Hungry Holes and Insatiable Balls: Video Games, Queer Mechanics, and the Limits of Design

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ABSTRACT
This article presents a queer, comparative reading of the video games *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004) and *Donut County* (Annapurna Interactive, 2018). These games offer contrasting models of consumption. In *Katamari Damacy*, players roll around a ball that gobbles up items. *Donut County* follows a similar premise, with holes that swallow objects. Yet *Donut County* fails to deliver on its queer potential, leaving its holes hungry, whereas the balls of *Katamari Damacy* remain insatiable. Building on the work of Kathryn Bond Stockton, Shira Chess, and Edmond Chang, this article argues that these games, considered together, suggest both the power and the limitations of video game design to reflect queer "appetites."

This article compares two video games, both of which are about gobbling up objects and wreaking havoc on quaint, normative towns: *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004) and *Donut County* (Annapurna Interactive, 2018). In *Katamari Damacy*, players roll around increasingly large, sticky balls that pick up everything from household items to animals to buildings, creating bizarre, colorful masses that are then shot into outer space. Similarly, in *Donut County*, players move around holes in the ground, which widen as they swallow up more items, sucking homes and businesses into a jagged chasm that has formed beneath a sunny, pseudo Los Angeles. Though neither video game includes overt LGBTQ representational content, such as gay characters or

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same-sex romances, these games offer examples of what queer game studies scholars and queer game developers have referred to as *queer game mechanics*.[1] *Mechanic* is the term commonly applied to the designed, interactive components of a video game—that is, the things that games allow players to *do* rather than the people or narratives that games present on-screen.[2] Queer game mechanics are those interactive elements of games, either digital or analog, that resonate with non-heteronormative experiences of sexuality or gender. Whether or not they have been implemented intentionally by game designers, these mechanics allow games to engender queer meaning through player experience. Specifically, *Katamari Damacy* and *Donut County* offer two models of what I describe, drawing from Kathryn Bond Stockton and Shira Chess, as mechanics of *queer consumption*: queer forms of eating and the transgressive desire to consume, rendered into video game play.[3]

Despite the many similarities between *Katamari Damacy* and *Donut County*, there are also telling differences between the two games and how they translate queer consumption into queer game mechanics. Whereas the balls of *Katamari Damacy* are insatiable, seemingly capable of eating up an infinite array of haphazardly strewn items, the holes of *Donut County* are merely hungry; they can be sated by a comparatively small number of items carefully placed within levels that have been designed with clear precision. These differences give the games, as "affective systems," notably different feels.[4] Because its gameplay is more loosely structured, *Katamari Damacy* allows for a sense of ecstatic chaos: a queer act of messing up and "messing with" the game world.[5] By contrast, through its careful and overly restrained design, *Donut County* constrains the queer potential of its mechanics and gives play the semblance of tidying up. What ultimately emerges from this juxtaposition of *Katamari Damacy* and *Donut County* is an ambivalent picture of the interplays between game design and queerness. In this way, this article complicates existing scholarship on the queer potential of game design, which has typically celebrated the capacity of video games to engage with queerness "beyond representation" through the interactive elements of games.[6] By contrast, this work demonstrates how queer mechanics themselves, when over-designed, can re-normativize a video game with otherwise queer interactive potential. Placing queer interpretive readings of *Katamari*

1 Edmond Y. Chang, "Queergaming," in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 15–24; and Naomi Clark, "What *Is* Queerness in Games, Anyway?," in Ruberg and Shaw, *Queer Game Studies*, 3–14.

2 See Chris Swain, "The Mechanic Is the Message: How to Communicate Values in Games through the Mechanics of User Action and System Response," in *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values through Play*, ed. Karen Schrier and David Gibson (Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2010), 217–235.

3 Kathryn Bond Stockton, "If Queer Children Were a Video Game," in Ruberg and Shaw, *Queer Game Studies*, 225–238; and Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

4 Aubrey Anable, *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), xii.

5 Jen Jack Gieseking, "Messing with the Attractiveness Algorithm: A Response to Queering Code/Space," *Gender, Place and Culture* 24, no. 11 (2017): 1660, https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1379955.

6 Bonnie Ruberg, *Video Games Have Always Been Queer* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 14.

Damacy and *Donut County* side by side draws to the surface both the opportunity for video game mechanics to embody queer experiences as well as the limits of those very mechanics as tools for expressing queerness in video games through design.

Even in the face of such ambivalence, this interpretive critique of *Katamari Damacy* and *Donut County* entails a celebration of the queer body, its place within video games, and the way that play can become synonymous with expressions of queer hungers. For this reason, this work itself playfully revels in the absurdity, humor, and sexual charge of the "holes" and "balls" that become figures of queer corporeality and longing in these two games. In the same sense that queerness can manifest in video games in ways that go beyond literal LGBTQ representation, so, too, can the erotic body, which appears here not in human form but in the shape and movement of the ever-growing balls or the widening holes whose desires ravage placid scenes of the heteronormative world. To describe these figures as "hungry holes" and "insatiable balls" is to deliberately call to mind the terminology of pornography, in particular pornography featuring sex between men. It embraces the meanings suggested by sexual innuendo (a kind of epistemological sideways glance) and plays up the echoes between video games, their mechanics, and lived queer bodies. As hungry holes and insatiable balls, the anus, testicles, and, by extension, the genitals more generally are figured as subjects of longing and sites of agency—places where both pleasure and meaning are made through play.

VIDEO GAMES AND (QUEER) CONSUMPTION

The gameplay of both *Katamari Damacy* and *Donut County* centers on interactive mechanics of consumption. In her book *Ready Player Two* (2017), Shira Chess discusses some of the ways that consumption enters video game design. Chess's broad project is a critique of the development of so-called casual video games, often produced for mobile devices or social platforms, which Chess performs through the lens of gender studies and an attention to the biases faced by women players. Chess addresses how video game mechanics model consumption during her analysis of the immensely popular casual video game *Candy Crush Saga* (King, 2012). One of the most widely played mobile games of the last decade, *Candy Crush Saga* is a match-three game themed around sweets.[7] Typically, in match-three games, players attempt to line up identical symbols to clear them from the board. In *Candy Crush Saga*, once a player makes a match of three identical candy pieces, the pieces disappear in a puff of smoke or a twinkle of stars; making matches also triggers sound effects reminiscent of teeth chomping down on food. Chess refers to the mechanics of match-three–style games as "consuming mechanics." She writes, "the consuming mechanic is one where the player's goal is to perform a series of maneuvers that make an object or series of objects disappear, visually creating a sense that the object has been consumed."[8] In addition, con-

7 Tom McKay, "*Candy Crush* Developer Says 9.2 Million Users Play at Least 3 Hours a Day, but It's Totally Not Addictive," *Gizmodo*, June 26, 2019, https://gizmodo.com/candy-crush-developer-says-9-2-million-users-play-at-le-1835893580.

