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The queer case of video games: orgasms, Heteronormativity, and video game narrative

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, scholars have theorized about the narrative potential of video games. These conversations have helped to situate a complex new medium into the parameters of older forms of storytelling. This paper argues that these debates often privilege heteronormative formulations of narrative structure. Building on the work of Judith Roof (1996. *Come as you are: Sexuality and narrative*. New York: Columbia University Press), I illustrate how traditional narrative theory relies on masculine, heteronormative conceptualizations of a necessarily reproductive climax. Queer narrative theory, in contrast, focuses on the pleasurable possibilities embedded in the middle of the narrative. Similarly, gaming narratives play in the middle spaces where queer narrative thrives. Using this as a theoretical model, I explore how games are more effective in the narrative middle and provide a new lens for both narrative scholars and gaming scholars.

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A beginning

All video games play with queer pleasure. Acknowledging this forces us to radically rethink game texts. While some have argued that video games are not narratives at all, I counter that their narrative form is unrecognizable because they are fundamentally queer narratives. In this way, games do not rely on heteronormative concepts of what a narrative is in the first place. Our understanding of narrative is so deeply embedded in heterosexist academic discourse and practice that the debate over whether or not games are narrative itself fails to convey the possibilities of the gaming texts. Instead, by tapping into queer and feminist narrative theory, we can broaden what gaming is and what it can be.

Authors and academics have long debated over the meaning of narrative.[1] Over the last decade-and-a-half of video game studies, for example, many game scholars have theorized the complex relationship between video games and narrative (Aarseth, 2004; Juul, Raessens, & Goldstein, 2005; Koenitz, Haahr, Ferri, & Sezen, 2013; Murray, 2004). These conversations have been a productive means of situating a new medium into the parameters of older forms of storytelling. At the same time, there are long-standing debates on the meaning and implications of narrative structure within the field of narrative theory.

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Typically, when analyzing a narrative, scholars use the "Freytag" model (Freytag, 2012/1863)—focusing on an inciting event and progressing towards a climax. But video games offer alternative pleasures. Instead of getting embroiled in the escalation towards climax, video game narratives are placed firmly in moments of delay—moments of narrative middle. This space is what Barthes (1975) identifies as the core point of textual pleasure. Barthes explains that the hermeneutics of a text rely on the pleasures of creating problems or questions within the reader, and then delaying the response—the pleasure is not in the climax but in the delay of that very climax.

This essay marries game analysis and queer narrative theory by highlighting the dilatory moments that are embedded in gaming narrative and discussing the queer potential of those moments. While parts of this argument are structural, it is important to consider not only structure, but also process—how a narrative can come into (and become) something other than what it is. Within this notion of process, my goal is to move the conversation beyond the discussion of whether games are "narrative" toward a broader understanding of narrative possibility.

Acknowledging the queer potential of gaming is a mobilizing a call-to-action for game designers and scholars to embrace that queerness—not only thematically, but in form and process. I begin by discussing past debates on narratives and gaming, and then turn to traditional narrative theory. I use queer narrative theory to illustrate the relevance of the "climax," productive/reproductive narrative, and the dilatory "middle." This demonstrates that video games essentially lack the "cum shot"—the ejaculatory moment intending reproduction that is inherent in straight narrative form. To deploy these theoretical moments, I consider the structurally queer potential of games such as *Super Mario Brothers*, the *Grand Theft Auto* games, *World of Warcraft*, and *Tetris*. Finally, I consider *Mainichi*, *Lim*, and *Gone Home*—video games that are intentionally and thematically queer to indicate ways that form and content in queer gaming can be coupled in meaningful ways. The goal of this project is threefold: (1) to broaden approaches to studying video game narrative, (2) to give queer narrative theory a new medium for theoretical exploration, and (3) to propose that game designers rethink the queer potential of gaming.

Video game studies and narrative analysis

In the early 2000s, when video game studies first became an important area of emergent research, many scholars found themselves locked into the question, "Are video games narratives?" The debate, in many ways, was a worthwhile one, acknowledging the necessity of nuance when approaching video games from formalist perspectives. However, it quickly became polarized, and many academics found themselves in one of two camps: the more traditional Aristotelians (or "narratologists") who referred to video games as "cyberdramas" and the "ludologists" who suggested that video game studies should not be analyzed through traditional textual-centric academic disciplines.

