to wolves in *Skyrim*, rats, while still relatively simple in behavior, are given new forms of interaction with their surrounding world. For the most part, however, their identity is only rendered meaningful in relation to the human agents in the world of *Dishonored*. Complex animal identities in video games, for the most part, inherit their complexity from perceptions of human identity. This in turn means that analyses of representations of animal identity eventually shed light on the ways human identity is perceived.

Interceptor and Mog place our analysis closer to the animal-human. Both characters appear in *Final Fantasy VI* and both of them are optional[77] characters players may recruit. Interceptor is the dog companion of Shadow, a ninja assassin players encounter (and may hire) at several points during the first part of the game. From a gameplay perspective, Interceptor is more of a tool of Shadow that an actual

[77] Both of them join the party forcibly for a short period of time, and, after that, players may and may not see them again.

character as players do not control the dog directly. Instead, depending of certain conditions during battles sequences, Interceptor may automatically perform an action and leave. As a character in the story of the game, Interceptor accompanies Shadow at all times up to a critical point in which the ninja may die permanently. From that point on, Interceptor serves as a connection between Shadow's past and two other members of the player's party. Because of this, Interceptor's role in the story of the game as mediator depends on and complements his human companion, but the fact that the dog may potentially do so even in the absence of the ninja (if he dies) endows the character with a surrogate agency through the story of the game. Mog, on the contrary, is a fully-fledged character players can control directly (i.e. players can issue commands to him) in battles. Classifying Mog as an animal may be troublesome. He belongs to a recurring race in the *Final Fantasy* series, the moguri, that I would describe as the result of fusing a cat, a koala, and a teddy bear. They frequently have white fur as well as bat wings and a red or yellow pompom on the top of their heads[78] [see figure 1]. In addition to its animal physical traits, Mog shares a recurring set of features with other animal characters in other RPGs. First, his race seems particularly aware of and dependent on the equilibrium of the planet. As the story

[78] The design changes slightly between each *Final Fantasy* title. The name of the race also tends to change slightly between games (i.e. moguri, moogles...).

progresses and the world descends into ruin, Mog ends up being the only survivor in his tribe/pack. Secondly, his special skill, called "mog dance" is related to the properties of the terrain he is fighting on. That is, when the player selects the dance command for Mog, he will begin dancing. The dance Mog uses depends on the location and the battle. Each dance contains different moves with different effects that often involve other animals (such as tapirs, raccoons, or boars).

Figure 1: A hand-drawn moguri.

Terrain-based attacks or skill that refer to planetary energies are a common skill among the animal companions across the Final Fantasy series (e.g. the attacks of Rinoa's dog, Angelo, Invincible Moon and Whishing Star in *Final Fantasy VIII*, Kimahri's attacks learned from beasts in *Final Fantasy VIII*, and Red XIII's limit breaks). Finally, while dancing, Mog becomes uncontrollable as each turn dancing triggers one effect of the dance automatically that takes

place while players are not capable of issuing commands to him. The dance continues until the end of the battle or if Mog's health reaches zero. This "berserk state" (i.e. the state in which the character acts automatically each turn) is shared with other animal-related characters in the game such as Interceptor, the yeti Umaro, and Gau, a language-lacking human teenager raised in the wild who walks on all four and mimics the attacks of monsters that players encounter in the wild. Among these four examples, it is Mog the one with a full command of spoken language and also the one who has to rely less on his berserk state (his magic stat is one of the highest in the game, which allows players to ignore dancing and use Mog as a standard spell caster). Animalistic features (or non-fully developed human traits) seem to be connected to questions of uncontrollability and the command of natural forces as well as limited forms of interactivity the more animal characters lack a command of language.

Koromaru, a playable shiba-inu[79] from *Persona 3*, expands what I have just said. At a first glance, Koromaru performs in battle similarly to other party members. Just like their human companions, Koromaru is able to use in battle his own persona (a manifestation of his inner personality) and behaves during fightsin a similar fashion to the rest of the main cast (excluding the protagonist). Koromaru

[79] This is the way in which it is described in fan sites (see, for example XXX). For its color, he could also be a Japanese Akita or a Hokkaido. Koromaru´s size, however, makes me think that fans are actually right.

understands human language perfectly and, while the other characters normally apprehend his intentions without the need of words, he is fully understood by Aegis, a female android who also joins the protagonist's party. Aegis's semi-human nature and ability to understand and translate the dog serves as a bridge between the world of the quasi-humans (characters that behave like but still lack some key human traits, such as language) and fully developed humans. *Persona 3* saw two re-editions, *Persona 3: FES* in 2007 for PlayStation 2 and *Persona 3 Portable* in 2009 for the PSP. Both editions expand on Koromaru's relation with human identities.

Persona 3: FES offers an epilogue where players take control of Aegis after she becomes the protagonist of the final section of this version of the game. As the epilogue progresses,[80] Aegis learns to deal with and accept her own humanity and, as she does so, she begins to lose her capacity to understand Koromaru. As the cyborg becomes less of a robot and more of a human, the dog also loses more of the bridge that brings him closer to being human: his access to language. In *Persona 3 Portable*, however, Koromaru's character is further expanded through the inclusion of his own Social Link (Strength Arcana) if, and only if, the main character is female[81]. Social links in the Persona

[80] The word "epilogue" may lead to confussion regarding its actual lenght. *P3: FES*´s epilogue is around 30 hours long.
[81] *Persona 3* and *Persona 3: FES* only have a male protagonist. *Persona 3 Portable* gives player the option of choosing the protagonist´s gender.

series[82] stand for the relationship the player character establishes with other characters throughout the story. In addition to its RPG elements, the Persona series can also be described as a social sim game in which players live the life of a transfer student during his first year at his new school. As the year passes, players have the option to establish and develop different types of relationships with other characters in the story. Each character represents a different "Social Link" that in turn stands for a different arcana (e.g. Chariot, the Hanged Man, the Fool, the Sun, Death…). Developing these relationships is optional, as it is up to the player to spend time with specific characters in order to know more about their personal stories. Maxing out social links, however, grants players several advantages during the RPG portions of the game. Within the Persona series, and up to the release of Atlus' *Persona 4* (2008), each social link revolved around human characters. In *Persona 4*, however, it became possible to establish a social link with Fox, a fox who accompanied the player party to dungeons to heal the protagonists and sell them healing items at rather steep prices. Koromaru's social link in *Persona 3 Portable* not only allows him to have a more prominent role in the story but also brings him closer to the rest of the human (and android) party members who already had their own social links since the original *Persona 3*.

[82] Other RPGs developed by Atlus also have something equivalent to social links (e.g. *Devil Survivor 2*'s "Fate System").

Koromaru's example hints towards specific ideas that I will develop later. First, Koromaru lacks the degree of uncontrollability that other animal characters, such as Interceptor, have, as well as their specific animal-related skills (such as Mog's dance). Koromaru behaves in battle exactly like the other party members with the exception of not being able to equip shoes. Also, he understands language and is able to communicate, to a varying degree, with humans. Finally, by having his own persona and social link, he is eventually given the same treatment other human characters receive during the story. This amalgamation of traits situates Koromaru closer to humans and is what, in my opinion, allows him to have another type of relationship: a relationship based on gender. Gender and sexual relations in video games tend to depend on human, or human-like, agents for them to be established. It is only through achieving a near-human status that animal identities are given gender and sexuality. This is because gender and sexuality in video games are themselves mostly human. The last two animal examples of this chapter, Quina and Red XIII, will allow us to explore this idea.

Quina is the perfect example of queer identity. Everything about her (or him) seems queer, including her appetite and her inclusion in this chapter. Quina belongs to the Qu, beings of immense appetite and great culinary delicacy that live in swamps. They appear dressed as

chefs, and possess frog-like tongues and eyes [figure 2]. Their favorite prey is frogs. Quina's gender appears remotely female, but she never refers to herself as such and there is some evidence during gameplay that challenges such an assumption. The most notable one is the fact that *Final Fantasy IX* protagonist Zidane's ability "Protect Girls", a skill that allows him to protect female members of the party from physical damage, does not work on Quina (but it does on Freya, a female anthropomorphic rat). Freya, herself a humanoid with obvious animal traits is, however, not only given a specific gender—female—but also participates in a romantic, heterosexual relation with other male member of the same species. What separates Quina's queerness from Freya's normative gender and sexuality? Their individual command of language. While Quina is barely able to form complete sentences and has a very limited command of grammar and vocabulary, Freya's speech resembles that of an honorable knight, with formal choice of words and speech patterns. When both characters are placed at a human-animal limbo, it is language what confirms Freya as more of a human. Language, in turn, also serves as the key to gender and sexual identity. While Quina seems to be already too queer and unreadable, Freya's gender and sexuality seem to take a definite form through her ability to present her own identity as definite though her use of language. However, just as Koromaru only had the

opportunity to interact in a very limited form with the female protagonist of *Persona 3 Portable*, Freya also has a rather constrained form of expressing gender and sexuality: through a heterosexual relation with a member of the same species. Inter-species sex between humans and animal-humans seems problematic. The next example confirms this idea.

Figure 2: Quina and Freya from Final Fantasy IX.

Final Fantasy VII introduces Red XIII and the idea of inter-species mating at once. Red XIII enters the game's storyline as the intended mate for Aeris, a human-looking female who belongs to the human-like race known as the Ancients, in Hojo's (an evil scientist) attempt to study the couple's offspring. Aeris is the last survivor of a human race capable of controlling and protecting the life flow of the planet. According to Hojo's logic, due to Red XIII's natural

lifespan (one human year equals 0,3 for him), the couple's progeny would be the perfect objects of scientific research, having the power of the Ancients and the long lifespan of Red XIII's species, perfect for prolonged experiments over the decades. After the protagonists sabotage the experiment, both Aeris and Red XIII are released and their intended intercourse is forever forgotten as part of a mad scientist's idea. From this point on, the apparently 45-year-old Red XIII, sheds off his potential role as a sexual individual and occupies a secondary role in the party, serving as a spiritual guide. When the player reaches Red XIII's home in Cosmo Canyon the maturity of Red is put into question after players discover his real name and age[83]. Subsequently, Red must learn to grow out of his insecurity as a teenager while becoming the brave warrior he is expected to be. Red XIII's own appearance [figure 3], reminiscent of Native Americans, as well as his own personal story as a warrior on his quest towards adulthood, impregnate the character with clear associations to the human race. The lack of references to Red's sexuality and gender outside of the failed experiment is not merely the result of the character's condition as a semi-animal, but also stems from his pubescent, racialized nature. In fact, a scene glimpsed through the credits at the end of the game shows Red (or one of his descendants)

[83] He is 16, making him the second youngest party member, or the youngest if Yuffie, an optional character, has not been recruited.

running next to two puppies (presumably his own). The whole scene is accompanied by the sound of a tribal drum. This invites players to believe that, after the events of the game, Red managed to grow into a "healthy adult" and act on his sexuality…with female members of its own species/race. In this regard, questions of maturity and race seem to occupy the spot of gender or sexuality. Once these issues are resolved, however, normative behaviors seem to be the only response possible from these animals.

