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SAVING PRINCE PEACH: A STUDY OF "GAYMERS" AND DIGITAL LGBT/GAMING RHETORICS

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AND DIGITAL LGBT/GAMING RHETORICS

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the tensions surrounding the inclusion and increasing presence of LGBT performances within video games, their surrounding industry and culture, and their related internetworked cyberspaces – an assemblage referred to in this research as the "game-sphere." By analyzing the rhetorical activity performed within a specific LGBT game cyberspace (the Reddit subforum *r/gaymers*), this study offers insight into gaming and LGBT culture by answering the following research question: What rhetorical action is performed by LGBT video game players within r/gaymers? Data were collected over a period of two weeks, wherein screen-captures were taken and saved twice a day at 10:00 am and pm. These screen-captures consisted of 1) the front page of the subforum, 2) the "direct thread" multi-media images that were hyperlinked to the threads' titles, and 3) the discussions page of each unique thread. 543 unique threads were captured in this method. In order to organize and analyze the data, three theoretical frameworks – *networks*, *queertext*, and *games* – were employed in order to frame r/gaymers in terms of their rhetorical *acts* of *transformation*, *resistance*, and *play*, respectively. These actions were selected for in data collection, as they represented significant rhetorical exigencies concerned with each LGBT, writing, and game perspectives. Many of these transformations, resistances and play-acts reflect the current landscape of LGBT gaming. This study concludes that these rhetorics negotiate current tensions between heteronormative and queer ideologies, including the gendering of LBGT cyberspaces, the hypersexualization of bodies within their own discourse, the perceptions of "queer"

representations present in both Japanese and western games, and the evolving

discourse on contemporary gay performativity.

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CHAPTER 1

INCREASING PRESENCE OF LGBT REPRESENTATION IN   CYBERSPACE

In February 2012, when in-game scenes were leaked to YouTube depicting the

main character of BioWare's *Mass Effect 3* choosing gay relationship options, a

backlash within the Mass Effect fan-base arose. Although the sexual content of the

scenes was essentially limited to two men in underwear cuddling, the number of

"dislikes" on the clip initially skyrocketed, to various comments such as: "*Shepard*

was my hero, now my eyes are bleeding"; "*I GOTTA VOMIT*"; "*… homosexuality is*

just a way to weed out the weak, and useless. Sorry fags but the men get to procreate,

and you homos can sit in the corner playing with your skirts and make-up,"; etc.,

(Mass Effect 3 – Shepard and Cortez, 2012). Such comments – and the responses

which challenged them – continue to play out on the page (over 2500 comments at the

time of viewing) and highlight a growing controversy within the medium: the growing

inclusion of and resistance to LGBT presence within video games.

In his discussion regarding the analysis of cultural artifacts such as video

games, Ken McAlister (2004), in *Game Work; Language Power and Computer Game*

Culture, argued that any such analysis must account for the reciprocal tension of how

rhetoric works through and on producers, consumers, and the technology in question.

In other words, research must look at and beyond the artifact in question to the points

of contention in which it is involved and the cultural, socio-political, industrial, and

personal transformations it influences. This, McAllister refered to as the "so-what" question of such research; that game scholars must not just study the games, but the ways they specifically work to transform and change those who use them, the industry which produces them, and the cultures in which they are immersed.

This study highlights one such point of contention – the increasing visibility of queer/LGBT presence within video games, game-industry, and the surrounding game-complex (the surrounding forums, websites, blogsphere, etc.). By looking beyond video games themselves as cultural artifacts to their social-tensions, this study focuses on user-perspectives of the rhetorical acts performed by participants within the game-complex - that is, the work performed by gay video game users to superimpose, perform, and establish an LGBT identity within the game-complex and to resituate the technology for their own purposes. Thus, this study attempts to answer McAllister's so-what question by looking at the tensions surrounding the inclusion and increasing presence of LGBT performances within video games, their surrounding industry and culture, and their internetworked cyberspaces (the game-complex) – an assemblage referred to in this research as the "game-sphere." By analyzing the rhetorical activity performed within a specific LGBT game cyberspace (the Reddit subforum *r/gaymers*), this study offers insight into gaming and LGBT culture by answering the following research question: What rhetorical action is performed by LGBT video game players within r/gaymers?

Although the opening example is emblematic of the current state of LGBT video games, it represents just one stage in a process with began over twenty years ago.

The inclusion of LGBT presence in video games did not originate with BioWare's

Mass Effect series, nor was this the company's first attempt at including such themed

content within one of their "Triple A" titles[1]. The often quiet presence of LGBT

characters within video games can be traced back to the late 1980's, the most famous

of which perhaps being *Birdo* (a pink anthropomorphic character from Nintendo's

Mario franchise, detailed as a "boy who thinks he is a girl") and *Poison,* from

Capcom's *Final Fight* (originally detailed as a female thug, but redesigned as a

"newhalf," **[2]** and finally marketed as a transvestite to appease Western sensitivity

regarding violence against women). Throughout the past three decades, the video

game industry has suggested or even confirmed the existence of a growing, yet still

small, population of LGBT characters within their medium and even allowed queer

relationship options within their games. This is especially nuanced in Japan, the

world's second largest producer of video games (Video Game Industry), where

gender-roles hail from traditions which more readily embrace homoerotic relationships.

This aspect of video game cultural influence is so important, in fact, that I devote

Chapter 2 to its discussion.

Regardless of these cultural differences however, in the West, LGBT video

game audiences are often left wanting. Up until the turn of the century, the most

prominent role of LGBT characters was either a villain or an occasional oddity. Flea

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[1]A video game title representing the highest level of investment and anticipated
   revenue basted on current industrial standards.

[2]Colloquial for the proper term *futanari*, a Japanese term representing a type of
   hermaphroditism, popular in anime pornography. *Futanari* are often depicted as
   females with male genitals, often without testicles, or both male and female
   genetalia.

from Square-Enix's *Chronotrigger,* the previously mentioned Poison and Birdo, the commonly used trope of a seedy gay-bar the protagonist must investigate (*Rise of the Dragon; Police Quest: Open Season; The Orion Conspiracy; Final Fantasy VII*), among other titles, used flamboyance and effeminate speech or dress to signal a character's homosexuality. The other most common LGBT presence appeared in titles which gave player-designed avatars options for same-sex romance (*Fallout 2; Star Trek: Voyager – Elite Force; Star Ocean: The Second Story*). And eventually, as opinions of homosexuality changed and acceptance gradually grew, the new millennium witnessed a burgeoning of LGBT characters, who were featured more prominently and positively. Yet these characters are generally cast in supporting roles and were still commonly stereotyped or campy. As of now, no main protagonist of any title has officially been acknowledged as LGB or T.

Although this study seeks to analyze the game-rhetoric of a self-identified community of users, the very mention of a "gay identity" highlights several thorny issues faced by gaymers. Even as the game-industry and -complex reflect in some ways a gradual growing cultural acceptance, gaymers often struggle to establish their digital presence while they simultaneously attempt to resist the stigmatization of a hyper-sexualized profile at odds with a media-industry positioned against sexual presence. The process of coming out is especially problematic for video game characters or players because, as Addison and Hilligoss noted (1999), the process "automatically sexualizes" the activity. If Mario were to save *Prince* Peach for example, the act would be non-normative and signify the introduction of sexual desire

between the characters – a presence which would have been otherwise invisible to heteronormative standards had the character saved a *princess*. This sexual visibility in video games is a difficult taboo to dispel, not only because games are still generally believed to be toys or children's media, but because in many cases developers avoid detailing game characters so as to allow players to project themselves into the game (Perlin, 2004; Schell, 2008). Although this ambiguity may initially appear to offer sexual flexibility or the promise of diverse "readings" of certain characters, Western scholarship has thus far viewed this ambiguity as a ubiquitous reinforcement of the normalcy of white, male, heterosexuality (Consalvo, 2003). This parallels observations made by composition theorists regarding the writing classroom, who have argued that such an omission of sexuality is not done accidentally, but purposefully and through culturally institutionalized homophobia – a situation which silences and intimidates individuals from raising such topics (Malinowitz, 1995). It should also be noted that this prevalence of male perspective, while having these effects, also predisposes video game users to being predominantly male – a situation reflected in the demographics of this research's data pool (explained in Chapter 3).

As well as issues of representation, recent circumstances reflect heightening LGBT visibility within the game-sphere and digital communication in general. Not only are certain game companies open to the potential inclusion of gay content, but the advancement of certain digital technologies represents a shifting of online ecologies surrounding LGBT persons. Although scholars have noted that differences exist between performing sexuality online and in RL (real life) (Wakeford, 2000; Alexander

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& Banks, 2004), those differences may in many ways be eroding. Social networking media, such as Facebook, Skype, Twitter, etc. represent an increased interconnectivity between online and RL spaces, and have risen in the public eye recently for their implication in online bullying and subsequent gay teen suicides. Specifically regarding the game-complex, which strives to push development of more immersive, responsive, and "transparent" interface-options, these technologies are often compounded. Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP), internetworked writing within intra- and extra-game environments, motion-capture hardware, console gamer-tags, etc. represent an increasing transparency of identity within online games (Moberly, 2008). This writing and/or playing enacted by gaymers often represents a loss of confidentiality. In many cases LGBT gamers are forced out of comfortable online environments due to increased visibility of their real-world personages, leading to increasing contact and performance of gay identity within the game-sphere.

Were this not by itself isolated to "safe" contact zones, online game communities are frequently sites of racism, sexism, and homophobia (as the opening *Mass Effect* example demonstrates). Not only must gaymers frequently come into contact with overt and intended homophobic hostility enacted by other players, but with implied disparagement which downplays, obfuscates or otherwise ignores the effect of hate-speech within the larger heteronormative gaming community. Such a notion, however, is problematic for several reasons. As Adrienne Shaw (2009) noted, assumptions regarding the homophobia of the dominant demographic of hardcore video game players (white adolescent males) are often made based on the frequency of

the popular and pejorative uses of the words "fag," "faggot," and "gay" in online (and popular) discourse. This assumed homophobia fortifies a pre-existing skittishness on behalf of game developers to include pro-LGBT content in games due to fear of negative reception and poor sales revenue, a situation leading to further gay exclusion and under-representation. This is especially problematic in an industry which is so heavily driven by profit rather than aesthetics or cultural inclusion. Additionally, many straight and gay gamers do not observe the connection to sexuality that these terms in this context carry, acknowledging them as simply ways to insult other players based on heterocentrist conventions, thus denying their homophobia.

Finally, despite efforts to increase gay visibility in digital media, scholars note that the notion of a coherent "gay" digital identity masks a fracturing of subjectivities, possessing sometimes radically different activities and agendas; as if there was any one unified or stable voice which could hope to account for the diversity of sexualities represented by the term, or hope to account for the myriad ways to perform such identities (Alexander & Banks, 2004; Barrios, 2004; Jagose, 1997). This study thus attempts to provide an informed glimpse at the situations encountered and the strategies employed by a growing population to establish their presence as a community while simultaneously resisting forces which would generalize, stereotype, or otherwise over-emphasize their difference in the process of obscuring their presence.

Not only has this presence gone under-acknowledged in the game industry, but it has enjoyed relatively little attention within academia. Theorists from both Games Studies and Rhetoric and Composition (Shaw, 2009; Alexander, McCoy, & Velez,

2007; respectively) have noted that much of the discourse regarding gendered presence in video games has revolved around the experiences of female gamers and representations of women within the mainstream game culture; relatively little attention has been paid to the representation and experience of LGBT gamers. This is partly due to a general dearth of homosexual reference in American released games (Score). However, although Rhetoric and composition scholars have thus far remained mostly silent on the topic of LGBT gaming, there is a flourishing interest within the discipline regarding video games and game writing. Generally, these scholars have contributed in roughly three ways. First, scholars (Alberti, 2008; Gee, 2003, 2007; Holm, 2010; Lacasa, et. al., 2008; Sheridan & Hart-Davidson, 2008) have studied video games as powerful teaching technologies which demonstrate through their unique combination of tutorial, reward, scaling, and multimedia approach "that pleasure and emotional involvement are central to thinking and learning" (Gee, 2007, p. 2). Secondly, rhetoric and composition scholars (Alexander, 2009; Colby & Colby, 2008; Dewinter & Vie, 2008; Kitchens, 2006) have observed that bringing video games into the composition classroom can give students the opportunity to observe a multitude of literacies and literate practices within which they are frequently immersed, and that it can provide students a context to develop their perspectives on cultures and media with which they frequently interact. Finally, several scholars both within and beyond rhetoric and composition have extended these critical perspectives to look specifically at game-rhetorics, which explore the reciprocal influence of both games on users and users on games (Frasca, 2007; Johnson, 2008; McAllister, 2004; Shaw

2009). In each of these approaches, video games are acknowledged within the discipline as an important contact zone for future literacy, pedagogy, and scholarship.

Conversely, writing scholars have a growing corpus detailing the impact of digital communication on LGBT writers, including several special issues of *Computers and Composition*, yet the potential for extending that conversation to include newer forms of digital writing, such as video games, remains rich. Both queer and digital writing studies are concerned with identity and space, as these forms are disrupted (or otherwise challenged) by technology (Alexander & Banks, 2004). Within their respective field, game scholars have made similar charges regarding games and text, in that the configurative practice of *play* disrupts classical interpretive engagement (Moulthrop, 2004). In the same way that digital spaces "queer" writing, game spaces destabilize established notions of drama (Jenkins, 2004). Digital writing and games are rapidly converging in their dominance of society's textual/technological engagements. As Moulthrop explains, the *way* we interact with information systems is evolving from interpretive to configurative. The quantity of information available to us and the ever-changing and expanding tools used to access it both necessitate "participation" with information rather than "consumption" of it (2004). In other words, engaging with information today is more akin to playing games than it is to reading books. Extending back to *Queer Theory*, this participation with information systems also echos a move to consider identity as an active performative process rather than passive or static essence. Ultimately, both games and digital *queer-ing* signal "a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous,

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information system – from all work to all play, a deadly game" (Haraway, 1991, p. 161).

The elephant in the (internet) jungle: Reddit as an advantageous technology for the study of how rhetoric acts.

Perhaps no better example exists of such a polymorphous information system than Reddit.com, and by extension of this, r/gaymers – the cyberspace which serves as the data pool for this research. Online news site, forum, social networking site, user-driven content gallery, meme-hub, circlejerk: Reddit has been described by various sources as all of these things, and, to a certain degree they all fit. The point however is that while none of these descriptions are unilaterally accurate, they all suggest activities which occur on the website. These terms are our "blind sages" who, after stumbling around the jungle, all encounter the elephant and can only describe with limited perception what their hands feel. Technology and its subsequent revolutions in our writing, thinking, and culture is certainly our generation's "elephant in the jungle," because its effects are so wide-reaching and ubiquitous as to be impossible to fully grasp or anticipate. Change, indeed, is the only constant we can prepare for. As a "new-media," Reddit.com exemplifies this shift that technology - especially digital technology - so frequently forces us to deal with. Not surprisingly, the most appropriate response to the question of Reddit's definition is a common utterance of my cyber-generation: "meh, whatever." Although what Reddit *is* matters little, what Reddit and its users *do* is of central focus to this study. Before detailing that, some

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contextual description will be of use (fig. 1).
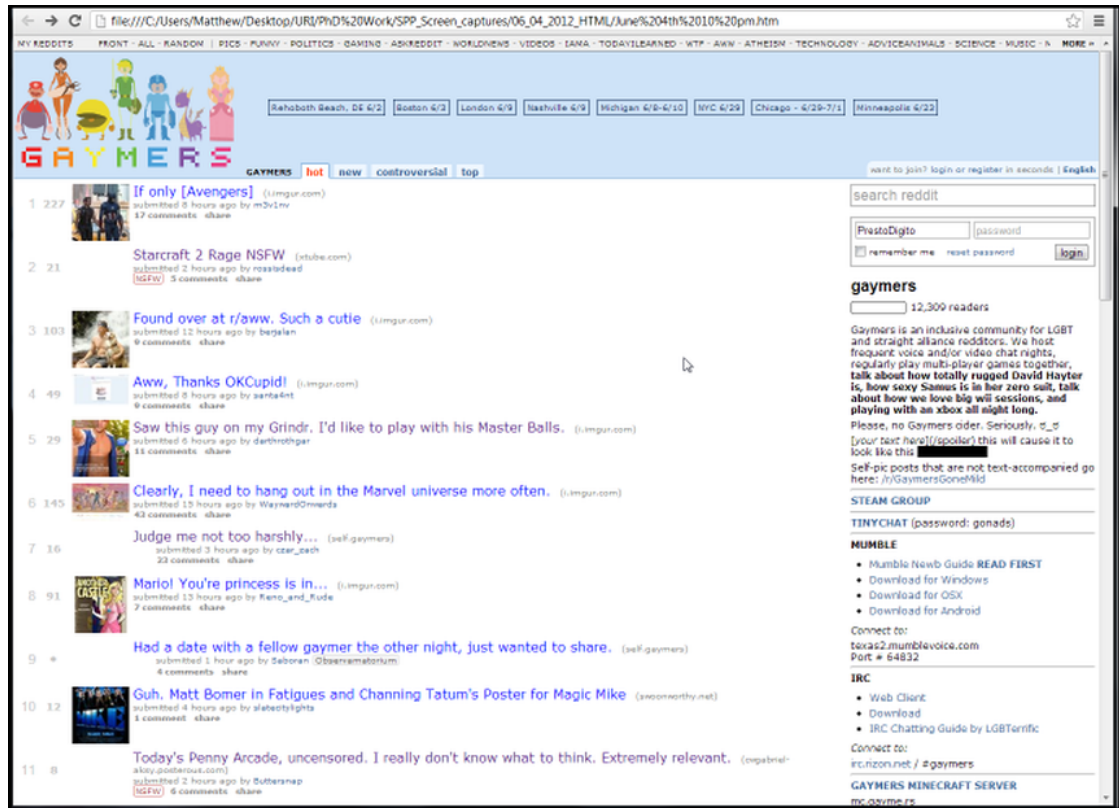
Figure 1: The Front Page

Generally, visitors to the page will see a central list of topics (I refer to these as

"threads"), each of which containing a text headline. These threads descend in

numbers from 1 to 25 on the first page, with successive pages following (each

containing 25 headlines; numbers 26 to 50 on the second page, and so on). Each

headline is a hyperlink one can click which either brings you to another site or to a

discussion page housed on r/gaymers itself. These headlines are most usually

accompanied by a small thumbnail image to the left, usually coinciding with whatever

image is associated with the headline. Those with none are provided generic images of

the website's alien mascot. Other information, such as the uploader's Reddit handle, time of submission, number of comments, etc. are also present (see fig. 1).

Additionally, every headline contains a number (to the immediate left of its thumbnail) and two arrows, pointing up and down.[3] These arrows are interactive. Registered users of the site can up- or down-vote the headline and its respective content to voice positive or negative reception. The number represents the net total number of positive votes, a score in other words, earned by the thread and its content. A more popular thread (well received by the community) will receive a higher score than an unpopular one. These votes also serve an additional purpose - position on the site. Higher rated threads move up the numeric hierarchy towards the #1 position, located at the top of the page - the website's most visible real-estate. Higher visibility leads to a greater degree of exposure and reproduction, so along with gauging reception, the votes also promote ideas which are popular within Reddit's respective communities by privileging their visibility. These resonant ideas, depicted and transformed via numerous repetition in varying topics, media, and purposes, are routinized by the communities and and eventually institutionalize themselves as the sites' culture (Giddens, 1979).

Participants on Reddit organize themselves into sub-communities by subscribing to specialized subpages which cater to special interest topics. These pages, called "subreddits," cover a staggering variety of topics which range from massively populated communities like r/politics, r/pics, or r/funny, (millions of subscribers) to

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[3]. Note in fig 1 that the up- and down- arrows do not appear in the screen capture, but are located above and below the second number on the left.)

extremely esoteric ones, like r/mylittlealcoholic (literally for alcoholic *My Little Pony*
fans, in case you're wondering). Additionally, because any registered user can start a
new subreddit topic, new subreddits are constantly emerging. All it takes for a
participant to start a new subreddit is to find an un- or even under-used subreddit
domain name (signified in the URL after "r/"), post threads to the subreddit and start
voting on them. Other users will eventually find the fledgling subreddit through the
Reddit's web of hyperlinks, and ideally a community of participants emerges.
Attentive readers may notice my distinction here between "user" and "participant."
"User" refers to anyone on the site, reading or writing, even "lurkers." "Participants"
refers to those people who actually have an account, submit either topic or discussion
content for voting, up- or down- vote other submissions, and take a more active role in
the website. I make the distinction because users do not take a rhetorical role in the
routinized activities of the subreddit. In order to do so, one must first create an account.
After that, even the simplest activities, such as up- or down-voting a topic, will
rhetorically impact the content of the site.

As another consequence of Reddit's thread rating system, up- and down-votes
are translated into a type of point-score, dubbed "karma," onto the user's account.
"Karma" is counted for both uploaded threads ("link karma") and responses to other
threads ("response karma"). A user who posts an original thread on the website which
receives a great deal of up-votes will find his "link-karma" score to accumulate, for
instance. Although karma doesn't translate into any tangible rewards for redditors, it is
frequently used to assess the credibility or quality of contributions attributed to a

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certain account. Although this research doesn't focus on Reddit in general, instead

focusing on one specific subreddit – r/gaymers, the agencies and methods of rhetorical

participation are the same on all subreddits. That is, the *content* of r/gaymers differs

from what one would find on Reddit's front page, but not its rhetorical practice.

Submitting content, up- or down-voting, commenting, responding, these things are

(for the most part) uniform ways of contributing rhetorically to any subforum hosted

on the website. Therefore, although the content of r/gaymers serves as the data for this

study, I refer to it by extension with this general discussion of Reddit's activities here.

Hopefully, this description will serve to illustrate r/gaymers' basic form and

functions. As previously stated, the purpose of this is not to establish, or even suggest,

what Reddit or its subforums are. A formal academic definition serves here only as a

distraction. Framing this discussion thus would accomplish little more than to provide

only a partial portrait of the subject in question and suggest potentially myopic

analytical commonplaces ("this is a *collaborative digital text*, something people *read*

and write, therefore I will use *textual exegesis*"). Even casual linguistic descriptions,

referring to it as "a technology," or "a process" for example, are problematic in that

they limit our ability to see it completely. Take for example that the website's common

parlance is to refer to one another as reddit-*ors* and the act of participating as reddit-

ing. Redditors commonly share a popular belief which equivocates the activities of

redditing with wasting time - of *doing*. There is a sense self-deprecating humor among

participants, who frequently describe the whole process as do-nothing-ness, a view

which tends to de-emphasize what is produced by the site. This is not to suggest that

these notions are not continuously and fluidly altered by its users, but there is a strong tendency here to see Reddit in multiple ways. This research attempts to follow suit. By temporarily adopting this sense of r/gaymers-as-doing, or r/gaymers-as-verb, it's easier to shift focus away from what the content on the website *means* to look more closely at *how* contributors participate and what this process enables or prevents, or to see what possibilities it accomplishes or denies. Alternatively, framing r/gaymers as a locale encourages us to see it as a site where cultural and intellectual economies are negotiated via rhetorical strategies - a public forum, in the classical sense, where civic power is exercised. To see how closely this digital environment mirrors these in-real-life (IRL) public spaces, one can observe r/politics, where an overabundance of liberal participants virtually shouts-out (through down-voting) dissenting conservative opinions into obscurity.

The best way to deal with this shifty ontology is by framing the research question not to look at the subject itself, but to look at *how rhetorics act through it*. Rhetorics act through processes of doing; they also act through people(s), texts, and locales. As mentioned above, r/gaymers's is a "new-media" which could be conceptualized as any of these things. But regardless of how it is conceptualized, several crucial perspectives need to taken into account. Broadly, this study is about gays, games, and internetworked writing (Porter, 1998) and how the three interact. Therefore this study uses three theoretical frameworks to help guide analysis and generate insight as to how LGBT participants, via this "new-media," engage with the

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larger heterosexist *game-sphere*[4]. These three frameworks are the following:

- r/gaymers as *network*.

- r/gaymers as *queertext*.

- r/gaymers as *game*.

These frameworks were chosen for several reasons. First, because they specifically address many of the characteristics r/gaymers possesses (and, by extension, Reddit as well); secondly because they acknowledge the previously mentioned perspectives (gays, games, and internetworked writing) necessary for this study; and finally, because they are each rooted in rhetorics of action. Ultimately, if this analysis can help look outward as to how LGBT participants engage with the *game-sphere,* then to not consider any one of these frameworks would seem incomplete. Lacking the framework of *queertext* would ignore r/gaymer's position contra the dominant heterosexist video-game culture as well as downplay the inherent queerness of cyberspace in general. Ignoring the game-framework would sever the exigent connection and increasing hybridization between games and digital writing. It would also prevent the study from generating insight regarding gaymers in the context of video games as *players*, rather than simply web-authors on digital text, even though many identical actions occur within both media. Ignoring the "reddit-as-network" framework fails to account for the larger, more general, transformative activities undertaken by the subreddit in question.

