Three Waves of Awkwardness: A Meta-analysis of Sex in Game Studies

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ABSTRACT

This article critically evaluates and questions the growth and maturity of game studies as a scholarly set of related approaches to the study of games, by providing an account of studies of sexuality in (mostly digital) games from 1978 to present. The main goal of this article is to highlight overarching themes and patterns in the literature, with a focus on theories and methodologies commonly used, and the way game studies is still risk-aware, even awkward in its discussions of sexuality. In addition to a review of 37 years of literature, the article employs a chronological and thematic metaphor analysis of past research texts to analyse whether game studies is growing up or in perpetual puberty, and whether it really is exploring sexual maturity alongside the games we study. It finds that while different periods of time can be identified in research as far as approaches to sexuality in games go, game studies is still to a large extent engaged in the management of the stigma that discussing sexuality may cause. Rather than a maturation process, the waves are shown to be manifestations of different types of

environmentally influenced risk awareness, consecutive risk avoidance, and a resulting awkwardness.

INTRODUCTION

Games are not made, played or discussed in cultural vacuums, just as those who make and play them do not exist in a space removed from cultural influence. Regardless of how we might define culture, games are the result of a complex interweaving of industrial and economic forces (O'Donnell, 2014; Castronova, 2006), government agencies and rating review boards (Brown, 2015; Karlsen, 2014), medical discourses of healthy play (Karlsen, 2013), journalists and media reports (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Shaw, 2010), moral and ethical frameworks (Sicart, 2009; Linderoth & Mortensen, 2015), and research (Mäyrä, Van Looy & Quandt, 2014; Sotamaa & Suominen, 2014). Or, perhaps, games have emerged out of play, the origin of culture itself (Huizinga, 2009 [1949])? The intimate relationship shared between games and culture can perhaps be best illustrated through their propensity to generate moral panic and public outcry, based on e.g., depicted violence, sexuality, gender roles or some other cultural facet undergoing heavy debate at the time.

Thought of in this way, games can provide a type of cultural marker to the moral and ethical standards present in a given culture. This is perhaps most famously seen through debates on games and violence (Anderson et al., 2003; 2010; Ferguson & Kilburn, 2010). When a game with explicit or controversial content is released, a type of backlash can often be witnessed through media and political responses which seek to neutralise the perceived threat to cultural values (Cohen, 1972). To some extent such backlashes are cultural, meaning that for example a Japanese dating (or tentacle rape) game will be received differently in places than its country of origin (Brathwaite, 2006). Although fears of games inspiring or 'teaching' people how to be violent are perhaps the most common (see for example Pidd, 2012), the occasional controversial inclusion of nudity, sexual simulation, or sexual violence in games (e.g., the HotCoffee mod discussed below) will likewise cause popular concern to flare up.

Whilst there can be no doubt that part of the controversy surrounding video games and adult content stems from the pervasive rhetoric that games are, by default, toys for children (Brathwaite, 2006; Paul, 2012), there is a larger cultural argument at stake. The notion that

violence and sexuality are exclusively the domain of the adult is a relatively recent one. Such concerns over the appropriateness of content for games serve to highlight the awkward and uncomfortable position games overall have in relationship to cultural expectations of where and under what contexts sexual themes may be included in popular culture. As this article will show, the study of games is also tied in with these notions and crises, and rendered highly risk-aware, possibly even risk-avoiding, as a result.

The appropriateness of discussing, and playing with, sexuality varies greatly depending on era and location. In the opening to his *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Michel Foucault (1990 [1978], p.3) writes that the Victorians shifted away from seventeenth century frankness toward, "…the image of the imperial prude…" which has been "…emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality". Connecting the rise of industrial capitalism to the Victorian bourgeoisie's control and regulation of sexuality as a private domestic affair, Foucault highlights (and contests) the institutional processes, namely of technology and economies, which potentially underpin moral stances and social regulation of sex in a specific period of time. What is regulated and how however differs from one cultural context, temporal or social, to another, and game studies reflects this. The waves discussed in this article are to a strong extent internalized manifestations of changes in the forces of societal prudishness. They also tie in with the potential stigma of conducting research upon human sexuality. It is a risky topic for research, in that the subject itself can taint the social image of the scholar studying it (see e.g., Frank, 2013). The waves thus reflect researchers' ways of stigma awareness and avoidance and the ways in which those change alongside the changes in prudishness.