Figure 3: Red XIII.

In terms of gameplay, players control Red in the same way as others playable characters. In fact, the main difference in *Final Fantasy VII* between characters is their limit breaks. Limits breaks are special attacks each character uses in battle. Limit breaks are specific to each character and are classified according to their power levels (levels 1 to 4). Each character has a special theme or reference that is common to all of his or her own attacks (e.g. Cait

Sith's are based on casino games, Tifa's on martial arts moves, and Cloud's on swordplay). Red XIII's limit breaks circle around the control of natural and planetary forces. One of his level 3 limit breaks, Howling Moon, makes Red physically stronger and faster, but, just like Umaro, Mog and Gau, he also becomes uncontrollable after using it. Again if in a limited manner, it is Red, as the animal-like party member, the one who offers instances of constrained interactivity in the form of automatic attacks. *Final Fantasy VII* offers another example of a berserk-like character with Vincent, an optional party member whose limit breaks revolve around him transforming into non-human beasts and monsters. While transformed, Vincent also attacks automatically. Animal-beast identities seem to, again, be tied to uncontrollable characters.

In all these examples, starting with *Skyrim*'s dogs and ending with Red XIII's Howling Moon, animal identity seems to be directly related to instances of limited interactivity (i.e. the detect-move-attack pattern of wolves) and gender and sexual agency. Example of limited gender and sexual animal identity can be seen in the complete lack of gender or sexual references in the case of the more "feral" animal examples and limited forms of interactions (i.e. non-interspecies sex) among the more human-like. The closer the animal character comes to mastering language, the closer he/she/it becomes to

being allowed to act on its own gender and sexuality. In fact, language, as a trait of borderline-human-animal identity, serves as a marker that overrides certain potential dichotomies associated with animal representations in video games. This apparently follows a logic that prevents certain traits to coexist with some others in any given representation. As such, bestial or feral behaviors during gameplay usually come associated with a complete absence of sexualized or gendered acts. A feral wolf is feral; nothing more. Following this very same logic, the ability to use human language allows certain gendered and sexual acts to become manifest. Not only does this tendency follow Judith Butler's (1990) vision of sexuality and gender as dependent on acts and performances; it also situates language at the core of these performances. Language is the human trait that acts as the key to animal sexuality.

However, we must not think about animal gender and sexuality as being queer in nature. Queerness originates in these characters from their animal nature, not from their sexual choices or gender practices. In fact, Animal-human hybrids such as Koromaru, Quina or Red XIII are already queer enough from the start due to their very condition of hybrids to be allowed other types of queerness. That is, games limit the number of queer traits such as hybridity or non-normative sexuality amalgamated into a single animal individual. As

such, animal sexuality in video games, when present, tends to follow very specific patterns; that of heterosexual, intraspecies-driven relations. This is because animal representations in video games, from that of the feral wolf to that the talking one, follow a binary logic that expands and retracts in an arborescent manner. I will expand this idea of binary arborescence in the next section.

5.3. Coded animals: Isolating the responses of the tick.

Binary arborescence in the configuration of animal identities in video games can be understood as answers to yes/no questions. A good starting question (or rather, for me, the starting point) for this tree of relations is language. Does the animal talk? From this starting point other questions begin to flow. Can players control the animal character? Is the animal different from human characters? Has he/she/it access to sex? Language defines what the animal is, and serves as a barrier that separates different levels of hybridity from feral to quasi-human animal. As Akira Lippit (2000) explains, Heidegger saw language as the main difference between animal and humans. With their lack of language, animals are poor in world; their perception of it incomplete as they were unable to reflect on it. Yet, as we have seen, "the animal" in video games is an ample category that comprises different degrees of complexity, with each degree

offering a different degree of language mastery and, consequently, of virtual dasein. As such, language marks the degree of complexity of each individual animal being in a video game. Different levels of complexity affect how each animal behaves at the level of story and gameplay.

This process, however, must not lead us to confusion. It is not the case that giving an animal the capacity to talk in a video game allows it to behave and play in a specific way. Rather, animal ontology, as an ongoing set of notions that also exist outside of the game, influences the way games are designed as well as the animals represented in them. Certain ideas on animal ontology, such as the language-driven higher complexity of humans, permeate into video games as a type of social code; a code that determines what animals are and are not. Language is just a key anchor of meaning other elements depend on. A feral wolf in *Skyrim* follows a specific conception of non-talking, aggressive animals. Closer relations to humans, first as tools or carriers of meaning, such as the rats in *Dishonored*, and ultimately as talking companions, such as Mog or Red XIII, offer different branching opportunities for the adherence of new identity traits. This follows the idea that the closer an animal gets to human speech, the more human-like he/she/it should be. In this respect, Red XIII, the example I consider most human-like on my list, has not only

the best command of language out of all the animals I have studied, but also the one to which the game attaches an additional trait; that of race. However, when it comes to Red XIII's sexuality and gender relations, the options are practically non-existent. Outside of the failed experiment at the beginning of the game, Red XIII sexual identity is, for the most part, not acted upon. When he does mate, however, it is offscreen and with a member of his own species. The other animal examples in this chapter, being further away from the human ideal, are also further away from any form of gender or sexual performance.

In the line from feral beings to tools to semi-human entities, animal identities become the carriers of additional connotations. Just as Jody Berland (2009) sees animals in advertising as mediators between humans, technology and an idealized natural world, animals in video games, due to their very nature as quasi-humans, also become mediators of signifying elements. In their role as mediators, however, animals mediate between elements barred, most of time, to humans. Just as associating race to an animal seems to be less problematic than a racialized human character (Red XIII is a good example of this), animals are easily transformed into "something else". Thomas Lamarre's (2009) study of race, nationalism, empire and speciesism in Japanese wartime animation already points at this agglutination of

signifiers in animal identities represented in anime. Lamarre's analysis could be easily extrapolated to video games. However, and unsurprisingly, not every animal example in video games stands for or points at questions of race. Mog, for instance, serves for me as an example of the reification of the "living" in which the animal character stands for a fetish. A fetish of/for what? The answer is debatable. Mog cuteness as well as his similarities to a stuffed animal are undeniable. From here, we can see Mog as the reification of the natural forces he commands; natural forces that are furry, friendly, and ready to oblige. As something cute, nature, as mediated by a character like Mog, is not far from Gary Genosko's (2005) vision of cuteness as something that "cultivates submissiveness" (…) and that "relieves one of the responsibility of understanding its physical and psychological consequences" (unpaginated, paragraph seven). This cultivation of submissiveness may work in two ways: Cuteness as something that allows itself be possessed without resistance; and cuteness as something that calls forth consumers' submissive desires towards the reified being. With its association with a stuffed-like animal, nature becomes tame; something players can possess and manipulate. Only when the toy makes uses of nature's full force, as in Mog's dances, do players lose absolute command over it.

Even then, nature is a benign force that becomes active at the players' will. All of these ideas have a direct impact on gameplay.

The feral wolf is not feral because it appears feral, but because it has, within the game, a feral behavior. The word behavior points at two elements that, in fact, are interrelated. The first one is the way games allow interactions between player characters and animal. This is, whether an animal can be spoken to, recruited, reasoned with, controlled, etc. Secondly, behavior also refers to the actual lines of code that regulate all these interactions. The difference between these two behaviors lies in that the former is the visible result of the regulation exerted by the latter. In fact, what an animal can do in a video game is regulated twice: By computer code and by the ideas about animal identity that circulate in society (such as the idea that feral animals do not particularly make good speakers…or listeners). Computer code manages every action within the game, just as ongoing accepted ideas on animal ontology determine the way any animal representation is designed and transferred into the game. Both regulations are binary in nature.

The fact that animals with a minimal command or understanding of language become controllable; or the idea that feral animals are based on detect-move-attack patterns can be reduced to binary questions of presence or absence. From each individual binary variable a new one

sprouts that complicates the animal representation that is being coded. However, each new attachment follows a pre-constituted pattern in which specific paths only become available upon the activation of previous states. The more human-like that animal is, the more human-like interactions games allow. This functions, both at the level of code and at the level of gameplay (what players see) as a very simplified version of von Uexküll's explanation of animal identity. In this respect, all the elements comprising any animal identity in video games are responses to the presence of other identity traits. Each identity trait calls into being, as a response to them, other traits. This is not only seen at the level of standard representation, where the fact that Red XIII speaks brings forth questions of race or gender, but also at the level of gameplay and code. The fact that Red XIII speaks, invites designers to give him the same abilities as other talking characters. This, in turn, makes the writing of the lines of code managing these interactions similar, in some respects, to the ones used for human characters.

Each visible animal action (i.e. wolves approaching the player's character or Mog dancing) is itself based on binary states. Each action wolves perform in *Skyrim* is based on the presence/absence of other characters. Once a specific condition is met, such as the presence of the player's character in the vicinity of the wolf,

specific states change producing a very specific response (i.e. from staying put to moving towards the player). In *Final Fantasy VI*, Interceptor's actions are entirely based on the presence of specific numerical values (e.g. Shadow's health points). Even Mog's dances and actions are themselves based on presence/absence states. First, upon the player choosing a command, its response becomes active. The end-result of any action derives from the interaction of interconnecting active values. These values as well as the links that connect them are always fixed beforehand.

Because of this, animal identity in video games is, both in behavior and in design, far from visions of animal identities that seem to be based on ever-changing, rhyzomic, or swarm-like systems of relations[84]. However, the binary nature of identity in video games is not exclusive to that of animals. All representations of identity in video games, animal or not, are always re-coded by social and computer code. The next sections expand this idea by studying code in greater depth and by analyzing representations of sexuality in video games as another type of binary-coded identity.

[84] Such as Donna Haraway's *When Species Meet* (2007).

5.4. Re-Coded: Back to the human.

Code is meant to run silently, hidden from the eyes of unsuspecting users who often share a willful idea about interactivity. Or, so it seems. As a researcher who focuses on sexuality in video games I always tend to opt instinctively for any non-heterosexual romance option games may offer me. This section, however, is not an account on the types, the amount or the importance of non-normative representations of sexual identities in video games, but, instead it explores how sexuality, when coded in a video game, goes through a process of being re-coded (or doubly coded if you prefer). First, outside of the computer realm sexuality itself is always in the process of being coded by social norms and ideologies that orbit around identity discourses. However, a second codification occurs when sexuality is included as part of the elements being represented in any digital medium. In these instances, sexuality is re-written as lines of code as well as the possibilities and limitations these lines afford. However, using Chun's (2011) ideas, we may claim that writing is not a process in which the writer shapes the identity of its reader/user. Instead, the code that manages sexual identity in a video game does not only mold its players or the machine that runs it, but also the programmer who writes it.