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[4]Again, I use the phrase *game-sphere* to include those media which constitute the "game-complex," the games themselves, and their respective users and producers.

r/gaymers as network or information ecology

In *Network: Theorizing knowledge work in telecommunications*, Clay Spinuzzi refered to networks as "material assemblages" which enact transformations within their purview (2008, p. 46). Producing physical resources, providing customer and self-sustaining services, storing and disseminating information, all of these are enacted by networks in one way or another. Spinuzzi synthesized *actor-network theory* and *activity theory* to establish 4 defining characteristics of networks. He attempts to use these two social theories in dialogue, selecting points of contact between the two and reconciling some of their rougher edges in order to establish comprehensive characteristics of networks. As he noted:

> *Activity theory and actor-network theory have traditionally worked in separate areas. Activity theory is primary a theory of distributed cognition and focus on issues of labor, learning, and concept formation; it's used in fields such as educational, cognitive, and cultural psychology, although it's also making inroads in human-computer interaction, computer-supported cooperative work, communication and anthropology. In contrast, actor-network theory is primarily an ontology - an account of existence - and focuses on issues of power in science and politics: rhetoric, production of facts, agreements, and knowledge. It's used in science and technology studies, philosophy, and sociology.* (p. 62)

"Activity theory is concerned with how people work; actor network theory is

concerned with how power works" (p. 42). By analyzing networks using a conversation between these theories, he was able to conceptualize networks to bridge the distinction between a comprehensive "materialist theory of knowledge" (a key feature of activity theory), and "a way to define technologies relationally and non-essentially" (a strength of actor-theory network). Networks, in other words, are defined in a way to see them both dialectically and rhetorically in order to conceptualize them by four constituent characteristics. These characteristics, which I'll detail further below are:

- heterogenous

- multiply-linked

- transformative

- black- boxed

Before I detail these traits, however, let me distinguish between Reddit-the-website, and the company which owns and runs it. Both are networks, yet the later (a subsidiary company of Advance Publications) conforms a bit more strictly to Spinuzzi's examples (his work described an actual telecommunications company within a physical space). In contrast, Reddit-the-website is a virtual network, whose physical locality is spread throughout millions of computers world wide. It is this network which provides the data pool for this study.

Networks are heteregeneous.

As Spinuzzi described, the heterogeneity of networks refers to their

characteristic of being composed of many types of actants: individuals, materials, spaces, objects, and information, many of which possessing high variances. Humans and non-humans; physical and electrical materials; information and objects – all are considered part of the assemblage. Additionally, heterogeneous assemblages are not composed of any primary element. This is done purposefully to de-emphasize prioritizing the actions or transformations of any one part of the system in order to consider equivalent active/transformative possibilities for all parts of a network's various assemblages. Spinuzzi added activity theory's perspective, that these assemblages constitute transformative processes which evolve and proliferate over time. Ecologically speaking, heterogeneity equates to what Nardi and O'Day (1999) referred to as a "diversity of species." The term "species" is preferred in order to eschew any over-emphasis of one particular participant within the ecology. "Communities," as a contrasting example, privilege the actions and transformations of human participants, emphasizing an actor- or human-centrist perspective which does not adequately consider the transformations undergone by information, technologies, or spaces. r/gaymers, for example, consists of both users and participants, the subreddit's moderators, the website content housed on hyperlinked sites, content housed on the subreddits themselves, servers, electricity, computers or other office technology housed within the millions of homes of users/participants, monitors, smartphones, chairs, labs, etc. All these things contribute to this network; all act, and are, in their subsequent ways, transformed.

Networks are multiply-linked and black-boxed

Another characteristic of Spinuzzi's networks, linkages within them connect many, if not all, of their constitutive components. All parts have access to all other parts, or at least can be rewired or rerouted to bypass disruptions in communication. Some networks are rhizomatic in that they allow multiple contacts between all its heterogeneous parts; some are nearly-rhizomatic in that they have few centers, but these are often easily circumvented. Just as heterogeneity de-emphasizes perspectives focusing on a singular subject's actions and transformations, a network's multiple linkages de-emphasize any center. Perhaps no better example exists of the rhizome than the internet, where it's very structure exists through the hyperlink; getting anywhere takes the same amount of time as getting anywhere else. As Spinuzzi describes, networks exist in larger or smaller nodes which overlap and interrelate to broader networks. One's local internet provider is itself a smaller network operating within the larger context of a global corporation. r/gaymers is one such "smaller" network (as such a word can apply to a non-local information node - a website) operating in the larger context of the World Wide Web. Indeed, one of Reddit's primary intended functions is to *link*, considering that the vast majority of content on the site hyperlinks to popular image sharing websites (Imgur), social interactive sites (Facebook), or other web domains. On r/gaymers, participants can instantly link to thread content, to thread discussion, to other subreddits, to user account information, to private messages, to voice interactive software; these linkages also lead to other

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websites and occasionally even establish IRL meet-ups for physical interaction, LAN

parties, etc. Many of these processes on r/gaymers become large enough that they

become "black-boxed." Their activities become "concentrated... within a functional

unit... [hiding] its complexity from other units" (Spinuzzi, p. 49). For example, certain

IRL meet-ups ("Sydney gaymers" as one example) have received enough traffic and

participation that they have created a sub-reddit dedicated solely to the purpose of

organizing events.

Networks are transformative

Spinuzzi uses Latour's concept of "standing sets of transformations" to

represent the changes networks allow (p. 48). For his example using a

telecommunications company, he illustrates how a complaint is transformed into a

note, then typed into a database, then changed to phone calls, and eventually manifests

as a physical labor addressing the problem. In this sense actants within the system are

"rearticulated" into various forms through the networks activity. r/gaymers, equally

stands as sets of transformations that articulate and re-articulate aspects of game-,

digital-, or queer-culture, whether personal or industrial. The example of queer

readings of videogame characters illustrates this. An artist creates a homoerotic

representation of Nintendo's Link, say, on a paper sketch pad. That illustration is

scanned or uploaded, becoming a .jpeg file, which then transforms into a thumbnail

and a Reddit headline (a hyperlink), then into an imgur-hosted full-screen text, and

finally manifesting as physical reaction or activity undergone by users. Not only are

"material assemblages" such as files, hyperlinks, or bodies (see *queertext*) transformed,

but also ideas and information. Game characters (their sexuality or other representations), the aesthetic of the website, the purpose of the website, personal feelings, all represent a small fraction of the *im*material assemblages which are also transformed.

"Networks" will remain a useful framework for this discussion, as the term offers flexible readings of what r/gaymers is or does. Not only does it share properties of "material assemblages" - *networks* in the sense defined above, but we can also read it as *net-work* – the aggregate of assemblages, transformations, and productions of the community's collective effort. Additionally, we may read it as *Net-work*, representing what "work" this internet activity is accomplishing - the reciprocal cause-effect action of reddit-ing, Reddit-as-verb.

r/gaymers as Queertext

The above example (homoerotic representations of video game characters) illustrates not only the net-work of r/gaymers, but also its linkage between information systems and physical reality. r/gaymers functions as what Jacqueline Rhodes (2004) termed "queertext." q*ueertext*, as Rhodes described it in "Homo origio: The queertext manifesto," is utterance which resists the dominance of "The Word" (traditional text which through its discipline enforces heterocentrist, capitalist, racist ills) by emphasizing the "material erotic realities of our bodies" (p. 389). Tracing its roots to cyborg-epistemology (Harraway, 1991), which challenges the distinctions between human-animal, between organism-machine, and between physicality and immateriality,

queertext concludes that all digital experiences are involved with the body – either through fingers which type, eyes which read, to backs becoming exhausted from sitting too long at a computer screen. The hyperlink, thus becomes the ultimate queer avatar, for in its possibility it represents that cyborg dispersion, the moment when we cease to be discreet from cyberspace. "Queering" the notions of text is both the method and outcome, accomplished through rejection of the essentialized and binary significations imposed by heteronormative compulsion (what Rhodes refers to as "dominance of the Word"). Disrupting the heteronormative binary is of central importance to Rhodes, and, by extension, to the general themes of Queer Theory. Binary distinctions of authorship, coherence, the very distinction between digitality and identity are all challenged. The homoerotic game character emblematizes this challenge. As the material assemblage transforms an erotic picture from a .jpeg to the physical response of "the desiring body" (Rhodes, p. 389), it demonstrates the collapse of the separation between user and text, they are both simply stages of a transformation.

Reddit-ing allows another level of queer transformation. The act of up- or down-voting entries or responses transforms the content and organization of the webpage. Although we might call it *interactive,* we might more precisely call it *configurative*. I borrow this term from Markku Eskelinen (2004) who, although writing about games, defines a configurative practice as a "combination of ends, means, rules, and manipulative action" (p. 38). r/gaymers contains all of these traits; its interpretive content will depend on the configurative action of its participants, who

navigate its rules and available means to participate physically and achieve goals. I will discuss r/gaymers' similarity to games below, but as queertext, it represents a middle ground between text and game where *action* takes center role, and the physical body is central to this process.

Shifting our focus to actions *queers* conceptualizations of text as they avoid the acknowledged problematic notion of queer identity. As Barrios noted (2004), re-framing queer digital writing as an *action-horizon* allows us to see writers/participants/players as political actors rather than as passive observers or critics of society. Avoiding questions of sexual-identity, Barrios instead focused on how to work through its effects. Conceptualizing gaymers as political actants establishes their net-work (the aggregate of the community's contributions) as always and already in response to a larger heteronormative industry and culture, rhetorical in their performative actions. Similar to this move, Alexander & Banks (2004) encouraged us to re-frame sexuality as *ethos* rather than *identity* (p. 285). This shift grounds the discussion more fully in sexuality's rhetorical situation – its space, audience, media, etc. and the ways it is purposefully constructed. Doing so thus avoids assumptions of fixed/essentialized sexual-identity and emphasizes the conscious and active rhetorics of videogame / digital presence.

Perhaps no better example of *queertext* exists than the video game – a text which directly incorporates the material realities of users. Video games are what Espen Aarseth termed *cybertext* (1999), distinguished from normal texts, because they require *ergodic* activity – non-trivial physical and mental activity in order to traverse

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or interpret the meaning. My interpretation of a novel will not be determined by the speed at which I turn the pages or the way I hold the physical codex. Yet, in a video game, the speed of pushing buttons, the way my thumb moves the analog control, indeed all the physical manipulations of the game's interface determine completely what becomes of the narrative. Cyber*text* for cyborg(*queers*)s.

r/gaymers as games

As mentioned above, r/gaymers as *queertext* bridges several gaps between games and texts. A configurative text which manipulates interpretive elements, Reddit wouldn't qualify as a true game by most formal definitions, but it contains many elements which promote game-like engagement. Juul's model of game definition illustrates Reddit's position as a "borderline" case (see Fig. 2).

NOT GAMES

BORDERLINE CASES

Free-form play
- Variable rules

Traffic, Noble war
- Non-negotiable consequences

Skill-based gambling
- Pre-negotiated consequences

Chance-based gambling
- Pre-negotiated consequences
- No player effort

GAMES

Fixed rules

Negotiable consequences

Variable outcome

Player attachment to outcome

Valorization of outcome

Player effort

Hypertext fiction
- Fixed outcome
- No attachment

Ring-a-ring o' roses
- Fixed outcome
- No attachment

Pen and paper role-playing
- Flexible rules

Open-ended simulations
- No valorization of outcome

Storytelling
- Fixed outcome
- No player effort
- No attachment

Games of pure chance
- No player effort

Conway's game of life; watching a fireplace
- No valorization of outcome
- No player effort
- No attachment

Figure 2: Juul's Formal Game Definition

Juul's diagram offers a formal definition of what ontologically constitutes a game versus various other forms of story-telling or interaction. According to his "classic game model:"

A game is a rule-based formal system with variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome,

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and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable. (as cited in

Engenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2013, p. 40)

As Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith and Tosca pointed out (2013), Juul's formal

definition considers the player's (participant's) role in the activity as voluntary, with

the end resul*ts* being negotiable (p. 20). An activity does not count as a game unless

the player's approach to the game is not coerced, with consequences stipulated by that

same person. Furthermore, the game must have a set of fixed rules which quantify the

rewards yielded by an investment of player effort.

r/gaymers qualifies under several of Juul's criteria. Of the six, it qualifies for

two solidly, three conditionally, and one it fails to meet entirely. Its aspects resonating

most solidly with games – *variable outcome*, and *player attachment* – appear from

both the *karma* score, and the whimsical nature of the site. A participant's *karma* score

(the combined number of likes earned for topics and replies) is a variable outcome,

meaning that certain posts or replies will score higher than others, as will certain

redditors. Occasionally viewed as a badge of social credibility, investment in the

website, skill at expressing the likes of the community, or other cultural capital, it

functions identically to a game score – measuring and contrasting individuals success

on the webpage. Its second solid resonance results from it offering voluntary *player*

attachment to outcome: As I mentioned previously in the chapter, participants often

equate reddit*ing* with wasting time, doing nothing, procrastinating, or otherwise

having fun. It has been frequently cited as being addictive for its near constant influx

of new, fun, or otherwise interesting content to its readers.

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Its borderline qualifications for Juul's criteria result from r/gaymers' unique position as a rhetorical site. The following criteria – *fixed rules*, *player effort*, and *negotiable consequences* mimic constituent game elements. These aspects, however, result not from a set of established game-mechanics, but from rhetorical proficiency within the r/gaymers as a rhetorical community. Thus they do not exactly mirror games. For example, the fixed rules of, say, *Chess*, are static for every player, and it is up to the player's investment (effort) to master and employ those rules for victory (negotiating the consequences of game decisions). Contrast with r/gaymers (and by extension, Reddit in general), where there are no fixed rules whereby one achieves karma. However, Reddit communities will often adopt practices which are reproduced over time, fortified, and established as implicit rules to be followed. Reddit has "flexible" rules; long term "karmic" success depends on learning the peculiarities and proclivities of certain Reddit communities and giving them what they want. Thus, *player-effort* is more of a matter to which Michelle Ballif (1998) applied the term *metis* – a clever dexterity over unstable, or otherwise semi-determinate conditions. These conditions are "pre-existant," as Juul would categorize. An r/gaymers participant will never be able to guarantee any degree of success for any decision. The amount of Karma will somewhat depend on the *metis* of the individual, and sometimes on luck or the community's whim. This practices closely resembles skill-based gambling (featured as one of Juul's borderline games).

r/gaymers fails to achieve Juul's outcome of *valorization of outcome* entirely. Put simply, there is no way to "win" at Reddit. Karma serves no ultimate purpose,

aside from what I've already described; it is considered by many to represent a degree of success, but such a stance is entirely subjective.

r/gaymers' proximity to games is compelling. By expressing the rhetorical purpose of many of its participants as *play*, it distances itself from perceptions regarding net- or Net- work. Not quite work, its optional participant engagement (Juul's *player-attachment*) prevents it from being a truly concerted effort to produce transformative change. Yet work is done, regardless of how no-consequence it may seem, for culture and actants are still transformed.

These three theoretical frameworks: r/gaymers as networks, as *queertext,* and as games, are intended to provide a multi-perspectival approach in observing the rhetorics of this cyberspace. They are not meant to be monolithic or even independent, but rather to be used as overlapping conceptualizations – generative concepts that incorporate perspectives essential in considering the dynamics of gays, games, and internetworked discourse. Primarily employed in data collection and interpretation, they will be revisited in the Methods chapter of this work in establishing the motives or rhetorical purposes of r/gaymers as rhetorical action; this is to isolate acts significant to the study. I will make use of them again as analytical lenses and finally as methods of social action in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively.

CHAPTER 2

A GENEALOGY OF SEXUALITIES IN JAPAN AND ITS INFLUENCE ON

THE GAME-SPHERE

To say that Japan has an influence on video games and game culture would be an understatement. Sony, Nintendo, Sega, Namco, Bandai, Tecmo/Koei - Japanese corporations all - are some of the most recognizable names in gaming. This is to say nothing of their characters or transmedia franchises (Mario Brothers, Pokemon, etc). In the current generation of video game consoles (the seventh) Japan produces two of the three available: the Playstation 3, and the Wii (with Microsoft producing the third, the Xbox 360), and has thus far completely dominated the hand-held console market. Not only are their brand names most widely recognizable, Japan also boasts the most recognizable developers. A recent poll conducted with video game developers asked them to name their "ultimate development hero"; the leader by a resounding margin was Miyamoto Shigeru (Nintendo's lead designer for Super Mario, Zelda, and other franchises) - no small feat, especially in an industry in which the products are considered to be commercial rather than artistic, and authorship is either downplayed or obscured (Paumgarten, 2010). If video games have a "Shakespeare," it's Miyamoto.

Japan rose to dominance of the industry in the 1980's after what is colloquially known as the "North American Video Game Crash of 1983." Prior to that time, Atari was the world's most prominent producer of video game titles and secured a place in about one in four American homes with their console, the Atari 2600 (Egenfeldt-

Nielson, Smith, & Tosca, 2013). However after several abysmal performances of heavily invested titles and competition with newly affordable and more versatile home PCs, console gaming virtually disappeared, and Atari would narrowly avoid bankruptcy. It never regained its former dominance. Instead, in 1986, aided by Japanese aesthetic traditions and led by designers like Miyamoto, Nintendo resurrected console gaming with the hugely successful N.E.S. (Nintendo Entertainment System, based off their well selling Japanese home Famicom model - short for "family computer"). Japan would then dominate the video game hardware industry for another 14 years without significant console competition until Microsoft announced the Xbox in 2000 (Egenfeldt-Nielson, Smith, & Tosca, 2013). This would allow the Japanese tremendous opportunities to increase their global presence as an electronic and video game giant. In some ways, today's gaming horizon looks similar to the early 80's (where tablet or touch-phone gaming are increasing competition with console based video games, rather than home PCs), and Japan's influence on video games is in some ways waning. This is due more to increased competition of new western technologies and a Japanese player base with increasingly esoteric tastes (Winterhalter, 2011). While the future may see Japan's global influence recede, their influence at this time remains long and ubiquitous.

As described in Chapter 1, r/gaymers evidences Japan's lasting dominance in video game culture. Their logo consists of several representations of popular video game characters both from Japanese and American producers. An amateur work by one of the sites participants, the logo abstracts the characters and organizes them

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according to their color palates to correspond to the colors of the Pride Flag and the word G-A-Y-M-E-R-S. From left to right, the seven characters are: Mario (Japanese), Chell (from the *Portal* franchise – American), Pac-man (Japanese), Link (Japanese), Mega Man ("Rockman," Japanese), Spiro the Dragon (American), and Princess Peach (Japanese); all characters are intermingled with a 5-2 split in favor of Japan. Although more observations in Chapter 4 will support this, hopefully this brief description illustrates how iconic Japanese characters are for gaming culture and for the r/gaymers subreddit in particular. As evidenced by these characters' prominence, Japanese titles constitute much of the larger video game canon, indicating a degree of Japanese hegemony within the global industry. Extrapolating on McAllister's conceptualization of video games as mass culture, mass media, psychophysiological and economic force, one can easily see how the Japanese have such tremendous rhetorical influence around the world, for along with hegemony comes the advantage of invisibility. Most imported video game titles in the U.S. are not considered Japanese, or even foreign. There are exceptions, of course; JRPGs[5] emerging as a recent genre, for example. Generally, however, this acts as the exception rather than the rule. *Super Mario Brothers is* not considered a Japanese video game title the way, say, sumo is considered a Japanese sport, or *Tale of the Genji* is considered a Japanese novel. For players, this lack of distinction can encourage one to forget that Japanese and Western games are products of their respective cultures, always and already informed by sometimes radically different ideologies. Even for Game Studies theorists, Japanese

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[5] "Japanese roleplaying games" often rely heavily on character and plot, therefore cultural, aesthetic, and narrative differences tend to be more pronounced.

video games are considered for the most part normative, and cultural influences on the design and development of content often goes unacknowledged. Japanese characters are in many ways *the* mainstream for the industry, yet the culture which has maintained their profiles goes under-acknowledged (if at all). This chapter is devoted to acknowledging that culture for both practical and theoretical reasons.

The most immediate practical necessity arises from the abundance of so many Japanese game representations in r/gaymers and their reception and interpretation by its participants (the subjects of this research). The primary issue in this regard is one of sexuality's *presence*. As explained in the first chapter, the presence of LGBT themes, characters, plots, options, etc. in video games is problematic for a number of reasons, mainly because it is considered to be either stereotyped or obscured (Consalvo, 2005; Leonard, 2005; Shaw, 2009). This is not without good reason. As Shaw (2009) noted, many Western game developers believe it is better to censor, and thereby entirely ignore LGBT issues, rather than to explicitly include it for players to encounter. One could call this type of symbolic annihilation the "video game closet" because it arises from forms of homophobic coercion – not only through the insistence that homosexual content must be hidden from mainstream audiences, but also through the insistence that homosexual content must be categorically *different* than other forms of male-male interaction. This form of coercion, in other words, is not simply economic ("players will not buy the game if there is gay content"), but epistemological. Sedgwick's (2001) theories illustrate this point fully. According to her in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, the difference between homosocial desire

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(non-sexual male-bonding) and homosexual desire (erotic same-sex attraction) is ambiguous – existing on a continuum between the two extremes – what she refers to as male/male desire. This continuum is ruptured in the presence of homophobic compulsion which imposes rigid boundaries between social and sexual activity. As Jeffrey Angles (2011) described it, "Once the continuum is fractured, homoerotic and homosocial relations appear profoundly different in character, and the introduction of sexual desire into a relationship compels people to consider the relationship in a different light" (p. 32). Angles, in his work *Writing the Love of Boys*, wrote specifically about traditions of Japanese art which contain strong and intended themes of male-male desire (I will get into further detail of Angles' work later). By using Sedgwick in this way, he demonstrates Sedgwick's notion that the very presence of homophobia forces us in the West to ontologically differentiate certain forms of male-male desire, rather than seeing them as occurring at various points of Sedgwick's continuum. We hypersexualize male-male sex by needing it to be explicitly present in order to acknowledge it, because we are compelled to categorize male-male sex as something entirely different than other forms of homosocial bonding. Thus, when Western scholars seek the inclusion of explicitly gay content in videogames, they do so from the compulsions/perspective of a homophobic culture, which looks at sex and friendship as distinctly different phenomena. Angles and other theorists cited in this chapter, however (Leupp, 1995, Score, n.d.), have pointed to traditions of Japanese expressions of male-male desire which do not. Indeed, Japanese art-forms boast a long history of intended homoerotic/homosexual content. Yet such content is not always

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interpreted thus, especially by Western audiences, whose perceptions and interpretations are shaped by our own history of power relations. This is why it is so important to discuss Japanese cultural traditions in light of any possible homosexual content and its interpretation/reception in r/gaymers. For Sedgwick, "It is one of the main projects of [her] study to explore the ways in which the shapes of sexuality, and what *counts* as sexuality, both depend on and affect historical power relations" (2001, p. 2435 her emphasis). Because Japan has developed from a history of power relations uniquely their own, those considerations will be key in determining what "counts" as sexuality in their media (video games). As Chapter 4 and 5 more fully explore, Japan's game franchises and icons command substantial cultural capital in r/gaymers, so much so that Japanese video game culture could arguably be considered the foundation upon which cultural performatives *relating to* video games are enacted within r/gaymers. Thus, analyzing how gaymers rhetorically engage with these mass media requires a complete consideration of the cultural roots of the media in question. In other words, because this study draws conclusions regarding how Western audiences perceive, interpret, and resituate the presence of sexuality in Japanese media, this chapter scaffolds those conclusions by more fully discussing what content is commonly "lost in translation." Better understanding of the data, in this specific case, requires a more robust context which I provide here – a context which more fully describes how Japanese video games have the potential to disrupt heteronormativity and these consequences for gaymers.

Theoretical necessity arises from the largely hitherto neglected role of Japanese

culture on video games. To ignore Japan's cultural influences on its media risks a deeply problematic "colorblind" analysis which, as Leonard argued, "limit[s] serious inquiry into their racial content and context" (2006, p. 83). He goes on to conclude, "How can one truly understand fantasy, violence, gender roles, plot, narrative, game playability, virtual reality... and the like without examining race, racism and/or racial stratification - simply put, one cannot" (p. 84). Although Leonard's primary thrust is to note disparities of racial representation in video game media (Leonard himself makes no distinction of Japanese titles), his point that race and culture play an important role in development and interpretation of video games must be acknowledged. "Race, gender, sexuality, and nationality are constructed and subsequently taught within virtual reality" he argues (p. 84); no game representation is free from the cultural context in which it was created. It is particularly important therefore to address the distinctions of Japanese culture when examining videogames as national artifacts, especially considering the videogame industry's high permeability, with its frequent imports and exports, and Japan's invisible influence as canonical.

This chapter seeks to avoid some of that color blindness by highlighting several cultural differences between Japan and the West, thereby providing a context for a more complete discussion of cultural video game representation and its subsequent reception in a "western" (read: English speaking) cyberspace. Although this study focuses on the game-complex as opposed to the games themselves in highlighting the tensions experienced by LGBT players, the games themselves play a significant role in reinforcing cultural attitudes of gaymers. Considering the core

demographic of the data pool – homosexual, cis-gendered males of a median and mean age between 18 and 35, it is fair to infer that a significant portion were introduced to video games and their cultural aesthetic before "coming out of the closet" and that these representations constitute a significant aspect of r/gaymers' rhetorical situation and context relating to video games. Ultimately, in light of Japan's traditions of sex, art, and personal expression, how should we view homosocial/homosexual content in Japanese videogames? That is the question this chapter seeks to explore, and which I conclude upon in its specific interpretation by r/gaymers in Chapter 5.

