

1. Assassinating Introduction.

While I was playing *Dragon Age: Origins* some of the ideas presented by Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media* (Manovich, 2001) came to my mind. For this author, one of the main characteristics of new media is “the automation of many operations involved in new media creation, manipulation, and access” (Manovich, 2001: 31). In the specific case of computer games, Manovich claims that automation works especially well as the characters presented in these games tend to respond effectively to the player’s demands within the affordances and limitations of the computer game itself. For Manovich, computer games “trick us into using a very small part of who we are when we communicate with them”, thus making us believe that they are responsive and intelligent (Manovich, 2001: 33). When Zevran, a companion for the player’s character and the only option for male homosexual sex in *Dragon Age: Origins*, asked me if there was something in my tent that needed assassinating, an euphemism for sex, after I flirted with him, I felt as if the game was not using a very small part of who I was to address me but rather, I felt as if the game was trying to mold what I was. Why couldn’t I tell Zevran that I like it soft and cuddly? Or, why couldn’t I tell him that the ones I really wanted to assassinate me were the heterosexual Alistair or the depraved and drunk dwarf Ohgren? Access to homosexual sex, a rarity that is often ignored in most computer games, is by itself something to be celebrated, an advancement for the recognition of a social minority, and an opportunity for a larger number of players to identify with their characters. However, what are the implications of having a not-so-masculine elven rogue perform as the only option for gay sex available in a game such as *Dragon Age: Origins*? This paper seeks to explore the nature of sexual and gender choice in computer games as both an enabling and a molding/limiting tool for the production and reproduction of identities in this type of new media.

2. Molding choices.

In *Games of Empire* Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter claim that computer games are “machines of subjectivation”. Computer games remove us from our own subject positions in order to invite us into pre-produced digital identities. These identities derive from the actual “social formations” that flow around the creation of a game. For this reason, most computer games present their users with forms of identity that are in fact “normalized subjectivities of a global capital order” (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009: 192). The sense of freedom created by the ability of players to interact with a game intensifies for these two authors “the sense of free will necessary for the ideology to work really well”. That is, perceptions of freedom impact the willingness to accept certain embedded messages about subjectivity in some computer games. *Dragon Age: Origins* and its representation of male homosexuality might just be one example in which players are invited to see or accept homosexuality in a very specific way thanks to the choices they can make. *Dragon Age: Origins* gives players the opportunity to have virtual gay sex with a male companion. But, to what end? Zevran, a stereotype of male

homosexuality may become accepted as THE model for gayness due to the fascination of some gamers with the option of having male-male virtual sex. Other games, such as the titles belonging to the *Grand Theft Auto* series have always offered players a wide range of options to spend their time when playing: Driving around, bowling, buying clothes and food, flirting and having sex with women, etc. Several prominent authors have spoken about the virtual urban space and its impact on the choices available to players in the GTA series (Bogost, 2007), (Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter, 2009), (Frasca, 2003) (Tavinor, 2009). Some of them have also highlighted that the extensive maps available to players in the *Grand Theft Auto* series (Miami-Vice City in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, San Francisco-San Andreas in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, and New York-Vice City in *Grand Theft Auto III* and *IV* have received the most attention) offer players interesting choices that are, however, associated and limited to predefined stereotypes about class and race. An example of this can be found in Ian Bogost's analysis of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* and CJ, the player character, in *Persuasive Games*. Bogost (Bogost, 2007: 116) explains that CJ's limited access to only a few types of food (food sold in fast food chains) frames the character, a black low class young man, into a specific stereotype. Following Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter's logic regarding the impact of apparent freedom in the consumption of ready-made subjectivities, we can argue that all the options available to players in the virtual urban space of San Andreas cloak certain assumptions about class and race by hiding them under an ample set of choices.