8 Chess, *Ready Player Two*, 131.

temporary casual games are often characterized by what she terms a "lush" aesthetic: bright colors, shiny objects and interface elements, and rounded edges suggest a kind of visual candy.[9] It is fitting, then, that *Candy Crush Saga* both epitomizes one model of consumption mechanics while also literalizing this emphasis on consumption through its food-related theming and sugary visual style.

Moreover, the cultural implications of consumption mechanics such as those found in match-three–style games are tied to the interrelations between gender and pleasure. Of tasks like clearing items from the board in *Candy Crush Saga*, Chess writes that "there is something *inherently satisfying* within the game mechanic itself. . . . This mechanic is enjoyable . . . because of the disappearing element, which has the effect of neatly clearing the screen."[10] In this sense, in Chess's view, the pleasure of consumption mechanics can be tied to the feminine-coded labor of cleaning. Aubrey Anable, in her book *Playing with Feelings* (2018), also discusses *Candy Crush Saga* and its relationship to gendered play. For Anable, *Candy Crush Saga* is exemplary of the types of games that have frequently been overlooked in serious discussions of video games. To illustrate how games like *Candy Crush Saga* are, in fact, an important part of the culture of the everyday, Anable describes a common scene: a woman plays *Candy Crush Saga* in snippets as she waits for a subway.[11] Through her discussion of this scene, Anable suggests that the pleasures that (women) players take in a casual video game such as *Candy Crush Saga* should be considered equally important as the pleasures that stereotypical straight, cisgender men take in playing so-called hardcore video games. For both Chess and Anable, games such as *Candy Crush Saga* are important objects of analysis because they offer scholars the opportunity to attend to feminine-coded design and women players and thereby challenge dominant notions about what modes of play are meaningful in video games and what types of players consume them.

At the same time, it is important to note the potentially hegemonic overtones of this vision of gendered play, which links women's pleasure to "neatly clearing the screen." Interpreted in this way, the model of consumption mechanics found in match-three games seems to enact what Dimitrios Pavlounis has described as a "straightening up" of the game space.[12] In his analysis of *Gone Home* (Fullbright Company, 2013), a video game well-known for its LGBTQ content, Pavlounis explains that games that appear to have queer meaning can invite players to straighten them, for instance by encouraging them to tidy up objects and archives in order to create linear, homonormative narratives. In this way, such games make players complicit in undoing the mess of queerness: that is, as queer studies scholars have articulated, the ways that queer lives, identities, and communities often look messy to those who hold positions of privilege

9 Chess, 48.

10 Chess, 48 (emphasis in the original).

11 Anable, *Playing with Feelings*, viii.

12 Dimitrios Pavlounis, "Straightening Up the Archive: Queer Historiography, Queer Play, and the Archival Politics of *Gone Home*," *Television and New Media* 17, no. 7 (February 2016): 579–594, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416631627.

and power and who therefore set the terms for what constitutes "order."[13] Though games like *Candy Crush Saga* typically forgo substantial attempts at building narratives, we might say that they, too, "straighten things up" in prompting players to create order by matching like objects and whisking them off the cluttered space of the board. Yet through their very emphasis on consumption, *Candy Crush Saga* and similar games themselves seem to resist such one-dimensional readings. Players do not simply clean up but in fact *eat* the candy that appears on-screen. As soon as it is eaten, more candy fills the board instantly and infinitely. In most match-three games, it would be impossible for players to ever actually clear the screen. Consumption becomes an endless task, both Sisyphean and decadent.

This connection between consumption mechanics in video games and the pleasures of indulgence helpfully points toward a broader resonance between consumption, erotics, and queerness. In "The Uses of the Erotic" (1978), Audre Lorde describes the erotic as expressions of "our deepest cravings," which often take the form of a desire to reach out to other people and form affective and intellectual connections across difference.[14] Lorde's use of the term *cravings* to characterize this longing to connect suggests that we might understand desire itself as a kind of hunger—and queer desire, by extension, as a hunger that does not fit with dominant notions of what (and how much) the desiring subject should crave. Indeed, queerness and transgressive consumption are already aligned in the broader cultural imaginary of twenty-first-century America. Both queer bodies and fat bodies are perceived as what Roxane Gay and others have referred to as *unruly bodies*, which are imagined as manifesting a socially unacceptable desire to consume, whether pleasure or food.[15] Relatedly, queerness and fatness are both "scandals of appetite," in the words of Lauren Berlant.[16] In *Carnal Appetites* (2000), Elspeth Probyn describes the similarities between sex and eating. Though Probyn does not present eating as queer per se, her descriptions of the erotics of consumption have clear resonances with queerness. "Practices of preparing and eating food are, of course, highly sensual and sometimes sexual," writes Probyn.[17] "The intricate ways in which food and self intertwine may help to extend our ways of thinking sexuality."[18] Much as eating shares qualities with sex in Probyn's formulation, sex shares qualities with eating. Both acts, argues Probyn, involve "the opening of the body to reveal

13 Martin F. Manalansan IV, "The 'Stuff' of Archives: Mess, Migration, and Queer Lives," *Radical History Review* 2014, no. 120 (2014): 94–107, https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2703742.

14 Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 57.

15 Constance Grady, "Roxane Gay on Unruly Bodies, the Difficulty of Being Transgressive, and #WhoBitBey," *Vox*, April 3, 2018, https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/4/3/17172642/roxane-gay-interview-unruly-bodies. The term *unruly bodies* has been explored by scholars from a number of areas, notable among them disability studies, long before Gay's popularization of the term. For examples of this work, see Susannah B. Mintz, *Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); and Nick Hodge, "Unruly Bodies at Conference," *Disability and Society* 29, no. 4 (March 2014): 655–658.

16 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 105.

17 Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities* (London: Routledge, 2000), 61.

18 Probyn, 64.

a multitude of surfaces that seek out contact with other surfaces."[19] Building from Berlant and Probyn, we might say that the connections between sex and eating color each other with queerness, casting a shadow of the erotic over food and reframing sexual desire in non-heteronormative terms as a hunger for contact between surfaces.

