

Sex & Video Games: A Textual Analysis of Sex in the game *Super Princess Peach*

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Abstract

Implicitly or explicitly, sex is part of the culture of video games. Female characters are depicted as docile bodies awaiting sexual conquest. The use of this heteronormative narrative (Rich, 1994), of saving and getting the girl, has robbed virtual women of their own sexual power. This research will analyze the game, *Super Princess Peach* as an ideological work to understand the current position of women in games. Through play, it will study implied sexual themes to help explain how gameplay shapes social perceptions of sex. Sex and sexuality is not a new subject of study (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Brookey & Kristopher, Cannon, 2009; Burgess & Burgess, 2007; Gross, 2005; Consalvo, 2003); however, in respect to the motives of why consumers play video games, narratives about sex have been neglected.

Keywords: sex, sexuality, gender, heteronormativity, Super Princess Peach, video game, textual analysis

Sex & Video Games: How *Super Princess Peach* reclaims the Vibrator

The study of sexuality in video games influences how gameplay shapes social perceptions of sex. Readers should recognize the underlying use of sex as an objective (or implied objective) the next time they are playing story-driven video games. Women comprise a substantial part of game playing audience (Williams, Yee & Caplan, 2008), some authors have begun to study female gamers; with a few exceptions (Consalvo, 2003; Jansz & Martis, 2007; Downs & Smith, 2010) the construction of women in games is still mostly absent. For games to move beyond heteronormative (Rich 1994) assumptions, or gaming as usual, women must be imagined as more than sexual objects.

Female characters in video games have long been depicted as docile bodies awaiting rescue or pursuit. The use of this heteronormative narrative, of saving and getting the girl, has robbed virtual women of their own sexual power. It is heteronormative to depict women as prizes in games because it forces them to await their romantic fate rather than actively taking steps to determine it. Characters like Lara Croft of *Tomb Raider* and Samus of *Metriod* have proven that not all virtual women need to be rescued. However, the prevalent sexism in games still casts women in one of two roles. Either they are dutiful heterosexual companions or they are mere plot devices lacking their own sexual identity entirely.

Male characters often fight to win the heart of the girl, but female characters cannot fight for the heart of another woman. Likewise, no male characters can complete a story-driven game and end up with the guy of their dreams. This inquiry focuses on women's sexuality but notes that male sexuality is potentially limited by gaming as well.

This study will analyze the game, *Super Princess Peach* as an ideological work. The strong female protagonist transcends previous heteronormative roles. However, the mere presence of women does not challenge the role female characters play. Peach is played and discussed to identify her purpose in the story and larger cultural implications. To engage the gaming industry conversations about developing female characters that challenge notions of sexualization and objectification. The inclusion of a token or major female character does not mean that play or marketing that character does not cater to archetypical heterosexual ideal; or frame them as a commodity the player is controlling or trying to earn.

Sex and Sexuality

The terms sex and sexuality, in reference to video games, are often evocative of *Grand Theft Auto* and *God of War*, games rated M for mature because of their sexually explicit scenes. This study is not a play-by-play of sex scenes in games, but rather examines the frequent and normalized portrayals of female characters as vulnerable, feminine and heterosexual. Analysis in this study will consider gender representations that reify sex stereotypes.

Gender roles contribute to both subliminal and overt use of sexuality in video games. Sexuality cannot be discussed devoid of sex acts. Heterosexual sex is the presumed outcome of many gaming narratives. Compulsory heterosexuality is the theory that heterosexual sex is seen as the only natural sex act.

Adrienne Rich's (1994) explanation of *compulsory heterosexuality* is a cornerstone of queer theory. She illustrates how in most social structures individuals operate under the notion that heterosexuality is the norm, which otherizes people who

do not fit neatly into this category. Gaming theorist Mia Consalvo (2003) takes Rich's (1994) ideas one step further and asserts that virtual worlds, via video games, have begun to operate under the same initial assumption of heteronormativity, or heterosexuality as the norm. Games like *Harvest Moon* or *Grand Theft Auto* blatantly illustrate this argument.

This research does not argue that being heterosexual is bad; it does, however, assert that the way heterosexuality is used to support patriarchy is horrific. The idea that there is only "one" means of sexual identity is a mechanism for asserting social control over women. Women's non-heteronormative sexual identity, such as masturbation or lesbianism, is seen as deviant because it does not seek to support procreation and male pleasure. Women, virtual and otherwise, must begin to define sexuality on their own terms. This research begins that battle in the virtual world.

Queer theorists articulate that when female sexuality is regulated women are forced to operate through strict gender roles. Feminine and masculine traits are readily identified in gameplay and contribute to the understanding of women. To borrow the words of Barker and Galasinski (2001), "Gender is not a universal of nature or culture but a question of performativity, that is, the re-citation and reiteration of the "law" which obliges gendering under the heterosexual imperative (p. 87). The performance of gender through play must be identified to successfully challenge any "laws" of sexuality.

Sex as a Prize

Building a story often begins with the old dramatic formula and a central conflict. Once the protagonist overcomes the challenge, *he* is rewarded by "getting the girl." But in

games, women are not always clearly marked as the objective. Players must make a short intuitive leap to identify women as the prize of a game. This research is a springboard to encourage that intuitive leap, and through a play-by-play of narrative choices it illustrates the role sex plays in games.

