Playing Animal: Coded Human/Animal Identities in Video Games

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Abstract

This paper studies how computer code and social norms coordinately manage human and animal identities in video games. Just as characters' actions are largely defined by computer code, identity-defining actions are also defined in real life by sets of social norms. Both computer code and social norms concur in the articulation of identity. My claim is, however, that both computer code and identitarian social norms have a binary, arborescent nature. As such, animal and human identities in video games are based on branching either/or dichotomies whose complexity varies depending on the identity being portrayed. In most cases, human characters follow normative identity discourses with little or no exploration of alternatives modes of being in the world. It is, in fact, in animal characters placed in borderline positions (such as animals not being entirely animal nor human or possessing an indeterminate gender that makes them act in unpredictable ways) where new forms of understanding human identities can be found. In order to substantiate my claims this paper will analyze representations of animals (such as the feral wolves of *Skyrim* and the sapient Red XIII in *Final Fantasy VII*) as well as humans (from games such as *Persona 3*, *Mass Effect 2* and *Dragon Age*, among others).

Keywords: Code; software studies; identity; animal; sexuality; animal media.

Introduction: On ticks and talking companions.

Years ago, when I was a fourteen-year-old teenager in his first year of high school, I started playing the, then, newly released *Final Fantasy VII* (Squaresoft 1997). Having grown surrounded by the consoles of the previous generation (Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo), *Final Fantasy VII* was my first introduction to the disc-based games of the PlayStation era. I was caught in the mechanics of the game, its story, its visual style, and the fan based communities that mushroomed around it. One of my favorite characters was Red XIII, a 45-year-old talking wolf with a spiky mane and a flaming tail. Due to his age and apparent connection with nature, I regarded him as one of the spiritual leaders of the party. During the first third of the game, however, I did not only discover that Red XIII's true name was Nanaki, but also, that according to the standards of Red's species he was actually a teenager (45 human years equal 16 years in the species' standards). When the name Nanaki was first mentioned, Cloud (the main character of the game), being oblivious of Red XIII's true name, asked a villager who Nanaki was. The response of the villager was "Red XIII is Nanaki". Once I finished the game I decided to replay it and, when Red XIII joined my party again at the beginning of the game, I renamed[1] him as Nanaki. By substituting Red XIII default name with his actual one (a name I was not supposed to know after much later into the game) I was secretly hoping to get some form of puzzled response from him (something close to "Hey! How do you know my actual name?"). Of course, nothing of the sort happened. I kept playing and, once I reached Cosmo Canyon (the place where Red XIII's true name, age, and past are disclosed), I was terribly disappointed after reading the answer the villager gave to Cloud: "Nanaki is Nanaki". Only then I realized what Red XIII truly was: lines of code reacting in predetermined ways.

At a first glance, this paper analyzes the ways animals and animal-like characters are represented in video games. Attention is paid to how each of the animals studied in this paper relates to specific forms of understanding animal (and sometimes human) identities. However, the true purpose of the paper is not to analyze or delve on representations of animal identity, but to deconstruct them in order to show how video games codify identities. More specifically, what I would like to show is how any identity representation, regardless of its complexity, is always dependent on code. In a similar move to Jakob von Uexküll's (2010 [1934]) interpretation of animal identities as being based on processes of meaning interpretation and action, I pretend to situate any identity representation in video games as framed within the logics and possibilities granted by computer code. Each of the representations of animal identity I will study offers a different degree of complexity (e.g. more and less versatile A.Is), grants players with different levels of agency, and carries a different weight in the general story of the game. All examples, however, can be reduced to a series of material inscriptions that are based on binary relations. In this sense, just as the tick in Uexküll's view is based on the perception of very specific meaning markers and the automatic bodily responses to them, identity representations in video games are based on pre-existing relations established by code that become active as responses to binary values. 0/1 sequences and the absence or presence of a mammal's odor of butyric acid are not too distant from each other as both provide and anticipate automatic responses to specific markers. Just as a greater number of meaning markers-response relations is what separates simple animals from more complex ones, more complex animal representations in video games result from the adding and writing of additional lines of code.