Writing about contemporary time, Anthony Giddens (1992, p.27) discusses the creation of a plastic sexuality - a type of sexuality which is "…severed from its age-old integration with reproduction, kinship and the generations". The use of technologies to control reproduction, limit family size, prevent death from childbirth, as well as create life without sexual intercourse is, for Giddens, the final liberation of sexuality from biological or social-structural imperatives. Rather than a need to control sexuality for fear of an unwieldy family size, potential death through childbirth or the risk of concretely proving infidelity, the advent of more effective forms of birth control and increasingly easy modes of access in most Western countries has meant not only greater opportunities for egalitarian sexual choice, but also that it is easier to consider sex as an

opportunity for play. This is of course not to say that sexually transmitted disease and other risks are not still present in sexual activities, but rather that these risks not only become manageable with increasing medical technology, but also affect all genders equally. With increasingly reliability in birth control methods, the gender bias in responsibility for heterosex shifts slightly toward egalitarianism. For Giddens, this shift and others bring us closer to contextualising sex in terms of pleasure - particularly for women.

In considering the relationship between sex, technology and culture, it would be probable, if not logical, to suggest that sexual liberation and plastic sexuality have delivered culture into a type of ludic sexuality. Taking the idea of plastic sexuality a step further and looking into how technology interfaces with carnal pleasure, the advent of teledildonics in the 1980s was in many ways like the "…perfumed promise of sexual utopia provided by new digital technology" (Krzywinska, 2012, p.144; see also e.g., Eerikäinen, 2014). And yet it was not. Although there are increasingly diverse and creative uses for peripheral game equipment, such as the Mojowijo which originally began life as an attachment for the Wiimote but has since become its own app-controlled device, there is still a distinct rarity of sexual content in games - both in terms of developing games which take full advantage of the medium's interactive elements and in terms of representing the act on screen. Games dedicated to purely sex and porn do of course exist as well, but they have been rather marginal in influence and have had little impact on the study of games (see Brathwaite, 2006, for examples).

This article investigates the lack, or perceived lack, of the study of sexuality in games through a meta-analysis of existing literature. In using pre-existing research, this article not only provides an extensive review of existing literature on games and sexuality, but additionally analyses the content of past studies with an eye to tracing major movements and shifts in the representation and discussion of sexuality in games. Our sources mostly favour the study of multiplayer PC games, due to their prevalence as subjects of game studies in general, but when possible we have also taken into account the study of sexual content and interpretations in other digital game types. The results of this article cluster sexuality in games studies in three main waves: the first (1978-2000), the second (2001-2008), and finally the third (2009-present), based on differences in how they deal with sex, sexualities and risk awareness. The waves have been so divided as both homage to Foucault's works on sexuality and to more clearly illustrate trends, patterns,

shifts, and changes to the treatment, discussion, and representation of sex within games studies. After each wave has been established, the article will reflexively analyse that wave, and discuss how thematic changes in the literature are indicative of changes within the culture of games and the scholars who study them.

METHODOLOGY

This article utilises a particular type of content analysis to examine academic documents such as books and articles from the field of games studies and the works that in retrospect can be seen as its earlier building blocks. Over a period of three years literature searches were conducted for the terms sex, sexuality, play and games, including database searches (on e.g., EBSCOhost) for relevant keywords, as well as the content analysis of over two hundred books affiliated with the discipline. We identified roughly 40 central English language texts that dealt with either sexual content in games, the utilization of games for sexual purposes, or the representation and/or acceptance of one's sexuality, sexual orientation or sexual identity within game spaces, as well as a handful of older works that discussed sex as a form of play, as well as some relevant works in e.g., German or Finnish, such as Reunanen, Lankoski & Heinonen (2011). The results of this literature search consist of published academic texts on the topics of sex, sexuality, play and games which were then analysed using methods from metaphoric and text analysis to organise the results into distinct waves.

The method of analysis was chosen because game studies itself is still in a mutable state. It would at first glance appear suitable to use the methods of media archaeology on the topic, yet the waves identified in this article do not correspond to any key technological developments or larger paradigm shifts, which are usually central in media archaeology (e.g., Parikka, 2012). Likewise, while queer studies and more broadly gender studies have provided a vast number of interesting tools, game studies' own connections to those fields are still quite eclectic. In the most prominent cases (e.g., Boelstorff, 2008; Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012) the connection appears to have more to do with the authors' examination of their self-identities within virtual worlds than with an academic discourse between game studies and e.g., queer studies (in which the analysis of sexuality has already advanced much further). Others, in turn, tend to utilize queer and gender theory to explain in-game dissonances rather than sexuality issues (e.g., Habbe, 2012).