Mass Effect 3 gives players the option of establishing a male homosexual relation with two potential candidates. Kaidan Alenko, a white Major officer who joins Shepard, the player's character, in his fights against the Reapers, and Steve Cortez, the pilot of the shuttle in Shepard's ship as well as a recent widower (his husband died in the war portrayed during the game). During my first playthrough I reached a point in which I had become friends with the two characters and both of them had requested a meeting/date outside of the ship to talk about personal matters. I knew that during these dates the topic of establishing a romantic relationship with each one of them will be brought up. I was not wrong. I first headed towards Kaidan's meeting place, and after navigating through different dialogue choices, Kaidan ended up saying that what he really wanted was a life partner to have a tranquil, traditional life with. He hinted that he would like my character to be this life partner. After one of the more contractual-like dialogues I have ever seen during a "love scene" in a video game, we both agreed to be life partners, share a dog and some cozy afternoons in our comfy backyard. After this, however, I decided to head straight to Steve to check what he had to offer me. To my surprise, after reaching the point in which I had already suggested Steve to become partners, he refused my offer and told me that he knew that Kaidan and I were together. How did Steve knew? Didn't I head

straight away to Steve's place right after my cozy agreement with Kaidan? From a narratological perspective it should have been impossible for any other character of the game to know about the player's relations with other characters in such a short amount of time. Do characters in the Mass Effect universe get automatic updates on romances via a super sophisticated virtual version of Twitter? Are Mass Effect characters gossip queens? Are they psychics of romantic lore? Jokes aside, these scenes made me think about how a potential example of bad writing makes the running code of a game more visible to users.

In some previous game developed by Bioware such as *Jade Empire* and the *Dragon Age* series, romanceable characters were coded to respond to the player's character in very specific, scripted ways. In this sense, characters such as Morrigan or Allistair in *Dragon Age: Origins* or Dawn Star in *Jade Empire*, were written so that they would offer specific lines of dialogue leading to romance if the player met a specific requirement—this requirement being a specific coded value attributed by the software to what players could understand as gender. Hence, as players choose and configure their avatars, they also unknowingly select how the game codes their main character. The value of these selections is then run in conjunction with other lines of code in order to open and close different content within the game. In

this regard, what players perceive as sexuality and gender in these video games can be summarized as binary potentialities. Sexuality is then the result of the way a character's gender is coded and the pre-established requirement of the non-player character in relation to that value.

Dawn Star, Alistair, and Morrigan are perceived as being heterosexual and behave as so in the narrative of the game as a result of how the lines of code managing their actions engage with the value given to the player's character. Similarly, what the player perceives as romantic relationships are managed internally by the games by giving an on/off value to that particular line. What differentiates *Jade Empire* and *Dragon Age: Origins* from *Mass Effect 3* is that the first two games allow the value state that manages the relation between the player's character and the other romanceable characters to either change among, or stay active with, more than one character at the same time. This is what allows players in *Jade Empire* to establish a romantic relationship with both Silver Fox and Dawn Star. *Mass Effect 3*, on the contrary, takes into consideration the value of one active relation (such as my avatar's relation with Kaidan) to close down any potential interaction with other characters. This is, once the value of the relationship between the player's character with Kaidan has been established, the game treats any other potential

relations in very specific ways based on this very same value. In a very broad sense, code runs in spite of, and faster, than the narrative of the game. This means that Steve's rejection to my "love" proposal is the automatic response caused by the ways the value of each state relates with the rest. Accepting Kaidan's proposal for a sheltered romantic life is in itself an either/or binary that relates to sets of other binaries within the code of game.

Outside of titles developed by Bioware, games such as *Persona 3* and *Persona 4* follow a similar trend of portraying and managing sexuality. In both games, as the protagonists develops different Social Links with different people, they are given the chance to select specific dialogue responses that may lead to romance within the ongoing social link. It is important to note that advancement in Social Links depends on the two main elements: The presence/absence of a persona of the same arcana as the Social Link players want to develop; and the selection of the best responses (out of a total of three options) during conversations. The game gives a different value to each response and, depending on what players choose (and the social link itself), social links may end up in romance, friendship or failure. In addition to this, some responses are conditioned by the main character's attributes in specific social departments, such as courage, knowledge or expression. Lacking enough points in courage,

for instance, closes down some responses and, consequently, specific outcomes. Again, the way of raising these social attributes is by selecting from a closed number of daily activities and actions that net players a number of pre-established points. Players, being all the force to make decisions whose value and effect has been predetermined beforehand, cannot step outside of this close menu of actions. In a way, the numerical basis of human relations in these two games mirrors the numerical value of computer code itself.

In the next section of this chapter I will study what are the implications of reducing sexuality (and gender) to a set of binary relations while highlighting that both computer code and the social codes regulating sexual identities function in similar ways[85].

5.5. The binary rhizome.

Judith Butler (1990) presents gender and sexuality as ongoing processes of meaning making where individuals form their own identities by performing according to, or despite of, a pre-existing set of socials norms. From her perspective, individuals can actively shape their own identities by actualizing their relations with a body of social norms. Performing individuals, however, are never

[85] This is not different at all from the way wolves in *Skyrim* ignore characters inflicted with the werewolf curse. In this case, the game assigns these character a specific value that produces non-aggressive behaviors in the wolves.

independent of the social and material conditions in which their performances take place as the meaning of their actions rests on the affiliations with and detachments from existing processes of meaning making. This is not too far detached from the vision of swarm-like relations and insect identities Jussi Parikka offers in *Insect Media*. For this author, the swarm cannot be understood by looking at each individual insect alone, but by acknowledging the set of ongoing relations and affects all the members of the swarm share among themselves as well as with an ever-changing exterior. Individuals are nothing but sums of relations. Similarly, an insect can only be understood as a totality of relation between its body, its mode of perception, and its surrounding world. That is, insect identity is not dependent on any single isolated trait but instead depends on a total set of affects that go well beyond the insect's body.

Butler's and Parikka's ideas on identity are easy to transfer to conceptualizations of both desire and code. Similarly to insect identities, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1977, 42-50) envision desire as set of interweaving constituents whose meaning is constantly being decided by a set of potentially infinite relations. As much as the body of affects might grow in unexpected, chaotic ways, processes of meaning-making always seem to depend dynamically on the elements that already exist within the revolving body of relations (planes in

the case of the rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 7-11) other insects in the "swarm", or other norms in the case of discourses about gender and sexuality). Code, in a way, also behaves similarly. According to Chun (2011), code "does not unfold linearly, because its values depend on intermediate results, and because code can be modified as it is run" (25). Again, the value, meaning or effect or any given line of code, just as any given identity performance, depends on its relation with other lines. Yet, code, at its core, is based on relations of binary values that are translated into high-level languages. As N. Katherine Hayles (2005) suggests "at the level of binary code, the system can tolerate little if any ambiguity" (46) and, further on adds that "all commands must be parsed as binary code to be intelligible to the machine" (Ibid.). This transition from non-linear unfolding code to binary processes of meaning making is a move that resembles Deleuze and Guattari's critique of how capitalist societies make use of desire to reterritorialize all possible discourses into their own operating logic. For them, capitalist societies absorb any potential deviant or independent forms of desire back into their own systems of drive control (1987, 240-62). In turn, these societies continuously present individuals with seemingly unlimited, normalized, forms of satisfying desire. By doing this, society not only controls what is to be desired, but also how it is

desired, and by what means desire is satisfied. Interactivity in video games works exactly like this.

5.6. Post-Babelian Identity in Video Games.

Interactivity in video games is often presented as some capacity given to players to act on the world of the game and do things they could not normally do outside of it. It is also widely accepted that games are based on sets of rules that afford and restrict specific actions and conditions. These affordances are coded into the game. Playing a video game results in interacting with a body of possibilities that is restricted from the outset by lines of code. Yet, video games are also based on the idea that players would want to interact with them; to play them. As a result, video games create closed circuits of action where players play with an irremediably limited, very specific set of actions. What qualifies as a player action is both created and regulated by code. Code, as Chun states, acts as law, a law that materializes certain restrictions and affordances within the game. It is a law users cannot escape from, for their actions depend, and are only meaningful, in relation to this law. Chun, citing Butler (1997) and Hayles (2005), describes code as being more performative, in a machinistic and inevitable way, than language. Indeed, code blends meaning and action; or if you prefer, code means what it does (and conversely it does what it means), even if these meanings and actions

are not always automatically apparent. However, in the particular case of video games, meaning and action are often oriented towards an external response in the form of the players' actions while playing. Players have to act in order to play. The performative quality of code results in a subsequent performativity at the players' end. In the particular case of sexual and gender performances while playing, video games offer what we can call "performances on rails" where the computer code animates a second, identitarian code. Let me delve on this idea.

As stated before, gender and sexuality are already dependent on the relation of individuals with a regulatory body of norms. These relations can go for or against the norm, but it is always actualized in relation to the norm. In a video game, anything machinistic relates back to computer code, just as any line of code refers back to some specific element in the running software. Thus, what is perceived by a player as a representation of gender or sexuality is encrypted as an inescapable mandate of the programming code. Any performance from the player's end is in actuality preceded by the writing of the code. Following Adrian Mackenzie's (2006) expansion of Adrian Lessig's (1999) ideas, we must not think of code as an object of regulation, but "itself a form of regulation" (31). However, from my perspective, in the specific case of sexuality in video games code is

both an object of regulation and the regulation itself. This, on the one hand, is because the very act of writing code is already embedded in the social contexts and material conditions that allow identity norms to exist. But also, similar to what Kittler (1992) claims, code itself is a material condition, a regulation that makes the norm come into being. Thus identity discourses not only enter and affect the writing of the code, but are also created by this very same code.

At this point, it is easy to link animal identity with gender and sexuality in video games as sets of code-regulated discourses. As objects generated by computer code, animal identities in video games are based on continuous performances; a performance that is executed both by the machine that runs the game and by the person who plays it. By defining what an animal is and then making it run as part of piece of software, video games not only participate in and circulate preconceptions about animal identity; they also contribute to the fabrication of these very same discourses. Also, by incorporating questions of race, sex or gender into their own representation, animal identities are in themselves identity performances. To play as and interact with an animal is not only a way of participating in constructions of animal identities, but also, a way to act on regulations of human race, sexuality, or gender through an animal-like

medium. Social and computer code determines animal identity just as any other form of identity.

This idea of coded determinism finds an ally in David J. Gunkel's (2001) book, where the author defends a vision of code and computer language as tools for a universal, unequivocal and homogeneous rendering of social order. Gunkel, citing Jacques Derrida and George Steiner, places code as a second coming of Babel; one that undoes the chaos brought by the first mythical tower. Thus, in response to any potential overabundance of divergent voices and dissonant languages, code unifies all human thought into a streamlined, regulatory system. When coding identities, code does not only inscribe unequivocal visions of identity; additionally, these regulated visions also entail regulated user's performances. Performing identity discourses while playing a video game is therefore based on two instances of codification that work really well together and follow the same logic. Players always act in relation to the laws that codify their actions.