Games have objectives that propel the player forward. If there was no urgency to keep playing audiences would not dedicate countless hours of their lives to overcoming on-screen obstacles and achieving virtual goals. One element that propels a player forward is sex. Some games like *Harvest Moon* make it impossible to move forward in a game without getting married to someone of the opposite sex. *Fable 2* is one of the few games to date where a player can have sex with a male or female partner. Games like *The Witcher*, or *God of War*, include scenes with nude women that reveal part of the story through dialogue or a memory that players unlock as they advance in the game. *Grand Theft Auto* gives players achievement points for fornicating with prostitutes. Implicitly or explicitly, sex is part of the culture of video games and warrants further investigation.

Relevant Literature

The reach of games extends to both society and the individual player. Thusly, representations of women in video games shape beliefs about sexual identity and agency outside of games (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Dill & Thill, 2007). But what motivates people to remain engaged in these influential media? Is it the promise of interacting with other players that keeps gamers loyal or is there something more at stake?

Tony Manninen (2003) utilizes Habermas' four areas of communicative action to understand and articulate interaction in video games. The first area of communicative action

is instrumental, the process through which individuals work to achieve personal goals through interaction with others and the games interface. The second communicative action is strategic and has to do with the overall competitive nature of games: humans gain pleasure from measuring their abilities in relation to their peers. Normatively regulated actions are the third type that Manninen describes. He argues that gaming “clans” comprised of “veteran players” share common objectives and values which drive their actions. The fourth aspect is dramaturgical: the actions players commit and visual appearance players construct for themselves online communicate to others who they are and define their interactions. As a whole, communicative action establishes gaming as “real” communication and social action rather than just play. Manninen expresses the value of games interactivity but does not articulate whether this value is what motivates people to continue.

However, Manninen’s second phase, strategic communicative action, extends to recent quantitative research by Michigan State scholars Nicholas David Bowman and John Lucas Sherry. Bowman and Sherry (2006) explain how success in video games leads to enjoyment for the players. Through survey of a large sample, they show a clear causal relationship between high scores and a “flow state.” The closer people feel they are to success, the more compelled to continue. But what is valued as success?

The book *Playing Video Games: Motives, Responses and Consequences* (Vorderer & Bryant, 2006) indicate different markers of gratification, social stimuli, and competition as motivation for play; but like Bowman and Sherry (2006) they neglect the narrative element of winning. Video games are both a communicative and social medium, and the narrative of story-driven games does not just exist in a vacuum.

The third communicative act of shared objectives begins to explain the culture produced by games. Janet Murray (2006) argues that games are a “ratchet” that signals markers of the status quo. Myths socialize humans and video games are a powerful mechanism for conveying cultural values and myths (Murray, 2006). Rules, ethics, and language are all examples of how society can be transformed and challenged while playing video games.

Video games are a forum and tool that players use to communicate and understand their culture (McAllister, 2004). People are motivated to play because of that understanding; but what are the narratives that are being established or reproduced about women? A study of the way women are portrayed in games cannot be divorced from the way that they are positioned in society.

Representation of Women’s Sexuality

The prehistoric practice of bonking women on the head and dragging them to a cave for intercourse may be a thing of the past; but brutish notions of controlling bodies of women is still alive in the twenty-first century. Women’s sexuality has been positioned as a mechanism for procreation or male amusement (Katz, 1995). Video games do not provide an overt dialogue about women and their sexual power (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). Ivory (2006) argues that female video game characters are overall under-represented and that as playable characters they are hyper sexualized. Some games overtly exploit women. Players of both *Playboy Mansion* and *Leisure Suit Larry* are presented with a single objective: guide your male characters in having heterosexual intercourse with women.

The fantasy advertised by such games is engaging in acts that cannot be accomplished in the real world (Kearney & Pivec, 2007). These games offer scenarios where one can easily

win some alone time with a playmate, but not the option to realistically live a day in the life of Hugh Hefner. These games exemplify the problem of gaming culture presenting women as sexual objects (Kearney & Pivec, 2007) rather than rational sexual human beings. The female characters in *Playboy Mansion* or *Leisure Suit Larry* have no dignity or power to escape their roles as sexual objects (Kearney & Pivec, 2007).

You might ask why this research investigates story-driven games instead of games that clearly illustrate the problem presented by my study. There is no proof necessary to show that *Playboy Mansion* or *Leisure Suit Larry* objectify women. The marketing of these games is contingent on that claim. This research asks whether representations of women in other games perpetuate that same exploitation.

One cannot examine sexuality without a discussion of gender (Karl, 2007). Women must understand heteronormative roles that sustain patriarchy in order to identify them in gaming spaces. There is a direct link between the policing of gender roles and the system of patriarchy that limits sexuality.

One of the more damaging pressures faced by women in society is the unattainable standard of beauty. These pressures have seeped into the virtual world. Only those deemed “worthy” of sexual attention are shown to be valuable in society. Normative notions of beauty are at the forefront of the most problematic representations of women.