The intersection of these components—video game play, consumption, pleasure, and queerness—is precisely the subject of Stockton's 2017 article, "If Queer Children Were a Video Game." In Stockton's theorization, playing video games itself can be seen as an act of queer consumption. Inspired in part by Georges Bataille, who ties gameplaying to nonreproductive sexual acts, Stockton compares video games to candy.[20] "Clearly, a chocolate bar is not a game. But is it like a game in effect not in fact?" she asks. "The effects of candy are libidinal, captivating, repetitive, time wasting, grandly lateralizing of adults and children, and linked to the pleasures of self-destruction."[21] By "lateralizing," Stockton means that eating candy both literally widens the body and represents a form of "diversion" or sideways movement (rather than forward movement) through which the subject lingers in the pleasures of consumption.[22] Given the context of Stockton's essay, which appears in the volume *Queer Game Studies*, as well as her related writing in *The Queer Child* (2009), it is reasonable to add an additional, inferred adjective to this list of candy's qualities: queer. Stockton observes, "at this point in gaming's history, digital games are becoming more like candy: quickly consumed, 'eaten' in snatches, snacked on in the cracks of our time, especially as they migrate increasingly to smartphones, which are a pantry in our pockets. . . . Games are candy without the calories."[23] As a form of queer candy, video games promote their own sort of libidinal, sideways growth. Building from Stockton's work, Christopher Goetz describes an inherent tension in the notion of "queer growth" within the context of video games.[24] As Goetz explains, those approaching video games from queer perspectives seem simultaneously to call for video games to grow up and become more inclusive and to grow sideways—that is, to resist teleological narratives of upward progress and instead to reach outward for other forms of connection and meaning.

If video game mechanics can model different forms of consumption, and consumption has ties to queerness that intersect in video games, what might it look like for a video game to take on the task of translating queer consumption into interactive gameplay? In what follows, I demonstrate how the designs of *Katamari Damacy* and *Donut County* offer two related yet different models of queer consumption mechanics—both of which are notably distinct

19 Probyn, 63.

20 Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl, trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

21 Stockton, "If Queer Children," 232.

22 Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 25. Although I am focusing on Stockton's essay "If Queer Children Were a Video Game" here, this essay is itself an outgrowth of the writing in her book *The Queer Child*.

23 Stockton, "If Queer Children," 232.

24 Christopher Goetz, "Queer Growth in Video Games," in Ruberg and Shaw, *Queer Game Studies*, 239.

from the models found in casual games that have been discussed in the existing scholarship mentioned above. As I use it here, the term *queer consumption* describes modes of consuming (where *consuming* itself encompasses multiple meanings) that resist heteronormative notions of what constitutes an acceptable appetite or object of hunger. Queer consumption operates around alternative logics of longing—whether for food or flesh. If to consume is to eat, in one form or another, then to consume queerly is to eat in ways that do not fit the dominant dictates of society: to eat *what* one is not supposed to, to eat *for reasons* that one is not supposed to, and, by extension, to inhabit a body that bears the markers of stigmatized forms of eating. Queer consumption is about what (and whom) we desire, what (and whom) we take into our bodies, and why we do so. To think about consumption in a conceptual sense is always also to be thinking about the implications of these concepts for actual individuals who inhabit real, lived bodies—both non-normative in their desires and their physical forms. This is especially true in discussions of a popular media object like video games, which have commonly depicted fat characters in discriminatory ways.[25] Exploring queer consumption as a video game mechanic is not intended to devalue the realities of people who are queer or fat (or, as in my own case, both) but rather to respect their embodied experiences as important ways of knowing, seeing, and valuing various elements of video games as a medium.

COMPARING *KATAMARI DAMACY* AND *DONUT COUNTY*

From the perspective of design, *Katamari Damacy* and *Donut County* appear to have much in common. The two titles were produced many years apart, by entirely different teams, and in different national contexts. Yet from the time that the first announcement appeared about the video game that would become *Donut County*, journalists and reviewers have compared the game to *Katamari Damacy* as its unofficial predecessor. In 2012, the video game news website *Polygon* published an article about an early iteration of *Donut County*, then called *Kachina*, with the title "IndieCade Selection *Kachina* Has Shades of *Katamari Damacy* and One Intriguing Hole." The article's author, Michael McWhertor, who had played a demo of the game at the independent games festival IndieCade, begins the piece by addressing these similarities: "[*Donut County*] designer Ben Esposito is open about the visual and gameplay similarities between his game . . . and *Katamari Damacy*. Both games feature simple, colorful characters and items that grow bigger in scale as players gobble up more stuff from the world. In *Katamari* games, players control a sticky ball. But in [*Donut County*], they control a hole."[26] Though much changed between that early iteration of *Donut County* and the final version of the game, which Esposito released in 2018, the fundamental parallels between *Donut County* and *Katamari Damacy* that McWhertor points out remain. The two games

25 Todd Harper, "Portrayals and Pitfalls of Fatness in Games" (presentation, Game Developers Conference, San Francisco, CA, March 3, 2015).

26 Michael McWhertor, "IndieCade Selection Kachina Has Shades of *Katamari Damacy* and One Intriguing Hole," *Polygon*, October 8, 2012, https://www.polygon.com/2012/10/8/3476056/indiecade-selection-kachina-has-shades-of-katamari-damacy-and-one.

share saturated, soft-edged aesthetics; they are both populated with playfully designed everyday objects; and their core mechanics—"gobbling up stuff," whether as a ball or a hole—are strikingly similar. Yet the value of comparing *Katamari Damacy* and *Donut County* runs deeper than identifying these points of commonality. Indeed, it is the fact that these two games *seem* so alike that allows us, when reading them in juxtaposition, to draw out the crucial differences in their design and, by extension, their implications for issues of culture, identity, and queerness.

The original *Katamari Damacy* was released in 2004 for the PlayStation 2 video game console by the Japanese development studio Namco. Game designer Takahashi Keita is widely credited as the creative force behind the game, although it is valuable to question narratives that foreground the work of individuals (typically straight, cisgender men) in the creation of video games developed by collaborative teams. In addition to its unusual mechanics, two of the many features that make the original *Katamari Damacy* unique are its striking visual style, which is reminiscent of surrealist and Dadaist collage art, and its high-energy, pop-inspired musical soundtrack. In her brief but wide-reaching book on *Katamari Damacy*, which looks at the game's production and the artistic influences that shaped its design, Laura E. Hall describes how the game initially faced sales challenges because reviewers were not sure how to classify *Katamari Damacy* according to traditional video game genres.[27] However, its popularity among a growing international fan base eventually made *Katamari Damacy* a large-scale success in both Japan and North America. Since 2004, Namco has developed a number of sequels and adaptations of the original *Katamari Damacy* for alternative and later-generation gaming platforms. The ongoing life of the franchise demonstrates that *Katamari Damacy* still holds an important place in the cultural landscape of video games. For the purposes of this analysis, however, I will focus on the original *Katamari Damacy* game.