In my view, computer coded animal identities are not different from other forms of coded identity, including sexual human identity. Both forms of identity, when

represented in a video game, depend on the same running processes (code) as well as similar processes of *re-codification*. What do I mean by this term? I will explore this idea in greater detail during the second half of the paper. On broad terms, however, we could understand *re-codification* as the name I give to the capacity of video games to render identities through two uses of two types of code. Computer code on the one hand, and identity discourses (understood as a social code) on the other. Computer and social codification follow similar patterns and complement each other well. As we will later see, code is widely regarded by scholars as a form of language that is irremediably performative or, if you prefer, a language whose execution always entails changes in material states and machine behavior (even if these changes are not always visible)[2]. Thus, by splitting code into computer and social code, we can say that code becomes doubly performative. First, because of its very machinistic nature and, secondly, due to the representation of a set of discourses that are already, by themselves, performative (they delimit and create the contexts for individuals' performances to take place).

Another way of understanding this re-codification of identity discourses in representations of animal and sexual identity in video games is through Gilbert Simondon's theory as explained in *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual* (Combes, 2012). As explained by Muriel Combes, Simondon invites us to think about the emergence of the individual as "the resolution of the tensions between potentials belonging to previously separated orders of magnitude" (p. 4). These tensions are part of what Simondon defines as the pre-individual; a set of potential relations that precede, determine and accompany every identity through its process of individualization. Using Simondon, we can understand any representation of animal or sexual identity as an object-individual whose preindividual relations depend primarily, but not exclusively, on the nature of computer code as well as the influence of existing

identity discourses. Any identity representation is always defined by its relation to its own coded nature. In this regard, code, understood as a preindividual aspect of any representation of identity in a video game, never abandons the individual it helps to shape. Similarly, every representation is, from the outset, determined by an existing social code that shapes the way identity is understood. The types of virtual identities players are exposed to, as well as the process of coding these identities, depend on existing identitarian ideologies.

It is important to note that the preindividual resulting from the union of computer code and identity discourses in a video game is only partially visible to players; code itself remains, most of the time, invisible. Glitches and bugs are not part of the representations as individuals-objects, but derive from some of the relations video games establish (here, the representation itself would be part of the preindividual potentialities of the glitch). This paper seeks to analyze the visible elements of any representation of sexual and animal identities as an opening introduction to understanding what, oftentimes, remains invisible (or less visible): the coded component (where code stands for computer code and social code) of identity representations in video games. In the next two sections, I will present a number of depictions of animal and sexual identities in video games in order to understand them not only at the level of visual and narrative representation, but also as coded objects susceptible, in turn, to re-codification.

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

This section approaches the representation of animal identities by looking at seven examples extracted from six RPGs[3]. The reason for choosing RPGs over any other type of game is simple: as a genre, RPG games offer more opportunities to configure some

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

From a narratological and ludological perspective, wolves in *Skyrim* are poor in world. The reference to Martin Heidegger in this statement is, of course, intentional. As we shall see, the more animals resemble humans in video games, the more complex their roles become in the games. Compared to the other examples, *Skyrim*'s wolves are the farthest from what video games seem to understand as virtual humans. Wolves in this game often travel in packs and attack the player's character cooperatively. Their actions, however, are limited to three interrelated states: searching, moving, and attacking. First, if no other non-wolf character is in their vicinity, wolves remain motionless waiting for other characters to enter into their radius of action. Once they detect a potential objective, they approach it in order to get to attack it. Finally, once they are close enough to the target, they attack it. Wolves go back and forth from these three states

dynamically (i.e. should a character walk away from the attacking range of the wolves, they would then resume moving towards their objective). These animals lack language, do not use weapons or spells and are, consequently, one of the weakest enemies in the game. As players may encounter wolves anywhere in the map of the game while traversing outdoor areas, the game seems to suggest that these foes do not depend on a specific ecosystem to survive[4]. Players will be attacked by wolves when detected, and it often happens long before players spot the wolves (i.e. wolves are better at detecting the players than the reverse). Wolves, however, offer a certain degree of pack recognition towards players whose avatars have been inflicted with the werewolf curse and will not attack them. No matter the case, interactions with wolves are always limited to antagonistic (in most cases) and neutral interactions.