Challengingly, game studies' treatment of sexuality consists also of such rare and different texts that a narrative analysis of them is also difficult. While the works have in common an approach in which sexual content presents a kind of *paraxis* - a transformation of the ordinary path into a dislocated replacement of the normal familiar logic of things to a new temporary world of fantasy (Jackson, 1981) - this step beyond just discussing socially convenient topics and into the controversial is insufficient as a focus of research, even as it plays a significant role in the ways in which the different waves display risk aversion.

However, a suitable tool can be found within business studies research of users through narratives. Narratives, being able to carry and explain experiences, dreams and hopes also through metaphors, grant access to sequences beyond just singular instances of some phenomenon. They turn anecdotes into potential insight. In the EBNIT (event-based narrative inquiry technique) method, potential users project experiences, especially critical incidents, into insight in the form of metaphors (Helkkula & Pihlström, 2010). The purpose of the method is to understand experiences based on both explicated and tacit needs. In it, the researcher and the storyteller construct an imaginary narrative with the help of a metaphor such as a magic wand that would in the story allow the storyteller to create anything they want. The metaphor liberates imagination and produces insight based on current conditions but not bound by them, through the narratives it inspires.

Our projective metaphor for this study is that game studies is at least for now perpetually in its puberty. The metaphor emerged as a potential explanation from the data set during the initial literature review, and was thus applied to all of the material to see if it would reveal patterns of behaviour that have so far remained hidden. With the metaphor, we set out to see what kind of a future the discussions of sexuality within game studies would project using that metaphor, if we treated them as instances upon which a narrative inquiry was based. The reason for this approach is that while the field exhibits clear development, which manifests in the waves, a meta-analysis shows that it is not in fact actually maturing. Instead, risk awareness and stigma avoidance keep researchers on their proverbial toes. What changes from one wave to the next is the type of sex-related stigma that they appear to be avoiding. We are effectively asking *"if game studies is currently in its puberty, what does it want to grow up to be, and does it even want to grow up?"*, and replacing events with written-down examples, instances. So, in the form of adopting an

instance-based narrative inquiry technique (IBNIT), we are in a way stealing a narrative research technique back into the study of written works.

Through the application of IBNIT, we analyse the discourses of the waves of game studies and sexuality, and answer the question *what kind of a narrative emerges from combining game studies' approaches to sexuality as a topic*, with a look that also discusses the cultural changes that influence the formation of that narrative.

THE FIRST WAVE: OUTRAGES AND CONTROVERSIES

Following Aarseth (2001), the beginning of game studies as a discipline is often placed in the year 2001, even as the formalized study of games (in especially educational contexts) had existed for over three decades already (e.g., the journal *Simulation & Gaming* was established in 1970 and Richard D. Duke published his seminal work in 1974, preceded by almost two decades of sporadic research by others on management training games). Also known as 'Year One' as a result of Aarseth's claim (for which Google Scholar at the time of our writing this gives 488 citations), this was the year in which the journal *Game Studies* was launched. The study of games, and of sexuality in games, pre-dates 2001 and even the educational game research by several decades (if not centuries). For example, Georges Bataille (1952) mentions the alternative moralities of gameplay as an allegory of erotic transgression, referencing his friend Roger Caillois. Whilst it is useful to have concise dates with clever monikers, it is perhaps more important to strive for accuracy when developing a chronological account of a field. Developing a precise chronology, however, is a difficult undertaking. The straightforward and well-intentioned task of locating the first study of games quickly develops into a frustratingly risky experience rife with amorphous, awkward definitions. Depending on the selection criteria, 'Year One' changes.