To explore this notion of sexuality's presence in Japanese video games, I present a brief genealogy of sexuality in Japan and some of the nuances of its cultural expression. Similar to the method by which Foucault's (2001) genealogies described current circumstances of sexuality through examining the historical forces which shaped them, this chapter provides brief historical account to better describe the contemporary subtleties of Japanese sexuality and their reception and interpretation by (mostly) western LGBT audiences. As a primary benefit to engaging in this type of exploration, I hope to avoid "orientalizing" the Japanese or their cultural products. As Said (2001) described, "European culture gained strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (p. 1993). And although my purpose is to highlight significant cultural differences between Japan and the West, I do so not to "other-ize" their perspectives, but in fact to *prioritize* the cultural influences which may have shaped them. Any account of Japanese video games must be in light of their own history, customs, and ideas, rather than my own or

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my readers' (read: westerners). Yet, even with taking all this into account, there is much that risks being lost in translation, and, not being Japanese myself, I am too keenly aware of this danger. Those nuances, important to this study, which might otherwise be overlooked or misinterpreted by Western audiences, might themselves be misinterpreted or overlooked by me. The best I can hope for is to include enough contextual information to paint a complete (enough) picture, and avoid interpretations or translations on my part as to what Japanese cultural peculiarities are or could mean. The contextual information I provide in this chapter comes from a mix of both Japanese and Western voices, in a way which I hope allows them to speak for themselves, thereby opening a dialogue with academic perspectives, specifically to eschew the other-ness of orientalism. As Said further argued, one must take into account the discourses and relations of power which have historically been established between the East and West (p. 1995). Considering that the West's heteronormative hegemony in Japan during the Meiji era (1862-1912) played a significant role in redefining their expressions of sexuality, this latter point becomes crucial. Finally, I acknowledge that the very act of selecting specific contextual information is itself a rhetorical act, informed preexistent by my own cultural perspective. Knowing that what I offer here can never be entirely accurate or complete, I do so under the assumption that it is simply more accurate or complete than not mentioning it at all.

What then are these historical, cultural, or ideological nuances which are so important? Due to this study's focus on intersections of homosexuality and video game culture, I've isolated three which I believe to have direct influence:

- Japan's aesthetic and cultural traditions of minimalism

- Japan's unique history of sexuality

- Their virtue of consensus and "saving face"

Although I distinguish three seeming different aspects of their aesthetics, history, and etiquette (beginning with the former), I do so more for organizational purposes rather than to argue that these things themselves are distinct. They are all interrelated, each interwoven throughout the rich tapestry of Japanese culture.

Minimalism and Representation in Otaku Culture

Since the 1980's, not only did videogames help secure Japan's industrial presence, they helped, along with Japanese comics and animation, to globally disseminate Japan's culture. Video games, *manga* and *anime* (Japanese comics and animation, respectively) all contribute to a cultural tradition in Japan known as "otaku." The word *otaku* was originally coined in the 1980's to refer pejoratively to manga and anime fanatics, who were assumed to sit around home all day obsessing about it ("otaku" derives from the Kanji word "taku," meaning "home") and was roughly analogous (initially) to "geek," or "nerd" in the West. It has since become more nuanced, becoming synonymous with Japanese styles of contemporary art, specifically the three mentioned above, which have all been strongly influenced by Japanese philosophical and aesthetic traditions. When Miyamoto became Nintendo's first art director, he was an art-college graduate *otaku* (Paumgarten, 2010), who, along with other manga inspired Japanese artists, laid the foundations for the marriage between

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video games and otaku culture. Otaku culture continues to be spread via video games, manga and anime and has taken root in the imaginations of millions worldwide. Otaku conventions (whichever of the three media they happen to celebrate) continue to grow annually, and its influence can be seen widely in Western pop art as well. Its influence has been so ubiquitous in fact, that it has been hailed by various Japanese corporate or government sources as "what will sustain the future of Japan's content industry" and "an aspect of soft power that could enhance the nation's international standing and competitiveness" (Hato, Katsushige, & Pianski, 2011, p. 1).

Why Japanese video game developers rose to prominence in the 80's has a lot to do with the aesthetics of otaku culture, and its inherited traditions from Japanese art. Japan enjoys a long tradition of minimalism, as evidenced by their haiku and rock garden formations, as well as in many of their other artistic forms. Emptiness and silence play a large role in Japanese art and music because these concepts are assumed to give use and value to that which is present. Their aesthetics have a long tradition of this conceptual "negative space" in art – that what is not stated is as important as what is. This traces its origins to religious traditions (Zen Buddhism and its Taoist influences), as well as Japan's circumstance as a resource-poor country. Economy, efficiency, and making the most out of what's available are important cultural beliefs (Boyle, 1993). In his work *The Way of Zen*, Alan Watts (1995) expressed these ideas, and how they were inherited from Zen traditions:

> *One of the most striking features of [Zen inspired painting] as a whole, is the relative emptiness of of the picture – an emptiness which appears, however, to*

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be part of the painting and not just unpainted background. By filling in just

one corner, the artist makes the whole area of the picture alive.... which

amounts almost to "painting by not painting" or what Zen sometimes calls

"playing the stringless lute." The secret lies in knowing how to balance form

with emptiness and, above all, in knowing when one has "said" enough...

Furthermore, the figure so integrally related to its empty space gives the

feeling of the "marvelous Void" from which the event suddenly appears. (p.

179)

The concept of "painting without painting" is easily apparent in otaku art. As an example, manga for the most part uses black and white panels with relatively little detail. Mastery of line quality as well as dynamic composition and character action are emphasized. As the figure below shows, the dimensions a typical manga eye are not bounded with lines, but with space between, indicating lines. The dimensions are clear, but they are invisible.

Figure 3: The Anime Eye

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For video games, this translates into an ability to evoke powerful sentiments when faced with limiting resources such as processing speeds or graphical complexity. As Tane Kiyoshi (2011) stated:

The powerful artistic expression of [Japan's ukiyo-e] prints, mass-produced with inexpensive wood block techniques, astounded people around the world.... A century later, video games provided similar stories of simple compositions with global impact. The theme song for the video game Dragon Quest, for instance, was composed by Sugiyama Kōichi in 1986 using only the triadic chords that the sound system in Nintendo's Family Computer (known as the "Famicon" in Japan and exported as the Nintendo Entertainment System) could produce, but ended up being a much-loved composition in subsequent years... Anime, too, showcases this aptitude for using limitations as a springboard to creativity. Instead of the "full animation" of the Disney style, with its smooth movement throughout the frame, Japanese anime attained a global presence by employing the polar opposite "limited animation" approach. Anime maximized its impression with minimal resources through finely-honed methods that innovatively used a limited set of images to portray its stories.

Japan's minimalistic aesthetic traditions translated into graphical, audio, and linguistic capabilities which allowed them to invoke complexity within the medium without

compromising the quality of game.

This minimalism would also influence content of Japanese aesthetic and narrative. Watt's reference to the "marvelous Void" points out many instances of Japanese art or narrative which on the surface appear to western audiences as "unfinished." For Japanese aesthetic, emptiness is the artistic aspect into which the usefulness or personal experience inserts itself. This provides audiences a much more involved interpretation, as the art is "completed" within its personal interaction. Chapter 5 will revisit these concepts of "painting by not painting" (or "saying without saying") and the "marvelous void," for they grant important contexts by which we understand the content of Japanese video games (specifically the "presence" of sexuality) and how they are interpreted by western audiences. They are concepts which have deep roots in all forms of Japanese expression – social, artistic, or otherwise – and remain a marked distinction between Japan and the West.

Along with Japanese aesthetic and artistic traditions, video games would inherit other cultural nuances from Japan, namely, a strong thematic homoeroticism which informs much of *otaku* culture. Within certain forms of *manga* and *anime,* homoeroticism or homosexuality stands as the *primary* theme of the work. Indeed, Angles referred to the homoerotic presence in *manga* as "one of [its] most important thematic elements" (p. 1). *Shonen-ai* (literally "boys' love") *manga,* a genre of comics which focuses on homoerotic/homosexual expression between (typically) school boys, rose to prominence in the 1970's. The term *shonen-ai* is often used interchangeably with the more colloquial *yaoi* – an acronym for "*Yama nashi, oichi nashi, imi nashi*"

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(no build-up/climax, no resolution/denouement, no meaning/point) and remains one of

the most popular genres of *manga* published. Although *yaoi* tends to be more sexually

explicit, for the purposes of this study, I will follow Zanghellini's lead and refer to

them as one genre *(shonen-ai or* "boys-love" *- BL)* (2009). The genre consists

generally of several features: passionate love between young beautiful boys (*bishonen*),

generally instigated by an older aggressive *seme* (attacker) on a younger passive *uke*

(receiver); florid and dramatic expressions of desire; and often angst-ridden tension

and conflicts of power relations or sexual aggression. Zanghelilini (2009) described

some of the most salient features of the genre: the characters are usually drawn lithe,

with large expressive eyes, and often androgynous, beautiful, and very young; sex is

typically engaged face-to-face; and the *seme* often "proclaim[s] his enduring devotion

by vowing to always protect the *uke"* (p. 170). Many of these features are targeted

towards adolescent females who identify with a "fictitious category which, embodying

the principle of pure play (fantasy), contests the socially determined definitions and

parameters of sexuality" (as cited in Angles, 1993). Female audiences who are

constrained by gender roles are thus allowed to romantically envision themselves

outside those roles, experiment with sexualities or sexual attitudes foreign to them,

and identify or fantasize about the characters present. Other genres of *manga* cater

more to gay males. *Barazoku* (literally: "tribe of roses") and *gachi-muchi BL*

("muscle-chubby" boys' love) will typically feature more masculine looking characters

and more gay-oriented depictions of sexual positions or activities, but they will very

typically draw upon central themes of *shonen-ai*: passionate desire between bonded

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seme and *uke;* transgenerational power relations, and florid juxtapositions of angst and desire.

As many scholars noted (Angles, Zanghellini, Leupp, et al.) these themes which have been so long institutionalized in *manga* trace their origins back over a thousand years in Japan's history. This I will do in the next section in which I examine Japan's unique history of sexuality (the second nuance necessary for this study). Any sexual genealogy of this type however, must be careful to avoid imposing overarching sexual narratives on historical periods. Angles made such a point in his work tracing the historical homoerotic influences on *shonen-ai* (2009). In doing so, he cited Sedgwick's work in *Epistemology of the Closet,* which claimed that it is inaccurate and inappropriate to view perspectival shifts of sexuality as total or unanimous between or even within historical periods. Instead, past influences often remain to conflict with and sometimes contradict sexual attitudes within any given time. He noted that Sedgwick "concentrates her attention on a handful of key texts. In so doing, she disassociates them from historical narratives" (p. 11). Angles brought up the concept of "queer spectrality," espoused by Carla Freccero in her work *Queer/Early/Modern*, to make a specific point about recasting the past in present perspectives. The concept of "haunting" is useful in several ways here. First, as pre-modern influences of sexuality remain to exert their influence on contemporary art and expression, one could say that they haunt the present. Second, queer spectrality *seeks to be haunted* by previous performances of sexuality. This allows them to be present in a form which remains unaffected by modern conceptualizations. Contemporary views therefore

coexist with visions of sexuality from the past to prevent them from being forced into

"straightjackets of [modern] meaning" (as cited in Angles, p. 161), so as to allow

different visions of past sexualities to *remain* different. This queer spectrality guides

the next section of this chapter. My purpose here is to trace the origins of

homosocial/homosexual desire in Japanese history, presenting it in its own context, so

that it can more fully "haunt" our understanding of video games and their reception

today.

A Brief Genealogy of Sexuality in Japan

     When researching historical traditions of sexuality in pre-modern Japan, one is

immediately struck by how prevalent male-male sex was. As Gary Leupp (1995)

stated in the opening of his work *Male Colors: The Construction of Homosexuality in*

Tokugawa Japan:

> *It is no secret to any careful student of Japanese society in the Tokugawa*
>
> *period (1603-1868) that during these two and a half centuries male*
>
> *homosexual behavior was extremely common, at least in towns and cities. Sex*
>
> *between males was not only widely tolerated among the articulate classes but*
>
> *positively celebrated in popular art and literature. Homosexual behavior was*
>
> *formally organized in such institutions as samurai mansions, Buddhist*
>
> *monasteries, and male brothels linked to the kabuki theater. It was, indeed, a*
>
> *salient feature of mainstream culture.* (p. 1)

Leupp used the term *nanshoku* to refer to this concept. Roughly translated, it means "male eros," and has been translated to refer to any number of male-male sexual activities or desires, both by the Japanese and by the West. It does not, however, equate to "homosexuality," instead only offering a crude analogue to how contemporary Western readers would conceive of that concept. Leupp's choice of *nanshoku* attempts to capture how the pre-modern Japanese constructed sexuality, and it is perhaps easiest to illustrate these differences with our own views by examining the West's popular construction of homosexuality from the modern era. As Foucault's (2001) genealogy argued, our modern conceptualization of sexuality traces its origins to 1800's psychoanalysis, which "transposed [homosexuality] from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny" (p. 1663). Steeped in traditions of patriarchy and Judeo-Christian homophobia, the psychoanalytic classifications of sexuality thus essentialized it to a type of psychological bedrock - a type of gender bending aberration or condition. Prior to this, "the homosexual as species" did not exist. There were same-gender sexual activities but these did not constitute identities, only crimes - sodomy. Although this term today refers directly to anal sex, it originally referred to many forms of non-reproductive sex including masturbation and fellatio. Once categorized thus by modern psychotherapy, with one's psychology taking precedence over one's actions, the homosexual "became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology" (Foucault, p. 1663). Contrasting the West, in Japan, not only did sexuality not

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constitute an essentialized identity, acts of "sodomy" were not considered aberrant (the term "sodomy" did not appear in their vocabulary). Throughout this time, bisexuality (as we refer to it) was the overwhelming norm, being considered typical for men to engage in sexual activity with both men and women alike. Much of their art and history attests to this. That is not to say that they did not follow their own sexual traditions or marginalize certain activities, just that they did so from certain traditions transformed by and inherited from their own philosophies for over a thousand years. Homosexual traditions, specifically, would be codified throughout different periods by monastic, military, and commercial circumstances. These transformations, as Leupp traced, would ultimately solidify around three distinct characteristics of *nanshoku*:

- It was specifically codified by transgenerational power negotiations between "younger" and "older" males

- It engendered an aesthetic perspective which saw beauty transcendent of gender

- It disassociated passivity from femininity.

I will trace the specifics of each of these below. Homosexual acts would eventually be repressed during the Meiji era, when Japan opened trade with Europe and became influenced by Judeo-Christian taboo. Undoubtedly though these traditions played a large role in shaping contemporary Japanese sexual expression, for although *acts* of male-male sex were suppressed during the Meiji era, the specific characteristics of *nanshoku* (mentioned above) remained influential.

Tracing the influence of *nanshoku* on Japanese sexuality begins in continental

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Asia. Ultimately, with so many of Japan's higher cultural practices being imported from China and Korea, *nanshoku* is believed to have been initially brought to Japan through expressions of male-male sex in Confucian philosophy, Taoism, and Buddhism (particularly the latter) and eventually became a common aspect of moral society. Although it is generally assumed that all human cultures have within them some homosexual expressions, evidence of the codification of transgenerational power negotiation of *nanshoku* in Japan can only be traced back approximately one thousand years (Leupp, p. 22). Although it is almost guaranteed that forms of male-male sex existed prior to this time, no evidence exists that it was an established facet of public or private life, or that it was an institutionalized factor in negotiations of power or economic resources. Evidence of publicly endorsed male-male sex in China, on the other hand, can be found in texts as early as 600 B.C.E, and in Korea as early as ~57 B.C.E (Leupp). In fact, the lack of any mention as to the prohibition of male-male sex in prior Japanese or Chinese historical texts attests to the (at best) acceptance or (at worst) ambivalence they had for the topic. "Sexual love [as] unconditional good" was the prevailing attitude (Leupp, p. 32). A chapter in the *Shiji* (Chinese: Historical Records) reads: "It is not women alone who can use their looks to attract the eye of the ruler; courtiers and eunuchs can play at that game as well. Many were the men of ancient times who gained favor this way" (as cited in Leupp, p. 14). Initially in Japan, these expressions of homosexual behavior were a common result of monastic life - a consequence of scarce female presence within the monasteries. And although celibacy was the ideal, homosexual dalliances were very much tolerated - sometimes more so

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than opposite sex transgressions, which were seen as a more severe violation of a monk's discipline. Women, according to medieval Buddhist teachings, were inherently corrupting. Leupp described this:

> *But if sexual contact with women was regarded as debasing, sex with boys, if not a positive good, was regarded (to use Kitamura's term) as a tolerable outlet for [monk's] feelings.' It came to be accepted that monasteries maintained boy-acolytes (*chigo*) who aside from performing domestic chores, commonly shared the beds of older monks. Mountain priests (*yamabushi*), practitioners of Shugendo sect... did not reside in monasteries, but they, too, acquired a reputation as boy-lovers. The popular saying 'Acolytes first, the mountain god second.' reflects the sense of priorities cynically attributed to the Buddhist clergy from at least the Muromachi period.* (p. 38)

This form of transgenerational pederasty, like its analogues in Greek and Roman society, would become a well established form of education for young men, who typically take the role of passive partner or insertee. The relationship was considered a form of erotic brotherhood (the passive partner referred to as *nyake* – the younger brother, and the older brother, the *nenja*). Those entering this relationship would usually swear ritual oaths to one another sign documents attesting to their love.

Inspired by heterosexual traditions at the time, men typically sought out feminine traits for their sexual advances. Participating in monastic *nanshoku* meant adopting those traits for *nyake*. Because many of these youths would act as surrogates

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for absent women, this process of pederasty would inspire a taste for androgyny.

Sexual ambiguity had been previously celebrated in many forms: in certain Buddhists

deities, stage actors, even warriors. But for the beautiful "youths" (*wakashu*) involved,

monastic *nanshoku* would result in a unique form of feminization. Traditionally

feminine traits such as beauty, elegance, and passivity became desirable for young

males as well as females, but as a consequence of Buddhist traditions being so far

removed from women, the entire process was associated with the gender-stratified

power relations. Because submitting sexually to a *nenja* was an act limited to the

realm of male dominated social influence wherein women were not allowed and thus

could not participate, this practice was seen as supporting patriarchy, rather than

threatening it. Thus *wakashu* were not considered womanly; they weren't educated in

any feminine traits or pursuits, nor did they speak as women (Leupp, p. 46). Thus it

was not considered debasing in any way, but as mutually beneficent and spiritually

pure by monks. This resulted in an expression of gender many found to be more

alluring than actual females, and fascination with "beautiful youths" would become a

widespread cultural norm. Many poets, playwrights, and social commentators (Leupp,

p. 40, 41, 43), would reproduce these ideas in stories about monks and would help

further establish this practice as a natural expression of interpersonal development.

 Nanshoku would progress through various transformations throughout pre-

modern Japan, particularly during the feudal periods (Kamakura period through the

Edo period: 1105-1863) which saw both its militarization, and the rise of its bourgeois

commercialization. During the early years of this feudalism, Japan's ruling caste of

noble families (*samurai*) became increasingly educated in Buddhist traditions (they would often train in Buddhism to prepare for death in service to their lord). Along with spiritual teachings of Buddhism, they would adopt and gradually co-evolve monastic *nanshoku*. This was at least in part due to the similarities in gender disparity in both military and monastic life, and partly due to the devaluation of women in a time of feudalism (Leupp, p. 48). The samurai expression of *nanshoku* emphasized an extreme duty to one's superiors. Perhaps the most significant tenet of the warrior culture, or way (*bushido*), was that loyalty to one's lord overrode all other obligations: family, spouse, or children. Lords and retainers would continue the pederastic practices of the monks but would add to this a militaristic fealty. It was considered fitting and noble to "devote one's life" to the service of one's superiors. The often romantic or erotic undertones of this were not suppressed. Nearly every significant military leader, warlord, or general during the *Sangoku* period (the "Warring States") was known to have sex with boys and dress them up in masculine yet elegant non-military clothing (Leupp, p. 53). Most had particular "beloved retainers" who shared their beds. As samurai were the peak of masculinity at the time, a retainer's passivity to his lord's advances was seen as the honorable and ennobling. This sometimes led to strife among subordinates over promotions or militaristic advancement, illustrating that throughout this time, *nanshoku* retained its hierarchical codification of age oriented power relations. And although "age" could also be taken to mean experience or rank, it almost always expressed itself between an aggressive, "older" inserter and a passive, "younger" insertee. Heterosexual marriages were still celebrated as well, but they

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served different purposes (lineage, family, romance, and eroticism). *Nanshoku* was not seen to interfere with them but rather complement them.

As the warring states period ended (approx 1600) and Japan settled into a bourgeois society, gradually the gender disparity between men and women would level off in major cities at least. This however did not diminish *nanshoku,* nor would it disrupt its aspect of hierarchical power structure. It had been a tradition for the political and cultural elite so long that commoners sought to emulate their practices and widespread bisexuality became normative. *Nanshoku's* center moved from the military to the kabuki theaters, where men often played women and worked as escorts. As these conditions continued, the Japanese would further refine their concepts of gender. The "way of young boys" (*wakashudo,* or abbreviated to *shudo*) would maintain its androgynous proclivities. Although beauty remained a trait to be emulated by both boys and women, distinctions between the sexes persisted, due to the stratification of social positions and responsibilities available to them. Again, although *wakashu* would frequently share physical traits or grooming practices with females, this had more to do with an aesthetic of elegance rather than femininity. At this point the term *bishonen* came into vogue – a contraction between *bi* (beautiful) and *shonin* (youth [boy] of middle or highschool age). The term came to be associated with an aesthetic which views ultimate beauty as transcending gender or sexual orientation (Pflugpfelder, 1999). The traits of beauty were not gender specific, but applied to both males and females alike. *Bishonen* would not shave their pate (an indication of coming of age), and would typically possess fair skin, high curved cheekbones, and would

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sometimes shave their eyebrows and blacken their teeth (common grooming for women at the time).

As Leupp further discussed, although *nanshoku* was certainly mainstream throughout this time, it is important to attribute the appropriate complexity to the concept. It was not universally celebrated. With such emphasis on Confucian propriety, some feared it was disruptive to the family unit. It was most commonly associated with fiery passion, and so was represented occasionally as something to "grow out of" as men's passions settled down and they were expected to focus on securing family and estate. Those who did not "outgrow it" however were not especially condemned. There was also a taboo against male fellatio, being considered a woman's expertise (Leupp, p. 191). Ultimately though, just like any temptation, it had its critics and objections, but was treated for the most part equally with other indulgences. As trade relations opened with the West, the first instances of institutionalized homophobia arose. As Leupp stated:

> *The changes [to* nanshoku*] are due in large part to the nature of Japan's incorporation into the world system since 1859... A consensus developed within the Japanese ruling elite that Japan must absorb Western learning in order to obtain the respect of Western nations and reverse the terms of the unequal treaties. Such "learning" included the hitherto unknown concept of "illegitimacy"; a new conviction that the phallic religious images were shameful and deserving of destruction; and homophobia... By the late nineteenth century Japanese elites had come to share the view that*

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homosexuality (now referred to by the term doseiai *or "same sex love") was*

"unnatural" and some called for its criminalization. (p. 203)

       The Jesuit and other Eruopean traders were quick to deplore Japanese customs

which their own sexual customs considered immodest. Nudity within bathhouses,

Shinto traditions which celebrated phallic iconography, the prevalence of erotic *ukiyo-*

e art, male prostitution associated with the Kabuki Theater, all came under sharp

criticism as uncivilized. The publication *Eastern World* (written in English) would

claim that acts of male-male sex were "bestial," "unnatural," and "condemned and

punished as crimes in all civilized countries" (Leupp, p. 203). Informed by Western

psychoanalysis, *Doseiai*, the term, reflected some of the perspectival shifts occurring

in the 1800s regarding sexuality and more closely resembles contemporary views of

same-sex love. The term distinguishes itself from previous concepts *(nanshoku,*

wakashudo), because it focuses on the "interiority of its practitioners in ways one did

not find in the Edo period" (Angles, 1999, p. 7). This was the first time that the love

between two women and the love between two men became equated, as the Japanese

began viewing all forms of same-sex eroticism as the same phenomenon (p. 7) It also

disassociated same-sex love with the concept of transgenerational power negotiations

between older and younger "brothers" which had up to this point been considered

normal. Ultimately, once homosexuality was categorized and the homosexual became

isolated, marginalized and fetishized, the discourse of sexuality would follow a similar

vein as it did in Europe of the 1800's and capture a public fascination (Angles, 1999).

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Professionals in psychology, social sciences, sexologists, and the public attempted to understand the motivations behind the behavior and the urge for deviance.