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

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

Interceptor and Mog place our analysis closer to the animal-human. Both characters appear in *Final Fantasy VI* and both of them are optional[5] characters players may recruit. Interceptor is the dog companion of Shadow, a ninja assassin whom players encounter (and may hire) at several points during the first part of the game. From a gameplay perspective, Interceptor is more of a tool of Shadow that an actual character as players do not control the dog directly. Instead, depending of certain conditions during battles sequences, Interceptor may automatically perform an action and leave. As a character in the story of the game, Interceptor accompanies Shadow at all times up to a critical point in which the ninja may die permanently. From that point on, Interceptor

serves as a connection between Shadow's past and two other members of the player's party. Because of this, Interceptor's role in the story of the game as mediator depends on and expands on his human companion, but the fact that the dog may potentially do so even in the absence of the ninja (if he dies) grants the character with a surrogate agency through the story of the game. Mog, on the contrary, is a fully-fledged character players can control directly (i.e. players can issue commands to him) in battles. Classifying Mog as an animal may be troublesome. He belongs to a recurring race in the Final Fantasy series, the moguri, I would describe as the result of fusing a cat, a koala, and a teddy bear. They frequently have white fur as well as bat wings and a red or yellow pompom at the top of their heads[6]. In addition to its animal physical traits, Mog shares a recurring set of features with other animal characters in other RPGs. First, his race seems particularly aware of and dependent on the equilibrium of the planet. As the story progresses and the world descends into ruin, Mog ends up being the only survivor in his tribe/pack. Secondly, his special skill, called "mog dance*"* is related to the properties of the terrain he is fighting on. This is, when the player selects the dance command for Mog, he will begin dancing. The dance Mog uses depends on the location and the battle. Each dance contains different moves with different effects that often involved other animals (such as tapirs, raccoons, or boars).

Terrain-based attacks or skills that refer to planetary energies are a common trait among the animal companions across the Final Fantasy series (e.g. the attacks of Rinoa's dog Invincible Moon and Whishing Star in *Final Fantasy VIII*, Kimahri's attacks learned from beasts in *Final Fantasy VIII*, and Red XIII's limit breaks). Finally, while dancing, Mog becomes uncontrollable as each turn dancing triggers one effect of the dance automatically that takes place while players are not capable of issuing commands to him. The dance continues until the end of the battle or if Mog's health reaches zero.

This "berserk state" (i.e. the state in which the character acts automatically each turn) is shared with other animal-related characters in the game such as Interceptor, the yeti Umaro, and Gau, a language-lacking human teenager raised in the wild who walks on all four and mimics the attacks of monsters players encounter in the wild. Among these four examples, it is Mog the one with a full command of spoken language and also the one who has to rely the less on his berserk state (his magic stat is one of the highest in the game, which allow players to ignore dancing and use Mog as a standard spell caster). Animalistic features (or non-fully developed human traits) seem to be connected to questions of uncontrollability and the command of natural forces as well as limited forms of interactivity the more animal characters lack a command of language.

Koromaru, a playable shiba-inu[7] from *Persona 3,* expands what I have just said. At a first glance, Koromaru performs in battle similarly to other party members. Just like their human companions, Koromaru is able to use in battle his own persona (a manifestation of his inner personality) and behaves in battle in a similar fashion to the rest of the main cast (excluding the protagonist). Koromaru understands human language perfectly and, while the other characters normally apprehend his intentions without the need of words, he is fully understood by Aegis, a female android who also joins the protagonist's party. Aegis, semi-human nature as well as her ability to understand and translate the dog, serves as a bridge between the world of the quasi-humans (characters that behave like but still lack some key human traits, such as language) and fully developed humans. *Persona 3* saw two re-editions, *Persona 3: FES* in 2007 for PlayStation 2 and *Persona 3 Portable* in 2009 for the PSP. Both editions expand Koromaru's relation with human identities.