User-generated mods still follow this logic. The modification of computer code in order to add new content or alter the relations of specific aspects of the game depends on a pre-existing act of writing. Thus, modifying code is always made in relation to, and not outside, code. Even the act of allowing non-normative relations through the act

of writing is in itself a form of law writing and enforcement. In this sense, computer language always works following a reterritorializing logic where all possible actions refer back to fixed, limiting, written lines. We could argue that playing video games is related to more than just playing while being subjected to the regulatory power of code. Factors such as the material conditions in which each gamer plays, or the external affiliations players bring with themselves to the act of playing all shape the effects of the regulatory power of code. And yet, a question would still remain: Aren't all these affiliations and material conditions ultimately affected by relations with machines controlled by the very same logic of code?

CHAPTER 6. QQSQQ(Quina Quen the Swamp Queer Queen): Spaces and Avatars Beyond the Human.

This chapter explores the ways video games reproduce gender and sexual identities through non-human spaces and avatars. One of the main ideas of this section is that playing with the non-human is, in fact, a meaningful way of playing with discourses about the human. As a starting point, I will re-introduce Quina, a character in *Final Fantasy* IX (Squaresoft, 2000), to then move on to less human-like examples.

Quina is a peculiar character in more than one way: While her clothes resemble, to a limited degree, those of a female chef, she is considered to be genderless or of an indeterminate gender. Also, some other features make it easy to classify the character as being queer in more than one respect. Examples of this are her limited command of human language, her voracious appetite or her half-animal, half-monster appearance. As discussed some sections ago, some of the gameplay mechanics in *Final Fantasy IX* also acknowledge Quina's characterization as someone whose identity is difficult to grasp. The more obvious example is the fact that some of the skills and items designed to be used by, or associated with, female characters do not work on and with the frog-like chef. Under these circumstances, Quina's is a borderline identity: a being whose gender, sexuality, and human-like traits are neither fixed nor clearly delimited. Compared to the rest of the main cast in the game, Quina clearly

belongs to the margins of society. This marginalization is further emphasized by the spaces Quina as well as the rest of the member of her race, the Qu, inhabit: Swamps.

The swamp seems like the most extreme form of a slum in the world of *Final Fantasy IX*. Far from the medieval and fantasy steam-punk influences of the cities populating the game, the swamps are presented as places where nature is barely affected by the forces of human (or semi-human) society and power. In fact, the only vestige of semi-human colonization in the swamps is an isolated hut where the Qu reside. The swamp confirms Quina in her position as a social outcast; a being hard to read, to identify, and to locate within the social flows of her world. Quina is, without a doubt, a queer being inhabiting a queer space.

Introducing Quina and her swamp at the beginning of the chapter is not, of course, random. This character serves as an entry-point to analyze the implementation of non-normative discourses in video games through non-humanoid avatars and virtual spaces. And while Quina is a good example for introducing the idea of the queer marginalized individual forced (or placed) at the also marginalized borders of social space, my intent goes a bit further: I will focus my analysis on non-humanoid avatars as well as on gameplay mechanics that introduce objectives, relations and motions that are as far from

referencing the human as possible. I will study the human through the non-human and the non-humanoid. In order to do this, I will study the four games developed by *Thatgamecompany* (*Cloud*, 2005; *fl0w*, 2007; *Flower*, 2009; and *Journey*, 2012). Among them, I will pay special attention to *Flower,* a game in which players explore meadows and flower fields by controlling the breeze carrying a flower petal using the gyroscope and accelerometer of the PlayStation 3 controller. Before that, however, I will first review the major academic works on the study of virtual space in video games and, secondly, I will study the relation between non-normative identities and space.

6.1. Video games and virtual space.

The study of virtual space in video games has drawn the attention of some of the most influential names in the field. For new media scholar Henry Jenkins (2004), the designing and coding of virtual space is one of the most important processes in the creation of video games. Jenkins claims that virtual space is not merely a set of textures and surfaces where the action of games takes place. Instead, virtual space acts as the carrier of the affordances and limitations that make gameplay possible. This is, affordances and limitations shape the design of virtual space, which in turn can be retroactively analyzed to understand the rest of the game. The programmed jumping distance of

an avatar in a platform game such as *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sega, 1991) determines the distance between and the height of the different platforms and elevations the character has access to. It also affects the speed at which the avatar can and must move, the placement of the enemies, and the timing of the player's button pressings when playing the game. Game Studies scholar Michael Nitsche (2008) supports this idea by claiming that virtual space is the physical manifestation of the code. Virtual space embodies code and allows it to have an effect in gameplay. It is a manifestation of code players can directly perceive and respond to. Similarly, the design of virtual space derives from a set of conscious choices at the designer's end that affect how a game is played and perceived. These choices carry with them ideological meaning that affect the kind of social discourses that shape the games. This idea of virtual game design as a form of ideological design has materialized into two main approaches in the study of space in video games: The first one is to see virtual space as a locus for meaningful interactions between players both with other players and with in-game content. This is particularly prevalent in the study of MMOs [Massively Multiplayers Online Games] and the online communities of players that flourish around them. There are many examples. One of the most prominent ones is *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity, A World of Warcraft Reader* (Corneliussen, 2008), a

collection of papers on ethnicity, gender, and sexuality in the MMORPG game *World of Warcraft.* Divided into four sections (Culture, World, Play, and Identity) this reader seeks to explore the way ideology permeates the construction of the game as its own community while paying attention to how design decisions as well as the players' usage of the game promote and demote certain types of being in the virtual world of the game. In the reader, Torill Elvira Mortensen (2008) sees in virtual communities a great place for the study of human behavior. Her vision is shared by Edward Castronova and Mathew Falk (2009), who perceive virtual worlds as tools "that allow controlled experiments at the level of all society" (396). While the "all society" part of their assertion may not be actualized in MMOs, Castronova and Falk's contribution, with its recognition of the extended reach and potential social impact of games, invite readers to think about games as sites of ideological experimentation, manipulation and/or normative consolidation. For some authors, however, the "experimental" part of video games lacks, for the most part, any form of ideological transgression. Leigh Schwartz (2006) argues that "video game environments are embedded with metaphors and ideas for political and mythological constructs" (313). For this author, fantastic environments and non-human avatars (i.e. orcs or elves) recreate social norms that are not so "fantastic". In fact,

the fantastic setting of these games might help normative ideologies to "gain a more uncritical acceptance" (322). This is, ideology presented through fantastic narratives, aesthetics, or gameplay mechanics seems to be more readily absorbed by players. Schwartz cites Lisa Nakamura (2002) to reinforce her idea. According to Nakamura, virtual identities, fluid as they may seem, reinforce racial and social stereotypes via avatars ready for consumption. This idea is supported by Jessica Langer (2008), who studies the different races players can choose from when creating their avatars in *World of Warcraft* and shows that despite its sword, sorcery, and steampunk background, the game recycles existing ethnic stereotypes for the creation of in-game races. Examples of this are the voodoo/Caribbean inspired savaged trolls; the Asian-like, culturally refined blood elves; or the Northern hemisphere oriented humans. This can be seen in the types of buildings (that of medieval European settings) that fill human cities in *World of Warcraft* as well as the most common skin color among the NPCs in the game, white. The collusion of these two concepts, being human and being white, is made even more evident by the presence of real-life ethnic stereotypes inserted as non-human.

The second approach to the study of space in video games is similar to the first one, but instead of focusing on social interactions, it reads virtual spaces as semi-closed texts containing

identity discourses players are subjected to and, sometimes, can contest. Such is the position of many authors (Frasca, 2003; Galloway, 2006; Bogost, 2007; Miller, 2008; Ouellette, 2008; Gazzard, 2011) who study gender, race and sexuality discourses through the analysis of avatars and virtual space.

In addition to Niko's sexuality (as discussed in chapter 3), his ethnicity is also made perfectly clear. Not only has Niko a very distinct accent he never loses during the game; he is also accompanied by another individual of Eastern European origin and initially lives in an area of the city—the in-game version of Greater New York's borough of Queens called Dukes—that is a main locus of immigrant population. Niko's first apartment is a dingy one-room studio with an old, folding bed whose sheets seems to be in need of replacement, and an old TV set. As Niko rises in his criminal career, he gains access to better apartments and houses in "better" areas of the city more aligned with the white middle and upper classes. In this sense, the spaces Niko inhabits through the game are used as clear markers of social status and power. As a newcomer and an immigrant, Niko lives in an ethnic neighborhood. Each area of the city is also dotted with different types of businesses and shops (from Striptease clubs and cheap Russian clothing shops in Dukes to high-end fashion boutiques in more central parts of town) that themselves create a virtual map of

class, ethnicity, and power. With its use of space as a social marker, *Grand Theft Auto IV* creates a social grid with a clear, white, rich, highly desirable center (i.e. Liberty City's equivalent of New York's Park Avenue) and several increasingly non-normative peripheral orbits (i.e. Bohan/the Bronx or Duke/Queens). This distinction between the white center and the non-white peripheries is something that was already present in the discussion of MMOs such as *World of Warcraft*. In the next section, I will study the relation between peripheries and non-normative identities while seeking an answer to the following questions: Are ghettos/peripheries the spaces scholars should pay attention to when studying non-normative articulations of gender and sexuality in video games? Do these spaces offer alternatives to the social norms that create them?

6.2. Trapping the Queer in a Ghetto.

The relation between social order, individuals, and space has been explored by numerous scholars during the last decades. In "Bodies/Cities", Cultural Theorist Elizabeth Grosz (1992) links the configuration of urban space with that of our own corporeality. For Grosz, "different forms of lived spatiality (…) affect the ways we live space, and thus our comportment and corporeal orientations and the subject's forms of corporeal exertion" (249). These forms of

corporeal exertion define in turn our own identities as well as the role and place we fulfill in the social order. In fact, using Paul Virilio's ideas (1984), Grosz claims that "the city's form and structure provide the context in which social rules and expectations are internalized or habituated in order to ensure social conformity, or position social marginality at a safe or insulated distance (ghettoization)." (249) From Grosz's perspective, the city can be then seen as fulfilling and being shaped by a number of interrelated actions and flows. First, the city is an enforcer of social norms; individuals experience social norms by living in the city. Second, the enforcing nature of urban space requires that the city be from the start already shaped by the social norms it administers. And third, in its marginalization of non-conforming, non-normative individuals, the city itself creates its own bubbles of ostracized-ostracizing space, the various urban ghettos.