The narratologists and ludologists differed in approach. Aristotelian theorists such as Janet Murray use drama as a model for analyzing games and interactive texts as "cyberdramas" (Murray, 2004). In *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997), Murray describes the cyberdrama as a means for understanding how the story is retold in digital media. In essence, Murray describes three player experiences that characterize the cyberdrama: (1) immersion, involving an "active creation of belief" (p. 110); (2) agency, or the "satisfying

power to take meaningful action" (p. 126); and (3) transformation through variety (p. 155). The cyberdramatists use traditional literary and theoretical approaches to analyze games. The alternative position, ludology, is best summed up by Eskelinen (2004) who insists that video games are not narrative because, "If I throw a ball at you, I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories" (p. 36). Eskelinen and others suggest that traditional tactics such as literary, cultural, and rhetorical theories are ill suited for understanding video games' dynamic format. Some researchers have found a middle ground, such as Jenkins (2004) who suggests understanding video games "less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility" (p. 119). Additionally complicating these matters, a distinction can be made between "game" and "interactive fiction" wherein both narrative and game-like factors work in congress—although as Montfort (2004) points out, it is often difficult to distinguish the two when looking at artifacts such as text adventure games.

Yet there is another problem with how we understand video games in terms of narrative and narrative theory. Often, these debates privilege both masculine and heterosexual understandings of narrative theory (De Lauretis, 1984; Roof, 1996; Winnett, 1990). Queer and feminist theories offer alternative ways of understanding narrative by pushing beyond masculine, heterosexual paradigms, and are useful in re-considering the queer potential of gaming narratives.

The narrative orgasm and Heteronormativity

Much of our understanding of narrative uses the "Freytag's Pyramid" model (Freytag, 2012/1863). A narrative is complete when it has an inciting event, rising action, leading towards a climax, and then ultimately a falling action. This understanding of narrative fits nicely with popular media; Hollywood films, bestseller books, short fiction, episodes of *Law & Order* all fall within the parameters of what we often understand as being a correct mode of narrative form.

This assumed shape of a narrative, its form and intention, has significance. It has been argued by Scholes (1979) that fiction resembles, replicates, and shapes the cycles of the orgasm. Scholes explains,

> The archetype of all fiction is the sexual act. […] for what connects fiction—and music—with sex is the fundamental orgastic rhythm of tumescence and detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and consummation. (p. 26)

In other words, regardless of the content of fiction—sexual or otherwise,—the patterns and flow of the structure resemble that of sex acts. Similarly, other narrative theorists have drawn comparisons between the pleasures and desires in fictional form with those of sexual intercourse. Brooks (1977) uses Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to discuss the structure of narrative. Brooks suggests that the most important part of the relationship between intercourse and narrative structure is not in the climax but in the *delay* of climax. Brooks explains,

> It is a characteristic of textual energy in narrative that it should always be on the verge of premature discharge, of short-circuit. The reader experiences the fear—and excitation—of the improper end, which is symmetrical to—but far more immediate and present than—the fear of endlessness. (p. 296)

The implication made by Brooks is that to delay the climax, to end improperly (either prematurely or never) is a bad narrative. The understanding of narrative-as-sex presupposes that there will, indeed, be a singular, successful climactic "discharge" towards the story's end.

This model of understanding narrative in terms of orgastic pleasure is not without criticism. Winnett (1990) remarks on the masculinist perspective of Scholes's and Brooks's arguments in relating textual pleasure to orgastic pleasure. According to Winnett, part of the problem with the perspective offered by Brooks and Scholes is that the narrative orgasm implies and universalizes a masculine subject via a singular ejaculatory moment. Winnett's argument helps to remind us of the patriarchal undercurrents normalizing masculinity in literary theory, however unintentional this may be. One of the most notable critics of the Scholes/Brooks argument is De Lauretis (1984). De Lauretis explores ways that Scholes's metaphor of the orgasmic narrative necessarily implies the "inherent maleness of all narrative movement" (p. 108). Deepening this explanation and pulling in other modes of psychoanalytic theory, de Lauretis argues that all narrative stems from the "mythical subject" transforming all narrative desire into male desire. According to de Lauretis, regardless of sex, the mythical subject is always, structurally, a stand-in for male-ness.