Persona 3: FES offers an epilogue where players take control of Aegis after she becomes the protagonist of the final section of this version of the game. As the epilogue

progresses[8], Aegis learns to deal with and accept her own humanity and, as she does so, she begins to lose her capacity to understand Koromaru. As the cyborg becomes less of a robot and more of a human, the dog also loses more of the bridge what brings him closer to being human; his access to language. In *Persona 3 Portable*, however, Koromaru's character is further expanded through the inclusion of his own Social Link (Strength Arcana) if, and only if, the main character is female[9]. Social links in the Persona series[10] stand for the relationship the player character establishes with other characters throughout the story. In addition to its more RPGs characteristics, the Persona series can also be described as a social sim game in which players live the life of a transfer student during his first year at his new school. As the year passes, players have the option to establish and develop different types of relationships with other characters in the story. Each character represents a different "Social Link" that in turn stands for a different arcana (e.g. Chariot, the Hanged Man, the Fool, the Sun, Death…). Developing these relationships is optional as it is up to the player to spend time with specific characters in order to know more about their personal stories. Maxing out social links, however, grants players with several advantages during the RPG portions of the game. Within the Persona series, and up to the release of Atlus' *Persona 4* (2008), each social link revolved around human characters. In *Persona 4*, however, it became possible to establish a social link with Fox, a fox who accompanied the player party to dungeons to heal the protagonists and sell them, for a rather steep price, restorative items. Koromaru's social link in *Persona 3 Portable* not only allows him to have a more prominent role in the story but also brings him closer to the rest of the human (and android) party members who already had their own social links since the original *Persona 3*.

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

Quina is the perfect example of queer identity. Everything about her (or him) seems queer, including her appetite and her inclusion on this paper. Quina belongs to the Qu, beings of immense appetite and great culinary delicacy that live in swamps. They appear dressed as chefs, and possess frog-like tongues and eyes. Their favorite prey is frogs. Quina's gender appears, remotely, to be female, but she never refers to herself as such and there is some evidence during gameplay that challenges such assumptions. The most notable one is the fact that Zidane's (*Final Fantasy IX* protagonist) ability "Protect Girls", a skill that allows him to protect female members of the party from physical damage, does not work on Quina (but does on Freya, a female anthropomorphic rat). Freya, being herself a humanoid with obvious animal traits is, however, not only given a

specific gender, female, but also participates in a romantic, heterosexual relation with other male member of the same species. What separates Quina's queerness from Freya's normative gender and sexuality? Their individual command of language. While Quina is barely able to form complete sentences and has a very limited command of grammar and vocabulary, Freya's speech resembles that of an honorable knight, with formal choice of words and speech patterns. While both characters are placed at a human-animal limbo, it is languages what confirms Freya as more of a human. Language, in turn, also serves as the key to gender and sexual identity. While Quina seems to be already too queer and unreadable, Freya's gender and sexuality seem to take a definite form through her ability to present her own identity as definite though her use of language. However, just as Koromaru only had the opportunity to interact in a very limited form with the female protagonist of *Persona 3 Portable*, Freya also has a rather constrained form of expressing gender and sexuality: through a heterosexual relation with a member of the same species. Inter-species sex between humans and animal-humans seems to be problematic. The next example confirms this idea.

Final Fantasy VII introduces Red XIII and the idea of inter-species mating at once. Red XIII enters the game storyline as the intended mate for Aeris, a human-looking female who belongs to the human-like race known as the Ancients, in Hojo's (an evil scientist) attempt to study the couple's offspring. Aeris is the last survivor of a human race capable of controlling and protecting the life flow of the planet. According to Hojo's logic, due to Red XIII's natural lifespan (one human year equals 0,3 for him), the couple's progeny would be the perfect objects of scientific research, having the power of the Ancients and the long lifespan of Red XIII's species (perfect for prolonged experiments over the decades). After the protagonists sabotage the experiment, both Aeris and Red XIII are released and their intended intercourse is forever forgotten as