Although the Meiji restoration brought about this perspectival shift regarding Japanese sexual *practice*, evidence exists that the country had been aesthetically and emotionally transformed by the *concepts* institutionalized by *nanshoku*. Even as Western informed psychology internalized same-sex desire and viewed it as the root of reprehensible, uncivilized, or simply unspeakable acts, it did not erase echoes of its historical influence, nor, unsurprisingly did it erase homosexuals from Japan. In his work *Writing the Love of Boys*, Angles discussed these conflicts arising from the early 20th century in Japanese art and poetry by focusing on key "queer" authors who negotiated their own performances of sexuality within their art. For several reasons his work is particularly important for this study: he traces the influence of *nanshoku* in these artists' works; he analyzes how those influences (sometimes violently) clash with the artists' modern Meiji views of *doseai*; and he demonstrates how each of these artists would eventually become a major inspiration for contemporary *manga* artists. As I've discussed above, *manga, anime,* and video games are closely related to one another in Japan, and are extremely intra-permeable media. The authors analyzed by Angles - Murayama Kaita, Edogawa Ranpo, and Inugaki Taruho thus, bridged pre-modern traditions of *nanshoku* with contemporary Japanese performances of sexuality in art. That is not to say that their works draw a direct translation of pre-modern sexualities; rather, they are themselves filled with conflicts, just as Sedgwick argued. The very nature of these conflicts demonstrates how concepts of *nanshoku* were

revived and resituated in order to negotiate between their personal same-sex desires (or eroticism) and an increasingly homophobic culture. Sometimes filled with ambiguity, sometimes invoking the grotesque, each author would eventually seek vindication of same-sex desire within the bloody feudalism of pre-modern Japan (Angles), redeeming their desires by invoking their similarity to a history which saw them as neither perverse nor emasculated. These works were, at the time of their publications (approx 1918-1930), hugely popular and known for several key tropes: "schoolboy desire, acute aestheticism, and almost decadently strong expressions of personal passion" (Angles, 1993, p. 2). The similarities to traditions of *nanshoku* are striking: the youth whose education is mentored by an older brotherly figure; a focus on aspects of beauty (not gender); and a heightened form of devotion which overrides heterosexual compulsion. Terminology follows suit. The words *seme* and *uke* (attacker and defender respectively) trace their origins to martial arts practitioners. Japanese customs of combat training (*kumite*) position trainees in scenarios in which, with various degrees of rehearsal, a *seme* would attack an *uke*. Analogous in *nanshoku and shonen-ai,* sexual aggression would be the responsibility of the older brother, as passivity would be considered a virtue of beauty.

This study would thus be incomplete without a mention of Angles' work and these authors, as they demonstrate the conflicts between previous historical sexualities and contemporary performances within Japanese art. Not only does their work highlight threads of sexual performance dating back hundreds of years in Japan's history, but they provide insight as to the presence of sexuality in Japanese video

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games, through their relation to *manga*. Artists such as Ranpo, Kaita, and Taruho would be considered authorities on non-normative sexuality well past WWII, and the themes they explored would largely inspire women *manga* artists of the later 20th century. *Shonen-ai*, which mostly debuted in the 1970's, was established by a group of women authors, known as the "24-*nen-gumi*," (referring to the date on which many of them happened to be born) whose primary audience was, again, adolescent girls. Angles highlights Takemiya Keiko's *Kaze to ki no uta* (*The song of the wind and the trees*) as one of the "undisputed masterpieces of the genre" (p. 234). Keiko's story, about a homoerotic romance set in an all-male school in Arles France was, according to her own admission, influenced directly by Taruho's work, *Shonen-ai no bigaku.* Angles further highlighted a defining aspect of *shonen-ai manga*: the high prevalence of fan-based amateur art, termed *doujinshi.* He describes the "explosion" of amateur art, which continues to amass alongside advances in publishing technologies such as the internet:

> *One of the most important developments in these amateur* manga *was the development of a rich genre of parody that takes preexisting characters and plot lines, then reinterprets them in ways that diverge from the original work... refashioning and ultimately taking control of elements of culture and ideology handed to them from on high by mainstream authors, artists and publishers.* (p. 236)

We can include to that list *game developers*. The following is taken from a *doujinshi*

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entitled *Strange Brew,* by artist Usagi Shinobu (1997), (Figure 4).

(Figure 4: Cloud and Sephiroth *Doujinshi*)

In it, two of the most famous characters from the RPG genre of video games, Cloud

Strife and Sephiroth, are depicted in typical *shonen-ai* fashion. This was

acknowledged by game critics, as noted by Avery Score:

Square Enix's Final Fantasy series is a perfect example of the roles of seme

and uke being used to fuel character development and interactions. The

*seminal example of this would be Cloud and Sephiroth, from **Final Fantasy***

***VII**. The spiky-haired soldier Cloud is strangely drawn to the domineering*

Sephiroth. One cannot help but feel that Sephiroth is a seductive presence for

Cloud, even as he regularly belittles and emasculates our hero, who is the uke

to Sephiroth's seme. This emasculation takes a more literal manifestation when

Cloud is forced to wear a dress in order to sneak into the Honeybee Lounge, a

sort of high-class brothel, where Tifa is being forced into servitude as one of

the attendants. During his stay at the Honeybee, Cloud is hit on by a large man

wearing a pink Speedo. Cloud may have the convenient alibi of doing all this

for the sake of his buxom girlfriend, but the fact remains that he hot-tubbed

with eager, homosexual men in a game designed for young teens.

Avery theorizes that homoerotic content is often intended in Japanese games

but is often implied or underwritten so as to allow heterosexual audiences a "safe"

way to interpret the content. A similar argument was made by Consalvo (2003), who

stated that games typically provide love triangles between two males and a female, the

purpose of which to disguise homosocial desire by displacing in on a third female

presence (even when the second male presence is the player himself). There are other

possible interpretations, and none are necessarily correct. One may induce that

traditions of *nanshoku,* and *shonen-ai* have become influential enough in *otaku* culture

that homophobia is diminished within the media. This would encourage game developers to simply see Sedgwick's continuum of male homosocial desire as more continuous. Sex in this case between *seme* and *uke* would simply be an extreme form of their preexisting canonical relationship. This would imply that a type of "queer" form of (homo)sexuality is indeed written into the game, but not necessarily intended as or considered queer by Japanese authors or programmers. For them, it would simply be traditional.

Japan's Virtue of Consensus and "Saving Face"

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, minimalism of expression is an important aspect of Japanese etiquette. "Saying without saying" as I use Alan Watts' term, refers to a Japanese cultural preference of politeness, hospitality, and consensus. This is the third cultural nuance important for this chapter. As John Boyle (1993) wrote in his work *Modern Japan: The American Nexus*, the Japanese custom is to operate by a "collective opinion of the group [which is] critical to the functioning of Japanese organizations" (p. 24). This is a fundamental difference between them and Westerners (especially Americans) who value straightforwardness and individual opinions to be voiced and often contested. The Japanese do not value disagreement or conflict when making their opinions, so negotiations usually follow cautious, measured, and conciliatory procedures. If the American adage is "the squeaky wheel gets the grease," in Japan it's "the nail which stands up gets hammered down." Voices censor themselves. So much so that:

...it is necessary that each member of the group avoid not only open

confrontation but even unpleasantly jarring exchanges. "Telling it like it is" is

not a conversational skill that is much prized among Japanese. Rather,

Japanese admire the person who proceeds cautiously, sensing what others feel

and sparing them any embarrassment. This is the essence of the Japanese –

and Asian – virtue known as "saving face." (Boyle, 1993, p. 25)

To illustrate, an example: You are in Japan to give a lecture on videogames at a

Tokyo convention. As you disembark the plane and pick up your bags at the airport,

you run across a Japanese acquaintance of yours. After a brief exchange of

pleasantries and some getting reacquainted, you inform him that you are to be giving a

lecture and invite him to attend. He seems eager for your lecture and enthusiastically

agrees to attend. You part ways. Later at the convention, he does not show up. You

later learn that he simply stayed home, he really never had any intention of showing

up; he just told you that he would.

Most Americans would assume that this person was dishonest -that he misled

you by saying he was going to show up when, in fact, he had zero intention to do so.

Some would perhaps be hurt or offended by this (others may not feel hurt, but still

acknowledge that he was lying). Many Americans would prefer that he make up an

excuse, say, a previous engagement on the day of your lecture, which would

unfortunately have to excuse him from attending. The Japanese man, however, is more

concerned with not disgracing you by saying that something (anything) is more

important than your lecture, and so in public he will certainly agree to attend, as this is the proper way to honor your friendship. He does not intend on showing up, but saying "no" to you (for any reason) would be considered rude, and so he doesn't. He assumes that when he doesn't show up to your lecture his implicit message to you that he can or will not make it to your lecture will be received when you don't see him there. As Boyle states:

> *...Japanese excel at "indirection" in their communications. Indirection means avoiding a harsh "No!" This does not mean that conversational paralysis sets in when a disagreement surfaces. A whole host of indirect methods of saying "no" are available to the Japanese, and they come to the Japanese speaker naturally and easily ("I wonder," "somehow or other," "I'll think about it," or "I'll try," respectively. The last two phrases do not connote what they literally state: Both speaker and listener know that they really mean that some matter is to be dropped.* (p. 26)

It is therefore important to consider these three aspects of Japanese culture in tandem with observations regarding the reception of its media: Japan's aesthetic and cultural traditions of minimalism, Japan's unique history of sexuality, and their virtue of consensus and "saving face" are all essential factors in analyzing the representation of "what counts" as sexuality in their video games, and by extension r/gaymers' rhetorical situation. Considering first that Japanese video game characters are very much haunted by traditions of *nanshoku*; secondly, that these traditions are often

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invoked through an aesthetic which values emptiness as the functional impact of the work; and finally that congeniality is typically presented in a "silent" way, which resists offending potential audiences; it's not difficult to deduce that homosexual *doujinshi* is not only anticipated, but intended for Japanese video games. With the canon of video game representation rooted so thoroughly in Japan, much of this constitutes a substantial contextual paradigm for r/gaymers.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

To answer the research question: *what rhetorical work is performed by LGBT video game players within r/gaymers?* the primary site for this research's data collection is a subforum ("subreddit") of an online news site named Reddit.com. As part of the constellation of media surrounding video games, r/gaymers qualifies as part of Johnson's (2008) concept of the "extra-game agency and civic participation".

> *... before, during and after gameplay, gamer-authors participate in online*
>
> *communities* beyond *the fictional worlds of the games themselves. In these*
>
> *electronic spaces, gamer-authors can have a real effect and institute real*
>
> *change. The agency – the real effect that gamers can have within gaming*
>
> *environments – operates in an influential way on a larger public.* (p. 278)

Although the findings of this research are meant (at least in part) to generate insight as to how gaymers interact within *games* and *game industry*, this rhetorical analysis benefits more from studying the extra-game community interactions of gaymers, as opposed to an intra-game community immersed within the games themselves. Although there are several well known and established intra-game LGBT communities (The *World of Warcraft* server: *Proudmoore* is known to host several large queer communities, for example), this research focuses on extra-game rhetorical acts for several reasons. First, extra-game rhetorical acts can be more deliberately

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prepared by participants, whereas within games, rhetorical acts are more immediate or reactive – due to the game environment's rapid changes. Second, an extra-game environment's participants tend to be more stable, in contrast to intra-game spaces which often times introduce hundreds of unknown players, therefore extra-game rhetorical acts can often benefit from more time to accustom themselves to a perceived audience. Third, intra-game spaces are often technologically constrained – any such interactive game will only allow so many different types of media, modes, or genres of communication, as opposed to the rhizomatic flexibility of the extra-game internet at large. Finally, rhetorical acts within intra-game environments tents to be transitory, whereas extra-game writing is more lasting, and therefore easier to re-access for research purposes.

Data for the study consisted of collected internetworked forms of discourse featured within the subreddit reddit.com/r/gaymers. r/gaymers is a special interest site developed to address video game topics from an LGBT perspective. Combining both "gay" and "gamer," r/gaymers is described in their general mission statement as:

> … an inclusive community for LGBT and straight alliance redditors. We host frequent voice and/or video chat nights, regularly play multi-player games together, **talk about how totally rugged David Hayter is, how sexy Samus is in her zero suit, talk about how we love big wii sessions, and playing with an xbox all night long** (r/gaymers, their emphasis).

At the time of data-collection, no comprehensive census information is

available regarding the subreddit, but it should be noted that although r/gaymers was created with the intention of being inclusive to all expressions of sexuality, the population admits to be demographically gay-male predominant. This may be due to several possible reasons, which at this time this study can only induce: the prevalence of androcentrist orientations of video game culture and/or industry, the general popularity of video games as a male pastime, the fact that the subreddit is designated using a term adopted by cis-gendered homosexual males, or other possible reasons. Although the subreddit r/transgamers is registered and linked on r/gaymers, no specific subreddit exists for the other respective sexualities within the **L**[G]**B**[T]**IQQAPP** initialism (This has since changed since this time of writing – see conclusions). At this time of writing, r/gaymers boasts 22,728 of registered participants (which has doubled its population of 11,313 since the submission of this study's proposal in May of 2012) – as opposed to r/transgamers' 635 (1,692 as of September 2013), and is assumed to reasonably reflect current trends in queer video game demographics. These demographics and their possible influences however are noted later in this chapter, and fully considered in my conclusions.

This study responds to calls made by those few academic sources studying the intersection of sexuality and games to "turn [its] attention to [the LGBT community's] own commentary and reflection on gaming" (Alexander, McCoy, & Velez, 2007). In accordance to that principle, I propose that r/gaymers constitutes what Cresswell (2003) would consider a *naturalistic* environment representing the virtual lived experience of the population in question (p. 14). This setting, as an semi-anonymous

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public online forum (participants may voluntarily publicly disclose personal information), allowed me to maintain non-invasive observational participation and record the every-day discourse of a vulnerable population present without interfering or altering the data through interaction.

It is acknowledged that study involves human subjects. However, the primary method of data collection accesses publicly available online information, voluntarily given by participants. Due to the public nature of the data, participants do not have a reasonable expectation of privacy. This study, therefore, introduces only a minimal risk to subjects' privacy or confidentiality. For this reason, and in accordance with the University of Rhode Island Institutional Review Board's standards of conduct regarding human subjects research, this study qualifies under Category 4 of the IRB criteria for exempt research review. To further protect the privacy and confidentiality of subjects, pseudonyms are used for all data publication and names and faces have been whited-out in any and all screen captures. The study also excludes any self-identified minors.

Data for the study were collected over a two week period between June 4th and June 18th, 2012. Two events influenced the decision for the timing of the data-collection period. First, June is celebrated for being Gay Pride Month, with many pride celebrations and parades occurring throughout the United States and abroad. For this reason alone, June is a common month of queer expression and outreach. This month also coincides with 2012's Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) (held June 5th through 7th), an annual video game trade fare in which video game manufacturers

exhibit their upcoming titles, franchises, hardware and accessories. Targeted to both investors (primarily) and players (secondarily), E3 is one of the largest and most recognized conventions, and typically results in more than a few headlines for video game enthusiasts and industrial participants. The overlapping of these two events provided a unique opportunity for the abundance of conversations dealing specifically with video games or LGBT related topics.

Starting on June 4th, my data collection procedure consisted of directly copying the hypertext markup language (html) of the "front page" (the top 25 posts) of r/gaymers and saving it to my computer's hard drive. This allowed me not only to capture the visible layout of the front page, but preserved many of the original active hyperlinks embedded within the page. This would later afford me the opportunity to relink directly to the content hosted on these various other sites beyond r/gaymers. Along with the front page, I also downloaded all of the visual content on each thread, uploaded by various r/gaymers participants (many of which consisted of imgur.com hosted .gifs or .jpegs), and saved those to my computer's hard drive as well. Finally, as each thread on r/gaymers contains its own individual sub-page for "comments" or discussion. I copied the html of each of those pages. I limited the capturing of thread-discussion-pages (referred hereafter to comments-pages) to those which contained at least three comments, as fewer than three comments generally represented dead or otherwise ignored threads. I carried out this procedure once at 10:00 am and once again at 10:00 pm. All information was backed up on a 2 GB flash drive. The page data was labeled with the date and the time of collection (am or pm). The individual

comments-pages were labeled as per their thread titles on the web page. The images were labeled with an abbreviated version of the thread title. This information was sorted into electronic folders labeled by date of collection.

As noted above, data was collected twice a day at 10:00 am and pm, each day from June 4th to the 18th. As I proceeded, however, I noticed that as threads remained on the webpage, they would often degrade in their ranking past the first page (ranking lower than 25), yet the discussions occurring on their comments-page would often continue. It was during these threads' tenure as 2nd or 3rd page residents in which most of the rhetorically engaged conversations occurred. Therefore, starting June 6th of the data-collection period, I began copying the html of the front *three* pages (posts 1-75) and followed my procedure above. I observed that after a thread had degraded past the third page, it would receive minimal to no additional attention, or discussion would completely cease, and I did not copy or record that information.

Once the data had been recorded, the first three pages on r/gaymers for each day (threads 1-75 for the 10:00 am and 1-75 for the 10:00 pm collections) were re-sized and printed out in order to keep notational reference, for a total of six pages for each day (save for the June 4th and 5th, which only had the first 1-25 threads recorded). Using the print-outs for notational purposes, I registered and numbered each individual thread, starting with the top (#1) thread on r/gaymers on the date of June 4th and continued assigning numbers to each subsequent newly encountered thread in descending order. Between the 4th and 18th of June there were 543 original threads posted to the website. These print-outs were later held for general note keeping, while

I was able to access the actual html of the page saved to my computer for more detailed analysis.

As discussed in Chapter 1, I had chosen three theoretical frameworks rooted in rhetorics of action to guide data collection and analysis - *networks, queertext,* and *games*. This was done, not only because r/gaymers shared characteristics of each of these structures, but because, as generative frameworks for inquiry, they were each necessary to present a complete view of this digital phenomenon that involves gays, games, and their internetworked writing. The concept of *rhetorical action* (what do these frameworks employ rhetoric *to do*) was the best way to operationalize these frameworks (I discuss this decision further below). This was in order to both organize the massive amount of data collected (over 500 individual posts, with their subsequent comments-pages, attached multi-media, and links), sift through and select what may or may not have been important to this study, and to begin assessing their rhetorical consequences. Thus, I began by establishing the constituent rhetorical actions of each networks, queertext, and games, respectively, and used those concepts to guide both my selection of data significant to the study and as a starting point for further rhetorical analysis.

I anchored my observations of r/gaymers to the constituent rhetorical actions of networks, queertext, and games, specifically because rhetorical action is a relatively observable aspect of the data, representing *what accomplishment is being attempted by any given instance of participation*. This is somewhat similar to rhetorical motive – a component of r/gaymers' rhetorical situation – but distinct in several important ways.

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Motivation is impossible to observe, for one, contrasting the fact that one can observe actions. This additionally avoids the problematic assumption of ascribing motives to individuals or inanimate objects. Instead, these theoretical frameworks, when applied to the data, allowed me to conceptualize these multimedia utterances as the constituent action of the framework and not as the framework itself. That is, when I ask: *When I look at r/gaymers through this framework (network, queertext, or game) what is it trying to do?* In order to best establish how rhetoric was operating through r/gaymers, it was easiest to first establish what the initial purpose of the post was, and then analyze how it went about doing that successfully or not. Additionally, when considering rhetorical action, other aspects of their rhetorical context were either too nebulous or generalizing for the data at hand. Take audience as an example. It would difficult, if not impossible, to establish one constituent audience for any given network, or queertext, or game (and by extension r/gaymers), as they all have highly varying audiences. The same would be true for their stances regarding certain topics, the types of media they use to enact their processes (less so for games, more so for networks), the genres utilized in their operations, or the other circumstances surrounding them. Focusing on these later aspects of their rhetorical situation would also, by extension, over-generalize conclusions regarding any queer digital presence - presences which would have highly differing individual stances regarding many topics, differing access to available media, different preferred methods of expression, and sometimes entirely different life circumstances. Additionally, each of the constituent rhetorical actions of networks, queertext, and games are defined, sometimes precisely, by their respective

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theorists.

To reiterate a point I made in Chapter 1, the following discussion of rhetorical action on r/gaymers looks at general procedures on Reddit.com in general, and not specifically on r/gaymers. Although the data pool for this study is not focused on Reddit.com in general but instead one of its specific subreddits, the *methods* of rhetorical action are the same on r/gaymers as they are for Reddit.com at large (with some exceptions, r/5thdimension being exemplary). Even though much of the following discussion refers to general Reddit.com rituals, they apply by extension to the primary data pool, r/gaymers.

Networks: Transformation

For networks, the definitional necessity of rhetorical action is *transformation*. Even though Spinuzzi isolated 4 definitional components of networks (the others being: heterogeneity, multiple-linkages, and black-boxing), the ends to which all these means are employed is to transform human or technological goods or activities into some product or capital. As Spinuzzi noted, both actor-network theory and activity theory support this conclusion. Although activity theory introduces *mediation* along with *transformation,* which is defined as "controlling one's own behavior 'from outside' as it were though physical and psychological tools. *This self-regulative work is transformative*" (p. 21, my emphasis). Actor-network theory makes even less distinction between mediation and transformation, viewing them both as expressions of the same outcome. In both cases, transformation (whether orchestrating human behavior into a greater communal yield or direct manipulation of other actants) is the

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ultimate rhetorical act. Without transformation, networks simply do not occur.

What are good examples of transformations in r/gaymers? Briefly, anything which controls, modifies, or otherwise manipulates actants within the network. Again, the term *actants* is intended to account for a vast multiplicity of constituent elements that interact within this dimension and to not prioritize one type or "species" (using an information-ecological term) over another. People; hardware; information such as images, texts, ideas or intellectual properties, are all actants on r/gaymers. Good examples of these actants being conspicuously transformed include, but are not limited to:

- **Transformation of human actants:** This includes but is not limited to: *incentivizing / self-policing subreddit behavior* (encouraging people to get involved with an aspect of the game industry, [re]producing content which establishes the culture/practices of r/gaymers or the meta-discussion of such topics); *looking for more* (to game with, to meet up, etc.); *community support* (advice solicitations/responses, purposeful pro-social acknowledgment)

- **Transformation of technological actants:** Including but not limited to: *hardware assistance* (sharing computer set-ups, trouble shooting tech issues); *game licensure* (giving out beta-keys to new software)

- **Transformation of information:** Including but not limited to: *alternative readings of characters* ("shipping" - described in Chapter 4, homoerotic readings, etc.); *multi-media posts or reiterations*

Considering human actants, *mediating* their behavior (as activity theory proposes) transforms both them and their communities. Mediating behavior could include anything which organizes, compels, coerces, or (again) manipulates decisions or even physical responses (this will be important to reiterate in discussing *queertext*). One example would be when actants on r/gaymers incentivize certain behaviors, like, say, encourage people to post self-pictures to their posts, or attend meet-ups at real-life or virtual locations (bars, parks, game-rooms, video-game environments or digital lobbies, chat rooms, or forums). People are transformed; their behaviors are organized; their emotions affected, their activities channeled; all to enact further transformation down the line. A scared self-closeted gay youth who, on r/gaymers, is encouraged to come-out and instructed on how to do it safely, undergoes profound emotional and social transformation, even if we are to limit our scope of the scenario's context entirely to that which occurs online. This works in positive and negative directions. Self-policing subreddit behavior, discouraging people from posting (or responding) either through flame-warring, or constant reinforcement of certain behaviors or stereotypes (one typical complaint encountered: "all the pictures on r/gaymers are of young males with 0% body fat, I can't contribute because I'm *a girl*, or *...fat*, or.... *old*, etc.") all can impact or originate from a broad spectrum human behaviors. The community itself undergoes structurational transformation through these reproduced practices (Giddens, 1979).

Information is also transformed. Consider a player/participant on r/gaymers interested in sharing a character concept with the website that was inspired by his

avatar in *World of Warcraft.* That person would most likely translate that information through a multitude of media. Much as was described in Chapter 1, such information might start off as server (game) code on a Blizzard Entertainment server. That information then becomes a screenshot on the player's personal computer for the purposes of a reference. The player then uses the reference to produce an amateur sketch of the character in a book, including in the portrait personal custom modifications. At this point the character concept has deviated both in media and representation, but the process continues. The character sketch is scanned, becoming a .jpeg file and is then uploaded onto r/gaymers and becomes a reddit post with up and down-voting. It then becomes a conversation about how scantily clad the character is, and perhaps results in an argument about "slut-shaming" or perhaps a solicitation for cyber-sex back on the Blizzard server. These chains of transformation, like the example used above, sometimes originate from without the rhizomatic r/gaymer network (a Blizzard server), but equally as common occur transformation chains originating from within r/gaymers as well. Those originating from within often utilize r/gaymers commonplaces which tend to arise from either queer, video game, or geek culture. These commonplaces, for example, are the main source for the transformation of heteronormative characters through queer readings, and the reinforcement of certain aspects of queer, game, or popular culture unique to r/gaymers.

Games: Play

Whereas the constituent rhetorical action for networks may be *transformation*, for games it is *play.* Although Juul's formal definition of games avoids explicitly

defining their specific rhetorical outcome, it can be arguably assumed that the ludological perspective, to which Juul belongs (Wardrip-Fruin & Harrington, 2004), would reinforce that claim. This is supported not only by the root etymology of the discipline, borrowing Huizinga's *homo-ludens* (man-the-player), but in the overarching struggle in ludology to redeem the act of play as legitimate academic topic of inquiry. We could also understand the importance of play in the same reductive fashion in which we summarized networks: a game without play is not a game; it may be work, or tedium, or coercion, but not a proper game. This also satisfies Juul's formal definition which states that "the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable" (Engelfeldt-Nielson, Smith & Tosca, 2011).

Just as with *transformations*, certain activities on the website illustrate clear examples of *play*. Most of these behaviors center on the prioritization of the Reddit's integrated points system (karma). Whereas transformations occur continuously and often without intention, play tends to be a more explicit motivation for many on r/gaymers, due to the incentivising of rewards. Thus, good examples of *play* in r/gaymers include but are not limited to: **"Karma-whoring"** (explained below); **Verbal play** (such as *in-post-joking* or *sparring;* **Conscious displays of *metis***; **Beta-key giveaways**; **Conspicuous displays of up- or down-voting.**

The phrase "karma-whoring" refers to when a participant "cheats" or panders to the community in order to receive easy karma-points (via up-votes) for little effort. Some examples of this behavior include: consciously and often directly re-posting

older content on the sub-reddit which another poster had uploaded previously;

inventing or orchestrating real-world scenarios which would merit a reaction had they

happened legitimately, and then photograph and upload under the pretense that the

circumstances aren't fabricated; make frequent use of cookie-cutter memes which offer

little more than common sense or mundane observations; recycle stock images which

are known to be universally accepted by the communities (kittens, for example: instant

karma). There are others (special thanks to http://redditkarmawhore.blogspot.com/).