In *Katamari Damacy*, players take on the role of the prince: a tiny, perky, silent character with an oblong head (or hat; we never really know) who is tasked with creating bigger and bigger "katamaris." A Japanese word preserved in its transliterated form in the North American localization of the game, *katamari* translates roughly as ball, mass, or lump. The player's objective in each level is typically to create a katamari large enough that the prince's father, the flamboyant King of All Cosmos, can shoot it into space and turn it into a star, slowly replacing the stars that the king recently destroyed while drunkenly stumbling around the night sky. The player begins with a small, bumpy ball no bigger than a golf ball, rolling it around levels strewn with an eccentric array of objects (see Figure 1). The bigger the ball grows, the larger the objects that the player can roll up. Since the player's katamari starts small, they can initially only pick up tiny items, like thumbtacks and matches. However, as the katamari grows—and as the game allots more time for individual levels—players can gather items of an exponentially larger scale. By the end of an early level, a player's katamari may only grow big enough to roll up a household pet. By the game's final sequence, however,

27 Laura E. Hall, *Katamari Damacy* (Los Angeles: Boss Fight Books, 2018).

Figure 1. Players begin *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004) levels with a small, sticky ball. Screenshot by author.

a player can create a katamari so large that it rolls up skyscrapers, then whole islands, and eventually even the clouds from the sky. Each of these items is glommed unceremoniously onto the growing, rolling mass. This is key to what Hall calls the "pure anarchic fun" of *Katamari Damacy*'s gameplay.[28]

Donut County emerges from a different production paradigm and cultural context. The game was released in 2018, nearly a decade and a half after *Katamari Damacy*, by an independent American designer in conjunction with a comparatively small video game publishing company. Though *Donut County* is modest in scope—it takes about two hours to play and is available on PC and a selection of consoles—designer Ben Esposito spent six years developing it, notably longer than other video games of comparable scales. Along the way, the game took on many forms. Esposito created the first version of *Donut County*, then called *The Pits*, for a 2012 game jam: an event in which developers rapidly prototype new games.[29] Later in 2012, as mentioned above, Esposito demoed the game, by then called *Kachina*, at IndieCade. The first official trailer for *Donut County* appeared in 2014. In 2015, three years before its release, the game won a Story/World Design Award at the Independent Games Festival. Reports about previews of the game at events like the Game Developers Conference rolled in throughout 2016 and 2017.[30]

28 Hall, 2.

29 Jason Tanz, "How a Videogame God Inspired a Twitter Doppelgänger—and Resurrected His Career," *Wired*, October 19, 2012, https://www.wired.com/2012/10/ff-peter-molyneux/; and Michael McWhertor, "Donut County Is Like a Reverse *Katamari* Inspired by Bruce Springsteen and Fake Peter Molyneux," *Polygon*, August 11, 2014, https://www.polygon.com/2014/8/11/5992923/donut-county-kachina-ben-esposito.

30 Alec Meer, "Next Year's Indie Giants Today: IndieCade 2015 Winners," *Rock Paper Shotgun*, October 28, 2015, https://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2015/10/28/best-indie-games-2015/.

By the time the game was finally available for sale in 2018, *Donut County* had generated considerable buzz as one of the most anticipated indie video games of recent years. This long buildup speaks to the considerable amount of time that went into crafting *Donut County*—and arguably over-crafting it, as I discuss below. It also helps explain the charged (and at times erotically inflected) anticipation that circulated around *Donut County* as would-be players awaited its release.

While *Katamari Damacy* focuses on gameplay with only short, interstitial moments of storytelling, *Donut County* spends considerably more of its time on narrative. The game's two main characters are Mira, a young woman of color, and BK, a raccoon. Mira and BK work together at a local donut shop, which is set against the backdrop of a city skyline that is clearly an homage to Los Angeles. Trouble starts when BK, who is supposed to be using a mobile application to deliver donuts, instead uses the app to open holes beneath customers' houses, causing their belongings and even customers themselves to fall into a cavernous pit. In each level, players move the hole around the home (or workplace) of one customer. The narrative frame of the game, which also serves as a hub for these levels, is a conversation that takes place inside the pit. There, BK, Mira, and all of the customers whose homes BK has ruined sit around a campfire amid the rubble. Though initially defensive, BK comes to realize over the course of the game how his actions have harmed others. In the game's second half, BK and Mira set off to defeat the Trash King, the villainous raccoon behind the mobile application that has allowed BK to create such havoc. In the game's final sequence, BK and Mira, having vanquished the Trash King and acquired a hot air balloon, send all of the characters who were swallowed up by BK's holes back up to the surface.

Despite *Donut County*'s emphasis on characters and story, however, it is the mechanic of the all-consuming hole that has dominated the popular imagination around the game. This can be seen, for example, in the title of the *Polygon* article mentioned above, which describes the game that would become *Donut County* as having "one intriguing hole." As a bit of sexual innuendo, this reference to the game's "hole" is simultaneously playfully erotic and potentially homophobic, suggesting that the implicit connection between *Donut County* and the sexual body should be a source of humor. In later writing on *Donut County*, this fascination with the embodied suggestiveness of the hole continues to surface. We can see this, for instance, in Laura Hudson's *Verge* article titled "*Donut County* Is a Game about Swallowing Los Angeles and Realizing You're an Asshole. That's the Central Theme of the Game."[31] *Swallowing* and *asshole* stand in interesting relation to each other here. Hudson's title fittingly blurs the divide between hole, player, human body, the erotic, and the abject. It suggests that the player-character is at once a mouth receiving oral sex (swallowing) and an anus. This rhetoric reflects a general, low-key sexual aura that has surrounded *Donut County*, a game that appears otherwise unrelated to sex or sexuality. Such language

31 Laura Hudson, "*Donut County* Is a Game about Swallowing Los Angeles and Realizing You're an Asshole," *The Verge*, September 1, 2018, https://www.theverge.com/2018/9/1/17806888/donut-county-game-la-los-angeles-ben-esposito-interview.

nods toward the unspoken yet palpable fact that a game about playing with and as holes cannot help but have intriguing sexual implications. At the same time, it mirrors the precarity of this queer potential and foreshadows the ways that a video game's queer mechanics might, as in the case of *Donut County*, be used to support decidedly un-queer ends.

QUEER ELEMENTS IN *KATAMARI DAMACY*

Though this article focuses on how *Katamari Damacy* and *Donut County* model mechanics of queer consumption (to varying degrees of effectiveness) and thereby engage with queer experience through design, these video games also contain representational elements that can be interpreted queerly. As scholars of gender and critical race in video games have argued, it is important to consider questions of whom and what video games represent alongside an analysis of their mechanics and interactive structures so that we can understand them as computational objects with cultural meaning.[32] Indeed, my interpretation of these games' mechanics understands them as fundamentally coloring and colored by the visual and narrative contexts in which they appear on-screen. Together, these mechanics and representational elements, along with related considerations of the games' receptions, form what could be termed an *assemblage of queer meanin*g—as adapted from T. L. Taylor's concept of the "assemblage of play" in video games.[33]

Of these two games, *Katamari Damacy* has the more obvious representational connection to queerness—though even these representational elements are far from the types of overt, "inclusive" LGBTQ content that many have called for in mainstream video games.[34] Much of the queer imagery in *Katamari Damacy* circulates around the figure of the King of All Cosmos. Before the opening title of the game appears, *Katamari Damacy* presents players with the image of a dark night sky, which brightens to reveal the king rising over the horizon of a field of cows. As if the game is celebrating his arrival, rainbows shoot out of the hillside like searchlights (see Figure 2). Throughout the game, whenever the king transports the prince back from Earth to the sky—where the king examines the balls of objects that the prince has rolled up—the king opens his mouth and lets out a royal rainbow, a wide shaft of saturated colors that beams the prince into space. These colorful spectacles are candy-like and "lush," to recall Chess's term. They associate the king with queer iconography: the vibrant rainbow that heralds his appearance and pours forth from his lips.