In her book *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf (1991) discusses the pressures women face in meeting social standards of femininity and appearance. Wolfe outlines five areas impacted by normative notions of beauty, work, religion, sex, violence and hunger. She provides an in-depth discussion of how women have surrendered to stigmatizing images of prettiness, and

how that has brought some women to sacrifice their lives for socially inflicted standards of beauty. She implicates the media in the spreading of such messages and Wolf is not alone in this condemnation.

Bell hooks (1994) maintains that critical investigation of media is a means of social change. Evoking historical narratives of oppression can help us to understand and re-imagine negative imagery (hooks, 1994). She does not specifically examine video games, but does approach other media forms including commercials, movies, and music videos with a focus on gender, race, class, and sexuality. Hooks analysis demonstrates the importance of taking a historical perspective on women's sexuality. The history of laws and policy that have restricted women continue to shape perceptions about sex.

Our Bodies, Their Sex: An Overview of Restricting Women's Sexuality

The United States has laws on the books today that prohibit women's sexual autonomy. The use of a sex toy, or vibrator, is a crime punishable by imprisonment in many states (Nussbaum, 1999). Such laws are carefully worded to include vibrators but not adversely impact the sexual aids used by men. The objective of these laws is not to stop heterosexual intercourse but rather to stop women from simulating such intercourse without the presence of a man. John Hopkins legal scholar Danielle Lindermann (2006) claims that she could find no similar United States law that restricted men's ability to masturbate.

Additionally, what constitutes "sex" is framed by what is physically pleasing and valuable for men (Katz, 2007). Many contend that a sex act only occurs if a man achieves penetration or has an orgasm (Lorber, 2005). In one conversation between a married heterosexual couple, the wife counted having sex with her husband three times in one week

but the husband counted four because that was the number of times he ejaculated (Kimmel, 2000). This couple's tally points to a larger problem of perception: what counts as sex has been framed to use heterosexuality as a mechanism of keeping women subservient to men.

Controlling women's sexuality is a long held social practice. In the game *Super Princess Peach* the female illness of hysteria is invoked by the game's inclusion of radical emotions and suggestively shaped scepters. Vibrators were not originally created for women to masturbate for pleasure, but rather out of medical necessity. As early as Ancient Egypt, unmarried or unruly women were documented as suffering from "hysteria" (Maines, 1998). The relationship between women's emotions and sexuality is relevant because the game *Super Princess Peach* is built around female emotion.

In her book *The Technology of Orgasm: "Hysteria," the Vibrator, and Women's Sexual Satis/Action*, Rachel Maines (1998) explains how orgasm was understood as a means for controlling/curing women and not their personal enjoyment. I am sure women did gain some degree of pleasure out of their medically sanctioned orgasm; but some such procedures were a spectacle that employed a midwife or doctor to help "control" the patient. The spectacle of having sexuality imposed rather than chosen seems un-imaginable today.

Today most women have access to commercial vibrators, but their use is still taboo. Women who have sexual autonomy are seen as less valuable. The "gender template" discussed by Patricia Collins (2000) has been solidified by the "virginity movement," made up of primarily fundamental religious organizations that ask women to pledge their sexuality to their future husbands. In her book *The Purity Myth*, Jessica Valenti (2009) articulates how

America has used the virginity movement to create two categories of women, those that are “clean” and those that are “dirty” (p. 45).

New monolithic notions of beauty are tied up in policing women’s sexual autonomy. Those few who are deemed as wanted or attractive is determined by their agency and sexuality. Valenti (2009) explains desirability in terms of the *virginity movement* that implies two justifications for its existence. Women cannot be trusted to make decisions about their own sexuality. Women by nature are modest and chaste and do not go online and order their own personal vibrators.

Another damning impact of the virginity movement is that it has forwarded a new and definitely not improved beauty myth that women must be pure and young to be beautiful. The clearest indication of the adoption of a “pure as beautiful” standard are adult Halloween costumes, which have sexy school girl and baby outfits, with knee high socks and pigtails. Childhood visages, are now seen as sexy, which is incredibly disturbing. Every day more media images arrive that appropriate youth for sex.

Other theorists agree with Wolfe and hooks in demanding a feminist lens be used to understand representations of power in the media. Ann Kaplan (2004) critiques feminist media theorists for their *tabula rasa* approach to media archetypes. She discusses the history of feminist theories and film theory, but argues that post-structuralism provides one of the most appropriate means for understanding film. Though Kaplan and hooks discuss a more critical approach, they do not take into account the dynamic nature of video games.

Because this study focuses on sexuality it is important to discuss how sexuality is represented and regulated. A groundbreaking article (Lorde, 1984) brought attention to how

male and female gender roles are a performance of heteronormativity. Lorde (1984) described how society subtly regulates gender to enforce heterosexuality as the correct way of being. A queering or re-imagining of roles is necessary to break out of socially prescribed roles.