Yet, while feminist scholars such as Winnett and de Lauretis offer apt criticism of the Scholes/Brooks argument, this does not account for queer interpretations. In continuation of de Lauretis' explanation of the masculine structuralism of narrative form, Roof (1996) argues that narrative is not merely masculine, but heteronormative. Roof explains that our understanding of a functional and successful narrative hinges on a notion of a singular orgasm that is implied by *reproductive* intercourse. In other words, the ejaculatory nature of the climax that is described by Scholes/Brooks necessitates a reproductive moment—an anticipation of an impregnating moment. Referencing de Lauretis' mythical subject who is masculine but also built within binary positions such as male/female, active/passive, and boundary/passage, Roof pushes the argument further. If the masculine mythical subject of a heteronormative narrative performs the *fucking* (leading to the ejaculative climax), the implied female body in this binary opposition is what is being *fucked*. In this way, the mythical subject dis-embodied by narrative structure is necessarily both male *and* heterosexual.

A tension between reproduction, sex, and narrative leads back to Freud. Using *Beyond the pleasure principle*, Scholes argues that because sex (hetero-sex is implied here) is an attempt to overcome death, the climactic moment embedded in narrative works similarly. The narrative climax—the ejaculatory moment—functions metaphorically, attempting to displace anxiety of death through reproductive acts of narrative consummation. Roof explains, "As the end of the orgasmic story, the coalition of reproduction and death situates the two in an ambivalent relation, reproduction staving off death and death the simultaneous enemy and/or product of reproduction, and both the outcome of coming" (Roof, 1996, p. 20). This confluence between sex/reproduction/death as metaphorical relationship between sex and narrative, according to Roof, means that there is always a naturalization of the heterosexual/reproductive conclusion to narrative, in order for it to appear "productive." To be considered a good story, a satisfying story, there is a presumption that narrative will end productively/reproductively.

Roof argues that narrative that does not emulate this form is not always identified as narrative. Roof explains that these predilections guide how we judge and interpret all narrative form: "Without the expectation of an ending, we have difficulty discerning a story, its pleasures, terrors, lessons, its making sense of things, its usefulness as catharsis or panacea" (1996, p. 6). Roof's suggestion here is that the narrative that does not emulate heterosexual orgasm is simply not recognizable as a narrative. If Roof's assertions are true—if our expectations of narrative form maps to reproductive, heterosexual orgasms (making other forms of narrative unrecognizable)—it becomes necessary to rethink how we conceptualize the video game narrative.

Perhaps the reason video game researchers have debated so heatedly whether or not games constitute narratives, then, is that they are unrecognizable as heteronormative narratives. Instead of climactic moments, video game narratives are differentiated by being constantly submerged in the story's middle. This middle, according to Roof, revels in queer process: it allows for a space that is not defined by a singular, ultimate climax but a multitude of climaxes that are not intent on necessarily finding an end. In this way, the "queer narrative middle" seems to be a more complementary mode of understanding narrative pleasure in gaming spaces.

Video games and the queer narrative middle

Gaming narratives lack traditional climax or catharsis. As Aarseth (2004) explains, the end is not the goal in a video game—it is about small victories and rewards. He explains,

> The gameworld is its own rewards, and the end, if and when it comes, does not offer dramatic satisfaction, but a feeling of limbo. There is no turning back, and no going forward. You are no longer employed by the game. Time to buy another. (p. 51)

Aarseth's observations affirm the view that gaming stories do not exist in the climax. This is why, per Roof's discussion of queer middles, we can see how games might be unidentifiable as a form of narrative.