From his clothes to his movements, the king's body also drips with queer signifiers. He wears a large, sparkling, multicolored headpiece that matches his flowing purple cape, recalling the visual language of dandyism and drag.

32 Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, "Introduction: Identity, Representation, and Video Game Studies beyond the Politics of the Image," in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2017), 1–17.

33 T. L. Taylor, "The Assemblage of Play," *Games and Culture* 4, no. 4 (August 2009): 331–339, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009343576.

34 Bonnie Ruberg and Amanda Phillips, "Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games," *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018), http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

Figure 2. The King of All Cosmos appears in a flash of rainbows in *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004). Screenshot by author.

Glitz, decadence, and feminine touches characterize his costumery. His skin-tight shirt, which shows off his muscular physique, contrasts with his ornate, oversized ruffled collar. He wears a gold crown to suggest his status as king but also gold rings, a gold bracelet, a gold necklace, and a chunky gold belt. Even his features suggest a queer, if comical, erotics. His chin is dramatically cleft into two globes that resemble firm buttocks. In the game's opening scene, the king stands larger than life at the center of the screen; looming over the pasture of baffled and enthralled cows, he spreads out his arms with dramatic flair in a stiff yet graceful gesture reminiscent of ballroom vogueing. As he begins to rise upward into space, and his body passes by the player's gaze, the outline of a prominent codpiece bulges noticeably from his crotch. Filling up the screen, the king's exaggerated genitals set a queer tone for the rest of the game that follows.

Queerness also manifests both in the way that the king speaks and in his relationship with the prince. The king is the main mouthpiece for the game—the prince himself never talks—and the humor of his chatty, self-aggrandizing commentary often lies in his implied gender and sexual non-normativity. For example, he wistfully considers the idea of starting a diary to write down his feelings, a feminine-coded proposition. His comments also suggest that the king is something of a "size queen." The king, and by extension the game, is preoccupied with measuring the player's katamaris. If the katamari is big enough, the king will proclaim his nearly sexual excitement at the sight of the impressively large ball. The king himself is a strikingly big figure. At times, he delivers these teasing remarks while looming over the tiny prince, who stands directly beneath his father's enormous, bulging crotch, suggesting an erotic tension between the two. The king is not just any queer figure, though. He is specifically a queer dad. *Katamari Damacy* is clearly invested in the relationship between the king and the prince—or what

the king himself refers to as the "father-son bond." This is far from a heteronormative picture of parenthood, however. The King of All Cosmos offers a compelling if unlikely alternative vision of the queer daddy in video games: one who is both sexy and strange, domineering and often disappointed, yet caring, a desirous figure whom the player seeks to please.[35] Indeed, within the diegesis of *Katamari Damacy*, this longing for approval from the queer father is the hunger that drives the creation of the katamaris and, by extension, the play of the game.

KATAMARI DAMACY'S MECHANICS OF QUEER CONSUMPTION

Katamari Damacy offers the first of two models for how queer consumption might be expressed through elements of video game design. The game's core mechanic, rolling around a ball that grows increasingly large as it picks up items, is all about consuming. The purpose of the gameplay is to accumulate and engulf items, sucking them up into the body of the katamari, which expands in diameter, literalizing Stockton's image of grand lateral growth.[36] One of the characteristics of this model of queer consumption is that the katamari always remains hungry—that is, always capable of taking on more items and more girth. The game does impose arbitrary time limits on levels, which in turn limit how big katamaris can grow, but the ball itself never becomes "full." Without designed constraints, it could go on eating forever. In this way, *Katamari Damacy* offers up the insatiable ball as a model of queer consumption that defies dictates of reason and reasonableness. As it moves through each level, gobbling up a dizzying array of larger and larger objects, the katamari recalls Probyn's description of the shared qualities of sex and eating. As the ball grows larger and larger, quickly dwarfing the tiny prince, it seems to be driven by a set of desires all its own: the longing of "surfaces [seeking] out contact with other surfaces."[37] Indeed, this is how the katamari consumes: through the stickiness of surfaces, which causes new objects to glom onto old objects, thereby constantly expanding and changing the exterior surface (or skin) of the katamari.

This insatiability drives both the tension and the allure of *Katamari Damacy*'s gameplay. Generally speaking, players cannot collect all items in a level. No matter how many objects they collect, when the timer goes off, more remain strewn around them. In this way, the game fosters a sense of yearning: a desire for that which remains uneaten. When playing, one has the sense that, given enough time, the katamari could grow so large that it would roll up the entire world. Indeed, this is precisely what *Katamari Damacy* allows players to do in the game's final sequence, where they can create a katamari that reaches a nearly unfathomable scale. In this last level, which has

35 Queer game studies scholar Braidon Schaufert has argued that video games such as the popular *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (Game Grumps, 2017), which purports to represent the romantic lives of gay men, have in fact deradicalized the daddy figure and put him in the service of homonormative notions of family. Braidon Schaufert, "Daddy's Play: Subversion and Normativity in *Dream Daddy*'s Queer World," *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018), http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/braidon_schaufert.

36 Stockton, "If Queer Children," 232.

37 Probyn, *Carnal Appetites*, 63.

Figure 3. In the final level of *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004), the katamari can pick up enormous objects. Screenshot by author.

no time limit, players begin with the same tiny katamari as in other levels. Yet here, their balls ultimately grow so large that they can pick up an awe-inspiring buffet of objects that previously seemed too enormous to contemplate consuming: elephants, cargo ships, skyscrapers, and whole islands (see Figure 3). The pleasure of this level is its sheer excess. Once so tiny it could not pick up a scurrying mouse, the katamari has now become an enormous mass—monstrous, powerful, and thrilling. In this climax, the game delivers on the long-tantalizing prospect of unrestrained consumption. It also serves as a powerful suggestion that if queer worldmaking is the capacity to create worlds, then queer consumption may be the capacity to eat them up.