Unfortunately, the high rotation of new users enables these strategies, many of which

are often effective, and this is one of the main reasons cited in laments that Reddit is

becoming increasingly vapid. Regardless of its impact on the quality of information

offered on Reddit, this is a clear indication that the user prioritizes the points (karma)

offered by the website. The point is to *score*.

     Verbal play is also extremely common in various forms. As just one illustration,

in a recent "Ask Me Anything" thread with Stephen King (2013) (a reddit topic in

which a famous or otherwise interesting person will answer various questions asked

by the community), this was the question asked and the response chain which resulted:

[–]**ColonelLugs** 1683 points 18 hours ago
The timing of this AMA... 4.15...4 + 15 = 19. Coincidence? I think not
    [–]**stephenkinghere**[S] 2455 points 17 hours ago
    19 is never a coincidence.
        [–]**scabyslashmix** 1358 points 16 hours ago
        "Is never a coincidence" is also 19 letters. Nice.
            [–]**codysatva** 914 points 15 hours ago
            "is also 19 letters. Nice" is also 19 letters. Very cool coincidence?

[−]**moodrench** 571 points 15 hours ago

Very cool coincidence?

19 letters again.. the typo

[−]**Dragonword** 472 points 15 hours ago

letters again.. the typo

19 LETTERS! OOOOOOHHHHHH

[−]**jacktigs** 384 points 14 hours ago

How did you do that shit?

[−]**ReverendTwitch** 296 points 14 hours ago

How do you do that shit?

That is nineteen again!

[−]**Shining_My_Stroller** 273 points 14 hours ago

That is nineteen again!

Oh I see what the game is!

[−]**Bugjam** 125 points 14 hours ago

These should stop soon.

[−]**6jarjar6** 25 points 14 hours ago

They should never stop.

[−]**ilovegoodggg** 27 points 14 hours ago

my mind's like blown now

[−]**madog1814** 21 points 12 hours ago

I think I understand it...

[−]**GetdownSKI** 19 points 11 hours ago

I don't. Someone explain.

[−]**Xachula** 8 points 9 hours ago

Everything's eventual

[−]**cloudsdales** 9 points 9 hours ago

I'd really like a burger.

[−]**thatguy60** 11 points 8 hours ago

You and me both, mi amigo.

[−]**architectkellv** 10 points 7 hours ago

UPVOTES FOR EVERYBODY

[−]**originsquig** 8 points 7 hours ago

bIs it over now, can I play?

[−]**deftrecluse** 9 points 6 hours ago

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c-c-c-combo breaker! wait!

[−]**lightspeed123** 1 point 59 minutes ago

OMFG holy fucking shit

[−]**MotorBikeManV** -9 points 11 hours ago*

You reply with 19 letters.

Edit: For everyone seeing this and raging about how numbers count too, go back to earlier in the thread. Numbers clearly do not count as **letters**.

[−]**madog1814** 0 points 10 hours ago

ummm, numbers count too

Several things stand out from this exchange. First, aside from the obvious sense of play permeating the thread, the presence of the karma-point totals reinforce the concept of scoring and winning. The better your verbal play, the higher you're rated by the collective judges on the thread. Also notice that the participant named **Shining_My_Stroller** actually refers to the activity as a game. Furthermore, when **GetdownSKI** claims that they don't understand how to play the verbal game, their solicitation for help ("I don't. Someone explain.") contains itself 19 letters, which may have been a tongue-in-cheek contradiction, or a subtle in-game way to bait another participant to break the chain and fail at the game, which it actually accomplishes. When someone explains the "rules" of the game to **GetdownSKI** they receive -9 points for their effort – a poor enough score to bury the comment, even though they themselves use 19 letters. Clearly, that person did not get the improvised rules. These kinds of verbal games extend to puns, combinations of visual images, etc.

There are other specific examples of play on r/gaymers, Beta-key give-aways are one example, wherein someone posts a live game-key on the subreddit, and it goes

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literally to the first person (or persons) to activate it, offering a real-time race to win a prize. Other manifestations of play however tend to be more subtle. Rarely do threads receive a lot of attention on r/gaymers yet avoid any presence of humor or wit. It permeates many of the interactions and remains one of the most unifying of themes between the threads. Not only that, but it remains a unifying purpose for interaction. Play is not only a sense that participants bring *into* the subreddit, but in many cases of "Looking for (Game or Meet-up)" it is the outcome of networking within this digital environment.

Queertext: Resistance

Of the three concepts, *queertext* is the most challenging to establish a constituent rhetorical action. Although Rhodes (2004, p. 388) explicitly stated:

> *2. The material of a queer text dances in the openness of the margin between Signifier (Sr) and Signified (Sd.)*
>
> *3. In this open margin, we subvert the Word.*
>
> *8. To write a queer text, to identify or come out as is to resist the connection between Sr and Sd, to choose one or the other, to become the Queer Signifier, to isolate ourselves from political meaning.*

The definitional action *to resist*, stands as the most apparent outcome – to resist the dominance of the Word, and along with it, heterosexist ideology and coercion. The problem however lies in attempting to establish a coherent outcome of queertext – such a move would exactly represent the type of signifying dominance that it resists. By definition, queertext has no coherent voice, or message, and therefore no coherent rhetorical action. No established queer voices can or would be able to speak on behalf

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of all participants, nor are they driven by the same politics or ideology. In my reading of Rhodes, the eroticism of the "typing, writing, desiring body" emphasizes this non-vocal individualism. The erotic reality of our bodies thus internalizes queertext to non-linguistic reality, and by extension localizes queertext away from the subjectification of absolute, top-down, patriarchal signification of the Word. Functionally then, we can say that although no unified action exists, queertext, through its various incoherency and possibilities *results in degrees of resistance*. It is "action" only in that its ends can be summarized as thus. As Nina Wakeford (2000) stated, "Cyberqueer spaces are constantly reconstituted as points of resistance against the dominant assumption of the normality of heterosexuality in ways which are familiar to activists engaged in other struggles against heterosexism" (p. 408). Some good examples of resistance in r/gaymers include but are not limited to: **Physical manifestations or reactions to texts**; **Multiplicity** (of voices, sexualities, interests, ideologies, or agendas); **Direct challenges to r/gaymers' content**; and finally **Incoherence or non-sequiturs**.

Resistance on r/gaymers takes infinite forms, but it can be traced through several key commonalities. First the subreddit resists the larger heteronormative culture both within and without the game-sphere. Although in truth the game-sphere does not exist separate from its constituent culture (just as there is no real "outside" of the magic-circle), I make the distinction because video games as mass-media most frequently utilize particular methods of enforcing heterosexist norms – methods which other mass-media either de-emphasize or resist. To illustrate, consider the hyper-sexualization of women within the industry. Whereas many mass medias objectify

women, video games are primarily targeted to an audience of white heterosexual males (even though current estimates place female gamers as high as 45% of the population) (Blackmon, n.d.), and the vast majority of video game titles portray women as objects of sexual desire or helpless and in need of rescue. This is both sexist and heterosexist in that female gaymers are forced to project their own agency onto typically male-oriented protagonists, and male gaymers are forced to project their agency to enact heterosexual relationships. Keeping in mind that r/gaymers' *primary resistance* is against (hetero)sexist compulsion, it is equally important to note that such compulsion assumes many different cultural forms and results in countless consequent responses – from personal opinions to sub-cultural norms. These will be further discussed in the Conclusions in Chapter 5.

Just as there are countless reactions to heterosexist compulsion, the *methods* of resistance also vary significantly. Where one gaymer might simply down-vote female images on the site, others may simply pass over or otherwise ignore them, others still may post topics or responses that explicitly condemn female anatomy. Therefore, due to the myriad, personal, and many times transient nature of these resistances, a second more-dynamic resistance occurs in r/gaymers: the subreddit resists its own overarching coherence. A truly queer cyber-space, in keeping with academic theory, would be open to all genders and performances of sexualities. Just as there is no one queer-identity, but instead a fracturing of subjectivities and performances, there is no real uncontested voice or purpose of r/gaymers. This includes not only what is considered sexually desirable and how to perform such sexualities, but extends to what

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content the site should contain (should it be exclusively about video games, sex, both or neither?) and who is invited, either explicitly or implicitly, to participate.

My data collection and analysis were thus based on how r/gaymers rhetorically performed these various degrees of transformation, play, and resistance. To use Aristotle's famous phrase: *the faculty of observing, for any given situation the available means of transformation, resistance and play.* In this context, an appropriate operational synonym for constituent rhetorical actions of each of these theoretical frameworks would be Aristotle's concept of *telos,* or *final cause* – the ultimate aim, purpose, or goal by which all other cause can be defined. Yet, the synthesis of these three rhetorical frameworks for this study prevents its conclusions from attempting to establish any universal interpretation, but to offer flexible probative inquiry. This methodology thus reasons that *all* posts on r/gaymers contain each of these actions, or their potential, to various degrees – each link, response, or uploaded image of Mario-Brothers-porn. Every post rewards or punishes with reddit-karma, yielding a score; every upload transforms information and human activity; every participant "outs" themselves to a certain degree (or at least their account) by contributing to a self-identified queer cyberspace. With the amounts of data collected (over 500 unique posts and their subsequent responses), covering a wide range of possible topics (anything including sex, games, or even the community itself) the necessity was to isolate those which were most relevant to this study. I therefore prioritized those posts which contained high degrees of these constituent rhetorical actions, these observable *final causes*, reasoning that higher instances (or degrees) signaled corresponding rhetorical

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exigency, and thus an important post to this study.

CHAPTER 4

OBSERVATIONS: *TRANSFORMATION, RESISTANCE, AND PLAY*

Fittingly, the first data file collected, June 4[th,] 2012, provides a good starting vantage for observational analysis. Below I have included the entire first page for the 10 pm data capture in order to provide a initial cursory look at the general practices and types of rhetorical engagements on r/gaymers. Doing so will help scaffold my later observations about more nuanced acts and more complex instances of *transformation, resistance, and play* (Figure 5).
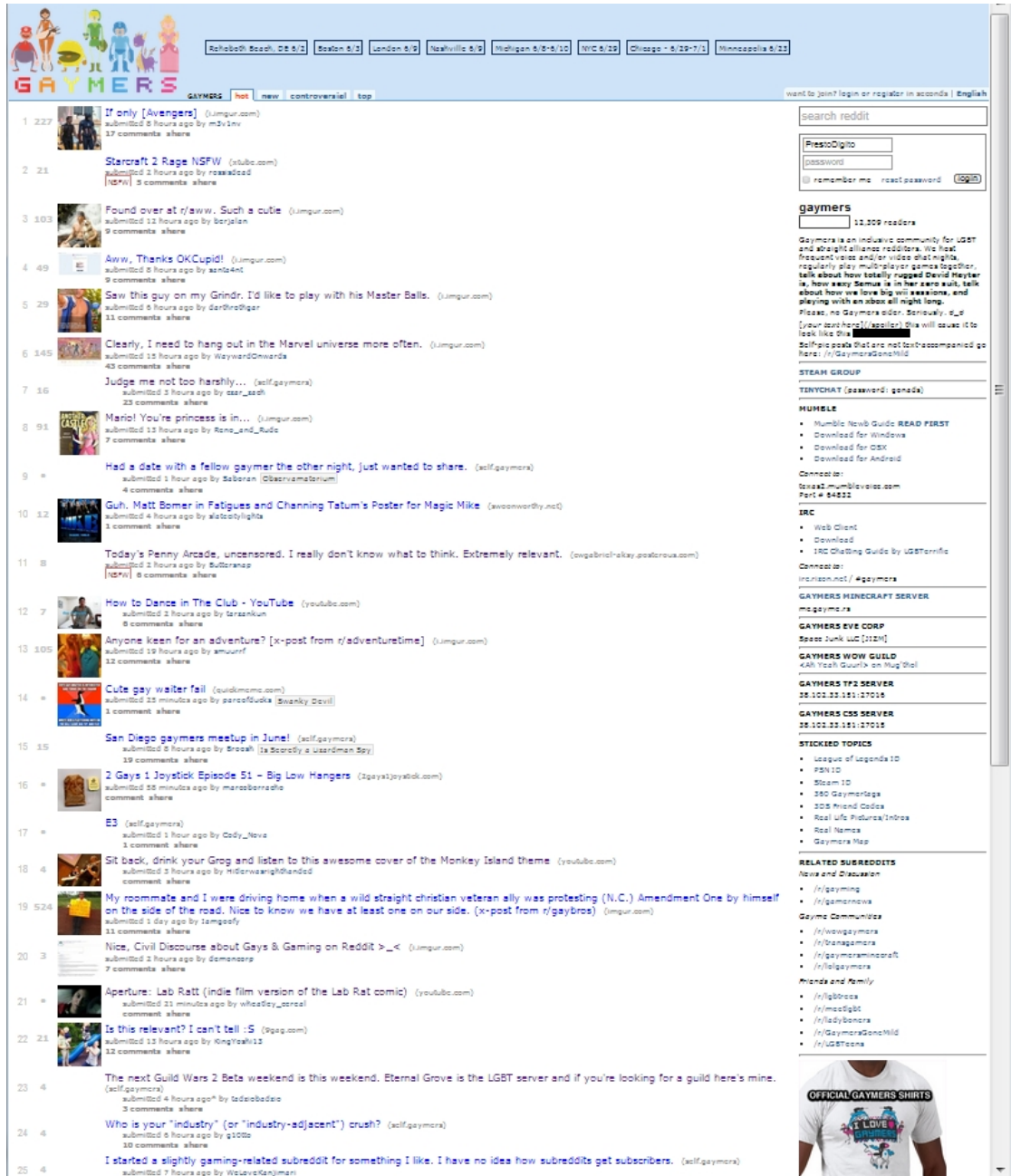
Fig 5: r/gaymers Front Page; June 4, 10:00 pm.

The screen capture above provides a general picture of the website's typical appearance and the type of posts most frequently encountered. As I noted in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, the mascots used in the upper left hand of the page mainly come

from Japanese games, including Mario, Pac-Man, Link, Mega Man, and Princess

Peach. I discuss the iconoclasm of Japanese characters further below. The boxes to the

immediate right of the mascots list real-life meet-up locations and times, including

places such as Boston, London, Nashville, NYC, etc. To the far right of the page, a

column lists their contact information, mission statement, and links to related websites.

The top ranked (1st) position with 227 points, labeled: *"If only [Avengers],"* is an

exemplary homoerotic reading to two canonically heterosexual characters, both from

the Marvel Comics universe: Captain America and Hawkeye. The two appear as they

did in the latest *Avengers* movie, but the image is photo-shopped to show them

holding hands. These threads descend in their rank as follows:

1. *"If only [Avengers]"*
2. A link to an amateur porn site featuring a video of a single young male
3. A picture of young man without his shirt on, holding a dog
4. A picture of a birthday cake message from OKCupid (a dating site)
5. A shirtless Pokemon cosplayer on Grindr (a geosocial networking app for gay hook-ups)
6. An erotic group picture of the canonically established gay characters in the Marvel universe
7. An advice solicitation about a game company (*Valve*)
8. An image interpreting Mario and Peach as though they were characters in a romance novel
9. A personal sharing of an experience - a successful date
10. An erotic poster for the male-stripper themed movie *Magic Mike*
11. A link to an uncensored version of a popular web comic *Penny Arcade* in which male genitalia are exposed.
12. A young man's YouTube clip on humorous club dances
13. An image of a male and female "cos-playing" characters from *Adventuretime*
14. A Common Reddit "awkward-penguin" meme about not following up on asking a waiter out.
15. A coordination for a San Diego meet-up
16. A link to an episode of "2gays1joystick"
17. An inquiry and solicitation for discussion on the topic of Xbox's E3 presentation
18. A YouTube clip of a band playing the Monkey Island theme

19.   An image of a young North Carolina veteran protesting for gay rights
20.   A link to homophobic comments on the topic of a gay gaming convention
21.   An YouTube clip, previewing an indie film company's interpretation of a "Lab Rat" comic
22.   An image of Neil Patrick Harris and husband David Burtka playing with their children
23.   An invitation to join a *Guild Wars 2* LGBT guild/server
24.   A solicitation of discussion on the topic of "(video game) industry" crushes
25.   An advertisement to a newly created subreddit devoted to gemstones

To a certain degree, the topics of these posts emblematize r/gaymers, because they address the most common rhetorical exigencies encountered by the sites participants. Inquiries or solicitations for advice or information, for example, are very common in r/gaymers, several often appearing at multiple times each day. The topics of these solicitations vary, some ask about games or the game industry (as the 7th ranked post above does - "Can someone please tell me about a certain game company?"), some about LGBT related issues ("How do you deal with hate-speech?", etc.), and some about off-topics or non-sequitors. Many times participants in an inquiry thread will attempt to respond in either well-constructed and informative or otherwise concise and witty posts – as these types of responses tend to earn the most Karma (see below).

Along with inquiries (or solicitations), the above example showcases many of the other common r/gaymers topics:

- LGBT commentary – general observations, news, or other media dealing with general queer or gay issues – as is in the image of the North Carolina protestor above

- Game commentary – observations, news, or other media dealing with video

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game issues, often (but not always) intersecting with the game-sphere's treatment and representation of LGBT individuals.

- Looking for More (… for a Game, … for Meet-up) – posts that coordinate gaymers to play particular games, join certain virtual environments, or meet in certain real-life locations.

- Video game eroticism – sexual images of video game characters or scenarios – as exemplified by the Pokemon cos-player, wearing little clothing, and featured on an app developed for sexual activity.

- Non-video game eroticism – sexual images of non-video game characters or scenarios (the amateur porn link, the *Avengers* homoerotic reading)

- Social announcements – generally, posts which address meta-content or issues with the website, public service announcements, other Reddit-related issues – evidence by the last post, addressing the r/gaymers audience, attempting to draw interest to a new subreddit.

The "June 4th, 2012" example above also highlights some other strong tendencies of the site. Immediately, one observes the abundance of sexual themes, some subtle (as in the case of the 4th post – the shirtless man holding the dog), some overt (the 2nd post leading to an amateur porn clip). These themes heavily favor representations of male sexuality, as opposed to gender-neutral or female representations. I will further detail this specific issue below. Additionally, it's apparent that not every thread or commentary deals with issues of games, or of gays, or sometimes either. These "non-sequitor" posts are often simply efforts to share

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experiences with others of similar interests. Many obliquely touch upon gay experiences (dancing at clubs), or of games and their related pop-culture cousins (the Marvel Universe), and these divergences do not necessarily reflect their overall reception or karma-score.

Although the common topics discussed above (inquiries or solicitations, looking for group, video game eroticism, etc.) showcase many situated practices within r/gaymers, I reserve the term "genre" for reddit-*ing* itself. According to Miller's (1984) now famous definition that "genre must be centered not on the substance or the form of discourse but on the action it is used to accomplish" (p. 151), this would render many of these activities, *in the context of this study*, sub- or pseudo-genres. This study assumes no one motive or action for any of these threads themselves, but rather that they each contain actions of *transformation, resistance* and *play*. As Bawarshi (2000) explained:

> *This container view of genre, which assumes that genres are only familiar communicative tools individuals use to achieve their communicative goals, overlooks the sociorhetorical function of genres – the extent to which genres shape and help us recognize our communicative goals, including why these goals exist, what and whose purposes they serve, and how best to achieve them... [Genres] help us function within particular situations at the same time they help shape the ways we know these situations... Genre does not simply regulate a preexisting social activity; instead it constitutes the activity by making it possible through it ideological and rhetorical conventions* (p. 340)

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Because this study considers these three actions equally as purpose and aim, and as method and outcome, the genre thus studied is "reddit-ing" itself or r/gaymers-as-genre. Not only do the methods of successful rhetoric (posting well received threads/comments) make possible the preexisting social activity, it regulates the activity (through up- and down-voting posts) through reinforcement of its own constituent requirements.

Regarding karma and its scoring, some general tendencies repeat. As mentioned above, karma is rewarded for content that participants wish to endorse. Threads that gaymers find appropriate, uplifting, or stimulating will often fall within an up-vote percentage of around 80-90%. Note that this percentage does not reflect the total score of the thread. Typically, well received threads will maintain this percentage regardless of whether they receive a total karma-score of 10 or 100. Threads which receive an equal or greater number of down-votes will receive 0 karma points. In other words, a thread which receives 100 up-votes and 100 down-votes will result in a total score of 0 karma; a thread must have a >50% approval rating to award any karma at all. Within threads, comments which are appealing, witty, informative, or timely will most frequently receive the highest score, whereas low scoring posts tend to be needlessly belligerent, unsophisticated (grammar, spelling, and structure all count), or otherwise introduce distasteful content to the site. The speed at which new content arises on the website amplifies *kairos'* effect on a post's karma-score as well, as posts which are second or third generation responses will often go unnoticed. This is simply due to the majority of the audience moving on to participate in other newer threads.

Thus, in this faculty, karma serves as an informal gauge of rhetorical efficacy, where often times the successful employment of rhetorical appeals – *pathos, ethos*, *logos, kairos, poiesis*, earn participants their score. Karma, however, is widely known to be "fuzzed" (artificially manipulated in order to reduce threats such as user-spamming, and "bot"-scoring – computer programs designed to inflate a thread's score), and the algorithm by which this is calculated is not publicly disclosed (Theory of Reddit). Assuming that an information-age's economic capital is the attention of its citizenry (Lanham, 2007), karma influences this capital in its ability to position the thread at the top of the page where it will receive the most advantageous page real-estate. Furthermore, a thread's ultimate karma-score does not necessarily correspond to the attention it receives (either positive or negative) in its subsequent comments-page. There are some posts which participants simply up-vote and move on, others which draw more conversation, and others which evolve into protracted debates, sometimes hostile. Because of these variables, a thread's or post's karma-score can only be considered a vague symbol of its rhetorical *exigency* at best (note: not rhetorical efficacy). Instances of *resistance*, for example (r/gaymers as *queertext*), depend sometimes on contradictions or ruptures to the status-quo. Regardless of how these ruptures are received, they represent how r/gaymers contests its own overarching ideology and identity. This is why this study highlights instances of *transformation, resistance,* and *play*, rather than r/gaymers highest scoring threads/posts. As a gauge of reception, rhetorical efficacy, and attention-capital, however, karma still indicates some degree of relevance. I include posts' karma-point totals parenthetically below.

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Reception and Iconoclasm of Japanese franchises

As discussed in Chapter 2, Japan was the leading video game producer from the mid-80's to around the turn of the 21st Century (Engelfelt-Nielson, Smith & Tosca). This industrial influence is evident in r/gaymers' strong tendency to emphasize Japanese franchises and capitalize on their widespread recognition. Pokemon especially, but many other Japanese franchises yield high karma outcomes. Throughout the entire period of survey, not a single day lacks a thread on the front page referencing Nintendo franchises (which includes Pokemon). Although other popular Western games (and publishers) are referenced often, including Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft* and *Diablo III*; *Riot* Games' *League of Legends*; ArenaNet's *Guild Wars 2*; Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed*; Valve's *Team Fortress*; and others, they do not command the same degree of recognition that Nintendo has established.
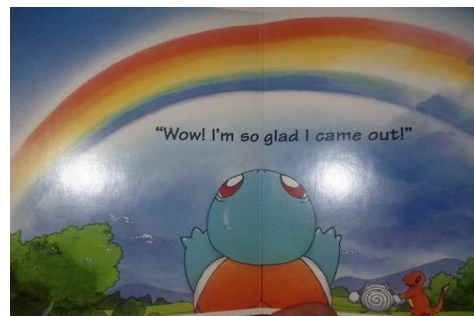
This is not to infer or imply that the prevalence of Nintendo franchises on r/gaymers results from anything other than simple recognition or popularity. As a transmedia world, Pokemon was fantastically successful, especially for the generation that self-identifies as the primary demographic of r/gaymers. It cannot be assumed that its popularity on r/gaymers arises from its Japanese origins, or that its close proximity to *otaku* culture carries any additional weight. Other explanations for this observation may be equally valid. Nintendo's influence in the late 80's through the turn of the century grants many of these franchises (or characters) recognition simply because

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they are the oldest in the industry and the most canonical (in the same way Mickey

Mouse would be for cartoons, or Batman would be for super-heroes). Their age

provides ample ground for gaymers' nostalgia who grew up playing those titles,

especially considering that older gaymers would have been playing in a far more

limited video game landscape prior to 2000, when the industry was far less saturated

with titles and new intellectual properties. Many of these reasons undoubtedly

contribute to Nintendo's high visibility.

However, subtle qualities in Nintendo's aesthetic overlap with popular gay

iconography, a factor which may account for its lasting influence with LGBT gamers.