If we think about games not as a narrative en route to a singular reproductive climax—if we focus on the process of narrative, rather than then a singular heightened point of pleasure—then we find video games have potential for alternative pleasures. The heteronormative nature of the productively climactic narrative discussed in the previous section doesn't really seem to help us when dealing with the complicated nature of video games. The pleasure of gaming isn't in a singular moment, but in the anticipation and release of many singular moments, perhaps even moments that do not infer the productivity of reproduction. The pleasure of video game narrative is about becoming, rather than about coming. There is rarely a final reproductive "cum shot" to video games.[2]

Gaming pleasures are wrapped in the middle spaces, those spaces where, Roof contends, queer narrative thrives. She explains that just as heterosexual narrative is dependent on climax and reproductive orgasm, queer narrative exists in the never-ending middle that is dependent on alternative pleasures and is unconcerned with the reproductive act. According to Roof, the delay of the inevitable climax and closure is characterized by literary deviance. She explains that this is often identified as a "bad narrative" as opposed to reproductive narratives, which are identified as "good narratives." In effect, if the narrative's middle never ends, it is considered deviant, non-productive (or non-reproductive);

it results in no climax or conclusion that can be aligned with heteronormative reproductive pleasures. To some extent these narrative "perversions" are permissible and considered, "narratively useful, necessary to stir up the middle," but ultimately the heteronormative narrative relents and gives way to climax and closure (Roof, 1996, p. 39). It is through this narrative teasing, the focus on process (*becoming* not *coming*), and its reliance on the never-ending middle that video games can be re-considered through queer narrative theory. This focus on the middle is not about the absolute denial of orgasmic pleasure—Roof's argument is not to say that there is no climax within the queer middle—but that pleasures can be in multiple and indefinite. Where normative heterosexual sex centers on the singular (reproductively intentioned) orgasm, the queer narrative can have a million climaxes, or none at all. In short, queerness loosens the structural grip forcing narrative to move in a singular, inevitable direction.

According to Roof, some authors (such as Monique Wittig, Nicole Brossard, and Djuna Barnes) have subverted traditional narrative, by embracing the queer middle. Yet, our expectations of narratives make it difficult to read and understand formats that do not reinforce hetero-ideologies. Similarly, perhaps we have been so reticent to acknowledge video games as a narrative form simply because of their queer potential.

The queer case of video games

As previously quoted by Roof, without the heteronormative expectations of narrative structure we have difficulty even in "discerning a story." This seems to be true in the queer case of video games, where many scholars have, indeed, denied the presence of narrative form. Eskelinen (2004), for example argues that a game can never be a narrative because it is "a sequence of events produced by manipulating equipment and following formal rules" and that this definition means that older theoretical models (literature, theater, or other modes of narrative understanding) are not applicable (2004, p. 37). Yet, these remarks still rest on assumptions of narrative's heteronormative structure. This is not to reject the work done by ludologists or narratologists, but to broaden the question of narrative form, where "formal rules" may not apply.

Level-based games perhaps provide the simplest and most straightforward example for considering the queer narrative potential of video games. The *Super Mario* games, for example, put the player in the role of Mario the Plumber, who runs and jumps past foes in the Mushroom Kingdom in search of Princess Peach, who is languishing in a distant castle. As he arrives at each castle, Mario is told that his princess is in yet a different castle until the game ends. Despite his heteronormative heroics, *Super Mario*'s pleasure is not in completion—the game's end is anti-climactic. Instead, the pleasure of Mario is in the dilatory moments of the denial of climax. And perhaps there is a playful admission here—the heternormative quest of Mario and Peach is just a ruse. It is possible that we never wanted the trappings of this generic rescue after all. We are secretly pleased to know that our princess *is* in another castle. Although the singular, non-mutable direction implied by any level-based platform game has a heteronormative ontology, the multitude of pleasurable moments in its narrative structure suggest something other.

Console action games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series[3] follow a similarly anti-climactic format. *The GTA* games place the player in the role of a criminal who is tasked with

working his way up the underworld through a series of missions. Missions are not meant to be singularly climactic. Instead we get dozens of moments of pleasure at the excitation of completing a mission, or even at not completing it and getting to perform a do-over. The pleasure is not in reproductive completion, but in the process of play. Additionally, *GTA* is a sandbox world, meaning that players can constantly test the parameters of the space (choosing to follow missions or to just do our own thing) allowing for narrative deviance. In a sandbox world game—the pleasure is situated within a never-ending delay. One can play a sandbox game and never experience any kind of productive climax at all. Despite the heteronormative masculine themes and styles in the content of the *GTA* series, the game provides queer narrative pleasures through process.