Emphasizing gender and sexuality archetypes can entrench such categories. During play this research will attempt to engage choices in games that resist such fixed categories. Feminist theorist Judith Butler (1999) considers it problematic to consider women a fixed category, but she contends that recoding can occur through audience participation. To resignify, or challenge fixed notions of femininity, Butler argues for a series of "subversive repetitions" of gender. Her goal is to divorce the categories of sex and gender. She uses the example of drag to illustrate society's reworking of the "reality" of gender.

Like drag, gaming narratives provide a landscape for imitation and thus reframing problematic concepts (Turkle, 1995). Players can choose to equip clothing, weapons and abilities that present a virtual drag. Participants can adopt cross-gender or even cross-species roles that do not correspond with how they may be socially classified (MacCallum-Stewart, 2009). For example, though a human woman is a playable option, my character in the game *World of Warcraft* is a male orc that shares none of my physical traits. My gender reality is disrupted by my ongoing social interaction with other players, who interact with me as though I were male, oblivious that I have a vagina. This disruption is not unique to MMORPGs, but often exists in other story-driven games.

Communication takes place between communities of players and their games. Butler (1999) argues that language is inextricably linked to action because words do not stand-alone.

Instead she considers them part of a larger performance. Sexuality in games must be critiqued as fluid performance, not explained in binary frameworks as a series of acts (Butler, 1999).

The in-game play that occurs in gaming narratives is part of that performance.

Power relations extend beyond the performance act itself and permeate social norms and identities. In the next section authors who further discuss the role of “play as performance” that ultimately shapes social meta-narratives. Though Butler does not articulate resignification in term of technology, her theory has relevance to this emerging discussion.

Sex, Gender and Technology

One of the first authors who began to bridge feminist discussions of representation and technology is Donna Haraway (1991). She argues for the confusion of boundaries in construction of the cyborg self. She clearly establishes that power is being reframed in dynamic media and that we must use this as an opportunity to challenge dominant narratives. Haraway (1991) lays the groundwork for contesting and imagining new identities in gaming spaces, but she is not the only scholar who discusses the potential of user space.

Sherry Turkle (1995) also conducts research that incorporates technology’s impact on identity. One of the first scholars to take an ethnographic approach to the Internet, she makes the argument that in virtual spaces users “can be recreated or can recreate ourselves” (Turkle, 1995, p. 26). An online experience holds the opportunity to embrace an "aspect of yourself" as a separate entity in the game space. In the world of the game “you are who you pretend to be” (Turkle, 1995, p. 3).

A discussion of text-based games is applicable to video games because they discuss the transformative power new identities forge through technology. The disembodied location

in cyberspace allows people to choose how they are presented (O’Riordan & Phillips xii). Video games provide a safe space to recode notions of identity. Turkle (1995) and Haraway (1991) wrote more generally about technology and women, but they did not focus specifically on video games.

With their book *From Barbie to Mortal Combat: Gender and Computer Games*, Henry Jenkins and Justine Cassell (2000) were at the forefront of writing that examines representation in gaming. This book has three main objectives: (1) to establish that women play video games, (2) to explore what video games women should and do play, (3) to understand the relationship between gender and gaming. The contributing authors are at odds with this research because of the lack of distinction between terms; in their text the term gender is used interchangeably in reference to biological sex and the social construct of gender. This is problematic because games cannot be seen as a location for change when scholars are arguing for the reification of gender norms.

By arguing that more “feminine” games should be made and played by women, hegemonic gender norms and social stigmas are reified rather than being challenged (Jenkins & Cassell, 2000). This book recognizes that a dialogue about representation and the implicit power dynamic therein must occur. Jenkins’ findings begin to scratch the surface of representational politics in games. However, his work is acutely lacking in a critical analysis of the social impacts of negative representation. The politics of representation in games is undermined by the lack of an acceptable method for researching games.

Questions of Representation Still Not a Priority

There is no methodology for studying narrative in story-driven games. Issues related to studying narrative have begun to warrant attention, but this has yet to yield a methodology. Authors have begun to discuss the politics of who plays, it is uncontested that women play games but there is still little data about their experiences (Ivory, 2006). The lack of data about female consumers is problematic when recent studies indicate that almost half of all gamers are women (Ivory, 2006). Compounding this problem is the fact that most scholars are not playing games in depth; ninety minutes is the longest recorded gameplay noted in communication research (Ivory, 2006).

Feminist media research is lacking in the realm of technology research at large (Lee, 2006). Women are situated globally as uneducated consumers of technology rather than informed and equal consumers. The focus of these writers is women's role as consumers; they ignore questions about the way female characters are presented in games and how those representations impact female gamers.

In the article, "Sex Lives in Second Life", a long overdue discussion about sexual identity in video games is raised (Cannon & Brookey, 2009). In *Second Life*, the potential impact of gameplay is a double edge sword that cuts both ways, making games a location where women can be objectified and empowered (Cannon & Brookey, 2009). In order to challenge how that sword is wielded, a dialogue about sexuality must continue; but new research has come to a turning point.

That turning point includes writings such as Elisabeth Hayes' (2005) article, "Women and Video Gaming: Gendered Identities at Play," she posits that current discussions of women in games focus on "girl games" rather than games at large. The goal of Hayes research is to

disrupt traditional notions of female identity construction when interacting with games. She argues that gender should not be isolated from all other elements of play; rather, a multiplicity of issues should be considered to help recode static notion of gender.