Rainbows are a common theme in Nintendo titles. Threads #340 and #339 illustrate

two such examples (Figures 6 and 7)

(Figure 6: Rainbow Road)   (Figure 7: "Outing" Squirtle)

The first picture, of a gaymer's desktop wallpaper is taken from a *Mario Kart* (1992)

course, entitled "Rainbow Road." The course is notorious for being visually stunning,

whimsical, yet difficult, as the comments-page for thread #340 confirm. The post,

created by **[WeCanBeHeroes]** received a total score of 124 karma (85% approval),

and exhibits degrees of *resistance* and *play*, but highlights some important

transformations. The multi-media transformations (video game > screenshot > desktop

wallpaper > r/gaymers thread > uploaded .png file) ultimately result in back-and-forth flirting. **[ParanoiaLord]**'s statement, "I forgot we were talking about Mario Cart. I need a cold shower," and its response by the original poster (OP), "Pics or it didn't happen. Jus' throwing that out there," demonstrate the close proximity between *transformations*, and the *bodily resistances* of *queertext*. The multi-media transformations result in a simulated sexual experience, which would have ultimately translated into a real-world response of some degree.

Post #340 also suggests transformations which affect players on far deeper cognitive levels**. [tehdrnukgr8t]** begins a discussion with the OP, stating, "Wow. Haven't seen that in ages. Thanks for the trip down (rainbow) memory lane," (2 pts) expressing his nostalgia. The full exchange follows:

"You're welcome. Just try not to fall off the edge. :P" **([WeCanBeHeroes],** 2pts.)

"HELL YES I'M GONNA RAMP THIS HILL... OH WAIT NO OH GOD NO," **([scurvebearded],** 3 pts.)

"Even though it looks all smiles and happiness. That course was serious business. XD" **([WeCanBeHeroes],** 2 pts.)

The course was particularly difficult because it consisted of a suspended road in space with little to keep the player on the course. Falling off the course would set the player back, as **[scurvebearded]** references. **[WeCanBeHeroes]** then recalls how the course broke the cognitive association between video game representations and their correspondence to difficulty or skill. In this instance, a whimsical, colorful

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(rainbow), even cutesy and cartoonish course requires serious gaming proficiency. Being bright and colorful (read: gay) does not reflect on one's game. This sentiment is reiterated in other threads. Thread #197 links to an imgur file of a warrior in Viking-style armor from Bethesda's *Skyrim* carrying a basket filled with flowers, to which **[somethingaboutrainbows]** claims, "World of Warcraft taught me that I can make dresses, pick flowers, and still rip the lower jaw off of a dragon... this only further reinforces that bad asses like them some daisies" (1 pt.). *World of Warcraft* (2003), and similar games are popular in r/gaymers, because they allow options for players to read or otherwise create gay characters. Yet, Nintendo's early departure (Mario Kart is over 10 years older than WoW) from the association that "serious gaming must look hyper-masculine" may explain why it is so iconic with LGBT gamers. It was *play* (a video game course) that *resisted* the notion that gay representations could not be taken seriously, which ultimately resulted in a cognitive *transformation* for the OP.

The second image (Figure 7) of Thread # 339, posted by **[islasttoknow]** achieved a total of 419 karma (84% approval). This thread showcases the occasional suggestion of gay readings, not only because the image uses the rainbow iconography, but also utilizes an expression common in queer-identity, with the Pokemon *Squirtle* exclaiming, "Wow! I'm so glad I came out!". Not only does the exclamation of "came out" suggest coming out of the closet – accepting one's life as an LGBT person – but the character's gaze upon a rainbow, a symbol of gay pride, further reinforces this non-canonical reading. This (unintentional?) proximity between Nintendo and queer representations is interpreted by the OP as an endorsement of LGBT lifestyle.

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Although the thread generates little discussion (the responses generally voice quick emoticons or brief sentences of approval), the high score of the post attests to the popularity of the queer reading.

Nintendo's queer proximity is also celebrated in one of its most popular characters, *The Legend of Zelda*'s Link. Thread #305, posted by **[1gor1313]** on June 12 (104 total karma, 91% approval), links to an imgur file capturing the OP's wall-art that he designed for his apartment which is inhabited by gay men (Figure 8).

(Figure 8: Gay Icons)

 Link's inclusion (top-left) among these characters positions him (literally) among other gay (or otherwise LGBT) characters or icons. From Link's placement right-to-bottom are the following caricatures: Jem (a 80's cartoon glam-rock singer), although more likely to be a popular campy parody of the character named JIZ; Neil Patrick Harris (gay); *South Park's* Butters (bi-curious, featured in an episode critical of gay-conversion therapy); Bea Arthur (gay-icon); RuPaul (drag-celebrity, gay); Unknown

(most likely Marvel Comics' Wolverine – written as gay in an alternate continuity); *Family Guy's* Stewie Griffin (ambiguous, implied to be gay). These caricatures surround a symbol of gay power/pride. Link's iconoclasm within the gay community most likely stems in no small part from his physical appearance. Again, the proximity between Nintendo and queer aesthetic arises. He is slender or of medium build, athletic, yet he possesses a fairy-like quality. His features are often pointed, elegant, young, and boyishly good looking. In many ways he achieves the body image ideal to many gay men (who often refer to the style as "twink-ish"). Although he is often romantically paired with the franchise's namesake, Princess Zelda, that relationship is often de-emphasized, similar to many other video game romances. In this instance, the absence of explicit sexuality in the Zelda franchise encourages gay players to read Link as uninterested in Zelda, or that his relationship with her fits more within the dynamics of a "beard" (a fake heterosexual courtship, meant to disguise queerness), or "fag-hag" (a woman who desires to be around gay men – or a particular male – for either romantic or non-romantic purposes).

A Rough Trick Named Bowser: "Shipping" and Homoerotic readings of established characters.

As in the case with Link, a common practice on r/gaymers is to re-read straight characters (or otherwise normatively interpreted thus) as gay. This results from engagements with an industry and larger culture boasting so few positive examples of homosexual relationships.

A common way to accomplish these gay-readings is to "ship" certain

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characters pairings – as in "I advocate a romantic relation**ship** for these characters," or shortened "I *ship* Link and Gannondorf." It is far easier, visually, to depict a character as gay by positioning that character in homosexual acts, either tasteful or pornographic. The top post on June 4th, 10:00 pm (Post #26) provides both a visual (Fig. 9):

(Figure 9: "Shipping" Captain America and Hawkeye)

… and a conversation in the comments-page discussing preferences for the relationship. **[illusionmaster]** responds with "I was just going to say, if anything it'd be Cap and Iron man," (13 pts.). Other participants weigh in. "It'd never last. Cap's a great guy but Tony Stark would get so *bored*" (**[ZorbaDHutt]**, 16 pts.). "replace hawkeye with Agent Coulson and then you'd be right" (sic. **[MrAdrianBrony]**, 15 pts.). The response "Cap X Human Torch" (**[Bronymodeus]** 6 pts.) is met with, "See, that one is good because they are both played by Chris Evans. Chris Evans x Chris Evans = basically the hottest of all things" (**[CeloCat5]**, 2 pts.)

The thread achieves a total of 304 karma for the initial link and 37 comments. Although some of the comments do not address the relationship suggested, much of the *play* acts revolve around testing the relationship against what is known canonically

about the characters, evaluating it versus other potential matches, or embellishing the fantasy further. This *play* is *resisted* through the submission of other pairings, expressing different takes on possible relationships, or opining superior readings. Further *transformation* occurs as these ideas are re-circulated, reinterpreted, and re-uploaded. Thread #377 by **[gaymalelove]**, which occurs on June 14th, approximately ten days after post #26 (above), offers the following image (Figure 10)

(Figure 10: Transformation Ship)

Thread #377's comments page gives no details regarding the origin of the image or the artist, and so it would be presumptive to attribute its origins to any one source (including post #26), yet the ideas clearly re-circulate through this information ecology. Shipping homosexuality is an open field, although it almost universally occurs between characters existing within the same context/continuity/world. Furthermore, compelling character pairings have a higher frequency. Characters with histories of tension, homosocial desire, or frequent interaction are most frequently shipped. Aside from those "restrictions" just about any character qualifies. This enacts Sedgwick's homosocial desire by removing the barrier between platonic and romantic love. When

literally any character can be queer (or gay, bi, trans, lesbian, intersexed, etc.) reading homosexuality into them allows for an infinitely diverse exploration of sexual norms. Characters are read based on a continuum of desire, rather than the heterosexist binaries of gay/straight. Sometimes however, the presence of homosocial desire or homoerotic subtext does not go far enough to satisfy desire for gay representation, as is the case in the next example.

Desire for explicitly gay content: When is "suggested" not enough?

Thread #97, submitted on the 5th of June by **[WeHeartKanjimari]**, entitled "*I like to imagine gay versions of video games. Was thinking today about Kingdom Hearts if it was about Princes of Heart instead*" links to an image on deviantArt, by an artist named Simon Povey (http://lathronaniron.deviantart.com/) (Figure 11).

(Figure 11: Tarzan, Prince of Heart)

The image depicts Walt Disney's interpretation of Tarzan as he would appear in the

Square-Enix and *Disney Interactive Studio's* title: *Kingdom Hearts*. Briefly, *Kingdom hearts* is a story drawing from both companies' character franchises that focuses on rescuing (mostly) Disney princesses ("Princesses of Heart") in order to win the game. The princesses are depicted in an identical fashion to the one above: in stained glass, with their eyes closed, surrounded by iconography relevant to their story. *Kingdom Hearts*, under the direction of Tetsuya Nomura, a prominent Square-Enix character designer, was primarily developed and published by the Japanese software giant, and uses many of the traditional tropes of Japanese Role Playing Games ("JRPG's"). Two of their main characters, Sora and Riku, both males, are cast in the traditional roles of Uke and Seme, respectively (see Chapter 2), and fall into many of the traditional Japanese allowances for *shonen-ai*. There is also a third female character, Kairi, who forms the third leg of the triangle. The OP writes in the comments-page of his own thread:

> *If Alice gets to be a Princess of Heart, then Tarzan gets to be a Prince of Heart :P I'm glad someone drew this. Sora and Riku already make Kingdom Hearts pretty gay, though... But wouldn't it be fun to rescue Aladdin and Tarzan and such? I ache for the day I can play a game where I get to play a boy and rescue a prince:* <hyperlink to Figure 12> *When I first saw this image, I lost my breath. I don't know how to explain it. I don't think straight people (and even a lot of gay people) realize just how... much is lost to someone who is gay. Before I saw this image I never really grasped what I was supposed to be feeling with romances in video games and movies and stuff. I*

cried at the end of FFX ("Final Fantasy 10" - M), *but I feel like if Yuna had been male, I would've been much more invested, and I would have felt harder for both of them. Apparently everything I've been experiencing with heterosexual relationships in it isn't as powerful as it's supposed to be. :(* (5 pts)

(Figure 12: Rescuing a Prince)

[WeHeartKanjimari]'s powerful self reflection highlights several important issues which I will discuss below. Its reception on r/gaymers was decent, achieving a total score of 39 pts (43 vs. 4: 91% approval) – a good showing for posts of this type of "shipping" nature. Yet, of the 10 responses on the comments-page, few paid little attention to obvious soul-searching attempted by the OP. Note that the OP opens the thread with strong *transformative* and *resistant* motives. He is not only reimagining a single character in a homosexual context, but an entire cultural shift in the way homosexuals are portrayed in mass-media. *Play* as his motive, however, seems absent. Some of the responses attempt to introduce a sense of play: "... I accepted all of this

because I got to stare at Luxord at various moments" (**[ParanoiaLord]**, 5 pts). Others show greater degrees of agreement or support, "Completely agree. Still waiting for the Zelda where Zelda and Ganondorf's roles are reversed. :)" (**[melZel]**, 2 pts.). But for the most part, responses to the OP avoid the same emotional investment which began the thread.

This post calls into question the subtle methods commonly used by the Japanese of including suggested or non-canonical homosexual possibilities for their characters. Even though the OP admits to the presence of typical *otaku* homoeroticism between Sora and Riku, this is unsatisfying, because the emotional thrust of many games centers on the romanticism of male-female pairings. Even though Sora, Riku, and Kairi are exclusively referred to as friends (there is no explicitly established romantic relationship between the three), the game strongly reinforces the perception that Disney *princesses* are objects of beauty and desire. Sora is the playable character in *Kingdom Hearts* – a male. This causes **[WeHeartKanjimari]** to resist and reflect beyond the lack of sexualization of men in games, but to the more subtle gender-norms at play. These norms carry far greater consequence for him than just eroticism. The hyperlink he includes to further illustrate his point depicts a male-male interpretation of sleeping beauty. The image eschews depicting the sleeping prince as sexual object, but rather as a person of beauty, worthy of romantic devotion. *Love* is the theme, rather than *sex*, and this is why it affects him on a more emotional level than any video game he can remember. Neither the suggested homoeroticism of otaku inspired JRPG's, nor the optional one-off sexual encounters offered by games like

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Dragon Age fulfill that emotional void. By their nature of being sub-, side-, or optional plot elements, these representations of homosexual experiences cannot go far enough, because they cannot benefit from the full emotional thrust of any video game's main narrative, including all the vast resources which developers devote to that narrative's shaping – including soundtrack, scripting, pacing, etc. **[WeHeartKanjimari]** brings up the emotional attachment he had to FFX (another *Square-Enix* title) because significant resources of the game's development were allocated to develop that specific love story and enhance its emotional impact. So long as homosexual narratives remain supplemental or non-canon, their allocation of developmental resources remains a factor for gay players.

"Gendering" the Community

Thread #475, originating on June 17th, entitled: "*Every time I think of a vagina*" by **[kogenji]** illustrates a certain type of gendering occurring on r/gaymers, and how r/gaymers is collectively conscious that such acts are performed on the site. The post contains high degrees of every rhetorical motive mentioned in the previous chapter, thus its exigence is considered highly significant.

As is the case with many threads, the title is a hyperlink in which the phrasing of the thread is meant to connect cognitively with the content of the hyperlink. In this instance it links to a YouTube clip from *Pirates of the Caribbean 2*. The scene depicts one of the final scenes of the film, in which Jack Sparrow is confronted with the horror of the Kraken (Figure 13):
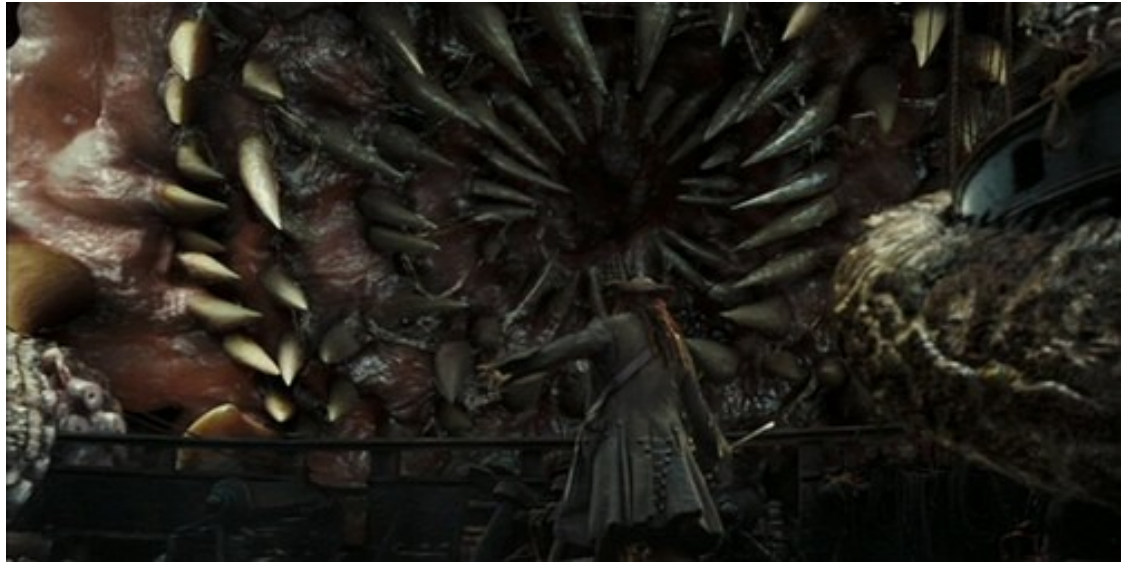
(Figure 13: The Kraken)

In the film clip (Bruckheimer, & Verbinski, 2006) when the monster is first noticed by Sparrow, it roars at him, releasing a powerful blast, covering him in a mucus-like substance. Sparrow shudders at the experience; declares, "Not so bad"; dons his hat; and with a challenge of, "Hello beastie," stabs at it with his sword, becoming fully engulfed (killed) by it, while his ship is destroyed.

The post received a relatively low score, with 68 participants up-voting it to 55 down-votes. The responses in the comment page however (19 total) range in their tenor. The most successful posts directly address the offensive nature of the hyperlink, but there are other responses present which participate in this "making-fun," or otherwise defend its presence. In this case, the highest ranking post on the page, by **[boyfromvancouver]**, simply states "Oh god not the vagina thing again......." (17 points), which is responded to by two other posts, "Here it comes..." (**[Bio-**

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ScienceMan], 0 pts.), and, "I'm thinking enough of us have learned that lesson that it won't be a 'thing' this time" (**[fmf3799]**, -1 pt.). **[fmf3799]** also responds to the original post, explaining, "In case the OP wasn't aware: At one point there was a crap load of posts about how us gays are so scared/disgusted/etc. by vagina. Some of our readers were, rightfully, offended. It was decided that the whole trope should quietly go away" (3 pts.).

Many of the other responses merely continue the "fun." "I loled, but srsly they aren't that bad. One of my best friends has one," (**[setaken],** 8 pts); or express contempt for the anticipated backlash of the linkage. **[shiverandburn]** replies, "Since you may have missed it, things like this tend to blow up into PC police shitstorms. I giggled, as I'm sure others have, but prepare for the incoming onslaught" (4 pts.). Another poster, **[Cegrand]** creates a link to a *Game of Thrones* meme which states, "Brace yourselves: the humorless uptight PC shitstorm is coming" (5 pts.). This response is challenged by **[MissMego]**...

> *Because anyone who gets offended by their body being compared to a slimy toothed, belching sea creature is just silly and has no real opinion. The term PC is just a way to blatantly dismiss opposing opinions so you don' t have to discuss why someone might hold a different opinion* (14 pts.).

Later when similarly challenged, "Um, there's a difference between the condescending and the 'this-is-so-ridiculous-it-can't-be-taken-seriously' (**[Cookiez],** 1 pt.). **[MissMego]** continues...

> *Yeah, but that difference doesn't exist when you're   talking about groups that*

have a history of being treated like shit because even when comments get into

the "can't be taken seriously category", they are still built upon attitudes that

can be and are taken seriously. It's so ridiculous that it can't be taken seriously

for me to compare all penises to this guy <hyperlink to Fig. 14> (Carroll, et al.,

1979) *because anyone with a penis can say well yeah but she's crazy, but when*

you compare a vagina to the Kraken, you're falling back on ideas built into our

society that vaginas are gross, disgusting, and bad. Women can't whip out the

"well yeah but he's crazy" because claims like these are built on ideals that

society doesn't think are crazy (2 pts.)
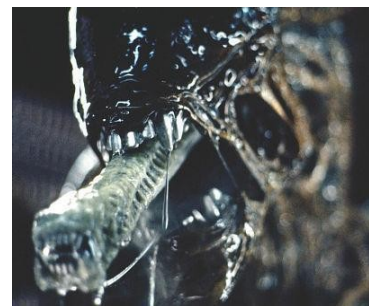
(Figure 14 MissMego's Rebuttal)

I bring up post #475 because it illustrates many of the *transformations*,

resistances and *play-acts* within r/gaymers. It also highlights a (self-acknowledged)

controversy regarding how these acts contribute to the gendering of this particular

cyberspace. *Transformatively,* it shows a high degree of an agency of self-policing, as

the majority of gaymers participating on this comments-page are all attempting to curb

the behavior of the subreddit at large, either through discouraging repetition of the

trope, discouraging "politically correct" criticism of it, or encouraging others to

maintain a light-hearted tone in its address. There are also several embedded multi-

media links, employed either to reinforce points or cash in on the ongoing "humor," making full use of rhizomatic linkages. Several key forms of *resistance* are also enacted, sometimes severely. In the comments-page, not only are objections brought up as to the entire nature of the post, but objections to a perceived over-sensitivity regarding the issue, and responses which clarify why such sensitivity is needed.

However, it is important to acknowledge that this very thread was itself an act of resistance. A reasonable assumption being that the OP is a gay male, this thread is a fairly clear case of a gay individual performing his sexuality by asserting his rejection of heterosexist influences upon him – influences which insist that he consider female anatomy sexually attractive. His rejection is "phrased" in the form of cognitive association he found humorous, and turned into a form of *play*. This is why the term "making fun of" is particularly apropos. We do not know the intended audience of the hyperlinked thread and its offensive content. We cannot assume (especially considering the gendered nature of the site) that the OP intended to specifically offend a female audience, or that his intention was simply to *play* along with a male one, or that he was simply ignorant of the diversity of the website, and thus the offensive nature of the post. When looking at this thread in this light, the posts which defend it (as insensitive as they are), may be motivated more by frustration over the fact that an initial (and what they consider a valid) heterosexist *resistance* is condemned. When confronted with a genuine female gaymer (or what at least appears to be) who can demonstrate how society's larger sexism contributes to their marginalization on the website, the point is not further resisted. These considerations aside, this comments-

page still broadcasts highly insensitive opinions of female anatomy (and by extension females); which, at best, invites challenges from defenders of females, both eloquent (as in the case of **[MissMego])** and non-; and at worse, intimidates and discourages females and their defenders from participating in this "inclusive" site.

There are other instances of "gendering" on r/gaymers, some of which conscious, and others which are consequences of repeated practice. Of the 543 original threads between June 4th and 18th there were 139 threads which contained exclusively male images (in which only images of male bodies are displayed, either in the thread's main hyperlink or the thumbnail), 38 threads which contained images of males and females simultaneously, and 11 threads which contained exclusively female images. Of those categories, 44 images portrayed males (exclusively) in a sexual manner, 3 images portrayed males and females simultaneously in a sexual manner, and 0 portrayed females (exclusively) in a sexual manner.

Reinforcement of body-image standards (perceived vs. enforced)

In addition to the "gendering" of r/gaymers' cyberspace, other body-standards are also reinforced, or at least perceived. Many instances of *resistance* respond to the exigency of r/gaymers' openness to male body types which are perceived to be under- or over-represented on the site. This, much like the gendering of the cyberspace, is evidently an issue that the r/gaymers collective is conscious of. This tension occurs more frequently within the community, for there are more male participants who are forced to deal with the perception of body-standards and self-image than females. I'll

discuss several instances here. First, in Thread #159, posted on June 7th by

[PandaInBlue], entitled "*Is the Gaymer Meetup for Me?*" the OP expresses doubt on

whether or not he will be welcomed within a real-life community of gaymers due to 1)

his inability to drink alcohol (he is 19), and 2) his physique. He writes:

> *Another concern is some of the wordings in both the main post for the meetup*
>
> *and in the comments. The whole thing about glistening gaymer bodies sort of*
>
> *seems as though those of us who should probably be over at r/gaybeargaming*
>
> *if that even exists. It wouldn't shock me if it did...I wonder if I should have just*
>
> *commented in the post about the meet rather than start this, but I feel as*
>
> *though this way will allow people who are on the fence like me make a*
>
> *decision.* (10 pts.)

Threads such as these are the result of the highly transformative nature of

meet-up solicitations ("looking for more/meet-up" - LFM threads). As discussed

earlier, these threads enable a high degree of human and material assemblages, often

ending in real-world or virtual play and erotic possibilities, "I'm not going to say sex

doesn't happen (because guys do hit it off and stuff happens" (**[jasonnlee]**, 5 pts.). In

this instance, the OP reaches out to r/gaymers to help him articulate a resistance to

what he perceived to be the over-abundance and emphasis of certain male body-

standards, namely the "idealized form." This standard, consisting of toned muscle, low

body fat, sparse to no facial or body hair, and generally young appearance, is

frequently encountered in r/gaymers highest scoring threads and discussions. Although

the thread's respondents universally encourage **[PandaInBlue]** to go to the meet-up, many with gentle reassurances that he will be accepted and that the gathering crowd is pleasant, only one response directly addresses his concerns regarding his body-image. **[purdeta]** writes,

> *It sounds like you may be bothered because perhaps you are not a twink. Well I am not either and I found myself to quite enjoy hanging out with the guys at the meetup... It is fairly likely no one will be bothered by your looks or even notice them much at all. I was super nervous before I went but it all turned out well and they were all pretty cool dudes* (1 pt.).

Note that the encouragement here emphasizes that either the OP's physique will simply "not bother" anyone, or that his appearance will go unacknowledged or simply ignored. There are no acknowledgments of this response, nor any follow-up confirming that the OP attended the meet-up.

A certain poster in Thread #223, however, articulates a preference against a certain body-types far more stridently. The post, entitled, "*What do the words 'Bad Dragon' mean to you?"* by **[smicky]** (14 pts., 71% approval), references a sex-toy company that allows its customers to post amateur videos of themselves using the featured products. **[asbel]** writes in response, "A bunch of fat, hairy, ugly guys (and some girls), often crossdressing in clothing that doesn't fit or look remotely good modeling dildos" (3 pts.). After further elaborating and encountering one of Bad Dragon's customers he finds attractive (he is assumed male or trans, based on other

comments), he shares his perceptions of his own body-image, writing, "Ah. I have a history of depression and sedentary living, and I'm unlucky to have a shit metabolism... My hope is that I'll be able to look like that before I'm old and ugly. I might not even need to take hormones, if this is a perfect world, which it isn't, so fuck me, right?" (2 pts.). He is resisted further below by **[up_or_tree]** who states,

> *IMO, your 'fat, hairy, ugly' comment makes you sound like a dick. You're entitled to your opinion, but not everyone shares your tastes and I at least like to think of r/gaymers as a place where I don't have to worry about fitting the stereotype of young skinny twink to be accepted. Let's please try to keep this a friendly and welcoming place for gaymers of all body types* (6 pts.).