Katamari Damacy is dotted with elements that suggest an awareness that its mechanics are queerly reminiscent of eating. References to food and consumption appear throughout the game, and a number of these disrupt scenes of heteronormativity. In most levels of the game, the player starts inside what appears to be a family home, on top of a dining room table. Many of the first objects that a player can pick up, when their katamari is still very small, are food. Positioned at the center of this domestic tableau, the player rolls up chestnuts, mandarin orange slices, and, appropriately, pieces of candy. This first area of the level, which the player plays through multiple times over the course of the game, uses an array of items to make explicit the connection between food and games. Interspersed among the food items are objects representing digital and analog games, such as video game cartridges and dice. At the end of each level, when the King of All Cosmos arrives to assess the katamari, the game gives players a breakdown of which categories of objects they have collected. After playing through the game's first level, which introduces the player to the core mechanics of the game, the top category of items the player is likely to have collected is "snacks," followed shortly thereafter by "games."

This blurring of gameplay and eating has transgressive implications in *Katamari Damacy*. At times, characters in the game describe the katamaris themselves as if they were food, calling to mind the allure of abjection and pleasures that are distinctly non-normative. In one series of levels, players roll up objects themed around zodiac sign constellations. The level for the constellation Cancer, which is shaped like a crab, is overrun with scurrying, twitching crabs. By the end of the level, the player has amassed a writhing lump of frantic crabs of various sizes. When the king measures the ball, he proclaims, "Whee, that looks delicious! But also slightly disturbing!" He counts the number of crabs and notes approvingly, "This could fill the tummy." If we understand queer consumption as eating (or desiring to eat) in the wrong ways, this moment in which the king salivates over the comical, repulsive ball of crabs becomes a scene of queer hunger made possible by the player's successful engagement with the game's mechanics.

Importantly, the consumption mechanics of *Katamari Damacy* not only are insatiable but also do not straighten things up, such as by picking up objects to make the play space tidier. Much to the contrary, rolling around homes and towns with a growing katamari sends people running and items flying, creating an increasingly enormous mess. This mess takes many forms. The katamari itself is messy: not a round, smooth sphere but a lopsided mass of jutting objects that rolls unevenly through the terrain. As the ball grows in size, it also messes with the technical elements of the game. When it rolls up against obstacles, the ball often "clips"—a form of glitching in which one object appears to pierce and stick out the side of another. Indeed, messiness is a key component of how *Katamari Damacy* performs its worldbuilding and level design. Littered on the floor around the family table where the player starts the game, for example, are a dozen open tubes of lipstick. Why are these lipsticks here? This mess extends beyond any logical explanation. It exists for the sheer (queer) pleasure of rolling through it.

In this way, *Katamari Damacy* offers a model of consumption that inverts the "consuming mechanics" that Chess describes in casual match-three games. The pleasure of consuming in *Katamari Damacy* lies not in tidying things up (e.g., organizing objects into matching sets and clearing them from the screen) but precisely in messing things up. To create these opportunities for messiness, the game's design must itself remain messy. *Katamari Damacy* is not designed around precise calculations about which items players pick up when and where, how they should move through a level, or what story—however loosely defined—their progress through that level should tell. Instead, *Katamari Damacy* leaves its mechanics loose, messy, ecstatic, and chaotic, an approach to designing opportunities for in-game interactivity that we could see as itself queer.

QUEERNESS RE-NORMATIVIZED IN *DONUT COUNTY*

Like *Katamari Damacy*, *Donut County* also has representational elements that could be interpreted as queer. Importantly, though, these elements are ultimately re-normativized, paralleling the re-normativization of the game's mechanics of queer consumption. As discussed, the very premise of *Donut County* and its "one intriguing hole" has erotic implications. Indeed, the

Figure 4. The donut atop the shop where BK and Mira work with its prominent hole in *Donut County* (Annapurna Interactive, 2018). Screenshot by author.

hole emerges as a point of fascination throughout the game, both for the characters and for the game's visual focus. In one scene in the pit beneath Donut County, BK attempts to convince the characters whose homes he has swallowed up that he has simply been "delivering donuts." Mira asks, in response, "What exactly do you think donuts ARE?" Chimes in Roma, a small rabbit-like creature, "Who can say?" After all, Roma muses, "What is a donut without a hole?" The opening sequence of the game represents an earlier instantiation of this interest in the hole. We see a scene of a donut shop, which is shaped like a coffee mug with a large, upright, pink-frosted donut on top (see Figure 4). Slowly, the camera zooms in, as if to emphasize the enormity of the donut. Yet, instead, the camera zooms in on the hole itself. This emphasis on the hole continues during gameplay. Though the player technically takes on the role of BK, the raccoon only appears on-screen in a small heads-up display. Consequently, the hole comes to function as the character that players see themselves controlling on-screen. If we understand this image of the hole as fundamentally embodied and erotic, then we can interpret *Donut County* as initially leaning into its queer implications by playing up this focus on the hole.

Donut County also connects queerness and consumption in myriad ways. The game has its own queer ideas about food and eating. For example, it often conflates the acts of eating and being eaten. When a customer orders a donut to eat, BK deploys a hole that eats the customer. A number of the characters have food-related names, such as Morsel. These names play on the fact that the characters have become food for the hungry hole. Other examples of eating in the game make food seem distinctly unappetizing or simply weird. One of the characters swallowed up by BK's holes owns a soup shop. The level that takes place at the soup shop is crawling with cockroaches. To progress through this level, the player must fill up the hole with

hot soup and use it to boil the cockroaches alive. At other times in the game, eating is used as a manifestation of intimate and arguably queer relationality. Two characters who are brothers, Salt and Pepper, reconcile after a fight by bonding over their shared love of eating the lava from inside lava lamps. "I shouldn't have smashed your lava lamp," says Pepper. "And I shouldn't have ate the lava. It was wrong of me." Salt replies, "Pep! It's alright dude. The lava is the best part." Previously in the game, these characters are described as "bird weirdos" who are so excited about watching videos of birds that their interest, other characters imply, may be worrisomely sexual. Here, the air of erotic transgression that surrounds Salt and Pepper is transferred onto their own relationship as brothers. Having fought, they reestablish their intimate connection through their mutual passion for eating a substance that is not food. Eating, intimacy, and the abject join in a queer bond.

However, the figure with the most queer potential in *Donut County* is BK himself. Fittingly, BK's defining trait is a non-normative pleasure: his love of trash. Apparently, BK is one of many raccoons who have recently overrun the city.[38] In part, BK's passion for trash is simply an expression of his urban raccoon nature. However, for BK, trash has become more than something he desires; trash also serves as the lens through which he sees the world. To BK, all the objects that humans own are already trash. Every item that the player swallows up in BK's holes gets subsequently listed in a "trash-o-pedia," where it is labeled with descriptive text written from the point of view of an irreverent raccoon. A small, potted, aloe-like succulent comes with the caption "Child's safety cactus"; the description beneath a suitcase reads "Climb inside for a free ride." If all the objects in *Donut County* are already trash, then the hungry hole functions not so much as the hole that eats things up as the hole that throws things away. Or perhaps, more queerly, it is the hole that eats trash. This connection between food, trash, and human waste is made explicit in a scene in which BK sits in the bathroom with his smartphone and performs a donut delivery while on the toilet (see Figure 5).