Something similar happens with sexuality in these games: both CJ and Niko Bellic (the protagonist of *Grand Theft Auto IV*) are individuals marked by their ethnicity (Niko has a distinct East European accent) and both have access to sexual intercourse with some citizens of San Andreas and Vice City. The fact that their heterosexuality is a given, since the player cannot have sex with men even if he/she wants to, contrasts with the freedom GTA offers its players. The game mechanics allow CJ and Niko to perform as selective hit men, as mass murderers, as taxi drivers or as compulsive consumerists (just to list a few). In contrast to this, players do not have the option to perform something different from a male heterosexual character. Sex is present in the game, but players are given limited freedom when it comes to performing their characters' sexuality and gender. Judith Butler (Butler, 2006) claims that gender and sexuality should not be understood as a rigid tag people use to understand themselves. Instead, gender and sexuality-related traits are defined by the ways people perform them. Gender and sexuality are therefore fluid concepts that vary in specific instances of each person's performances. The extensive map of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, with its ample options for leisure and fun, conceals a commodified and normalized vision of desire where heterosexuality is the norm. There are some exceptions to this norm, but they tend to be stereotypical representations of gendered and sexualized bodies. This becomes particularly evident in some specific instances. During a mission called "Out of the Closet" Niko is requested to contact and kill French Tom, a man who owes money to Brucie, one of the supporting characters in the game. In order to meet him, the players must use a fictive gay portal. After a couple of messages, the pair meets at a café and after talking for a bit, the player is given the option to interrupt the conversation and draw Niko's weapon to attempt to kill French Tom. Alternatively, the player can also wait for a bit. If the player chooses the latter option, Niko grows tired of the conversation and tells French Tom his true intentions (killing him). This results in French Tom attempting to flee from Niko. Regardless of what the player decides to do, he/she is given two options: Niko either kills French Tom or he lets the gay man escape and consequently fails the mission. Liberty City's apparent

freedom is suddenly reduced to an instance of an either/or dichotomy as it is not possible to keep on flirting with French Tom, kiss him or convince him to pay his debts.

Other sandboxes outside of the GTA series do something similar. In *inFAMOUS* players are presented again with the ample virtual space of Empire City—a counterpart of New York. Empire City is divided into three main areas that become available as players complete certain story missions. Similar to, but a bit more limited than, the GTA series, the virtual urban space of this game offers players opportunities for a varied number of actions. However, despite of the apparent freedom, *inFAMOUS* frequently forces players to choose between two distinct ways of solving missions. These solutions are labeled by the game as either morally good or bad. Again, the charm of the illusion of freedom caused by ample virtual game spaces contrasts with the limitations of the morality imposed on players. Being good or bad is defined by clear cut lines so that the player is made aware, most of the time, of where his/her actions stand in the hierarchy of predefined morals. True, games need to give players affordances and limitations for the game to be a game. This includes the ways games give players feedback about their actions. However, computer games tend to present a limited vision of subjectivity, and more specifically of desire, masked under a promise of free exploration and fun. That is something we should be wary of.

3. Unlocking Desire.

For French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the flow of human desire resembles a rhizome. Desire is composed by an infinite number of lines of flight that depart and converge. Capitalist societies, in an attempt to form specific subjectivities, mold human desire by presenting certain wants and needs as the only acceptable and desirable ones. Capitalism in this sense, needs for its own subsistence to promote certain form of desire (e.g. the drives that compel people to consumerism) while repressing others. Certain forms of desire (e.g. non-normative sexualities) that escape the normalizing workings of Capitalism are either discarded as socially undesirable options or are transformed (re-territorialized) and brought back to Capitalism's own flow. (Deleuze and Guattari, 2009)

CJ's and Niko's compulsory heterosexuality in their respective games is buried in an urban sea of flashy choices (such as dressing Niko in a specific fashionable way and getting a nice car) while certain non-normative forms of understanding desire are simply non-options. *Dragon Age: Origins*, on the other hand, uses a theoretical non-normative symbol, a feminine gay (or rather bisexual) elf in order to lure some players into a sense of freedom and choice (*Hey! You can be yourself!*). However, the limitation of allowing players to flirt and have sex with Zevran and only Zevran invites gay players (or players interested in pursuing virtual gay relationships) to experience homosexuality in a very regulated way. Homosexuality is then re-territorialized, marketed and reproduced under the terms imposed by the game. Desire is therefore restricted to a set of well-defined labels embodied by a set of easily identifiable characters. The final product is ultimately marketed as choice.