In even larger gameworlds such as *World of Warcraft* (*WoW)* and other Massively Multiplayer Online Games, the narrative potential is as vast as Azeroth—the imaginary world in which it takes place. With Tolkeinian zest, the player builds up their skill sets, making their characters infinitely individualized, regardless of whether or not they follow the structure of the game world. While players are sent on quests, these quests offer small pleasures and can easily be avoided. Raids and dungeons in *WoW* might give momentary climaxes, but not necessarily more so than the simple pleasure of fishing in the same game world. The repetitive play meant to push the player to the next level is often casually referred to players as "grinding"—perhaps teasing the pleasure of non-reproductive sexual play. Players can play as they like for as long as they like, having as many climaxes as they want. They can deviate, find their own pleasure, and revel in dilatory moments. It becomes easy to get sucked into the pleasures of "just one more … " in a persistent gameworld.

Considering this from an even more abstract perspective, casual puzzle games offer a different mode of climactic pleasure. *Tetris*, for example, is a simple game where players must align falling rectangular shapes into rectangular shaped holes—a simple enough concept. A game like *Tetris* has no ultimate climax—the player is ultimately playing against herself, in full masturbatory, non-reproductive reverie. *Tetris* (even with its heteronormative and never-ending stream of phalluses, which neatly fit into vaginal —or perhaps anal—pockets) defines the spectrum of queer narrative possibility. *Tetris* was a big point of contention in the early debates of narratology/ludology, wherein ludologists such as Eskelinen (2004) deny any possibility of narrative presence, but Murray (2004) insists that *Tetris* is, indeed, embedded with narrative. But, rather than being proof that gaming is quintessential/antithetical to narrative, *Tetris* provides a compelling argument that we've been looking at the question itself entirely wrong. The game centralizes narrative process rather than hetero-narrative form. Scholarship on video game narratives need to continue this focus on process-based narrative, moving beyond traditional hetero-narrative interpretations.

Embracing the queer potential of gaming

Embracing the queer potential of games allows game creators to engage with their narrative possibilities. In the conclusion to *Come as you are*, Judith Roof writes, "To combat hetero-ideology would mean thinking outside the system altogether, changing conceptions of time, cause and effect, and knowledge" (1996, p. 186). In this sense, some games revel in their own queer processes by seemingly and deliberately denying narrative orgasmic

catharsis. In recent years, several games have used queer topics in ways that highlight the potential of the medium.

Merritt Kopas' *Lim* is a browser-based game wherein the player controls a square that must fit through maze-like passageways while antagonistic squares try to block its entry. The game functions as a metaphor for passing—to get past enemy squares the player must pretend to be like them, a mechanic which takes excess labor. If a player attempts to "pass" for too long, her square moves more and more slowly, eventually violently shaking—unable to maintain the psychic labor of passing. The narrative of "passing" is embedded in the game mechanics, not in a story. In an interview, Merritt Kopas explains, "I was really consciously trying not to say, 'Here is a game about X' and I wanted to convey things with as little verbal language as possible and as little specific imagery as possible" (Adams, 2014). In *Lim*, process and narrative structure are intertwined. At the same time, in its finale, the player finds no catharsis in climax, and is forced out of the structured maze, ejected into a space of nothing. The non-traditional end to the game helps to highlight the queer narrative patterning. That narrative patterning couples form and content, embracing the queer potential of gaming.

Mattie Brice's *Mainichi* is a role playing game where the author uses the game world to articulate her daily experiences and difficulties as a transgender woman. Brice explains that she created the game in an attempt to have gaming reflect a personal, rather than universal, experience. Brice states that the game "stands as a commentary of how we currently use game design for broad strokes of universal experiences instead of the hyper-personal, and often exclude minority voices" (Brice, 2012). The game offers no heightened catharsis—only a series of moments (both satisfying and unsatisfying) wherein the player must make decisions and experience the transphobic behaviors directed at their avatar. *Mainichi* has no end—after the experiences transpire it restarts over and over again, with no finite conclusion. There is no satisfying set of correct decisions that will win for the player. While the game is a role-playing game not dissimilar to *Super Mario*, the hyper-personal experience and lack of finite ending embraces the queer potential of gaming narrative. There is neither princess nor castle, only the banality of our everyday struggles.