This notion supports French psychoanalytic feminists, who argue that the only way to move beyond oppressive sex is for women to begin a discussion. To resist phallogentric ideas about sex women must begin to write about “*jouissance*’, their exultant joy in their sexual bodies and emotions (Lorber, 2005).” Jeroen Jansz and Raynel Martis (2007) and Downs and Smith (2010) conducted content analyses that studied games representations of race and gender but only mostly character screen shots (Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009), cinema scenes and marketing. Conversely, Mia Consalvo (2003) successfully bridges feminist theory and a critical approach to games; Rather than interviewing players or watching introductory scenes, she played video games herself. Consalvo (2003) provides a new opportunity for gamers to re-examine the role of gaming in their sexual identity. Consalvo (2006) co-authored an article entitled “Game analysis: Developing a Methodological Toolkit for the Qualitative Study of Games.” This article supports my study and can be used to begin a discussion on the necessity of actually playing the games one writes about.

Video games have implications for both women who play and those who do not (Jeroen Jansz & Raynel Martis, 2007; Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009). Games are social tools where identity is questioned and negotiated. Video games that either position women as objects to be won or as inferior in other ways have detrimental consequences for both female players and all women, because games help shape larger cultural narratives (Burgess, 2007; Dill & Thill, 2007; Jeroen Jansz et al., 2007; Martins et al., 2009). This

study questions the representation of women in games and calls attention to the need for female characters to level-up.

Method

Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton (2006) agree that games are malleable texts that can be approached from a hermeneutic perspective. The organic nature of games provides the capacity to draw on historical metaphors to invoke new meanings around women's sexuality (Lehtonen, 2000). Lehtonen (2000) provides a foundation for unraveling narrative content through textual analysis.

A central point Lehtonen re-iterates is that texts build upon other texts. Meaning does not exist in a vacuum. Because texts exist in layers, unraveling layers concurrently allows one to uncover more of what lay beneath. To uncover these layers, a researcher should devote a great deal of time playing the games they study (Dutton & Consalvo, 2006; Aarseth, 2001)

Narratives about sexuality, like other social myths, are malleable. Social trends and new technology contribute to perceptions about sexuality (Dill & Thill, 2007). Mindful of social narratives, this research uses textual analysis to determine how perceptions about sexuality are reframed by story-driven games.

Sex in games does not supplement real sex, but instead shapes new and existing perceptions through simulation. With my findings I will engage how play influences meta-narratives about sexuality. Heteronormativity will provide a framework for my findings to help determine if women are indeed represented as sexual objects in games.

Findings

Peach as a Leading Character

Throughout the years, Princess Peach has been held captive by more villains than any other character in gaming history. After playing the victim in early Nintendo games like *Donkey Kong* and *Super Mario Brothers*, she became a playable character and active participant for the first time in *Super Mario Brothers 2*. Since then, she has been playable in many games, including, but not limited, to *Mario Tennis*, *Mario Golf*, *Mario Baseball*, *Mario Party*, *Mario Soccer*, *Super Smash Brother's* and *Mario Kart*. She also appeared in non-Mario titles such as *NBA Street Volume 3* and *SSX on Tour*. As indicated by the fact that Mario's name appears in the titles of these games and hers does not, playing as Peach was presented primarily as a quirky alternative choice: it was never the obvious, default option. Peach was never the central character.

In 2006, Princess Peach finally escaped the Koopas, Karts and Marios of the Mushroom Kingdom and landed a starring role in her own game, *Super Princess Peach*. Having achieved this independent status, Peach has finally been liberated. She is no longer a docile body awaiting rescue, but a heroine with her own set of superpowers.

Though Peach has escaped being a prisoner of bad guys, she is still a prisoner of social stigma: a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, pink-dress-wearing princess. The game cover art, like many covers that feature female characters (Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007) emphasize femininity. For this reason, Peach reifies hegemonic discourse, enforcing the notion of a monolithic woman (Kaplan, 2000). Simply put, the only image of a powerful female present is white and traditionally feminine. This representation, then, gives the impression that white

beauty is the norm. Unfortunately, the white aesthetic is far from the only stereotype perpetuated by physical representations of Princess Peach.

The television commercial for this game presents young girls from various backgrounds in pink dresses. My vision of Peach as a full-grown, powerful woman was disrupted by these ads because they relate Peach to young girls. These ads may appeal to a young demographic, but they also minimize Princess Peach's clout as a powerful woman. If the aim of the marketing was to show young women dressed as their hero, it is additionally problematic that there are not overweight, unattractive or male children in the ad because that implies that only girls who look like Princess Peach can hope to become a princess (Beasley & Collins, 2002; Wolfe, 1994; Shaw, 2012). The commercial for this game has the opportunity to transgress the monolithic character of Peach, and it does not do so successfully.

Peach's commercial was aired in 2004 and since the gaming industry has made some progress in resisting normative advertisements. Recognizable figures such as Beyonce and Penelope Cruz have been featured in Nintendo advertisements. These newer commercials may indicate a broadened of the intended audience to include different generations and women of color.