As befits a queer figure such as BK, what the raccoon finds stomach-churning is not trash but displays of heteronormative affection. Sitting in the hole beneath Donut County, characters Nicky and Roma, a married rabbit couple whose level is a carrot-shaped home overrun by scores of frolicking bunnies, nuzzle one each other by the campfire. Noticing this, Mira exclaims warmly, "It's really cute that you two are so in love." By contrast, in the conversation that ensues, BK makes it clear that he does not approve of this lovey-dovey performance of heterosexual pairing:

> BK: This is extremely gross.
> Mira: You're gross.
> BK: No, I'm NOT gross.

38 *Donut County* presents itself as a parable of urban gentrification, with the raccoons described in terms that clearly parallel visions of wealthy outsiders gobbling up urban space and displacing current residents. However, this interpretation of the game becomes muddied by the racial overtones of the raccoons, who are depicted as lazy, dirty, dark-faced hooligans whose growing presence destroys "nice" neighborhoods. This suggests that the narrative of *Donut County* might be more aptly considered a playable vision of racism and white flight.

Figure 5. BK "delivers a donut" from the toilet in *Donut County* (Annapurna Interactive, 2018). Screenshot by author.

Mira: You love trash.
BK: You love trash too!! Everyone here loves trash!! Why else would you all make so much of it?

For BK, the kind of heterosexual romance associated with marriage and reproduction is far more repulsive than trash. In place of heteronormativity, trash itself becomes the object of love. Thus, through BK, *Donut County* seems to offer a vision in which the normative world and its straight desires—represented by the quaint, friendly settings of the game's levels and the people found within them—are themselves rendered queer: revealed to have been "trash" all along.

Yet *Donut County* ultimately re-normativizes the queer implications of these representational elements. By the game's final sequence, when BK and Mira restore order to Donut County, most of its characters have relinquished their quirks and queerness. Epitomizing this ambivalence, even BK ultimately gives up his love for trash and cleans up his act by learning to respect private property. Just before sending him up out of the pit and back to his home, BK asks the character Coyote whether he would like to come work at the donut shop with him. "We're going clean," says BK. "I promise." At first, *Donut County* seems to offer a critique of capitalist consumerism by intentionally mislabeling people's possessions as trash.[39] Yet BK's disavowal of the pleasures of trash and his move toward the legitimacy of "going clean" are accompanied by an embrace of neoliberal reverence for individual ownership, undermining the game's earlier critiques. Mira implores BK to make amends by "giv[ing] people back their things." When he does so, BK redeems himself in

39 *Katamari Damacy*, too, was intended as a critique of consumer culture. Allegra Frank, "*Katamari Damacy* Was Way Darker than You Thought," *Polygon*, June 22, 2018, https://www.polygon.com/2018/6/22/17493942/katamari-damacy-keita-takahashi-wattam-ps4.

the eyes of his community. In *Donut County*, respecting others means respecting the sanctity of their possessions.

This speaks to one of many differences between *Donut County* and *Katamari Damacy*. *Katamari Damacy*, too, could be imagined as a game about the pleasures of trash. As they are eaten up by a rolling ball, items in *Katamari Damacy* become part of a trash heap–like mass that will itself be thrown away—or, more literally, shot out into space. Yet, whereas *Donut County* concludes with the unmaking of trash and the reestablishment of consumerist norms, *Katamari Damacy* pushes trash to far queerer ends, allowing the player to grow the trash-body of their katamari to superlative proportions and indulge the exuberant queer desire encapsulated in BK's earlier exclamation, "Everyone here loves trash!!"

DONUT COUNTY'S UNFULFILLED QUEER POTENTIAL

While *Donut County*'s mechanics seem to have much in common with *Katamari Damacy*'s, they offer a different model for how queer consumption could be rendered into video game play. Both the balls of *Katamari Damacy* and the holes of *Donut County* literalize Stockton's notion of queer growth as grandly lateralizing, growing wider as they consume. Indeed, both games emphasize this lateralization through secondary elements, such as the in-game camera. For example, the first full level of *Donut County*, "Potter's Rock," begins with a tight zoom on a collection of small objects found at the potter's house, including a coffee cup and some ceramic jugs. As the hole swallows up these items, each object falls in with a pleasant, rubbery bounce and disappears into the pit below. Once all of the items in view have been swallowed, the hole grows larger. Simultaneously, the in-game camera zooms out to reveal more of the level. Eventually, the hole grows large enough for the player to consume the potter and his home, stripping all objects from the scene and leaving behind an empty lot. In this sense, consumption becomes a way to lateralize both the body, in the form of the hole, and the visible world that the body inhabits.

Yet visibility is also at the crux of one of the key differences between the mechanics of queer consumption found in *Katamari Damacy* and *Donut County*. While *Katamari Damacy* is about amassing a large, highly visible ball of objects, *Donut County* is about swallowing objects up and whisking them out of sight. Items disappear into the hungry hole of *Donut County* as into the belly of an invisible creature. This leaves the queerly consuming body eerily implied and unseen—or else we could say the consuming body is the ground itself, with the hole as its gaping mouth. In this model of queer consumption, materials (food, objects, people, and communities) are eaten but not digested. The items and characters that are swallowed by BK's holes appear to land in the pit unharmed. Later, they are regurgitated—that is, sent back up to the surface—whole. To an extent, this represents an inversion of the way that consumption works in *Katamari Damacy*. As it picks up items, the katamari becomes a stomach in reverse, accruing objects along its outer surfaces. By contrast, in *Donut County*, absence rather than visual excess becomes the mark of queer consumption. However, while there is certainly transgressive potential in the idea of swallowing up scenes of normativity, this mechanic of consumption is ultimately put in the service of making things tidy rather

than messing them up. Reminiscent of Chess's description of match-three games in which players try to clear the screen, *Donut County* prompts players to clear away all objects in a level, removing signs of mess and leaving a clean, empty level behind.