Dutch historian Johan Huizinga described play as a free activity separated from ordinary life (Huizinga, 2008: 13). The rules that govern play do not affect the real world and, in a similar way, play seems to be separated from the seriousness of everyday life. Play creates a magic circle or a sacred spot that separates the playful from the serious sphere. However, the distinction between real/serious and playful (or virtual, if referring to computer games) is challenged by Edward Castronova (Castronova, 2006) who claims that the distinction between real and virtual

is becoming more difficult to establish. In fact, the rules in a computer game are always written by a human hand determining what can and cannot be done. This means that the sacred spot created by a computer game, far from being set apart from real life, is influenced, right from the start, by a number of subjectivities that inhabit the real world –those of the people who make the game. Shooting a virtual character in the head while playing a computer game does not have the same consequences as shooting someone in the head in real life, true; however, ideas about ethnicity, gender and sexuality may influence the way certain affordances and limitations are set in a game as well as the players’ responses to them. As a result, circulating normative ideas about gender or sexuality enter the game and produce works that, while relying on giving interesting choices to players, limit these choices to a conglomerate of socially controlled options. Does this mean that normative texts always produce normative responses in players? Not necessarily.

After looking at Janice Radway’s (Radway, 1991) and Henry Jenkins’s (Jenkins, 1992) ideas on the ways receptors of romance novels and television form their own identities by consuming media in specific ways, Sherry Turkle (Turkle, 1997: 241) discusses the modes in which users of Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) adopt positions of resistance against certain normative ideologies. Turkle’s ideas can also be applied to my analysis of normative sexual and gender-related choices in computer games. Radway claims that readers of romance novels do not necessarily read in order to escape their daily lives but rather to construct realities less limited than their own (Turkle, 1997: 241). In the same way, some players may use the examples of sexuality and gender found in videogames to explore areas of human life that are most of the time restricted to them. A woman playing as CJ may learn about certain aspects of performed masculinity just as a normatively married white man may find in Zevran a way to externalize certain aspects of his unfulfilled gender or sexual possibilities. In both instances the experience could be empowering even if rooted in normative discourses about being in the world and may even generate non-normative responses to these social norms. On the other hand, similar to the agency given by Jenkins (Jenkins, 1992), (Jenkins, 2008) to fan-based communities, computer games are also subject to interpretation, scrutiny and modification by their users. Examples of the concern of these communities with topics related to gender and sexuality can be the online magazine focused on gay issues, GayGamer.net, or some sections of the BioWare Social Network where players discuss their ideas about the inclusion, exclusion, and nature of choices about gender and sexuality in the games developed by the Canadian company. Placed a step beyond discussing gender in a forum is the creation of mods such as “Equal Love”¹. This mod erases any restrictions regarding gender in *Dragon Age: Origins* which removes the limitations that made some characters impossible to romance when approached by the “wrong” gendered character. This contests the regulatory power of computer games.

I began my paper using automation, the third characteristic of new media discussed by Manovich to talk about the modes in which computer games try to address portions of who we are. I will use variability (Manovich, 2001: 36), the fourth characteristic, to finish my intervention. The fact that new media can be altered and be presented in different forms guarantees that users can potentially adapt some of the content handed to them in computer games to suit their desires and needs. Sadly, this is not as democratic as it could be. While mods such as “Equal Love” are not difficult to apply to PC versions of a game, users of consoles, on

¹ Available at: <http://www.dragonagenexus.com/downloads/file.php?id=429>

the other hand, find modding a game more difficult, if not impossible. Desire, as it presented in most commercial games when they are released, is tied to social discourses that understand gender, sexuality and sex itself as sets of normalized dichotomies. The potential for rhizomic performances where players are introduced to non-regulated subjectivities is, most of the time, defused.

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