Though Peach's physical appearance may be problematic, we cannot lose sight of the fact that she has been empowered. A damsel has been transformed into a heroine, which is an important moment in gaming history. This game does not challenge white privilege, but it does include other instances with the potential to impact normative notions of sexuality.

Princess Peach's Powers and the Hysterical Female

Like most gaming protagonists, Princess Peach has extraordinary special talents, in this case super powers. In her newest game all of her abilities are exaggerations of women's intense or "hysterical" emotions. Each of her powers is related to a different emotion, referred to here as "Vibes." They are the Anger/Rage Vibe, the Sadness/Gloom Vibe, the Happiness/Joy Vibe, and the Calm Vibe. Peach is not the first woman in history ascribed with super emotions.

Though the medical condition of hysteria has been discussed in ancient Egyptian and Roman times, it was most often researched and documented during the Victorian era as a condition unique to women (Maines, 1996). Women who suffer from hysteria experience "symptoms of irritability, depression, confusion, heart palpitations, forgetfulness, insomnia, headaches, muscle spasms, ticklishness or weepiness" (Lindemann, 2006). In other words, hysteria is a female illness, generally used to explain extreme emotions.

While Peach experiences four extreme kinds of emotions, she utilizes these hysterics to eventually overcome the ominous weapon, the Vibe Scepter. Peach's four emotions, (1) anger, (2) sadness, (3) happiness and (4) calm are all exaggerated interpretations of female sensations which were historically a sign of women's inferiority and weakness (327).

The most drastic of Peach's emotions is anger. When she is angry, her body is engulfed in flames. This skill can be useful for breaking through bridges and walls. This anger posits that women can channel their anger for good use in beating up bad guys.

Connecting physical violence with human emotion incorporates a reasoning that most video games have ignored. Usually characters attack bad guys with a kind of cold determination or a complete lack of emotion. This stance is a vestige of the days when game

technology was not yet sophisticated enough for programmers to make character emotions look natural. It is the established norm: Emotionless characters often look neutral – simply digital; but compared to Princess Peach they seem almost unsettlingly cold. In this game, a player just taps the red heart on the touch screen and Peach becomes visibly and emotionally motivated to destroy.

When Princess Peach is sad/gloomy, she cries. Her stream of tears has many practical applications, which include putting out harmful flames, jumping further, running faster or growing climbable plants. Tears are commonly characterized as effeminate and a sign of weakness. The power of tears in this game validates this emotion as productive.

Another “vibe” in the game that you can manipulate is happiness/joy. A player just presses the yellow heart and then holds down the A button to invoke Peach’s joy. Happiness can be utilized for hovering or floating, which creates a wind tunnel surrounding Peach. This technique is useful for leaping over a chasm in the earth or for rising over a cloud of vision-impeding fog. Floating can also be used to find hidden items that cannot be reached from the ground. The myth of the blonde airhead is challenged by the resourceful Peach, who is flying high on life.

The last emotion is calm. By pressing the green heart, Peach becomes content (but not joyful), entering a state of calmness that refills her health. In *Princess Peach*, emotions are practical. In past generations, volatile emotions were diagnosed as a serious medical condition. Though Princess Peach’s emotions could be mistaken for hysteria, they drive her to accomplish her goals. The game sends an effective feminist message by turning stereotypes about emotion on their head.

The presence of exaggerated emotions is not the game's only link to hysteria. As a medical condition, the only known cure for hysteria was orgasm. In 1880 Dr. Joseph Mortimer Granville invented the medical device known as the electromechanical vibrator to more effectively treat hysteria (Maines, 1998). Before the advent of this invention, midwives and doctors would manually stimulate a woman's clitoris to ease hysteria. In the game *Super Princess Peach*, the primary villain's weapon of control is the Vibe Scepter, a bejeweled rod. Like the vibrator, the rod controls emotions and manipulates Peach.

For centuries, dildos remained uncontroversial medical devices. It was not until the 1960s that they became an "explicitly sexual commodity" (Lindemann, 2006). In the United States when vibrators were marketed as sexual gratification toys, many states made vibrator sales and use criminal offenses punishable by fines and imprisonment (Nussbaum 42). Several states retain laws that will imprison a woman for owning a dildo, making it illegal for women to please themselves (Lindemann, 2006). This prohibition represents an attempt by society to control women's sexuality.

The central goal of *Super Princess Peach* was obtaining control of an object evocative of women's historical usage of vibrators; but articulating the potential sex acts represented by the inclusion of a masturbatory tool in the game *Super Princess Peach* is meaningless without knowing the relationships between the characters. Sexuality is a fluid social relationship, and potential sex acts are only one dimension (Ross & Rapp, 1997). For Peach the scepter is a means of liberating her kingdom and herself. Though she has been a character in many games, this is the first where she has been afforded such agency. For Koopa, the relationship is more superficial and the scepter represents a weapon that he uses against all of the characters in the game.