The ghetto, from this perspective, can be read as a space that exists within the logic and social forces of the rest of the city while being continually pushed to its margins. The ghetto is a result of the exclusionary forces and social norms that shape the city. This is because the very act of being on the margins of society is just another form of being subjected to its regulatory power. But, at the same time, the actions individuals perform also shape how space is

perceived and evolves; this means that individuals' actions also have the power to shape space and transform social space. Geographer Don Mitchell (2002) explores the study of the queering of public space by authors such as George Chauncey (1995) and David Bell (1994). The idea of "queering" space by individuals implies for Mitchell that space was coded as straight and normative to begin with. Thus, the actions of individuals possess a double performative power: First, non-normative acts create non-normative identities. Secondly, non-normative acts in space (such as the sexual encounters Chauncey and Bell analyze in their work) also queer[86] space. The ghetto and its non-normative inhabitants define each other in a loop in which space defines identities and identities define space. As Larry Knopp (2007) notes, these processes of identity formation are necessarily fluid as they depend on actions and affects that are continuously changing and in motion. As such, the queerness or straightness of a given space depend on the social flows and actions that constantly reshape how space is experienced and perceived. To cite an example, the transformation of the piers in Manhattan from a working place to a gay cruising site in the 1970s and early 1980s, to an abandoned part of town from the mid-1980s onward, and finally to the bicycle friendly area that it is today is just an example of the fluidity of the uses of space as well as the kinds of identities that perform in them.

[86] Queer is here being used as a verb.

If we consider the scholarship on virtual space in video games we discussed earlier (e.g. Ian Bogost), it becomes easy to claim that virtual cities in games such as *Grand Theft Auto IV* also seem to be shaped by similar forces to the ones transforming real cities as discussed by Grosz and Virilio. Virtual space thus becomes something more than just the enforcer of the computer code governing the game, but it is also an enforcer of the identity norms and flows of power that govern society. Just like cities create their own pockets of exclusion, ghettos, video games also create their own spaces were individuals who deviate from the norm established by each game reside. Examples of this would be the swamp as a place of residence for Quina in *Final Fantasy IX*, the initial apartment of Niko Bellic in *Grand Theft Auto IV* or the representation of non-human races in *World of Warcraft* as inspired by non-white, non-European cultures. Swamps, dingy apartments or troll villages with voodoo decor are some of the spaces to look at when searching for non-normative characters in video games. Unlike city ghettos, however, virtual ghettos are less mobile and fluid. Quina's swamp is never gentrified in the events of her game, Niko Bellic does not make his initial neighborhood any whiter with the money he earns during the game, and trolls are automatically attacked if they venture into human territory in *World of Warcraft*. Even if players can add or alter certain features of games, for the

most part, video games tend to be closed texts governed by another body of text: code. Sure, players can play the game in unexpected ways. Game scholar Jesper Juul (2002) mentions the unexpected use of proximity mines in the game *Deus Ex* as ladders and platforms. By using these mines as ladders, players could skip entire sections in the maps of some of the missions and alter the way the game was played (i.e. avoiding some enemy encounters). This made the experience of playing the game and completing its missions different from what designers had expected. Yet, this was something that was allowed by the game mechanics[87] and its coding (i.e. treating mines as something with big enough surfaces for the protagonist of the game to stand on). Despite this example, most players have limited ways of interacting with the virtual spaces of games outside of their intended uses. Virtual ghettoes are still virtual ghettoes, and the people that inhabit them are characters meant to be perceived as non-normative within the game standards. But, can we say that the ghetto is a place outside of the social norms that rule society? Are non-normative individuals outside of the norm? No, they are not.

Ghettoes, virtual or not, are always at the margins of the society they belong to, never outside of it. This is because for the ghetto to be a ghetto it has to be part (even if through acts of

[87] Considering that some of the ways Deus Ex invites players to complete missions is by being stealthy, the land mine mechanism is, to some degree, encouraged by the game itself.

marginalization) of the very social system that deems it as being outside of the system. Similarly, when an individual is perceived as non-normative it is because she performs in opposition, but also in relation, to a norm. The ghetto and the non-normative individual are at the margins of the norms, marginalized by them, but still part of them and subjected to them by the very act of being branded as non-normative. Non-normativity does not represent the end of social normativity, but quite the contrary, it continuously refers back to the norm.

The games I have analyzed so far in my dissertation are all commercial games developed by big-budget companies. Among these games, the examples of non-conforming gender and non-heterosexual sexuality are either presented through characters portrayed as being non-normative outcasts (such as all the potentially bisexual characters in *Dragon Age II*, who are a pirate, a demon-possessed mage, a demon-obsessed elven wizard, and an elven slave) or remodeled and gentrified models where the non-normative aspect of their homosexuality is overridden by other perfectly normative attitudes (i.e. Kaidan and Sheppard in *Mass Effect 3* being potentially gay but also great, patriotic soldiers). In all these examples found in the previous chapters it is not easy to find an alternative model of human identity; one that does not refer back to the norm or depends on it to

exist. If Quina's queer swamp refers back to the normative castle and non-normative characters refer back to more normative examples, where can we look for alternative forms of human identity based on relations that are truly outside the ruling power of the social order? In case such examples exist, do they also entail gameplay mechanics that foster new forms of understanding identity?

Game and Gender Studies scholar Tanya Krzywinska (2012) argues that sex and sexuality often appears in video games in a non-sexual way. Rob Gallagher (2012) reads Krzywinska's ideas quite literally, and claims that sexuality and sex are indeed present in games such as *Fable* through their "misappearance" (466). This is, even if the game offers players the opportunity of having sex with male and female individuals, the very act of having sex is occluded by a blackout transition. This is true indeed. Sex is present in games by appearing only semi-presently[88]. However, while Gallagher seems to recognize Krzywinska's intended purpose, he does not offer an example to truly match it. Krzywinska might want to go a bit beyond that when she invites scholars to think about the sexuality of different rhythms and alternative forms of relating to the code of the game. In my view, video games where sex and sexuality might seem to be absent can still

[88] Examples range from the *Fable*-style sex scenes in the God of War series, in which players are never shown the sexual act directly, but through the movement of an object (e.g. a vase standing in a table) placed next to the bed where the sex is taking place to the sex scenes in Dragon Age and Mass Effect where penetration is heavily implied by bodily motions and groans but never actually shown.

reproduce identity discourses that imagine individuals in gendered and sexualized forms. This does not mean that sexuality and gender are everywhere, but that gender and sexuality in video games can be rendered by something more than virtual bodily configurations and sexual encounters. In addition to this, if one wants to find imagined identities that escape from normative/non-normative dichotomies as well as from ghetto-like/non-normative confines, it might be a good idea to look at games that abandon both human spaces and avatars as well as non-normative avatars inhabiting non-normative spaces that refer back to a more normative standard (such as Quina, her swamp, the ghettos of *GTAIV* or the non-human races of *WoW*). In the next section I will study the games of *Thatgamecompany*, and more specifically *Flower*, as examples of games that propose new kinds of human relationality and affect through non-human and non-humanoid avatars and spaces. As we will see, these games also propose gameplay mechanics that introduce non-human flows and movement.

6.3. The flow of flowering identities in video games.

Jenova Chen, one of the lead designers and co-founder, together with Kellee Santiago, of *Thatgamecompany*, has defended, both through paper conferences and games designed by his studio, a very particular view of video games that prioritizes flow as the ideal state a game (and

its players) can hope to achieve. Chen (2007) adheres to psychologist Mihali Csikszentmihalyi's (1998) description of the flow state as a challenging activity requiring skill that merges action, awareness, and concentration, with clear goals. The flow state also provides continuous feedback. If achieved, the flow state brings forth a loss of self-consciousness as well as an altered sense of time. Simply put, the flow state can be broadly described as the act of being completely immersed in the activity at hand—or, for my purposes here, of being lost in a game. This state is achieved both because the player's skill meets the challenge imposed by the game, allowing her to quickly adapt to the different stages of the game, and also because the game itself is finely tuned to offer a challenge that is within the players' grasp. Chen argues that if the challenge is beyond the players' skill, "the activity becomes so overwhelming that it generates anxiety." (2007, 33) Similarly, if there is no challenge, the player becomes bore and loses interest in the game. I still remember the first time I tried playing *Resident Evil 2* (Capcom, 1998) at a friend's house. Right from the very beginning, the player is assaulted by zombies long before she has had time to learn to control her main character. I died several times unable to make my character move properly. For several years that turned me away from that game completely. Chen proposes something completely opposite to what

Resident Evil 2 did to me back in 1998. In addition to including a progressive challenge, in which the difficulty of the game raises progressively as the player's skill improves, he also suggests to implement choice into "the core activities of the interactive experience." (33). So far Santiago and Chen have developed four games that attempt to materialize Chen's vision of flow into games. I will use the first two, *Cloud* and *fl0w*, to describe broadly these designers' major themes and gameplay mechanics to focus in greater detail later on the other two (*Flower* and *Journey*).

Cloud was developed by Chen and Santiago, along with other fellow students, at the University of Southern California, as part of a research project while they were completing their master's program. The game introduces the most important themes and gameplay mechanics that served as the core of the other three games Chen and Santiago have developed so far in *Thatgamecompany. Cloud* invites players into the dream of a sleeping child. In the dream, the child can fly freely among the clouds. If touched or passed nearby, these clouds follow the avatar and, when combined with other clouds, generate different effects such as rain.

We could say that the objective of the game is to combine and move around the different types of clouds in order to solve environment-inspired puzzles but, as true as this may be, we could

also say that one of the other main objectives of the game is to simply fly without a purpose. This is, to enjoy the movement of the avatar as he crosses the sky unburdened by weight, physical resistances and/or bodily limitations. Failing is simply not an option as there is no life bar, no points to be lost or time limit forcing the completion of any particular task during a specific time frame. This form of free movement without danger or pressure reappears later in *fl0w*, *Flower* and *Journey*, as does the peculiar relation of the avatar with the medium it traverses—air in the case of *Cloud*. In *Cloud* both the avatar and the air feel liquid and fluid. This does not only mean that air offers no resistance against the movement of the avatar, but that the movements of the avatar and the air itself seem to belong to each other; the avatar's movement and the medium seem integral to each other. This decentralizes the avatar itself out of the player's attention as a finite body (that of the flying child's) into a more ample whole (that of the avatar's, plus its movement, plus the air).

fl0w is Thatgamecompany's first game as a studio and it was also used to exemplify the flow state discussed by Chen in his M.A thesis. Unlike *Cloud*, only made available on PC and free of charge, *fl0w* was first published as a flash game and later commercialized on Sony's PlayStation Network. This game was the first title in a list

of three games (the last being *Journey*) Thatgamecompany agreed to develop for Sony's consoles (PS3, PSP, PSVITA, and PS4). *fl0w* puts players in control of a microscopic organism living in an aquatic environment. This water world is formed by two-dimensional layers inhabited by other organisms made of cells that players can attack or ignore. Simpler organisms are made of fewer cells while more complex ones have multiple parts composed of numerous cells. Should the mouth of the player's avatar come close to one of the cells of the other beings, it will consume it, growing a bigger body as well as decorative protrusions. In turn, some of the other organisms are also aggressive and may try to eat the cells that compose the avatar's body. However, this aggression has limited negative consequences: The player's avatar cannot be completely eaten as it automatically returns to previous and safer layers if too many cells are lost. As it worst, being attacked is just a temporary setback. This type of setback, however, is rarely seen in the other games developed by Thatgamecompany, and sets *fl0w* slightly apart from them. Like *Cloud*, *fl0w* allows for fluid movement in an also fluid environment. The relevance of the non-human elements in Cloud is greater in *fl0w* due to the absence of human elements. Yet, from my view, the presence of other predatory cellular beings makes the flow in *fl0w* different from the one found in the other three games, and because of this it makes

the game a very particular example of games that play with human identity through apparently non-human, non-humanoid avatars and spaces.