The exchange is ended soon after **[asbel]** responds with "IMO 'fat' and 'hairy' are true, and 'ugly' is my opinion and if someone is going to post themselves naked on the internet... they should be aware that they're opening themselves up to criticism and be of at least middlingly (sic.) attractive" (4 pts.), to which **[up_or_tree]** can only respond "Wow," (0 pts.)

Another instance occurs in Thread #242 which hyperlinks to a man fitting the "heroic" body-standard is pictured sitting with a dog (531 pts., 82% approval). After a long procession of ogling, **[WeHeartKanjimari]**'s statement of "I don't think he's cute, personally..." (3 pts.) is met with "GET OUT!" (**[lemonparthellyes]**, 24 pts.) and "deal with it" by **[lukewarmpita]** (2 pts.). The exchange continues thus between **[WeHeartKanjimari]** and **[lukewarmpita]**:

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"I wasn't, like, condemning anybody for thinking otherwise..."
(**[WeHeartKanjimari]**, 4 pts.).

"But no one was expecting you to find him attractive. I mean, what exactly was the point of your comment? To be a contrarian?" (**[lukewampita]**, 2 pts.).

"To make people who feel fucking awful seeing a constant onslaught of guys with 6 packs and pecs being posted to this subreddit and met with great fanfare and applause feel a little better knowing that this isn't everyone's ideal man. I'm sorry if that offends you" (3 pts.).

At this point a new participant, **[yagomynona]** responds to **[lukewampita]**, writing, "Makes people that don't find the person in the post attractive feel alone. Let's say you are questioning or unsure of your sexuality or something and you click on a pic and see a guy that you don't find attractive and you go into the comments and *everyone* says 'wow, this guy is so hot,' you might feel like something is wrong with you or make you more confused" (-2 pts.)

Although there are a few more exchanges between the later two participants, the discussion goes little further. **[WeHeartKanjimari]** opts out, and **[lukewampita]** reiterates his disapproval of the original resistance, writing "Comments like that seem very negative to me and add absolutely nothing. I feel like if people have a issue with what is posted here then they should post their own stuff" (1 pt.).

The last instance I wish to highlight brings us back to June 4th. Thread #3, featuring gay Marvel Universe super heroes, **[Previous_Manc]** comments, "So...nobody for the bear lovers out there? Not even a sort of husky guy? Just a bunch

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of six-packed, hairless pretty boys. No thanks. b*races for the inevitable downvotes"* (4 pts). Several posts respond to this comment, some which reiterate the sentiment, "I know, right? They didn't even go with the beefier version of Hulkling" (**[bartraze],** 1 pt.); and some which resist. The highest rated response to **[Previous_Manc]**'s post, by **[Oldpainless]**, challenges:

> *Why do bear lovers have this unfounded belief that gaymers are all twinks? As someone who likes skinny jean wearing pale skinny pierced and tattooed guys (and is one himself) I can tell you there's little to no love for us, but bears take centre stage more often than you think.*
>
> *Gaymers is filled with bear lovers. Literally, there's a fuck load of you, and you guys* always *talk about how there's none of you and that you're going to get totally downvoted... and it never happens, because this isn't 'twink-gaymers-who-fucking-hate-bears-and-downvote-anyone-who-isn't-attracted-to-twinks' like you continually paint us as.*
>
> *It's pretty fucking annoying to be perfectly honest.*

This exchange lasts for several more responses, with neither side conceding, before it ends in communicative static. Another participant however, **[setaken]**, replies to **[Previous_Manc]**'s resistance, writing:

> *To some extend that's this artists (sic.) style. Rictor for one is usually drawn a bit more mature looking. I'd normally describe his physique as fit rather than twinkish. Hulkling is also a shapeshifter so gets to look however he wants to. That must be fun in bed. But to be honest Marvel (and most other cape comics)*

isn't about showing the real world with real body types any more than

Hollywood is" (2 pts.)

I will specifically address **[setaken]**'s claim below. First however, there is

evidence in the data to support **[Odlpainless]**'s claim that non-"heroic" (ideal) body-

types are occasionally celebrated. Thread #411, entitled *"Friday Furday"* (200 pts, 74%

approval) by **[bearvivid]**, hyperlinks to an extensive imgur album containing images

of males who boast hairy and sometimes husky physiques. Although the 105 responses

contained within the comment-page digress in some areas, the overwhelming response

is ebullient, with many gaymers describing their physical reactions to this *queertext* in

some detail. This comments-thread eventually transforms into a meta-discussion

thread when **[greenking315]** comments "last time I checked naked guys have shit to

do with games" (-2 pts.). Here, we see a different sort of resistance, one that

challenges the content/purpose of the site instead of the body-types celebrated by it.

Two comments, one by the OP, deal with this resistance in different ways. First,

[hayeshamandman] responds "I used to think this... but as it was told to me, in the

before-time, gaymers was a steam group and this sub was created specifically so they

could, among other things, share links of porn and such. Obviously it's grown beyond

the original group..." (8 pts.). **[bearvivid]**, the OP responds, "last time I checked you

were able to post about games if you wanted to. Be the change you want to see in the

~~world~~ subreddit" (3 pts.).

There is also evidence within the data to support challenges to claims that

"ideal" body-types are universally endorsed. Thread #422, in which the male Abercrombie & Fitch models, all of which possess "ideal" physiques and share practically identical features, haircuts, height and weight, lipsynch to Carly Rae Jespen's *Call Me Maybe* (8 points 57% approval). It is difficult to estimate how many models are featured in the clip, as their appearances are so identical that it makes the viewer quickly lose track if they are seeing 15 or 150 models. At many points the models forget the lyrics, or simply don't bother continuing because they are more focused on keeping their abs flexed. The artificiality of the video, its transparent motive, and the hyper-saturation of the "ideal" physique all elicit reactions, although not necessarily what the advertisers may have intended. Responses such as, "somehow they managed to make this less homoerotic than the other A&F video ads," (**[listlesscerulean]**, 10 pts.), and, "Sure the guys are ridiculously hot but it is like watching robots fuck" (**[MrButch]**, 3 pts.) fill the comments-page. Although physique is certainly appreciated in this case, clearly the participants are focused on other things.

Whether or not participants on r/gaymers consciously over-emphasize certain body-types and exclude others is moot; the perception that it does clearly affects participants on the site. Drawing attention to it however is occasionally met with no small amount of finger-pointing. **[setaken]**'s response above, in which he addresses both artists' and Hollywood's representations of male bodies, is one of the few observed which addresses the original resistance by acknowledging the outside cultural influences on gaymers' body-image perceptions. Video games, super hero comics, manga – all media that are popular on the website, all media that conform to

standards which represent male bodies in "ideal" proportions. Even the response before it, made by **[Oldpainless]** which refutes the "lack of bears" perception, complains that "pale, skinny, pierced tattooed guys" are even less represented. As it turns out, both body-types are under-represented in the above mentioned pop-media. These posts will typically result in more explicit resistances, sometimes becoming hostile or antagonistic, a phenomenon I discuss in the conclusions.

Another point of contention which repeats on the website involves sexual and/or dating practices/protocols within the gay community. Perceptions of promiscuity, infidelity, and other tensions arising from non-normative relationships are common catalysts for resistances and attempts at transformation (changing human actants' behaviors). Many of these examples observed occurred within discussions about "slut-shaming" - the perception that sexually promiscuous individuals are deviant, not worth dating, and even dangerous, the latter opinion arising most frequently in threads related to HIV. "Slut-shaming" is a phrase used to counter these assumptions, and it is invoked to challenge the sexist and gendered context of the word "slut" - a word originally reserved for women. The phrase invokes the sexist double standard to point out how historically men were celebrated for frequent sexual encounters while women were shamed by them. The notion that gay males should reserve themselves sexually shares a history with that term in that within phallocentric, heterosexist cultures, only certain types of sex should be celebrated, and others disparaged or unspeakable. A typical example of this occurs in Threads #249 and #250. Thread #249, entitled *"Question about talking to dudes at bars"* by [deleted] (18 pts.

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90% approval) receives the following response by **[Jonism]** "One should never date the help at a bar. They are sluts. It is known" (2pts.), to which [deleted] responds sarcastically "Slut shaming is cool" (3 pts.). Another participant **[listlesscerulean]** joins in with "there's (sic) a difference between slut shaming and deciding who to date" (4 pts.). The remaining responses follow:

[deleted], "["they are sluts"] implies that people who are 'sluts' are bad people" (0 pts.).

[listlesscerulean], "it's implying that they'll cheat on you. Not that sluts are bad people" (-1 pt.).

[deleted] "Which is also bad. Just because someone has a lot of sex doesn't mean they can't be faithful" (4 pts.).

The original responder to the thread, **[Jonism]**, whose comment started this discussion, merely tells [deleted] to "Relax your pussy" (4 pts.), at which point [deleted] points out, "Misogyny is also amazing" (3 pts). **[Jonism]** then proceeds to further brush off [deleted] with "Ha. Don't get your internet feelings hurt. :'(" (-2 pts.).

It should be noted that "slut-shaming", even though disparaged by many queer voices within r/gaymers, often arises from concern of well-being for members of the community. As **[zuky]** states in Thread # 25, entitled *"Prevalence of HIV in homosexual men"* (24 pts., 85% approval):

> *Another tip, be wary of the people you meet and are interested in sleeping*
>
> *with...that is, how "easy" they are. The thing is, if someone is so readily willing*

to sleep with you after having met you 20 minutes ago, ask yourself"am I the

first guy this person decided to bang after barely knowing me?" (-5 pts.)

[zuky]'s response is obscured for receiving too many negative responses, but although the community's reception to his comments are quite negative, it's apparent that he writes from prosocial attitudes toward his fellow gaymers. His comments are intended to *agree* with a post by **[iamsplendor]** who corrects him:

> *Well the first part is slut shamming and actually part of the stigma people with*
>
> *HIV get. You basically just said people with HIV are sluts and I think that is*
>
> *entirely wrong. There are plenty of men who have sex one day after another*
>
> *who are both careful and do not at all have HIV. The chances? Perhaps higher*
>
> *that they might but the one does not equal the other.*
>
> *I have known people with HIV who got it from their partners cheating on them*
>
> *and they had NO IDEA. They trusted the people. This is also part of the*
>
> *problem with them not telling others. The stigma attached that they are sluts*
>
> *and whores is hurtful when they could have just made one mistake one time*
>
> *that they have never made before.* (9 pts.)

This exchange demonstrates that even though well intended advice is offered, it is often just as frequently and stridently resisted as any other opinion uploaded to the subreddit. Tensions arise here between notions of queer sexuality and mainstream notions of "easy" sexual partners or casual sex. Note that although I do not transcribe the entire exchange between the two participants, both were advocating a policy of "condoms at all times." yet is was **[zuky]** equivocation of frequent sexual partners to

at-risk health consequence which yielded him such pointed resistance. The distinction here arises from not from pro-social attitudes, but from tensions between mainstream (read: heterosexist) traditions of sexual practices and queer transformation and reclamation of sexist notions.

All of these observed threads and exchanges demonstrated significant degrees of transformation, resistance, and play, and consequently represent high degrees of respective network, queertext, and game exigencies. Of the number of posts collected in this study, the above were selected, because in each case a significant aspect of internetworking, gay-lifestyle, or games necessitated a response. What these observations indicate, I will review further in the following Chapter: Conclusion.

CHAPTER 5

CURRENT LANDSCAPE OF DIGITAL LGBT/QUEER TENSIONS

When observed through the constituent rhetorical actions of networks, *queertext* and games, r/gaymers highlighted several significant tensions currently negotiated within this "queer" cyberspace. This chapter more fully explores several of the major negotiations, their emergence from cultural factors in the game-sphere, and their consequences for gaymers as we continue to press for more inclusion and fairer representation in the medium. As a summary introduction to each of them, I prefer to think of one arising primarily from *resistance*, one from *transformation,* and one from *play.* I use these terms heuristically, and not as a formal definition. The first I describe is the *resistance* r/gaymers enacts in response to the hypersexualization of women within the game-sphere. The second negotiation explores how r/gaymers responds to a canonically Japanese medium – which is itself a *transformation* – and the degrees to which they are able to re-*transform* those aspects for their own purposes. Finally, the last negotiation frames the ethical introduction of technology as a type of *game* wherein one must "play by the rules" in order to resist disruption and minimize violence.

Between a Rock and a Hard Body: Sexism's self-perpetuating legacy

In the opening chapter, I discussed the necessity of scholarship dealing specifi-cally with queer issues and representation in video games. As I and other scholars have pointed out (Alexander, McCoy, & Velez, 2007; Shaw, 2009), the academic gaze

has focused primarily on representations of gender and the role/portrayal of females in video games and their respective industry and culture, and take that as a call to research other marginalized populations and their engagements with the medium. Yet, even though this study seeks to extend the conversation beyond gendered representation, the linkage between gender and sexuality is too significant to ignore, and it is imperative for these conclusions to discuss the portrayal of females in their role established by heterosexist conventions of this medium. This is so, because these conventions result in the heavy gendering of gay cyberspaces, and interfere with attempts for inclusion or queering.

Samantha Blackmon, an Associate Professor at Purdue University runs a website named "Not Your Mama's Gamer" (NYMG) (Blackmon, n.d.) which hosts discussions and articles on video games, many of which deal specifically with female perspectives of the gendered landscape of the industry and culture. Recently Blackmon and NYMG co-founder Alex Layne were honored by *Computers and Composition* with the Michelle Kendrick Outstanding Digital Production/Scholarship Award for their work on the podcast/blog. Several authors contribute to posts on NYMG; one recent addition to their staff, Sarah Nixon, in a blog entry entitled "Chiseled guns vs. bouncing breasts: The difference between male idealization and female objectification." Nixon (2013) summarizes the differences between male and female representation typically promoted in video games.

One only needs to look at the majority of the blockbuster games on the market today to see that it's definitely true that an unfortunate number of male characters are designed around the same model of excessive masculinity and are often inflicted by the generic white male hero syndrome... [grizzled but attractive features, heavily muscular figures, and exceptional strength]... Female characters, on the other hand, are usually presented as having their sexuality or attractiveness be the characteristics that make them the ideal target an affliction in game design that distinctively points out the fact that female characters are not designed for female players, but rather as an extension of the hetero sexual male fantasy.

Nixon argues that there exists an important distinction between idealization and objectification, claiming that male representations allow for the possible achievement of the Freudian ideal ego – a fantasy figure onto which a male player can project his own "agency, power, and bravery." The female representation, on the other hand, cannot achieve projection of a ideal ego, because their hypersexualized portrayal serves not as a means to project female agency, power, or bravery, but as a sexual object serving as a target or goal for heterosexual male desire. Although this representation of an "ideal" male physique presents an equally unobtainable figure for male players as female representations do for females, they are not equal, because the male idealization offers the projections of agency whereas female objectification does not.

As Nixon, Blackmon, and many other theorists have pointed out (Schell, 2008; Shaw, 2009) the video game medium is considered sexist, or is at least *perceived* to be. Another example of such sexism was the employment and popularity of "booth-babes" at video game conventions – promotional models who would often dress scantily and hype products to prospective buyers. Although a common practice in many industries, the placement of booth-babes became somewhat of a flashpoint issue for the video game industry recently (2010), as the models employed would often know little about the product they were endorsing, and their promotional role was (to many) insultingly transparent. This led to certain conventions "banning" booth-babes. PAX for example, (*Penny Arcade Expo*), one of the largest conventions currently in operation, has a "no-partial nudity" restriction, unless the clothing in question has relevance to subject being promoted. This had to do with a recent poll, conducted by the leaders of *Penny Arcade*, which revealed not so much as a formal objection to hyper-sexualization, but the desire for representatives to be "knowledgeable about their product" As reported by Kotaku (Good, 2010):

> *Eighty-one percent of respondents to their poll wanted booth reps who knew something about the product. So if that condition has primacy, then the semiconflicted language about what kind of dress is and isn't allowed may be a moot point. "Anything that is considered "partial nudity" ... Also, "No messaging that specifically calls out body parts," will be a part of the policy. That said, "cosplayed characters are allowed to wear revealing outfits, assuming it is true to the source game."*

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This of course does little to stem the influx of hyper-sexualized representations of women in video game conventions. It would be "appropriate," for example, for a promotional model for Namco-Bandai's *Soulcalibur* franchise, to cosplay[6] as one of their featured characters, Ivy (Figure 15):

(Figure 15: *Soul Calibur's* Ivy)

This is official artwork (http://www.soularchive.jp/SC3/index.htm); the point is self evident.

    Penny Arcade was also at the center of a recent controversy with their stance concerning "rape-humor" - an extremely ugly situation which arose from the artists' attempt to drive home the context of the strip's joke with the topic of rape. Unfortunately, one does not have to look far for other instances of this sort. In Microsoft's *Xbox One* demo, in which a female player admitted that she could not beat

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[6]"Costume-play": a Japanese custom of dressing up as favored video game or otaku characters.

her male opponent, his response of "Just let it happen; it'll be over soon," was

encouraged and deemed acceptable by a great many male players. Although these

featured incidents are primarily about hypersexualization of females in the game-

sphere, I include this context to illustrate how male-oriented video game culture

remains.

The reinforcement of gendered objectification and idealization also occurs in

subtler ways than the exaggerated proportions and costume of the character above.

Examine a recent poster for Rockstar Games' Triple-A title, *Grand Theft Auto V*

(Figure 16):

(Figure 16: GTAV)

Notice the camera angles and positioning on each of the figures. In all cases,

the men are depicted from a worm's-eye-view, a camera angle intended to invoke a

sense of power in the featured characters. None of the male characters are looking at the camera. The females on the other hand are "shot" from a far more intimate position, and with eye-contact in both frames. In the bottom-right frame, although the scene is supposedly depicting an officer (female) arresting a criminal (female) the stance is reminiscent of a heterosexual coital position, or the simulacrum of lesbian porn, fetishized for heterosexual males.

As video games are notoriously inundated with representations of women as sex-objects and men as representations of power, gay male gamers have few options to perform their own sexuality contra to this. Thus, r/gaymers as *queertext* resists this status-quo by inverting it in several common ways. The first common resistance is to view the male-form, rather than the female, as sex-object; the second common resistance is to view the female as a possible representation of power; and the final resistance is to view the female form as unappealing or unsexy. None of these are necessarily exclusive or universal. Some r/gaymers participants use some of these methods, some all, and some none.

The first method of this resistance – viewing the male form rather than the female as sex object – was evident throughout the data in the ways in which males were commonly depicted. As **[hayeshamandman]**'s response "[this subreddit was originally] a place to share porn" indicated, r/gaymers maintains this motivation in numerous ways. The site featured several erotic images of males every day of data collection. The re-reading of characters as gay, the numerous amount of sexually themed male-oriented material on the site, the recurrence of "ogling" sexual images, all attest to the

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conscious performance of gay sexuality, and of this resistance to heterosexist compulsion. One such depiction, Thread # 266, by **[Renoxo]** (48 pts, 59% approval) features a young attractive male with the ideal body type, sitting naked, holding an Xbox controller over his genitals – received a significant number of down-votes simply because r/gaymers participants had seen it re-posted "every month or so" and disliked the repetitive content. Yet it was hailed as a sort of "mascot" of the subreddit due to its monthly reappearance. Whereas Nixon points out that this heterosexist compulsion (in straight contexts) idealizes males and objectifies females, r/gaymers' resistance to this results in *both* objectification *and* idealization of males. Not only is the ideal male form portrayed in ways which allow agency, but also fetishized to serve as the goal of such agency. This impossible standard is imposed on gaymers doubly; not only are they required to achieve this ideal in order to succeed, but they must achieve it in order to be desirable for others to seek. This is most likely the reason for oft-recurring self-deprecation of gaymers who felt as though they didn't achieve that standard body-image. Reinforcing these standards hinders inclusion thus, as evidenced by the hesitance of many gaymers to participate, because they feel as though their own body-types will be poorly received. These standards also eschew or downright avoid representations of females, which fail to support queer presences, both those who identify as (gender-queer, sex-queer, gender or sexually ambiguous, intersexed, etc.) because of their over-emphasis on male sexuality. The overabundance of homoerotic male images "silently" encourages "G"-participation, while simultaneously suggesting that L,B,T,I, and Q gaymers to seek representation elsewhere. This is not a conscious ef-

fort of r/gaymers participants, but rather simply a consequence of performing gay sexuality via this type of resistance to the game-sphere's hypersexualization of females.

The second method of resistance is to invert the male-power/female-hypersexualization commonplace to view the female as a source of power and agency. Many female characters are embraced by r/gaymers this way: Princess Peach, Zelda, the rebooted cast of My Little Pony, Chell, and others. Thread #347, entitled *"I am in love with this game"*, by **[Didry]** (39 pts. 88% approval), hyperlinks to the splash promotion of Grasshopper Manufacture's *Lollipop Chainsaw*, a hack and slash game in which the main protagonist, a short-skirt wearing teenage female cheerleader, uses chainsaws and other weapons to combat zombies in her high school (Figure 17).
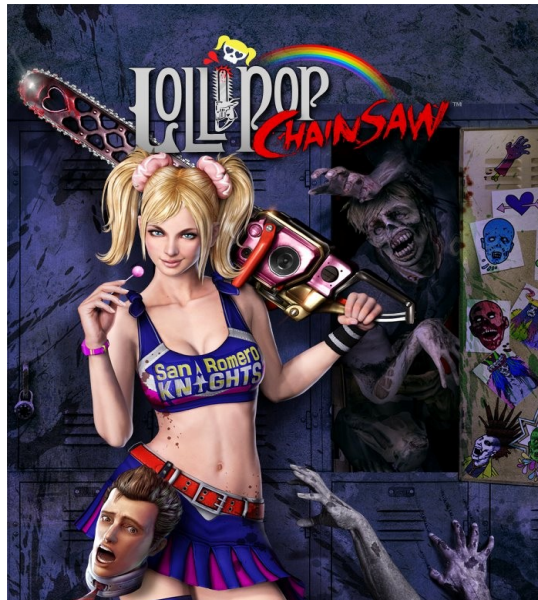
(Figure 17: Lollipop Chainsaw)

The 11 responses in the comments page enthusiastically endorse the game for its campy fun, yet the conversation regarding the game strays to how emblematic it is to the larger context of the game industry. **[Murabbit]** comments

That's strange, because judging by every bit of advertising I've seen, and of course the character design specifically, they're not really marketing it to us... Bayonetta was at least quirky and um sort of gothic on top of being blatantly sexist eye-candy for 13 year old straight guys. This... man I don't know, they want to be clear in the advertising that it's all boobs all the time... I'm all excited about Planetside 2 at the moment, one interestingly noteworthy feature of the game is that there are female characters but you'd hardly notice because they are all properly dressed in garb of the job they're doing: they look like futuristic space soldiers. Female character design that makes any goddamn sense is pretty sorely lacking in MMOs especially, so SOE's direction with planetside 2 (sic) is a bit of fresh air. (1 pt.)

[**MysticalNarwhal**] responds, "If Bayonetta has taught us anything, there's something inherently gay about beating up evil as a kickass oversexualised (sic) girl" (3 pts.). And there is. Because many of these female characters are designed to be objects of desire for males, they allow a different type of gaymer agency projection than they do for straight males or females. Those more subtle in their objectification, like Zelda or Peach (typically Nintendo IPs) rupture the equivocation between masculinity and skill (much in the same way Nintendo's general aesthetic encourages the same rupture -see Chapter 4). More hypersexualized female characters, however, assume a type of camp sensationalism, more akin to drag – and provide queer agency, especially for those who are unafraid to appear effeminate, feminine, or queer – in their agency to cast themselves as over-the-top objects of male desire.

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Perhaps the most problematic resistance of the male-power/female-hypersexualization dichotomy is the third type of inversion – viewing the female form as unappealing or unsexy – is emblematized in Thread #475 "*Everytime I see a Vagina.*" As I pointed out in the Observations chapter, this method does not necessarily mean to marginalize female gaymers (or players), but interferes with efforts to present an inclusive environment and invite participation for non gay men. Those attracted to females are not encouraged to upload content celebrating the female form. This is not accomplished simply through up- or down-voting, but rhetorically reinforced through comments and threads such as #475 (the Kraken comparison). Thread #361, entitled *"It's shit like this that makes me question just how gay I am."* by **[futon_bob]** (84 pts, 68% approval) offers an example of how these male-dominated rhetorics reinforce a conscious gendering of this space. The post hyperlinks to an imgur file featuring the female cast of the television series *Firefly*, (Figure 18).

(Figure 18: Female Cast of *Firefly*)

The responses which proceed in the comments-page – over 97 of them – mostly support counter sentiments to the title. The highest up-voted comment which received 89 points (achieving a higher score than the original thread total) states, "For me it con-

firms how gay I am. I can see that, objectively, they are very beautiful women. But that picture does nothing for me" (**[ntcguy]**). Other posts are a slightly more stand-offish. "I don't even look at the clothes. I see a bunch of women and think *meh*" (**[ikonnclasm]**, 29 pts.), and many of the responses hyperlink to counter examples of male images (celebrities or models) and result in ogling. At a certain point in the comments page, support for female representation is voiced by **[theklondeikbar]** "Yes but it's shit like this that makes the ladygaymers completely sure of just how gay they are. God those women are hot aren't they?" (27 pts.). This receives responses, "I also wanted to show some love to the lady gaymers :)" (the OP, **[futon_bob]**, 17 pts.); "This ladygaymer thanks you <3" (**[lucretiazawia]**, 10 pts.); and "And this lady(pan)gaymer too! <3" (**[marjadae]**, 3 pts.).