Women's sexuality is regulated by a society that historically provides limited sexual identities (Lorber, 1994; 2005). Women are forced into a binary of being moral or immoral, sexual or asexual, which bolsters the narrative of heteronormativity. Women are either cast as asexual beings who serve marriage or procreation, or as the converse, immoral women who dare to pursue their own sexual desires (Collins, 2000). Peach's objective of gaining controlling of the Vibe Scepter does not fit neatly into either of these categories.

Super Princess Peach is reminiscent of how vibrators were invented to control radical and emotional women. Koopa's attempt to use the scepter to control Peach is evocative of laws that sought to keep women from using such masturbatory aids towards their own ends. Peach takes the scepter from Koopa, and with it she has taken control. She has usurped Koopa's power; but even more importantly she has symbolically usurped a historical legal power.

The final battle of this game causes Peach to face-off with Koopa and his Vibe Scepter. In the end Koopa is unable to control Peach's body and emotions with this weapon/vibrator and she claims the object for herself while simultaneously rescuing all of the men in her life. The game *Super Princess Peach* successfully celebrates the dildo and women's sexual liberation.

The vibrator represents women's re-appropriation of an object that was historically used to regulate their sexuality. The game *Super Princess Peach* concludes with the vibrator in female hands. Dildos are more than a masturbatory tool, but a symbol of the back and forth attempts of society to control female bodies. *Super Princess Peach* provides one front where women have succeeded in asserting sexual autonomy. The Vibe Scepter is the main point of

contention throughout the game but its importance falls to the wayside when the final game objective is unveiled.

At the end of the story *Super Princess Peach* the player does not *get* the girl, but rather the girl character *gets* the guy. The final battle helps Peach to rescue her previous rescuer, Mario. Although this puts a woman in a position of authority, it still frames straight sex or romance as the ultimate objective of the game. Compulsory heterosexuality is still constructed as winning out, or the motive that propelled the player toward the games resolution.

Peach's autonomy is further undermined by the games construction of beauty. Peach sets women against one another because it only displays a straight white woman as having agency and sexual autonomy.

Peach does not deconstruct notions of women as inferior because she does not represent all women. As a woman of color who plays games, I am hard pressed to find leading heroines that reflect me. To borrow the words of Audre Lorde (1984), "divide and conquer must become define and empower." We as gamers have an opportunity not only to demand that women are part of their virtual worlds, but that we are given diverse and empowered role models reflecting the consumer make-up.

In the game *Super Princess Peach*, Peach is not a sexual object. She is no longer a captive awaiting rescue; yet her character still perpetuates patriarchy because of its normative use of sexual motives and appearance. The subject of sexuality is not absent in the game but is more subtly addressed in its content. Peach is still a notable heroine; her presence does not represent a step-forward but rather sideways, with much distance left to travel before games deconstruct heteronormativity.

Conclusion

Leisure Suit Larry, *Playboy Mansion* and *Grand Theft Auto* are all video games that market their sexual content. *Super Princess Peach*, did not capitalize on sex as an explicit commodity, but still reified sexual norms. Through textual analysis this study examined sex in video games and how game endings and content objectify women. No matter what abilities are attributed to female characters the games themselves still reify static notions of gender and heteronormativity.

In this research the final act rewards the player with the revelation of a romantic relationship between a male and female character. The resolution and reward for hours of text interactivity is a heterosexual relationship. These games celebrate straightness as the correct way of being. Female protagonists are either framed as achieving wifedom or ignored entirely. The confusion of what role women play is tied up in the notions of heterosexual romance that propagate the notion of heterosexuality as the only desirable/proper way of being.

As discussed in the book *The Purity Myth* (Valenti, 2009), society pressures women to save our sexuality for straight marriage. The conclusions of these games draw on this same idea; that women belong to future husbands. Even though Peach is independent throughout play the game their fates lie in heterosexual relationships. For Peach this takes the shape of re-uniting with Mario.

One finding of this study is that conclusions matter. Little attention has been paid to story-driven games, particularly in regards to how their conclusions impact the power-

relations of play. When considering the impact of female characters, conclusions must be part of the discussion.

Changing Female Roles in Video Games

A tension exists between the gender and sexual conformity in *Super Princess Peach*. Video games can challenge or limit social narratives, and in the case of *Super Princess Peach*, they do. Power is negotiated in this story, my experience and choices were not wholly heteronormative, but the intent of the design geared a player in this direction.

Sexual power is not overt in the game *Super Princess Peach*, but it clearly exists. Princess Peach's emotions are reminiscent of women's past hysteria, or women's *lack* of emotional control. The villain, Koopa, controls the vibe scepter - a rod evocative of the once deemed mystical dildo. This causes Princess Peaches' emotions to go haywire when used against her. Once all the levels of the game have been completed, Peach gains control of the scepter. Obtaining this bejeweled scepter imbues her with control over her own sexuality and emotions, and revokes the male villain's power over her.

Peach is not awaiting rescue or marriage. The physical attributes of Peach support traditional notions of femininity, but this is not supported by the content of engagement in the games. Even though she may not visually represent a masculine visage of camo-clad ninjas, Peach is a soldier.

I fully embrace Peach as a woman, and as a warrior, but this may not be enough to overcome heteronormative roles.