6.4. Flow: Familiar non-human/uncanny human.

In their quest for the flow state, *Thatgamecompany* (and Chen) do not remove challenge from their games; they make it optional and multi-layered. *Cloud*, *fl0w* (for the most part), and, as we will see, *Flower* and *Journey*, let the player do as she pleases within the limits of the game. In all four games there are objectives that may be met and places to be reached if the player is to access new areas in the game, however all these elements are fully optional and players may decide to simply wander around in the liquid environment of these games. True, many other games do the same. Sandboxes such as *GTAIV* also allow players to roam Liberty City and forget about story missions. However, wandering in a game such as *GTAIV* still signifies to be exposed to a series of gameplay mechanics, forms of motion, rhythms and environments that are human in nature (or at least attempt to appear so). In their personification of the human, these games also reproduce existing discourses of what being human is. On the contrary, games such as *Flower*, in their attempt to achieve flow, not only let loose of objective based environments, they also introduce new gameplay

mechanics set in non-human, non-humanoid spaces, populated by non-human, non-humanoid characters that in turn introduce new forms of relation with movement, with space as well as with other non-human beings. This, however, is not evenly maintained at all times by all games developed by *Thatgamecompany* nor by each individual game at all times during gameplay. The predatory enemies in *fl0w* are an example of this.

The encounter with the predatory organisms in *fl0w* breaks, at least partially, the flow the game has tried to maintain up to that point. The inclusion of enemies in a game that initially fosters free exploration through fluid gliding within its aquatic world inserts into the game two main approaches to playing *fl0w* that are made more relevant than any other; that of either evading the predatory organisms or attacking them in order to consume and destroy them. This does not only introduce a set of goals players can fail to accomplish and therefore feel anxious about, but in doing so, it reintroduces the shadow of the human into the game. In his discussion of horror games, Game Scholar Steve Spittle (2011) uses Sigmund Freud's concept of the *uncanny* to describe the human-like creatures that populate this type of games. The uncanny, as Spittle puts it paraphrasing Freud, is something that is both homely and *unhomely* at the same time. The uncanny is a distorted double of that what was once familiar to us.

Yet, the uncanny, both through its distortion of and reference to the familiar, acts as a prime source of fear and horror. In a sense, the predator cellular beings in *flOw* are uncanny.

Up to the point until players encounter other predator beings in *flOw*, the player's avatar is rather unique. This is because, unlike the other cells inhabiting its aquatic environment, the avatar seems to move with a purpose and is the only one capable of devouring other beings. Also, it is the only cellular being capable of moving through layers at will while exploring the virtual aqueous world. In a sense, it is made unique by the simple fact of being controlled by a human player. This uniqueness changes with the arrival of other predators. The movement of these beings can be as focused as that of the player's avatar while also retaining its grotesque and menacing appearance. These enemies also represent a limitation to the free roaming through the liquid world of *flOw* players have enjoyed up to that point. And, while the attack of these beings cannot bring forth the death of the player's avatar, it is indeed a setback in a game that lacks any other types of setbacks. In its mirroring of the avatar's capabilities and behavior, predators in *flOw* remind players of their own ways of approaching and playing the game. By doing this, the game puts players in front of their own reflection, their uncanny human-like double in non-human form that chases and devours their

avatars. The notion of the other predatory beings as human doubles is made more prevalent after the release of an add-on patch for the PS3 version that implements a multiplayer option. With this patch, made available a few months after the initial release of the game, different players can control different cellular being and can attempt to devour each other.

The introduction of the human/non-human double, also breaks temporarily the relation players establish between their avatars, their movement, the liquid environment and the gameplay mechanics devoid of obligatory objectives that were, up to the irruption of this double, non-human. The presence of predators is also the end of freedom, as players have to either escape from them or try to devour them in return. The introduction of the human through non-human cellular predators introduces a relation of power (that of the powerful dominating and feeding on the weak) reminiscent of actual relations of power in human social relations. This allows me to verbalize the first of the two main ideas this chapter introduces: Discourses on human identity are produced and reproduced in video games through non-human, non-humanoid avatars and spaces, as well as through the game play mechanics these non-humanoid elements introduce. However, the introduction of other cellular beings acting as human-like doubles make the identity discourses being reproduced in *fl0w*

similar in nature to existing identity norms. This forces us to look elsewhere for an example that expands modes of human affect and offers alternative forms of understanding human identity outside of existing social norms.

With my analysis of *Flower* in the next section I will show how the absence of human elements (and its non-human, human-like doubles) plays a crucial role in the creation of discourses that envision human identity outside of sets of interrelated dichotomies. The relationship between the player's avatar and its environment in both *Cloud* and *fl0w* proposes an interesting union between moving agents, their medium (air and water respectively), and gameplay mechanics that, for the most part, promote freedom of choice on what to do and where to move. *Flower* expands this relation by increasing the number of agents involved while minimizing the impact of direct references to the human.

6.5. Petal relations.

Flower was the second game developed by *Thatgamecompany* on Sony's PS3 and received wide critical acclaim in 2009. Together with titles such as *Braid*, *Super Meat Boy* and *Castle Crashers*, *Flower* has been one of the most important, and successful, indie games developed for home

consoles. *Flower* puts players in command of a single flower petal being carried by a gust of wind. Pressing any button in the controller makes the gust of wind stronger for an instant while continuously pressing a button causes the small gust of wind to continuously blow while carrying the petal. Tilting and turning the controller makes the gust turn and gain or lose height. At the beginning of the game players are hinted on how to move the gust/petal avatar, but apart from this, there is no other hint on what to do or why. The game takes place, until the later stages of the game, in wide open meadows and natural environments dotted by flower buds and flower bud beds. Touching any bud with the gust/petal avatar causes it to blossom and liberate into the air a single petal that is added to the avatar the player controls. The blossoming of each bud is also accompanied by the brief sound of a classical instrument. Players are free to move in the direction they want within the space open to them by each area. Collecting petals is not forced to players, as there is no numerical point system or time pressure that forces players towards a specific goal apart from the fact that making certain buds blossom opens new areas in each meadow and eventually allows players to move to new stages. In fact, collecting petals is part of the very act of flowing in the game and enjoying the visual and aural finesse it offers.

Flower offers a very distinct form of understanding the avatar. First because, unlike most games, while the elements the player controls respond as a single entity, the individuality of the avatar as a single body is uncertain. The avatar in *Flower* is both the wind and the petals it carries, one is part of the other, they move together and depend on each other, yet they are also distinct from each other. They form a single entity through plural relations. At the same time, their navigation through the world of *Flower* is based on a continuous, almost tactile, relation with many other elements of the game. The grass, the wind, and the flowers all react to each other in an almost complete sensuous harmony. The wind is what ties every single element in the game together and allows the player to control an avatar that escapes from traditional player/avatar identifications in which the avatar corresponds to a single entity or body. Identification, in this game, is linked to a fluid number of elements and the ways they affect other elements within their system.

The control design of the game also contributes to this feeling of being part of a plural identity. Instead of traditional control settings in which players find each action tied to the pressing of a button (i.e. the left directional button to move left or a specific button for jumping or punching) or motion controls that mimic human bodily gestures (e.g. mimicking with one's arm the movement of a

tennis player when playing *Wii Sports*), *Flower* implements bodily gestures that seek to make the wind blow. Instead of controls that tie gestures and buttons to human-like actions, *Flower* ties bodily movement to non-human locomotion. In doing so, the game allows for experiencing forms of movement and relation that do not have the mimicking of the human at its core.

In fact, the game tries to create a clear separation between the human and the non-human, non-humanoid world. The initial screen from which players can select the stage they want to play is an example of this. This screen portrays a room dotted with flower pots placed on a table next to a window that opens up to an urban setting. Players can move the controller to flow towards a pot and, after pressing any button, they enter the level. Before the level starts, a loading screen showing frantic urban life counters the natural environments in which the actual stages take place. Within each meadow-like stage, there are occasional references to the human world, but in all cases except one these intrusions do not signify a change in the gameplay mechanics or in the freedom of exploration this game offers, in the way the frequent presence of the predators in *fl0w* did. Instead, the windmills (main human reference in the game) help the petal/gust avatar reach new areas of the stage inaccessible by other means. The only exception to this norm can be found during the penultimate stage

of the game. In this stage, pollution and massive electrified light poles have covered the world and players must evade these obstacles at all costs. Touching the poles destroys some of the petals comprising the avatar, and while not being lethal, this new obstacle, the only real obstacle in the whole game, represents a clear limitation to the freedom players have enjoyed up to that point. Unlike the predators of *flOw*, however, poles do not mimic the player or her avatar in any way. The poles are what the avatar is not: Static, damaging, and a clear reference to human presence; it is something to reject and avoid that refers back to the human while making even more attractive the unique traits of the plural, non-human avatar. This human-petal confrontation is formally resolved a stage later during the final level in the game in which the avatar gains the ability to destroy the poles upon contact, liberating the meadows and the winds being trapped by these electrified objects. With this, the game seems to try to portray the triumph of not only nature over human society, but also of its own gameplay mechanics based on free exploration over the shadow of human-inspired limitations and destruction of the lightning poles.

Through its gameplay mechanics, control configuration, and theme, *Flower* manages to create a space set apart from human spaces. Yet, unlike the ghetto or the swamp, it truly presents a space that offers an alternative to social norms and traditional forms of

understanding identity. This is because the model *Flower* proposes is not based on the representation of the human, as well as human means of motion, action and/or affect. Instead, it goes beyond the human and, in doing so, it proposes a form of understanding identity outside of the normative/non-normative divide or the ghetto/standard urban space distinction. While Quina's swamp was an extension of the ghetto in non-human, yet humanoid, form, the flower meadows in *Flower* escape the human completely. But they can still be used to learn about human identity. The air and the petals in this game are not queer, non-normative or normative. Do they belong in this dissertation?

flOw allowed me to say that non-human, non-humanoid spaces and avatars can be used to portray human identities. *Flower* allows me to expand this idea by adding that spaces and avatars such as the ones found in this game, together with its gameplay mechanics, produce discourses about human identity based on non-normative affects and relations. There are other games that nearly accomplish something similar to what *Flower* does by also addressing human identity through non-human avatars, spaces, and mechanics. *Journey*, the last game developed by *Thatgamecompany*, is an example of this. The analysis of this game, where the avatar is humanoid, will allow us to delve a bit deeper on the importance of the non-human, non-humanoid aspect of

games that, like *Flower*, seem to reproduce novel ways of understanding human identity.