part of a mad scientist's idea. From this point on, the apparently 45-year-old Red XIII, sheds off his potential role as a sexual individual and occupies a secondary role in the party, serving as a spiritual guide. When the player reaches Red XIII's home Cosmo Canyon the maturity of Red is put into question after players discover his real name and age[11]. From this point in the story onwards, Red must learn to grow out of his insecurity as a teenager while becoming the brave warrior he is expected to be. Red XIII's own appearance, reminiscent of Native Americans, as well as his own personal story as a warrior on his quest towards adulthood impregnate the character with clear associations to the human species. The lack of references to Red's sexuality and gender outside of the failed experiment is not merely the result of the character's condition as a semi-animal, but also stems from his pubescent, racialized nature. In fact, the credits at the end of the game roll over a semi-hidden scene where Red (or one of his descendants) is shown running next to two puppies (presumably his own). The whole scene is accompanied by the sound of tribal drum. This invites players to believe that, after the events of the game, Red managed to grow into a "healthy adult" and act on his sexuality…with female members of its own species/race. In this regard, questions of maturity and race seem to occupy the spot of gender or sexuality. Once these issues are resolved, however, normative behaviors seem to be the only response possible from these animals.

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

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

In all these examples, starting with *Skyrim*'s dogs and ending with Red XIII's Howling Moon, animal identity seems to be directly related to instances of limited interactivity (i.e. the detect-move-attack pattern of wolves) and gender and sexual agency. Example of limited gender and sexual animal identity can be seen in the complete lack of gender or sexual references in the case of the more "feral" animal examples and limited forms of interactions (i.e non-interspecies sex) among the more human-like. The closer the animal character comes to mastering language, the closer he/she/it becomes to being allowed to act on its own gender and sexuality. In fact, language, as a trait of borderline-human-animal identity, serves as a marker that overrides certain potential dichotomies associated with animal representations in video games. This apparently follows a logic that prevents certain traits to coexist with some others in any given representation. As such, bestial or feral behaviors during gameplay usually come associated with a complete absence of sexualized or gendered acts. A feral wolf is feral; nothing more. Following this very same logic, the ability to use human language allows certain gendered and sexual acts to manifest. Not only does this tendency follow Judith Butler's

(1990) vision of sexuality and gender as dependent on acts and performances but also, it situates language at the core of these performances. Language is the human trait that acts as the key to animal sexuality. However, we must not think about animal gender and sexuality as expansive expressions of identity traits in video games. Animal-human hybrids such as Koromaru, Quina or Red XIII are already queer enough from the start due to their very condition of hybrids to be allowed other types of queerness. That is, games limit the number of queer traits such as hybridity or non-normative sexuality amalgamated into a single animal individual. As such, animal sexuality in video games, when present, tends to follow very specific patterns; that of heterosexual, intraspecies-driven relations. This is because animal representations in video games, from feral to talking wolves follow a binary logic that expands and retracts in an arborescent manner. I will expand this idea of binary arborescence in the next section.

Coded animals: Isolating the responses of the tick.

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

language marks the degree of complexity of each individual animal being in a video game. Different levels of complexity affect how each animal behaves at the level of story and gameplay.

This process, however, must not lead us to confusion. It is not the case that giving an animal the capacity to talk in a video game allows it to behave and play in a specific way. Rather, animal ontology, as an ongoing set of notions that also exist outside of the game, influences the way games are designed as well as the animal represented in them. Certain ideas on animal ontology, such as the higher complexity of humans because of language, permeate into video games as a type of social code; a code that determines what animals are and are not. Language is just a key anchor of meaning other elements depend on. A feral wolf in Skyrim follows a specific conception of non-talking, aggressive animals. Closer relations to humans, first as tools or carriers of meaning, such as the rats in *Dishonored*, and ultimately as talking companions, such as Mog or Red XIII, offer different branching opportunities for the adherence of new identity traits. This follows the idea that the closer an animal gets to human speech, the more human-like he/she/it should be. In this respect, Red XIII, the example I consider more human-like within my list, has not only the best command of language out of all the animals I have studied, but also the one to which the game attaches an additional trait; that of race. However, when it comes to Red XIII's sexuality and gender relations, the options are practically non-existent. Outside of the failed experiment at the beginning of the game, Red XIII sexual identity is, for the most part, not acted upon. When he does mate, however, it is offscreen and with a member of his own species. The other animal examples on this paper, being further away from the human ideal, are also further away from any form of gender or sexual performance.