This tidiness, which takes a number of forms, is the downfall of the game's queer potential. Through what we might think of as overly "tidy" or heavy-handed design, *Donut County* re-normativizes its mechanics of queer consumption. This re-normativization manifests, for example, in the game's level design. Whereas in *Katamari Damacy* levels are haphazardly packed with a bizarre and seemingly endless array of items, the levels of *Donut County* are small, comparatively sparse, and carefully crafted. Each scene is constructed with precision, like a diorama. With some notable exceptions, these scenes typically consist of one main building and its surrounding yard, in which the game's developers have placed an uncluttered collection of relatively logical items, many of which serve a pragmatic purpose for solving the game's puzzle elements. For this reason, among others, *Donut County* lacks the sense of chaos and disorder found in *Katamari Damacy*.[40] Because of its precise level design, *Donut County* has none of *Katamari Damacy*'s vertiginous sense of wildly shifting scale or rapid, gluttonous consumption. It similarly eschews the queer glee that *Katamari Damacy* takes in the absurdity and excess of an Earth that, as the King of All Cosmos states, is "truly full of things."

This puts serious constraints on what *Donut County*'s underlying queer mechanics can accomplish. Without a sufficiently overflowing world of objects to eat and enough room for playful destruction, the "intriguing hole" can only ever be a figure of hunger and not insatiability. As the gameplay of each level comes to an end, the holes of *Donut County* seem sated by meager objects and individual homes. Such limitations also manifest in the holes themselves. Even when they have reached their largest, the holes in *Donut County* hardly appear capable of (or interested in) eating up the world and, by extension, the hegemonic heteronormativity that characterizes it on a grand scale. Occasionally, the game does tease players with the possibility of eating to excess. In one level, players have to release a hot air balloon that has gotten stuck on Interstate 405, a Los Angeles freeway notorious for its traffic. Once players have completed the task, the game allows them to linger in the level, using the growing hole to gobble up rows of oncoming cars (see Figure 6). Yet this destructive indulgence only lasts a few moments, and the traffic is quickly consumed—leaving the hole seemingly full but players' longing for queer forms of consumption frustratingly unfulfilled.

Despite its promisingly queer premise, *Donut County* loses faith in the simple, transgressive pleasure of playing as a hungry hole before the game has even begun. Almost all of the game's levels incorporate additional, one-off mechanics that are matched to puzzle elements. In one level, for example, players move the hole around to collect snakes. The snakes' tails then stick out of the hole, and the player can use them to hit chickens. In such

40 This difference can also be attributed in part to the games' contrasting musical landscapes. Music and sound design give *Donut County* a placid feel, in contrast to *Katamari Damacy*'s frantic, upbeat vibe.

Figure 6. *Donut County* (Annapurna Interactive, 2018) players have the brief opportunity to gobble up traffic. Screenshot by author.

moments, *Donut County* deemphasizes the experience of embodying the hole and instead attempts to offer clever ways that a hole can be transformed into other things. From a queer interpretive perspective, then, it is unfortunate that the very thing that seemed to imbue *Donut County* with queer potential—its design—is also the thing that stifles that potential. At the outset, the game appears to promise gameplay that is "libidinal, captivating, repetitive, time wasting, [and] self-destructive," as Stockton writes.[41] Yet *Donut County* quickly molds itself into a far more traditional puzzle game, one that sidelines the mechanics of its own hungry holes and the queer longings that they embody.

THE LIMITS OF QUEER GAME DESIGN?

Katamari Damacy and *Donut County* offer two models for how video game mechanics might be used to reflect forms of what I have called here queer consumption. In this sense, these games offer a valuable illustration of how digital media can communicate queer meaning through their interactive elements as well as their representational content. Considered together, these games show not only that video games can be designed using queer game mechanics but also that there are multiple ways for video games—as a rich and varied medium—to engage with and reflect on such experiences. At the same time, this analysis challenges those who work at the intersection of queerness, games, and play (including myself) to consider how design can be both a site of queer potential and a limiting or even re-straightening force within video games. As Edmond Chang has argued of video games *FrontierVille* (Zynga, 2010) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), a number of mainstream video games that appear to contain LGBTQ characters and romances are still structured according to heteronormative

41 Stockton, "If Queer Children," 232.

gameplay mechanics.[42] The case of *Katamari Damacy* and *Donut County* extends and complicates critiques like Chang's by showing how even a game built around a fundamentally queer design element can be re-normativized. At times, as this article suggests, it may in fact be the lack of design that creates opportunities for queer meaning in digital media. That is, when a video game is designed more loosely, more messily, and with less precision, it allows more space for players to experiment with chaos and approach the game world as a sandbox for exploring queer possibilities.

Understanding video games and their queer mechanics in this way allows us to approach the interplays between queerness and digital media from new perspectives, such as by attending to how design resonates with queer experience far beyond the intentions of digital media creators. Indeed, in 2019, a new video game with echoes of *Katamari Damacy* and *Donut County* captured the hearts of many queer and trans players: *Untitled Goose Game* (House House, 2019).[43] Like *Katamari Damacy* and *Donut County*, *Untitled Goose Game* is about a non-human entity wreaking havoc on a quaint, normative community. Rather than gobbling up objects, however, the goose moves objects out of place, snatching them away from irritated villagers who are trying to go about their daily business in a small British town. Since its release, the goose from *Untitled Goose Game* has become a symbol of resistance, appearing in countless memes and on signs protesting everything from the dismantling of transgender rights to Brexit.[44] As journalist Ana Valens notes, *Untitled Goose Game* has struck a chord with queer players because "[the] Goose engages in play whereas the rest of the world engages in work, structure, labor. Demolishing this labor—the village itself, as seen at the end of the game—upsets everyone in the village, and yet, it won't stop the Goose. It's a story of queer resilience."[45] I close by pointing out the connections between *Katamari Damacy*, *Donut County*, and *Untitled Goose Game* to highlight how these questions of queer design can matter to queer players in strikingly real, immediate, and material ways. Even when their queer potential remains unfulfilled, the models of queer consumption that the video games discussed here propose are powerful precisely because they offer us alternative ways of playing through and playing with our own radical hungers as queer people in the world.

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42 Edmond Y. Chang, "Love Is in the Air: Queer (Im)Possibility and Straightwashing in *FrontierVille* and *World of Warcraft*," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 6–31, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/585653.

43 Heather Hogan, "'Untitled Goose Game' Is an Adorable Fifteen-Dollar F*ck You to Authority," *Autostraddle*, October 1, 2019, https://www.autostraddle.com/untitled-goose-game-is-an-adorable-fifteen-dollar-fck-you-to-authority/.

44 Alistair Jones, "The Horrible Goose Was the Unexpected Hero of the UK's People's Vote March," *Kotaku*, October 22, 2019, https://www.kotaku.com.au/2019/10/the-horrible-goose-was-the-unexpected-hero-of-the-uks-peoples-vote-march/.

45 Ana Valens (@acvalens), "The Goose engages in play whereas the rest of the world engages in work, structure, labor. Demolishing this labor—the village itself, as seen at the end of the game—upsets everyone in the village, and yet, it won't stop the Goose. It's a story of queer resilience," Twitter, October 23, 2019, 5:44 a.m., https://twitter.com/acvalens/status/1186986702168055809.