6.6. A *Journey* back from the flower meadow to the human.

In *Journey* players take control of a humanoid being in sand dweller clothes as she ascends to the top of a mountain in a world covered in sand and snow. The avatar has four main abilities at her disposal. First, she is able to surf down the slopes of sand and snow with a gliding motion that is immediately reminiscent of the liquid movement found in the other three games of the studio. Secondly, the avatar can also jump and glide in the air temporarily by using the energy of a scarf she wears from the start of the game. The scarf can be made longer (allowing for longer times in the air) by collecting special items that resemble magical sheets of paper. Collecting these items allows access to higher places faster, which in turn facilitates faster transitions between places where players can ride the sand or the snow downwards. The third ability is, like the first one, also related to gliding movement. Across the levels there are a number of ladders and bridges made of carpet-like materials that players can ride at great speeds in order to overcome abysms or high cliffs. Finally, the avatar can also perform an instrument sound that can be used to communicate with other players as well as to activate some

elements in the game, such as new scarf pieces or part of the carpet-like bridges.

Multiplayer in *Journey* is an integral part of the game and it pairs players in each map of the game. Should the same two players keep completing maps together, they will also reach the end together. Players can, however, ignore each other and complete each map at their own pace, which will make them encounter a different player each time. Unlike the mode found in *fl0w*, multiplayer in *Journey* is not competitive. There is no way for players to attack each other and instead, the game puts together two players that, if they decide to do so, can travel together while communicating through their actions and non-linguistic sounds. In Jenova Chen's words (2012), *Thatgamecompany* wanted to "make an online game [that brought] an emotion that has never been done before in online games. If you look around at online games in the console market, it's pretty obvious that no other games give you this feeling of connection with each other, of understanding."[89] However, being true to the studio's own vision of gameplay based on choice, the game does not make the multiplayer aspect compulsory or necessary. Players, after all, can both play alone and offline, or online but completely ignoring other players. Playing online, however, can indeed foster feelings of connectedness

[89] Interviewed by Ed Smith at Gamasutra: http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/170547/a_personal_journey_jenova_chens_.php Accessed August 29, 2013

and mutuality unavailable to solitary players. Similar to its three predecessors, *Journey* presents a fluid relation between avatars and space. The avatar's way of surfing the dunes and the air creates a communion in which movement and medium seem to become one. This time, however, this form of liquid movement is limited to downward surfaces and special surfaces like the carpet-like bridges and ladders. The rest of the time the avatar walks. Walking up a dune takes time and represents a sudden halt in the gliding of the rest of the game. It is also the time when the avatar uses her legs to walk and the only time she needs to use the strength of her own weak body in order to move. The weakness of the avatar's human body is opposed to the fluidity of movement granted by the combination of gravity and the sand. Human nature is, in that way, presented as weak and limited in comparison with how nature seems to flow. With this division, the game presents two alignments, one that follows the flows of nature (i.e. the flows of sand and air), and one tied to a human body, which also entails distinct modes of locomotion and rhythms tied to in-game controls. As the game advances and players get closer to the summit of the mountain, downward surfaces become scarcer and the sand is eventually replaced by snow. One of the final zones in the game has the avatar climbing a frozen slope slowly while falling to the ground and freezing. Again, the weakness of the avatar is made to face the might

of nature. This is also the part when the multiplayer component proves more meaningful: Every single time I have played the game other players tended to ignore me during the sections were rapid downwards surf was frequent and fluid. Yet right before reaching the summit, where all characters struggle, all players tended to walk next to me, wait for me if I fell, and call me using their own instrument-like sounds if we strayed too far away from each other.

Just as *Flower* suggested a new form of identity based on a plurality of relations, *Journey* invites players to reflect on the bodily fragility of their avatars (as well as the fragility of the other humanoid avatar walking next to one's own). Through this reflection another form of relationality and affect is made available: That of the avatar with its fluid movement through the dunes and the air. The avatar's humanoid body serves as a remainder of traditional forms of identification revolving around the determinacy of the human body; a form of identification less attractive than that of the one with natural elements.

The plurality of relations that come to define the avatar in both *Flower* and *Journey* suggest a new form of human identity that is not based on the regulation of human bodies and space. Instead, through their non-human, non-humanoid avatars, these games propose a form of relationality reminiscent on what the term "beside" entails

for Gender Studies scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2002). This author proposes a model for understanding affect, desire and relation that is not based on binary oppositions and encounters (e.g. the desire object and the desiring subject). Instead, every element is *beside* each other; next to each other. This means that any element in any given relation is fluidly connected and next to each other at the same time. This idea complicates conceptualizations of identity based on sets of traits opposed to each other (e.g. male/female, white/non-white, heterosexual/homosexual, normative/queer). Instead, identity is understood as a fluid interchange of relations in touch with each other.

Most commercial games propose relations between their avatars, their virtual spaces and the gameplay mechanics that are based on the human. By doing so, they also reproduce rigid grids of understanding human identity and social norms. Is it possible to escape from this grid? Games such as *Flower* and *Journey* escape from the grid. In most cases, they propose a form of affect based on fluid relations and motions. They also entail innovative controls tied to gameplay mechanics and objectives that are associated to those normally linked to the human. The non-human, non-humanoid nature of the avatar and virtual spaces in *Flower* (or, in the case of *Journey*, the opposition between the non-human world and its weak human counterpart) are key to

the imagining of alternative identities. In not being human or humanoid, the meadow and its petals, and the gameplay mechanics they allow, also escape from the gendered/sexualized/ethnic codification of the human bodies and spaces.

7. Final words.

This dissertation has offered a vision of discourses of gender and sexuality in video games moving from a more general, representational-oriented, analysis to more abstract concerns. The dissertation starts with the human as a historical and ideology-regulated category, moves on to study the processes for reproducing gender and sexuality which are specific to Game Studies (such as choice, haptic input, and code) to go back to the human through the study of non-human elements. By doing this, I believe the dissertation draws a circle that proposes what I hope are innovative forms of thinking about gender and sexuality in Game Studies. Not limited to visions of gender and sexuality that are mainly representational, this dissertation has also paid attention to invisible processes which run in the background of games or which seldom receive any attention.

Chapter 2, the most representational-oriented chapter of all, explores the history of Japan and its national discourses about gender and sexuality in order to show that they have had a crucial role in the creation of characters and narratives in Japanese popular culture products, primarily, but not exclusively, in manga and anime. The presence of these cultural forms in a dissertation about video games is justified by the similarities and connections in terms of themes, characters, aesthetics, and fan-expectations among these three media forms. As this chapter shows, ideology limits the situations in which

individuals are allowed to act (or, in which they perceive they are allowed to act). Together, choice and ideology serve, then, as historical and social mechanisms for the production and reproduction of specific identities. Choice also happens to be a fundamental element in video games.

Chapter 3 studies choice in video games and the potential ideological capabilities of specific implementations of it in this medium. This chapter shows that the affordances and limitations games offer players also have a very specific impact on the kinds of gender and sexualities that are promoted, called forth, and addressed during gameplay. Video games are, in general, cultural products created within normative identity discourses that also promote similarly aligned identities. The medium is, however, also malleable and subject to modification by users who might try to implement (or wish for) changes in the number and quality of choices available at any given time during gameplay. Choice, as a powerful tool, would also allow game designers to consciously introduce critically relevant discourses into their games. As this chapter shows with the evolution of the choices available in the *Dragon Age* series, choice seems to evolve to accommodate a broader range of sensibilities and desires. This gradual broadening, however, is not necessarily always positive, and must be carefully analyzed when thinking about games as identitarian machines.

Another fundamental element when playing games is the haptic relation established between players and games. In addition to the visual elements of games (something I mainly covered on the second chapter), repeated tactile inputs and forms of haptic incorporation during gameplay also play a critical role as enforcements of specific visions of gender and sexuality.

Up to chapter 5, my dissertation offers a vision of ideology and video games as media controlled by normative forms of understanding gender and sexuality. This vision departs from the, sometimes, celebrated nature of relations between humans, technology, and media as liberating and enabling. Instead, this dissertation analyzes video games and the technologies created around them as inserted within social and economic flows that affect the kind of ideologies this type of media adheres to and represents. Chapter 5, with its divide between animal and human identities, computer code and social code, adds to this vision of video games as powerful ideological tools aligned with normativity. However, with the analysis of non-human elements, the chapter also opens the possibility of going beyond normativity in order to analyze less constrained identities in video games.

Chapter 6 does precisely this and offers a way to talk about expanded representations of human relations and identities. The key to finding alternatives discourses about the human resides in looking at

games that abandon the human world to explore non-human game mechanics and settings. In this sense, it is through non-human relations, motions, and worlds that games might suggest presently new forms of thinking about the human.

Beyond this dissertation, the ideas presented here could be expanded in a number of ways:

First, the attention Japan receives in chapter two could be expanded to include more regions. Given the time devoted in this dissertation to games developed by the Canadian company Bioware, it would be interesting to write about gender, sexuality, and history in Canada or to see how, or if, Canadian games differ ideologically from those developed in the U.S or Europe.

During the writing of this dissertation, technologies such as Kinect and Move experienced a rapid increase in popularity and a sudden fall into oblivion. As of now, technologies such as the Oculus Rift show great promise, but are yet to enter players' homes. Expanding my ideas about haptic relations with deeper analyses about these forms of body and gaze oriented controls and displays might be exceedingly illuminating.

Also, animal ontology in video games could be further explored to turn it into a topic that works independently of its connection

with discourses about the human. I fear, however, that extracting the human from the animal may be impossible (or an exercise of wishful thinking), for all acts of animal writing have a human writer behind them.

Finally, most of the games I have analyzed are commercial games created by big companies. In the future I intend to explore the commercial/indie divide and study how (or rather, whether) differences in budget entail changes in the type and number of genders and sexualities portrayed.

I hope you have enjoyed reading this dissertation at least a portion of what I enjoyed playing with it. Game Over.

... Continue?

8. Spanish Appendix (as required by the institution).

8.1. Spanish Summary.

Título: Corporeidad, identidad y cultura digital: Género y sexualidad en videojuegos.

Doctorando: Juan Francisco Belmonte Ávila.

Tutor: D. Juan Antonio Suárez Sánchez.