In the line from feral beings to tools to semi-human entities, animal identities become the carriers of additional connotations. Just as Jody Berland (2009) sees animals in advertising as mediators between humans, technology and an idealized natural world, animals in video games, due to their very nature as quasi-humans, also become mediators of signifying elements. In their role as mediators, however, animals mediate between elements barred, most of time, to humans. Just as associating race to an animal seems to be less problematic than a racialized human character (Red XIII is a good example of this), animals are easily transformed into "something else". Thomas Lamarre's (2009) study of race, nationalism, empire and speciesism in Japanese wartime animation already points at this agglutination of signifiers in represented animal identities in anime. Unsurprisingly, not every animal example in video games stands for or points at questions of race. Mog, for instance, serves for me as an example of the reification of the "living" in which the animal character stands for a fetish. A fetish of/for what? The answer is debatable. Mog cuteness as well as his similarities to a stuffed animal are undeniable. From here, we can see Mog as the reification of the natural forces he commands; natural forces that are furry, friendly, and ready to serve. As something cute, nature, as mediated by a character like Mog, is not far from Gary Genosko's (2005) vision of cuteness as something that "cultivates submissiveness" (…) and that "relieves one of the responsibility of understanding its physical and psychological consequences" (p. 3). This cultivation of submissiveness may work in two ways: Cuteness as something that lets itself to be possessed; and cuteness that calls forth submissive desires towards the reified being. With its association with a stuffed-like animal, nature becomes tame; something players can possess and manipulate. Only when the toy makes uses of nature's full force, as in Mog's dances, do players lose

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

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

The fact that animals with a minimal command or understanding of language become controllable; or the idea that feral animals are based on detect-move-attack patterns can be reduced to binary questions of presence or absence. From each individual binary variable a new one sprouts that complicates the animal representation that is being coded. However, each new attachment follows a pre-constituted pattern in which specific paths only become available upon the activation of previous states. The more human-like the animal is, the more human-like the interactions the game allows. This functions, both at the level of code and at the level of gameplay (what players see), as a very simplified version of Uexküll's explanation of animal identity. In this respect, all the elements comprising any animal identity in video games are responses to the

presence of other identity traits. Each identity trait calls into being other traits. This is not only seen at the level of standard representation, where the fact that Red XIII speaks brings forth questions of race or gender, but also at the level of gameplay and code. The fact that Red XIII speaks, invites designers to give him the same abilities as other talking characters. This, in turn, makes the writing of the lines of code managing these interactions similar, in some respects, to the ones used for human characters.

Each visible animal action (i.e. wolves approaching the player's character or Mog dancing) is itself based on binary states. Each action wolves perform in *Skyrim* is based on the presence/absence of other characters. Once a specific condition is met, such as the presence of the player's character in the vicinity of the wolf, specific states change producing a very specific response (i.e. from staying put to moving towards the player). In *Final Fantasy VI*, Interceptor's actions are entirely based on the presence of specific numerical values (e.g. Shadow's health points). Even Mog's dances and actions are themselves based on presence/absence states. First, upon the player choosing a command, its response becomes active. The end-result of any action derives from the interaction of interconnecting active values. These values as well as the links that connect them are always fixed beforehand.

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

Re-Coded: Back to the human.

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

Mass Effect 3 gives players the option of establishing a male homosexual relation with two potential candidates. Kaidan Alenko, a white Major officer who joins Shepard, the player's character, in his fights against the Reapers; and Steve Cortez, the pilot of the shuttle in Shepard's ship as well as a recent widower (his husband died in the war portrayed during the game). During my first playthrough I reached a point in which I had become friends with the two characters and both of them had requested a meeting/date outside of the ship to talk about personal matters. I knew that during these dates the topic of establishing a romantic relationship with each one of them will be brought up. I was not wrong. I first headed towards Kaidan's meeting place, and after