One game that received a lot of attention upon its 2013 release is Steve Gaynor's Steam game, *Gone Home*. In *Gone Home* players navigate through the protagonist's childhood household, trying to slowly piece together what happened to a family. The player's primary goal is gaining a knowledge and understanding of the world around her in an organic, process-based way. The story itself touches on queer themes—the player quickly learns that the reason for her absent family is that her sister is gone. As the player wanders around the house, picking up clues, we learn that the sister (Sam) has been hiding portions of her identity from her family when she begins a homosexual relationship. The story is revealed in small pleasures and snippets—although it leads towards a singular, inevitable end (wherein the player finally finds out why the family is missing), there is no satisfying final climax. The things that have been wronged cannot be fixed—the player has arrived too late to help. The game ends with the discovery of a notebook which reads "Letters to Katie" and explains at the bottom, "Do not read if you are not Katie." When the player clicks on the book, the scene fades to black—we are not permitted to be part of the character's narrative climax. In this way, the player is ultimately denied the climax both literally and figuratively.

Gone Home received both critical acclaim and criticism from communities of game players and creators. Many lauded the game for its highly personal content and original

style of storytelling (Alexander, 2013; Keogh, 2013; Quinn, 2013). Yet, others have argued that *Gone Home* is "not a game"—some even going so far as to create an alternative version—*Gun Home*, which repurposes the setting but adds in gunfire (Schreier, 2014). This irreverent response to the game seems to imply that without violence or heavy action, a game is not a game. Others suggested that the amount of time it took to play the game, combined with a lack of clear-cut resolutions, makes it fail as a video game (Welsh, 2013). But *Gone Home* manages to be both game and narrative, locked into one another in ways that denies both the expected hard-core action of many game worlds, but also the expected catharsis and release of hetero-narrative. The player is bound to a story that is unable to offer a satisfying release, yet offers many small moments of pleasure through exploration and discovery. The player experiences denial both through watching the star-crossed lovers, but also by hearing about a story second-hand after-the-fact; it is too late to reconcile or resolve things. The player is impotent in the process of fixing the world around her and is bound by things that are out of her control; the only remaining pleasure is in discovery.

Conclusion

Of course, not all games (or things we label as games) fit quite so neatly into the metaphorical space in which I'm playing. My goal is not to provide a comprehensive list of every type of video game with a large 'Q' to demark each of them as queer. Queer theory functions as a road map that helps to navigate a complex interplay of narrative, play, and pleasure. And this road map may ultimately clear a path for considering gaming outside of heteronormative, masculine culture.

My analysis is meant as both a reconceptualization and a call-to-action. On one hand, it might be tempting to look at video games through the lens of traditional narrative theory. The impasse between ludology/narratology seemed to be a compelling one, but one that denied the potential pleasures of alternative modes of narrative. In this sense the central question of the debate is itself wrong. Traditional narrative theory is so deeply embedded in hetero-ideologies that it is easy to overlook the alternative possibilities that reach beyond the heterosexual, reproductive climax. Video games offer alternative pleasures because they exist in the space of narrative denial, reveling in a dilatory narrative middle where satisfaction is both immanent and impossible. In essence, debates over whether or not a game is a narrative is simply beside the point.

Games such as *Super Mario Brothers*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *World of Warcraft*, and *Tetris* illustrate the queer potential of all gaming. In a similar capacity, games such as *Lim*, *Mainichi*, and *Gone Home* help to showcase that when video games tap into their queer structural framework, there is infinite potential to expand the meaning, style, and form of the medium. This essay was written to rally game creators, game players, and game researchers to explore the queer possibilities of video games and to create games that revel in the unexpected pairing of form and content.

Notes

1. For the sake of simplicity I will not be rehashing the many debates about the defining principles of narrative. When I speak of "narrative" in what follows I will be referring to a systemic representation of an event or series of events.

2. While a "boss battle" might achieve some climax, it is only one point of pleasure in a series of pleasurable gaming moments. Most games generally have several boss battles of varying difficulty. Further, boss battles are generally located as easily in the queer middle as towards the game's end. It is easier to consider boss battles in terms of a multiplicity of orgasmic pleasures, rather than a singular orgasmic moment.
3. In referring to the *Grand Theft Auto* series, I am specifically referencing *Grand Theft Auto III* (*GTAIII*) and the subsequent games. *GTAIII* defined the series format more than its predecessors.

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