Esta tesis doctoral aborda la reproducción de los discursos sobre la identidad en los videojuegos desde el campo de los Estudios Culturales y los Game Studies. Este estudio es fruto de la experiencia pre-doctoral Fulbright (en Indiana University, Bloomington, Estados Unidos de América, años 2009 a 2011) y del período transcurrido como becario-investigador FPI pre-doctoral (años 2011 a 2014), así como de varias estancias de investigación en el extranjero (en McGill University, Montreal, Canadá; Institute of Technology, Copenague, Dinamarca) y de la asistencia a varios congresos internacionales relacionados con temas de la Tesis Doctoral (los congresos de la Society for Cinema and Media Studies de 2012 y 2103 en Estados Unidos; el congreso Serious Games, en Michigan State University; el Congreso de la Japanese Society for Digital Humanities, en Ritsumeikan, Tokyo; y el CODE, en Melbourne, Australia, entre otros). Esta actividad ha estado financiada, adicionalmente, por los proyectos FFI-2008-05615, "Periferias de lo queer I: textualidades, corporalidades, geografías" y FFI 2011-24211 "Periferias de lo queer II: espacio, cuerpo, cultura material"). En el texto, se presta atención tanto a elementos representacionales como a otros propios del medio específico estudiado, tales como el código de programación utilizado, las articulaciones de opción que ofrecen los juegos, sus formas de control y su naturaleza interactiva. Así, se revisitan textos fundamentales en los Estudios Culturales para el estudio de relaciones entre texto e ideología al tiempo que se ofrecen nuevas propuestas para el análisis de las características propias del medio, al incidir en aspectos casi totalmente ignorados por la crítica hasta el presente. La tesis, en su primer capítulo, resume las fuentes fundamentales que abordan la relación entre ideología y media digitales interactivos, para así dar paso a cinco unidades temáticas entrelazadas y complementarias. Autores relevantes en esta sección incluyen a

Sherry Turkle, Donna Haraway, Henry Jenkins, Espen Aarseth, Ian Bogost, Wendy Chun, Jesper Juul y Gonzalo Frasca.

La primera de estas unidades analiza la relación entre el devenir histórico de un país, los discursos sobre identidad generados a raíz de dichos eventos históricos, y el modo en el que la cultura popular refleja estas visiones identitarias con textos afines a los discursos dominantes. Para este estudio se escoge Japón, por ser un país relativamente desatendido (o mal atentendido) en este tipo de análisis, y por ser una cultura extraordinariamente generativa como primer productor mundial de cultural popular (manga, anime, y, de especial relevancia para el tema de esta Tesis Doctoral, videojuegos). De esta forma, el capítulo dos analiza la relación entre la historia japonesa, los discursos sobre el género y la sexualidad en este país, y su reproducción en la cultura popular. Las fuentes bibliográficas para esta sección incluye a expertos sobre la historia de Japón como Andrew Gordon, Michiko Suzuki o Tom Gill, estudiosos de la cultura popular japonesa (Susan J. Napier), y textos claves de la cultura popular japonesa claves. Entre los textos digitales analizados a destacar en esta sección cabe destacar Disgaea, Conception II, la saga Final Fantasy y Demon Gaze. Todas estos títulos han tenido una marcada influencia en el desarrollo de los videojuegos, llegando a influir además la producción visual en otros formatos (el manga, el anime, el cine y las series de televisión), no sólo en Japón, sino también en otros entornos nacionales orientales (Corea, la República Popular China) y occidentales (Estados Unidos, Canadá, Reino Unido, entre otros).

La segunda unidad temática presente en el tercer capítulo vincula una de las características principales de los videojuegos, choice (la interacción basada en opciones), con la difusión de identidades concretas que son absorbidas por los usuarios bajo un halo de interactividad y de relaciones entre usuario, máquina y texto digital aparentemente libres. Esta sección cuestiona percepciones automáticamente positivas sobre la interactividad y analiza este elemento como un mecanismo de difusión ideológica. Así, situaciones concretas en las cuales el jugador debe elegir

una opción entre varias, no sólo fuerzan a una actuación específica con consecuencias y connotaciones ideológicas pre-determinadas, sino que además dejan de lado otras opciones que no son consideradas relevantes. Esta relevancia viene dada por discursos dominantes que facilitan formas normativas de identidad y marginan a la invisibilidad a otras (tales como identidades queer). En este sentido, las mecánicas de juego y estructuras narrativas interactivas funcionan como una modalidad de lo que el filósofo francés Louis Althusser llamara Aparatos Ideológicos de Estado, un término que no ha sido utilizado para el análisis de los videojuegos, a pesar de su rentabilidad crítica en este ámbito. A través de la interacción basada en opciones, los videojuegos presentan como libre interacción lo que en realidad es una cadena de opciones dicotómicas basadas en lo que los filósofos Gilles Deleuze y Félix Guattari describieron como estructuras arborescentes; éstas ignoran "ramas" de la identidad no aceptadas por el régimen social imperante. En esta sección, los textos digitales más relevantes son la saga Dragon Age (Dragon Age: Origins, Dragon Age II y Dragon Age: Inquisition), Grand Theft Auto IV y Baldur's Gate II. Estos juegos, que han recibido considerable atención crítica, son analizados desde una perspectiva hasta ahora inédita: la estructura de la interactividad ofrecida al jugador y las consecuencias de ésta en relación con las opciones de conducta sexual virtual y las identidades de género.

La tercera unidad analiza la relación entre la naturaleza háptica (o táctil) de muchas interacciones entre el jugador y el videojuego y la absorción de discursos sobre la identidad. En esta unidad se entiende al cuerpo humano como uno de los elementos fundamentales utilizados para la identificación del individuo. Contornos, formas, hormonas y filias centradas en el cuerpo son algunos de los referentes principales para aprender y explicar la sexualidad y el género de cada individuo. En los últimos años, la teoría queer (teniendo a Judith Butler como una de las cabezas más visibles de este modelo de crítica) ha cuestionado visiones tradicionales sobre la identidad sexual y de género (basadas en dualismos como heterosexualidad/homosexualidad; hombre/mujer) para ofrecer una visión más líquida y polisémica de la identidad. Según la teoría

queer, el cuerpo no es sólo un elemento semiótico que refleja pasivamente la identidad de cada individuo, que puede ser descifrada de manera casi automática, sino que también es comprendido como algo maleable por cada persona, que puedo "actuarlo" (perform es el término Butleriano) para activamente representar—o cuestionar—las ideas individuales y colectivas sobre la sexualidad y el género. Con las interacciones táctiles con los videojuegos a través del mando, el cuerpo humano pasa a articularse con mecanismos de repetición y concentración háptica que complementan la transmisión visual de contenido y la absorción de flujos de carácter ideológico. Entre los textos digitales analizados destacan Bayonetta, Devil May Cry y God of War.

La cuarta área de estudio del género y la sexualidad en los videojuegos se adentra en el análisis del código binario y de las líneas de código escritas durante la programación de este medio para abordar un estudio comparativo entre un código puramente computacional y otro tipo de código, de carácter normativo y social, que se complementan mutuamente. A través del estudio de personajes animales—o animalizados—con un amplio rango de complejidad (a menudo asociada a su dominio del lenguaje) en los videojuegos, se busca encontrar una relación directa entre la complejidad a nivel de código computacional escrito, el comportamiento de dichos personajes en los videojuegos, y la ideología subyacente a dichos personajes. A medida que los personajes animales ganan en complejidad, su comportamiento y acceso a relaciones que configuran y matizan su género y sexualidad se aproximan progresivamente a discursos normativos sobre identidad equiparables a los personajes humanos. Así, el quinto capítulo de esta tesis doctoral busca mostrar cómo, tanto en animales y humanos, el código de programación es utilizado de forma eficaz para ejecutar un segundo tipo de código, el social, y es puesto al servicio de corrientes ideológicas dominantes. Esta sección analiza un gran número de textos entre los que destacan Persona 3, Persona 4, Final Fantasy IX, Dishonored, Skyrim y Mass Effect.

La quinta, y última, área de estudio retoma la temática no-humana (animal) del capítulo anterior para buscar formas de pensar sobre lo humano en videojuegos fuera de los circuitos de lo

normativo. El capítulo encuentra dicho espacio en avatares y espacios no-humanos, en temáticas y entornos alejados de lo social, y en formas de relación con el entorno que no están relacionadas con percepciones, movimientos, o corporeidades humanas. Así, el sexto capítulo de la tesis encuentra identidades no-normativas a través de videojuegos como los diseñados por Thatgamecompany: Flower, fl0w, Cloud y Journey. Estos títulos, que son los principales objetos de análisis en este capítulo, proponen relaciones casi líquidas y en constante movimiento entre avatares no-humanos (ni tampoco animales), tales como pétalos, viento, aire, o células, espacios alejados de la sociedad humana (campos de flores, praderas de hierba, dunas de arena o espacios acuosos donde seres unicelulares se reproducen, pero también se atacan y devoran). Estas relaciones, a pesar de no girar en torno a lo humano, ofrecen visiones expandidas de lo que potencialmente puede significar una nueva forma de entender la relacionalidad humana. Este último capítulo, además, ofrece una puerta para que los elementos estudiados en capítulos anteriores puedan ser utilizados para una expansión del tipo de discursos identitarios reproducidos por los videojuegos. Las nuevas formas de relacionalidad admiten nuevas visiones del rango de opciones (capítulo 3). A la vez, los movimientos y objetivos no basados en lo humano puede requerir formas de control táctil que estén basadas en nuevas relaciones hápticas entre el usuario y el texto digital (tema del capítulo 4). Y, por último, una visión expandida de lo humano puede desembocar en representaciones más complejas de avatares animales, representaciones basadas en una ontología animal independiente de ontologías sobre lo humano. El capítulo seis, además, matiza la visión negativa a nivel ideológico que la tesis doctoral ofrece sobre los videojuegos, al percibirlos, en ocasiones, como un medio que reproduce visiones normativas de la identidad, para mostrar ejemplos que sí escapan de dicha lógica y liberan a dicho medio de un futuro exclusivamente normalizado.

El valor académico de esta tesis es doble: Por un lado abre el campo de los Estudios Culturales (campo de enorme importancia de los estudios filológicos) al ámbito de los estudios de los textos

digitales, particularmente de los videojuegos, un medio relativamente reciente, caracterizado de forma distintiva por la interacción, que se ha convertido en el principal mercado cultural del mundo, por encima del cine, la televisión o el texto escrito. De esta forma, se multiplican el número de textos potencialmente analizables al tiempo que se atiende a un sector de producción cultural de innegable relevancia en las sociedades contemporáneas. Por otro lado, la tesis pretende servir de puente, en el ámbito universitario de nuestro país, entre el campo de los Game Studies (un campo de alta implantación y expansión con departamentos de reconocido prestigio en centros universitarios como New York University, el Massachusetts Institue of Technology, McGill University, Concordia University, Indiana University, Instute of Tecnology University-Copenhagen, entre muchas otras instituciones) y la investigación en Estudios Culturales realizada, por ejemplo, en departamentos de literatura y arte.

La redacción de la tesis doctoral se ha realizado en inglés atendiendo al marco de los estudios de Filología Inglesa, en los que se enmarca, y pensando en que la redacción en este idioma redunda en una mayor difusión de la investigación realizada. Además, la práctica totalidad de las fuentes consultadas está en inglés, y habría resultado no sólo laborioso sino además poco económico o práctico tener que traducir constantemente al español términos ingleses con significados extraordinariamente específicos que habrían requerido torpes paráfrasis.

Para una familiarización previa con la temática de la tesis se recomienda la lectura anticipada de las siguientes fuentes bibliográficas:

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