navigating through different dialogue choices, Kaidan ended up saying that what he really wanted was a life partner to have a tranquil, traditional life with. He hinted that he would like my character to be this life partner. After one of the more contractual-like dialogues I have ever seen during a "love scene" in a video game, we both agreed to be life partners, share a dog and some cozy afternoons in our comfy backyard. After this, however, I decided to head straight to Steve to check what he had to offer me. To my surprise, after reaching the point in which I had already suggested Steve to become partners, he refused my offer and told me that he knew that Kaidan and I were together. How did Steve knew? Didn't I head straight away to Steve's place right after my cozy agreement with Kaidan? From a narratological perspective it should have been impossible for any other character of the game to know about the player's relations with other characters in such a short amount of time. Do characters in the Mass Effect universe get automatic updates on romances via a super sophisticated virtual version of Twitter? Are Mass Effect characters gossip queens? Are they psychics of romantic lore? Jokes aside, these scenes made me think about how a potential example of bad writing makes the running code of a game more visible to users.

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

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

Dawn Star, Alistair, and Morrigan are perceived as being heterosexual and behave as so in the narrative of the game as a result of how the lines of code managing their actions engage with the value given to the player's character. Similarly, what the player perceives as romantic relationships are managed internally by the games by giving an on/off value to that particular line. What differentiates *Jade Empire* and *Dragon Age: Origins* from *Mass Effect 3* is that the first two games allow the value state that manages the relation between the player's character and the other romanceable characters to either change among, or stay active with, more than one character at the same time. This is what allows players in *Jade Empire* to establish a romantic relationship with both Silver Fox and Dawn Star. *Mass Effect 3*, on the contrary, takes into consideration the value of one active relation (such as my avatar's relation with Kaidan) to close down any potential interaction with other characters. This is, once the value of the relationship between the player's character with Kaidan has been established, the game treats any other potential relations in very specific ways based on this very same value. In a very broad sense, code runs in spite of, and faster, than the narrative of the game. This means that Steve's rejection to my "love" proposal is the automatic response caused by the ways the value of each state relates with the rest. Accepting Kaidan's proposal for a sheltered romantic life is in itself an either/or binary that relates to sets of other binaries within the code of game.

Outside of titles developed by Bioware, games such as *Persona 3* and *Persona 4* follow a similar trend of portraying and managing sexuality. In both games, as the protagonists

develop different Social Links with different people, they are given the chance to select specific dialogue responses that may lead to romance within the ongoing social link. It is important to note that advancement in Social Links depends on the two main elements: The presence/absence of a persona of the same arcana as the Social Link players want to develop; and the selection of the best responses (out of a total of three options) during conversations. The game gives different a different value to each response and, depending on what players choose (and the social link itself), social links may end up in romance, friendship or failure. In addition to this, some responses are conditioned by the main character's attributes in specific social departments, such as courage, knowledge or expression. Lacking enough points in courage, for instance, closes down some responses and, consequently, specific outcomes. Again, the way of raising these social attributes is by selecting from a closed number of daily activities and actions that net players a number of pre-established points. Players, being all the force to make decisions whose value and effect has been predetermined beforehand, cannot step outside of this close menu of actions. In a way, the numerical basis of human relations in these two games mirrors the numerical value of computer code itself.

In the next section of this paper I will study what are the implications of reducing sexuality (and gender) to a set of binary relations while highlighting that both computer code and the social codes regulating sexual identities function in similar ways[12].

The binary rhizome.

Judith Butler (1990) presents gender and sexuality as ongoing processes of meaning making where individuals form their own identities by performing according to, or despite of, a pre-existing set of socials norms. From her perspective, individuals can actively shape their own identities by actualizing their relations with a body of social

norms. Performing individuals, however, are never independent of the social and material conditions in which their performances take place as the meaning of their actions rests on the affiliations with and detachments from existing processes of meaning making. This is not too far detached from the vision of swarm-like relations and insect identities Jussi Parikka offers in *Insect Media*. For this author, the swarm cannot be understood by looking at each individual insect alone, but by acknowledging the set of ongoing relations and affects all the members of the swarm share among themselves as well as with an ever-changing exterior. Individuals are nothing but a sum of relations. Similarly, an insect can only be understood as a totality of relation between its body, its mode of perception, and its surrounding world. That is, insect identity is not dependent on any single isolated trait but instead depends on a total set of affects that go well beyond the insect's body.