Joan of Arc said she donned armor not to pass as a man but to be beyond sexuality, beyond gender. She called herself *pucelle*, a maid, but socially, she was neither

woman nor man. She was an “ideal androgyny”... When Joan was on trial, she denuded of knightly armor and accused of female carnality, and she was burned at the stake—as a woman and a witch. Twenty-five years later, at her rehabilitation trial, and in 1920 when she was declared a saint, she was presented as a sexless virgin, amenorrheic and possibly anorectic (Lorber, 2005 p. 89).

Like Joan of Arc, Peach is potentially androgynous and transformative, but only if that potential is recognized by the player. The progress of her story cannot be denied. Peach does not fit neatly into a saint/witch or female carnality/virgin binary means she is destabilizing such dichotomies and equipping the armor stolen from Joan.

In the first two decades of the Mario Brothers franchise, Princess Peach was never a central character. The re-assignment of new characteristics that combine both feminine and masculine to Peach challenge a static view of gender in these virtual worlds and produces a new counter culture of female gamers. The culmination of these negotiations generates new meanings and an emerging culture around women and games.

What does this mean for women gamers?

This research is not anti-video games; it is written by a gamer and feminist and opens the dialogue about where we go from here. Because without empowered female characters, hegemony cannot be overcome but only further entrenched. It seems that female characters are emerging as not just objects but heroines. But narrative motives of play must continue to be questioned to understand if these roles conquer or empower women.

Women are both characters, and players, but games only offer power congruent to socioeconomic power in the real world. Those with less agency in society such as the obese, queer, or people of color are not dominant characters in games. Players must demand games

that include marginalized groups not as a novelty, but significantly displayed characters with substantial narrative development. Peach is a substantial character but represents monolithic notions of beauty. At this point all women gamers are still not accurately represented or celebrated in gaming spaces. The next level cannot be unlocked until substantial progress is made for all women.

Asking the Right Questions

The problem is not that no one discusses the subject of women and games. The issue has become that women portrayed in games, like in real life, lack agency. Many are positioned as property to be attained, rather than as people with a choice in the matter. The confusion of what role women play is tied up in the notions of heterosexual romance that propagate heterosexuality as the only desirable/proper way of being.

The limited attention paid to women in games is illustrated by the controversy that surrounded the game *Fat Princess*. *Fat Princess* has received public backlash, not because its central goal is to capture or surrender the body of a woman, but because the princess in question is overweight (Kalning, 2008).

In *Fat Princess* two teams battle to kidnap the opposing team's princess. The task is made more difficult when players feed their princess, adding to her physical weight and making her harder to carry. This game does not step far outside the traditional story of trying to get the girl. Yet, it has faced scrutiny, not because it casts women in a subjugated role but because it portrays a "fat" female character.

This re-iterates the problem of a beauty-obsessed society and illustrates why obese characters should not be comic fodder for gamers. It also highlights perception that female

characters are less important than their own aesthetics. The princesses in the games are fed to the point of gluttony, which is not good; but women eating cake should not be completely condemned. It brings full circle the notion that people are still not asking the right questions.

The representational politics of video games must be framed to assure that women are given power and autonomy. *Fat Princess* would be less offensive if she were wielding an Uzi or could amass super strength to beat her captors before they stab her to death. Female characters like Princess Peach or Alyx from *Half-Life* have proven that games can be successful without allowing men to control female characters or their sexuality.

The demand for female characters that assert their power will only be successful if we continue to ask the right questions. We must demand games that celebrate diverse representations of women and sexuality. Developers and gamers should ask themselves if the only women in their games are helpless objects of the male gaze. In the findings of this research the answer so far has been yes and it seems that developers still have a ways to go.

Possibilities for Future Research

This research only begins the discussion of sexuality in gaming spaces. By extending this discussion we can alter the power dynamics in contemporary society and recognize virtual society as the new battleground for power relations. The emergence of games as social tools demands that this dialogue is consistent (Gross, 2005). There is much left un-discussed on the matter of sexuality in video games.

Hate-speech on Xbox Live targets the queer community. Blizzard has failed to recognize one of their largest guild networks because its members are openly gay. Microsoft banned all screen names that suggest sexual orientation. Even as games provide a safe space

to explore sexual autonomy, the gaming industry seeks to regulate those spaces. Gamers must resist these regulations.

Lack of access also extends to women who have yet to break through the glass ceiling of video games. I note many strong female characters through this analysis but there a diverse group of women is still not being portrayed. Diversity is a problem across the board in games. Story-driven games do portray men, both young and old, fat and skinny, and belonging to many different races: women are not afforded the same visibility. Though diversity in gameplay remains a problem for both men and women, the hypersexualization of female characters is not a problem faced by their male cohorts.

The Final Boss Battle

This research examines how sex or sexuality is used as a motive used to compel players to complete a game. In the game *Super Princess Peach*, the conclusion of the game indicates that heterosexuality is still a prize to be sought and won. The implications of this portrayal of normative sexuality are that anyone outside of the spectrum of heterosexuality is deemed as less valuable; such games further promote the idea that women are second-class citizens who serve the main purpose of sexually satisfying men in a traditional manner. These themes need to be challenged in the video game world as technology and its audience grows.

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