Another instance occurs within the comments page of Thread #386, entitled *"Decided to go back in time this morning. Anyone else play Harvest Moon?"* (**[iePikaPika]**, 154 pts, 87% approval). The game contains content in which you can woo and eventually marry a person to help you on your farm, but only allows hetero-sexual pairings. When one poster comments that "they let you cross dress... so make your characters face look as masculine as possible, then buy male cloths (sic) and pre-tend you are a guy" (**[BlueDonnatello]**, 3 pts.), the following exchange occurs:

"Ew. I'd rather be a straight man than a woman any day" (**[thgatekeeper09]**, -2 pts.).

"You'd think a person whose sexuality forces them to deal with many types of persecution wouldn't be such a bigot" (**[Luxie]**, 5 pts.).

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"Aw, you must be new here. Welcome to your first day on the Internet. I used something called sarcasm earlier" (**[thgatekeeper09]**, -2 pts.).

"Maybe try an irony mark? Your meaning wasn't clear; it came across as genuinely hostile toward women, not as (remotely) obvious sarcasm. Just a suggestion (**[Sarakitty]**, 5 pts.).

"Suggestion noted. 95% of my friends are girls (I'm sure like most gay guys) and we're always making anti-vagina jokes (yes them too). I guess I assumed more gay guys made jokes like that but apparently not" (**[thgatekeeper09]**, 1 pt.).

"I am used to 'gross, vagina!' jokes, but that didn't seem the same at all that's why the confusion" **[Luxie]**, 1 pt.).

As **[MissMego]**'s response to thread #475 (the Kraken comparison) articulates, attitudes that female genitalia are unappealing are rooted in society's phallocentrism, but as the above comments indicate, the r/gaymers' phallocentrism is rooted more in the desire to assert non-normative sexuality, rather than to reinforce (consciously or unconsciously) sexist cultural attitudes or beliefs. Evidence shows that there exists efforts on r/gaymers to include non gay male imagery, but the resistance to non-male sex appeal is telling. When confronted with an image of female sexuality, the majority of participants reasserted their own sexual preferences: a performative act, and not a mere falling-back on unconscious sexist traditions. Although the *results* of this rhetoric mirror those forces in larger culture which silence or disparage females, this is not a case of simple misogyny, as this consequence arises from the performative construction of a cyberspace meant to offer an alternative to heteronormative gaming environ-

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ments, ones in which the *overabundance* of female sexuality is conspicuously enforced. In this regard, gay male gaymers are forced into an unfortunate dilemma – they either perform their sexuality through challenging the cultural industrial standards which insist women be regarded as sex-objects, a situation which genders their own environment; or, through desire to be inclusive, reproduce representations of women as desirable, thereby recreating the conditions of other heterosexist gaming environments from which they seek to escape. This is why much of the gendering of r/gaymers is not intended as misogynistic, but the result of performative resistance to a misogynistic gaming culture in which gaymers do not feel they fit. One of the major differences between game/cyber and real-life (RL, pejoratively: meat-space) environments is that RL gay spaces typically preemptively gender themselves and openly acknowledge said gendering. A gay or lesbian bar, for example, will cater to a certain gendered clientele, due to the context of such spaces serving commonly as dating or hook-up locales. No so for r/gaymers, and many other cyberqueer spaces, which tend not to acknowledge gender, instead opting for an inclusive environment for all LGBT players. This is so, because (presumably) the networking of gaming is intended to take precedence for the networking of dating/sex. Considering that since the start of this research the subreddit r/lesbiangamers has been created (only 350 users at the moment), we are witnessing the eventual diversifying and conscious/purposeful gendering of cyberqueer spaces as well.

You complete me: "Queerness" lost in translation

This diversifying of cyberqueer spaces does not necessarily mean that the game industry is keeping pace, or even following suit. Just as the video game industry's hypersexualization of females encourages a gendered, even sexist, resistance for many gaymers, its under-representation of males in sexual roles further marginalizes gaymers (both male, female, and all others). As **[WeHeartKanjimari]**'s reflection reminds us, "Apparently everything I've been experiencing [in video games] with heterosexual relationships in it isn't as powerful as it's supposed to be," gay video game characters or relationships (when they are included at all, and not included as punch-lines or grotesques) are often sidelined into optional content or sub-plots. Marginalizing gay relationships thus generally means that the majority of game development resources are devoted to other more main-stream concerns – not uncommonly narrating a heterosexual romance. Again, there has yet to be a mainstream (read: AAA) game wherein developers devote the full resources (soundtrack and writing especially) to narrate an explicit same-sex romance. Even in games like *Mass Effect 3,* which features *optional* gay relationships between the main characters, the very nature of this optional inclusion has thus far prevented games from addressing issues specific to gay (or other LGBT) characters and lifestyles. How would a mainstream video game narrative handle, say, a character questing for a potion to change their gender so that they can be in a same-sex relationship with someone, or to have biological children with their significant other? For the most part, **[WeHeartKanjimari]** is right. These LGBT issues have been almost completely ignored. Yet this under-representation poses its own particular challenges to queering the gaming landscape.

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These particular challenges arise, because in some ways "queer" characters

have been present in larger degrees than observed by western audiences, yet their

queerness depends largely on audience interpretation and sexual epistemology (hence

the scare quotes). The way Westerners *know* their own and others' sexuality is always

and already informed by heteronormative standards (Queer Theory itself arises from

challenges to those standards). And so, for example, Japanese characters which would

otherwise be considered queer do not register thus for Western audiences. The

Japanese preference for -eroticism over -sexuality is in some ways "queerer" than

Western depictions of homosexual relationships, because it more closely resembles

Sedgwick's homosocial desire – an ambiguity (or *possibility*) which allows for gay

readings without explicitly including gay sexual content, whereas western games have

traditionally made a more stark distinction between gay and straight characters. Take

for example the character Uzumaki Naruto. Voted in 2009 by IGN magazine as being

the 6th most influential anime character of all time (MacKenzie, 2009), Naruto is a

teenage ninja, and title character of *The Naruto* franchise, created by Kishimoto

Masashi. Currently, the franchise has enjoyed no less than 60 individual video game

titles (Category Video Games, n.d.). Naruto's typical adventures cast him within a love

triangle between he and two of his teammates, the female ninja Haruno Sakura, and

the more experienced male ninja Uchiha Sasuke. Although Naruto makes overt

romantic advances towards Sakura, and Sakura makes even more over-the-top

advances towards Sasuke, much of the emotional thrust of the series stems from the

tensions between Naruto and Sasuke as their initial rivalry grows into friendship and

mutual devotion. Naruto is a hot-tempered yet powerful novice, desperate to beat

Sasuke for recognition, whereas Sasuke is aloof and experienced, and grappling with

his inner demons; *uke* and *seme,* respectively. Although the two characters remain

rivals throughout the entire series, and develop personalities and characteristics which

complicate each of them significantly, their intertwining arcs remain a central focus of

the entire series. Predictably, no small amount of *doujinshi* has been written and

illustrated by amateur artists featuring the two young men romantically involved in

stereotypical *yaoi* fashion. This is most likely due to not one but two "accidental" on-

screen kisses (Figs 19 & 20).

(Figure 19)   (and 20: Naruto and Sasuke's First and Second
Kisses)

Naruto and Sasuke are archetypal characters, emblematic of many of the

pairings imported from *otaku* culture. Neither character (to the best extent of this

research) becomes involved with a sexual or stable romantic relationship throughout

the series. By episode 16 of the series however, as Sasuke goes so far as to

(apparently) sacrifice his life to protect Naruto from an enemy, he flashes back to

many of the moments which narrated their developing relationship, the first kiss (fig.

x) being featured prominently in the montage. Even after the second "accidental" kiss

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(which incidentally they hold for several seconds), Sasuke grouses to Naruto, "Why is it always with *you!*?", lamenting the fact that they never gets to kiss anyone else, a suggestion (at the very least) that the incident is not just a mere bumping of faces. Neither Kishimoto or any of the other producers/artists/writers have confirmed a homosexual relationship between the two, but neither have they outright denied such a claim or confirmed their heterosexuality, but even if they had, it would hardly make them less queer.

What makes them so is their clear homosocial desire for each other, characteristics which echo traditional Japanese depictions of *nanshoku* and *shonen-ai*. Again, I use Sedgwick's continuum of male desire, which makes no clear distinction between friendship, romance, and sex. They exist ambiguously, neither gay nor straight; not because of the presence or absence of any set of particular actions, but because epistemologically, the series eschews the heterosexist dichotomy between friends and lovers. They are queer because they *aren't* gay (or straight). Such a label would subject these characters to two heterosexist dichotomies: 1) that there are only two expressions of sexuality, and 2) that such expressions are not performative. This is not to say that these characters are consciously written as queer by Japanese authors, but that Japan's sexual epistemology is constructed differently from the West, as detailed in Chapter 2. Many Japanese authors leave sex ambiguous for many characters so as to not purposefully leave anyone out from enjoying the series – gay, straight, queer, etc. When all of these sexualities are possible, what is left unsaid truly has the most utility and power for its audiences. By leaving Sasuke and Naruto's

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relationship purposefully open, the authors ensure that my interpretation of their struggles as lovers carries as much impact to me personally as it would to someone believing them to be friends. The characters themselves *are transformations*, because the "truth" of them exists between what is presented and the personal interpretations of their audiences. Their sexuality is contained within the "marvelous void," and presented as"unfinished" canvas, so that our engagement with them completes their representation in the ways most fulfilling to us.

These homosocial portrayals of male characters are advantageous to the game industry, because they provide the possibility of gay readings without the danger of including sexuality and risking a homophobic backlash from consumers. It is also advantageous to gaymer consumers in that it allows them to project their own sexual agency and desire on homosocial pairings while avoiding homophobic reactions from the larger gaming community. It is no wonder then why Japan has made such frequent use of such relationships. Japanese audiences who see two characters set in traditional (or slightly unique) depictions of *uke* and *seme*, are well aware of the history of these relationships – some of them were sexual and some were not – and apply which interpretation best suits their preferences. Defining it only closes it off to other interpretations. As the Taoist saying goes, "the only useful space is an empty one." In the West however, this "unstated utility" is often lost in translation. Not only is the flexibility of sexual ambiguity often lost on westerners, leading many to quarrel over the "true" sexuality of particular characters, but queerness itself is often silenced by heterosexist conventions. Generally, there is little patience for ambiguity or

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mainstream acceptance or understanding of performative sexuality. This is due to heterosexist conventions which dichotomize (or otherwise enforce strict categorical expectations on) genders and relationships. Depending on the nature of severity (how sexually explicit or non-) of any act in question, **one** intentional homosexual act "in canon" is enough to label a character gay, or at least bisexual by mainstream western audiences. This creates a hard ceiling for what would otherwise be queer characters, because even a "queer" character, occupying some point on Sedgwick's homosocial continuum, can never engage in sexual acts on that continuum without becoming essentialized as gay – which means that they can't really be queer to their audiences at all. Characters cannot be queer in other words, because they are generally not read that way by anyone not identifying as queer themselves. This results in frustration in some cases, because the homosocial continuum can never progress to a sexual level, causing gaymers to subscribe to heterosexist dichotomies and seek explicitly gay characters, as **[WeHeartKanjimari]** and other invariably do. This explicit presence then brings with it all the difficulties and stigmatization of gay characters in games detailed in Chapter 1.

Again, gaymers face a difficult disparity in this regard. Advances in social acceptance, visibility, and legal protections have encouraged many gaymers to demand more equitable media representation, and certainly the industry is growing in the right direction, but the current circumstances still have the game industry privileging white straight young males as their predominant demographic. Whether or not we will soon see a AAA video game title featuring a central LGBTIQ narrative is

conjecture, but not soon anticipated. Japanese games will likely take a more subtle approach to mainstreaming gay content in video games, falling back on their traditions of eroticism-rather-than-sexuality and "unspoken" queer possibilities. In any case, we are still quite a ways from **[WeHeartKanjimari]**'s wish that a full game development budget be brought to bear telling an authentic LGBTIQ narrative. Although Japan does do this in a certain regard (The *Naruto* series' powerful emotional impact just one example), the "unspoken" queer aspect of these characters is invisible – and thus "closeted" – to westerners. In the West, aside from "optional" gay content (*Mass Effect 3*'s "gay-Shepard" scenes), a non-optional narrative which includes explicitly gay themes or images will likely suffer from heterosexist convention – including labeling, essentializing, and likely homophobia.

It's all fun and games until someone gets gay: Disruption and play as tensions of social action

The two challenges facing gaymers I have thus far addressed – sexism's self-perpetuation, and heterosexism's influence on queer content, are not the only ones which require negotiation within our own LGBTIQQAP communities and with the mainstream cultures with which we are a part. As the observations of this study indicate, evidence shows a significant number of gaymers still negotiating many aspects of their sub-culture. The subjectification of queer bodies within their own discourse and their values regarding non-heteronormative lifestyles (including levels conservatism and resistance to sex-queer alternative practices and ideologies) are just two examples. "Slut-shaming" is an example of the latter. People who disparage promiscuity are of-

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ten trying to resist the attitude that "gay" should be synonymous with casual sex, and are often lamenting a sub-culture which promotes and even celebrates hypersexualization of its own participants. The current progress on marriage fronts, HIV, and the recent acceptance of LGBTIQQAP people in mass-culture, are all encouraging a re-negotiation of what it means to be gay. In some ways this shows progress (in that sexuality is occupying less of a role than other aspects of gay performativity), but many of the points in the negotiation are rooted in heterosexist coercion, and "queer" doesn't necessarily fit in to those negotiations neatly. Queer theory, for example, acknowledges the contextual androcentrist use of the term "slut", and that the subsequent queer resistance, saying "it's okay to have a lot of sex (as long as you do it right)" remains a point of contention. There are other related examples of queer ideology with which gaymers often find themselves at odds. For many, marriage has displaced the bathhouse as the celebrated achievement of successful gay relationships. Through a *praxis* of transformation, r/gaymers structures and encourages human ideas and actions, and it is through this praxis that cultural attitudes may or may not change. For many of these changes in gay-culture (questioning promiscuity for example), these discourses demonstrate this praxis in action, and suggest where one day social change may occur. Invoking Freccero's spectrality – a haunting by previous sexual performativities – the potential for marriage (among other issues) has introduced new possibilities for gay praxis, and will eventually subvert or replace older queer ideas. With the acceptance of more mainstream endorsement of gays, we are already haunted by "Stonewall queerness." r/gaymers demonstrates the praxis which reinvents our sit-

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uated practices. Whatever the potentials for change may be, it is imperative that queer

voices, voices which may view marriage as a heterosexist, damaging, and artificial

lifestyle, participate in this self-reflection. In r/gaymers, such notions are commonly

challenged.

Another *praxis* of transformation occurs through the rhetorics of body-image,

where participants angrily or dejectedly point out the subjectification of queer bodies

within their own discourse. At times, direct acknowledgment is voiced that challenges

the overabundance of idealized male images (as the case with **[Previous_Manc]**, and

[Oldpainless]), and at other times, images or utterances are offered which offer indi-

rect changes to the site's content - "Showing love to the lady gaymers."

The difference in method of these two attempts to transform the content on the

site provides an important contrast. As part of the self-reflection inherent to praxis,

many of the posts which question r/gaymers' recurring practices serve as a "taking

stock" of the content and development of the website. These comments, many of

which written with good intentions, are often critical of the site or bring to attention

practices which may offend, marginalize, or discourage participation in other. The

posts by **[Previous_Manc]** and **[Oldpainless]** exemplify these types of posts. In al-

most every instance of this taking stock, the ideas espoused by critical participants are

met with their own resistance. In each of the instances presented in Chapter 4 for ex-

ample, resistance to the ideal body-standard generally perceived to be preferred on

r/gaymers resulted in subsequent challenges in one form or another. In many cases

these secondary responses create tensions which are important for dialogue and an

open exchange of sides, but more often than not, hostility can easily be read in many of the subsequent comments. "It's fucking annoying", "Calm your pussy", " the humorless uptight PC shitstorm is coming", etc. are just several notable instances that contain degrees of aggression and animosity. Unfortunately, even in a relatively safe LGBTIQQAP cyberspace seeking to be inclusive, one must expect to encounter this. It is common knowledge (and experience) that the anonymity of the internet encourages anti-social behavior by negating reciprocity. But beyond that unfortunate circumstance of netiquette, in each instance of this type of taking stock one observes that, ultimately, the *play* of the website was interrupted. For many on r/gaymers, reddit-as-game consists of ogling erotic pictures of men, connecting to others of similar interest through game (or other) experiences, and reaping whatever karma rewards follow. As any game should, reddit-ing should be fun. Asking critical questions, or otherwise questioning repeated practices, dispels that experience; as if in the middle of a basketball game, the person with the ball suddenly stops and asks "Why are you hogging the ball?" The game stops, and the players are universally interrupted. Contrast these "taking stock" type responses with **[futon_bob]**'s – in which the original thread hyperlinks to the female *Firefly* cast – and he responds that he wants to "show the lady gaymers some love." The result of the effort not only encourages females to respond but receives no hostility. Not only that, but the thread itself accomplishes two things - it increases the visibility of females on the site, and it engenders a robust conversation. **[lukewampita]**'s assertion in Thread #242 (ideal body-type male with dog), that if people don't like the content of the website, they should "post their own stuff" is one

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of several endorsements of this method of *praxis*. This sentiment doesn't object to changes in content, so much as it insists that changes should happen *within the rules* – an accomplishment of questionable probability – but one that avoids hostility. This sentiment is also reiterated by **[bearvivid]** when he encourages dissenting posters to "be the change they want to see on the subreddit" by changing the content itself. Returning to the basketball analogy, rather than stopping a game because of one ball-hog, you simply don't pass to that player (or encourage others to do likewise) and the game continues.

This "changing by the rules" is similar to the point made by Sullivan and Porter (1997) in their invocation of theorists calling for the "freeing of (research) practices from the mantle of the objectivist paradigm":

> *Bourdieu wants to foreground cultural practices, or what he calls "habitus." Habitus represents the repeated rituals of culture: that which is done repeat edly, perhaps for no "reason" (in the theoretical sense of* logos*) other thn that it is that which is done. The attempt to provide some kind of exterior or legal reason for the activity is the arrogance of the objectivist tradition of methodol ogy.* (p. 24)

These instances of hostility likely represent gaymers *interpreting* these interruptions as "top-down" ethics – instances where objectivist researchers come in and says "this isn't the way it should be" and otherwise ignore the social-epistemic *habitus* of the website, even though those rituals may be gendered, sexist, or even from homophobic traditions. Posts which succeed at being "the changes they want to see" *do* follow the

social-epistemic practices of the website, and they are received with less hostility.

Consider the events surrounding Anita Sarkeesian (Hamilton, 2013), who attempted to

fund a kickstarter to raise awareness of the objectification of women in video games,

entitled "Damsel in Distress: Tropes vs. Women." Sarkeesian, who was initially seek-

ing $6,000 to produce an informative web series (Figure 21), was greeted by a hate-

fueled campaign oriented around photoshopping images of her as the victim of physi-

cal violence - a disgusting reaction, no doubt, but indicative of the resistance faced by

those who question *habitus* from the vantage of theoretical intellectualism.

(Figure 21: Sarkeesian's Vision)

My point is to not to criticize Sarkeesian's approach. Indeed, her intention was

arguably nothing more than to promote awareness of socially responsible consumers

who can "be the change they want to see" themselves, but the violence brought to bear

against her is disturbing. Homophobia is likely to follow a similar course in its violence against critics who challenge (hetero)sexist conventions as well. This disruption of play/*habitas* should be thought of as an analogy for the best possible methods of integrating LGBT or otherwise queer content into games. It must be done from the perspective of the player – with developers or programmers participating directly with the player base for reflective and just change. The problem that arises in attempting to change r/gaymers this way, or the game-sphere by extension, is that such attempts take a long time, and are often drowned out by more vocal or populated factions, a small consolation for marginalized populations fighting for equal representation. As gaymers, we will likely be forced to choose between slow process or quick violence.

Closing: Transformation, Resistance and Play

These results carry different consequences for different audiences.

For the video game industry, these results further demonstrate a necessity to transform and equalize gender representation within the medium, not only to benefit female players, but to benefit LGBT players as well. The two character images in Sarkeesian's promotion (Princess Zelda and Peach, Figure 21) demonstrate such a transformation, one that empowers female players rather than objectifying them by providing heroic examples who can serve as a vessel of female agency. As many feminist theorists argue, equalizing the idealization of males and females as avatars of agency in video games (rather than as objects of sexual desire) will directly support female engagement and advocacy. In terms of how this benefits LGBT audiences, such a move can obliquely support gayme cyberspaces by disrupting the heterosexist

compulsion which casts females only in the role of sex-object. With the game indus-try's compliance in this, gaymers are less coerced into negotiating these ideologies, sometimes resulting in hostile resistance to gender inclusion on their native sites. It also provides gaymers with ample idealized female representations, acting within posi-tions of power, and encourages more frequent and positive reception of female (or other) presences in gay game spaces. Game developers are also encouraged to queer their own gaming landscapes, and inculcate these changes through *play*. By introduc-ing characters or mechanics within the normal context of a game, the game industry can challenge heterosexism by making "queer" encounters or ideas normal aspects of everyday representation. Example: an in-game method for reassigning gender in MMORPGs. This allows developers to queer game content from "the bottom up" and avoids the disruptions and violence of top-down objectivist coercion.

For Game Studies, these results call for a less "color-blind" analysis of Japa-nese video games and their interpretation in western academia. Considering Japan's influence over early and contemporary video game culture, it is both inaccurate and inappropriate to continue to neglect, downplay, or even ignore its culture (and that cul-ture's influence) on the medium. Western scholars need to acknowledge both our own "other-ness" in regards to video games and the degree to which Japan and its traditions and aesthetics have shaped the game-sphere. Trends already suggest that the West is well on its way to "orientalizing" Japan, as the appellation *J*RPG attests. Notice that the genre is referred to as "Japanese Role Playing Game" as opposed to "*Western* Role Playing Game." We are already other-izing them.

For Queer Theorists, the fact that this research demonstrates contemporary conditions of LGBT life continue to be influenced both by heterosexism and queer-resistance is nothing new. Yet, video games (particularly Japanese titles) offer a potentially fertile ground for inclusion and discussion of queer ideology, especially in the medium's ambiguity (its "marvelous void") of sexuality, and the necessity of play. As the corpus of queer video game scholarship grows, western researchers and analysts need to adopt a more conscious and thorough contextual consideration to the presence of sexuality in videogames, especially regarding those descendant from traditions of *nanshoku* and *shonen-ai*. "Shipping" due to its increasing popularity and presence, allows for diverse readings, discussions, and negotiations both within our own community, and as a bridge to mainstream cultural representation. The more video games encourage this, the further we move toward sexuality as *play*-formativity.

For Rhetoric and Composition scholars, this research suggests that, try as we might to transition games into writing, we are already seeing a faster transition of writing into games. "Gamification" in composition has met with some success, and this research doesn't suggest that such efforts should be abandoned, yet clearly composition does not need to find new ways to synthesize play and writing. It's already happening, whether we participate or not. The methodology of this study – seeing cyberspaces simultaneously as *networks*, *queertext*, and *game* – encourages us to see online spaces as the most necessary locals of (Moulthroup's, 2004) molecular rhetoric – because by nature they contain acts of *play*, *resistance*, and *transformation*. The microlith of configurative textuality. As he states,

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Games model or inculcate a crucial set of cognitive practices. In older cultures

of print and broadcasting, the term literacy *came to represent the fundamental*

capacity to process information – that is primarily to interpret. It may be possi-

ble to expand the concept of literacy to cover digital systems… On the other

hand, the shift from interpretation to configuration may require something

more than revision, perhaps even a fresh conceptual start… By looking at

cyber[writing] through the lens of play, scholars may find it easier to resolve

this question, modifying or supplementing the old concept of literacy. (p. 64)

Whether *Play*, *resistance*, and *transformation*, provide a revision to our previous no-

tions of literacy or a fresh conceptual start, they effectively describe the actions

through which all molecular rhetorics function, whether transforming ideas into text,

"wasting time" online, or challenging the old paradigm of interpretive textual en-

gagement. Unsurprisingly, many don't consider their time on Facebook, or Reddit,

4chan, or many other cyberspaces to be writing at all. Academically adopting a more

multiperspectival consideration of rhetorical action within cyberspace will perhaps

reduce that disconnect. When, in other words, must we follow the suit of Games Stud-

ies and consider the *configurative* practices of cyberwriting to influence our notions of

genre, for example? The marriage of games and writing is already necessitating these

adaptations.

For gaymers, these results present more of a portrait than any specific call to

action. The very nature of the networking, queering, and gaming occurring on

r/gaymers empowers the community through the support, interaction, and (sometimes)

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conflict between its participants. Although this study at times highlights disruptions or friction between participants, there were countless instances of solidarity, and I remain convinced that the site accomplishes an important victory for LGBT persons, not only in the ideas that it offers and challenges, but in the community that it strengthens. This research could only be enriched by adding r/gaymers participants' own voices to the observations and conclusions of this study. It is for further research at this time, however, to take this necessary step.

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