Butler's and Parikka's ideas on identity are easy to transfer to conceptualizations of both desire and code. Similarly to insect identities, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) envision desire as set of interweaving constituents whose meaning is constantly being decided by a set of potentially infinite relations. As much as the body of affects might grow in unexpected, chaotic ways, processes of meaning-making always seem to depend dynamically on the elements that already exist within the revolving body of relations (planes in the case of the rhizome, other insects in the "swarm" or other norms in the case of discourses about gender and sexuality). Code, in a way behaves similarly. According to Chun (2011), code "does not unfold linearly, because its values depend on intermediate results, and because code can be modified as it is run" (p. 25). Again, the value, meaning or effect or any given line of code, just as any given identity performance, depends on its relation with other lines. Yet, code, at its core, is based on relations of binary values that are translated into high-level languages. As N. Katherine

Hayles (2005) suggests "at the level of binary code, the system can tolerate little if any ambiguity" (p. 46) and, later on the same page, adds that "all commands must be parsed as binary code to be intelligible to the machine". This transition from non-linear unfolding code to binary processes of meaning making is a move that resembles Deleuze and Guattari's critique on how capitalist societies make use of desire to reterritorialize all possible discourses into their own operating logic. For them, capitalist societies absorb any potential deviant or independent forms of desire back into their own systems of drive control. In turn, these societies continuously present individuals with seemingly unlimited, normalized, forms of satisfying desire. By doing this, society not only controls what is to be desired, but also how it is desired, and by what means desire is satisfied. Interactivity in video games works exactly like this.

Post-Babelian Identity in Video Games.

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

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

Gender and sexuality when coded as behaviors and states in a running piece of software are subjected to a double codification or re-coding. As stated before, gender and sexuality are already dependent on the relation of individuals with a regulatory body of norms. These relations can go for or against the norm, but they are always actualized in relation to the norm. In a video game, anything machinistic relates back to computer code, just as any line of code refers back to some specific element in the running software. Thus, what is perceived by a player as a representation of gender or sexuality is encrypted as an inescapable mandate of the programming code. Any performance from the player's end is in actuality preceded by the writing of the code. Following Adrian Mackenzie's (2006) expansion of Adrian Lessig's (1999) ideas, we must not think of code as an object of regulation, but "itself a form of regulation" (p. 31). However, from my perspective, in the specific case of sexuality in video games code is both an object of regulation and the regulation itself. This, on the one hand, is because the very act of writing code is already embedded in the social contexts and material conditions that allow identity norms to exist. But also, code itself is a material condition, a regulation that makes the norm come into being. Thus identity discourses

not only enter and affect the writing of the code, but are also created by this very same code.

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

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

together and follow the same logic. Players always act in relation to the laws that codify their actions.

User-generated mods still follow this logic. The modification of computer code in order to add new content or alter the relations of specific aspects of the game depends on a pre-existing act of writing. Thus, modifying code is always made in relation to, and not outside, code. Even the act of allowing non-normative relations through the act of writing is in itself an act of partaking in the logic of law writing and enforcement. In this sense, computer language always works following a reterritorializing logic where all possible actions refer back to arborescent paths. We could argue that playing video games is related to more than just playing while being subjected to the regulatory power of code. Factors such as the material conditions in which each gamer plays, or the external affiliations players bring with themselves to the act of playing all shape the effects of the regulatory power of code. And yet, a question would still remain: Aren't all these affiliations and material conditions ultimately affected by relations with machines controlled by the very same logic of code?

Notes

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

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

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

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

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

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

[7] I have used fan sites for this. For its color, he could also be a Japanese Akita or a Hokkaido. Koromaru's size, however, makes me think that fans are actually right.

[8] The word "epilogue" may lead to confussion regarding its actual lenght. *P3: FES*'s epilogue is around 30 hours long.

[9] *Persona 3* and *Persona 3: FES* only have a male protagonist. *Persona 3 Portable* gives player the option of choosing the protagonist's gender.

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

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

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

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