Whilst there is logic behind the use of 2001 as the start of *game studies*, this article places the probable date of the beginning of studying sexuality in games at 1978. This was the year in which Bernard Suits published the seminal book *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia,* in which he used sexuality as one comparison point for defining games. "Playing games", he writes, "is different from sexual activity…" (Suits, 2005 [1978], p.83). In his quest to reach a solid definition, Suits understood that the playful nature of sexuality needed to be contended

with, in order to fully describe the constitutional make up of games. In the book, he eventually comes to the conclusion that sex cannot be considered a game because "…losing the game implies that someone else has won the game, whereas failing to complete the sexual act does not imply a winner" (Suits 1978, p.83; note that this also implies that for Suits, games have to be largely zero-sum in order to fit his definition). Suits furthermore notes that some types of sexual acts, if they are not directed towards orgasm, might actually count as games. The emphasis Suits places on sexuality in defining the theoretical composition of games is why this article has chosen to set the first wave of game studies 23 years before 'Year One'.

Forming a type of pre-history, the first wave is characterised by studies of sexual politics in tabletop games, early erotic role play in multiuser dungeons (MUDs), and chatroom cybersex. Although not always strictly about games, but rather of play more generally, these studies brought up many themes found throughout the study of sexuality in later game studies: sexual play as adult play (Betcher, 1987; Suits, 1978; Sutton-Smith, 1997); sexism in the sexualisation of characters (Fine, 1983); cyborgs and the placement of technology on/in the body (Haraway, 1985; Sutton-Smith, 1997); virtual sexual violence (Dibbell, 1993); and the construction of sexual identities (Poster, 1995; Turkle, 1994, 1995). The wave also saw some examples the analysis of educational games that included sexuality as a topic (e.g., Cairns, Woodward & Savery, 1989), coming from the sibling field of simulation/game studies. A range of topics, both tangential and integral to game studies today, were represented as authors, scholars, and journalists alike attempted to account for rapidly evolving technology on a grand scale.

Reading through the texts mentioned above, one finds an overwhelming sense of turmoil and change. Particularly in the examples of Haraway (1985) and Poster (1995), from the writing style it appears likely that there was social pressure from publishers or colleagues which mandated that attempts to account for the influence of technology on the body need to include predictions about the impact this would have on society. Although, at least in the case of Haraway (1985) and Poster (1995), foundational theories about the nature of technology and perceptions of reality can be safely lifted from the texts without unnecessary claims of the inescapable power of the 'Information Superhighway' clinging on, the first wave - as a whole - demonstrates the characteristic awkwardness of puberty in its attempts to account for the changing social world.

As sociologists and media theorists were theorising about the influence of technology on the body, concurrent research was being performed on communities of players. In the foundational text *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, Gary Alan Fine (1983) noted the 'aggressive orientation' of his participants, noting in particular that "frequently male non-player characters who have not hurt the party are executed and female non-player characters raped for sport" (p.44). Throughout the book, Fine's account of sexuality in tabletop role playing games (RPGs) focuses only on violence and misogyny.

Ten years later, a journalistic account of sexual violence in a multiuser dungeon (MUD) emerged through the now infamous 'A Rape in Cyberspace' (Dibbell, 1993). From these early accounts it is difficult to tell if sexual performances and representations in role playing communities were full of violence and hate, or if the researchers encountered other types of sexual play but, for one reason or another, did not include it in their analysis. The first time a rounded depiction of sexuality in virtual worlds emerges is in Sherry Turkle's (1995) book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Gender-swapping, 'fake-lesbian syndrome', infidelity, and play with identity are all discussed as aspects of the 'online experience' (p.223). Early studies mentioning sexuality in player communities either picked up on moral panics in the media about dubious moral quality of games, or connected to existing literature about the therapeutic qualities of sexual play.

Still, many of the theories and methodologies used and developed during the first wave set standards and trends for following waves. Many of these early studies employed ethnographic methods offline and online, and the seminal book *Virtual Ethnography* by Christine Hine (2000) put in place many methodological standards which would be adhered to for academic generations to come. The book outlined many facets of online ethnographies which are taken for granted today - like the diffuse nature of virtual fields when conducting fieldwork, the flexible boundaries between 'virtual' and 'real', and the problems of spatial and temporal dislocation, ways to account for computer mediated interactions, and how to contend with issues of validity through 'strategic relevance' instead of 'holistic descriptions' of participants (Hine, 2000, p.65). Of particular concern to scholars studying sexuality in games, Hine's discussion of the 'virtual' and 'real' and how to simultaneously account for both proved influential in making nuanced

distinctions between sexual acts performed in game and the feelings, emotions, and biological responses which arise from such performances.

Looked through the lens of the puberty metaphor, the first wave was clearly still sporadic in its approaches, unsystematic, and awkward. During it, initial forays into the topic of games and sex were made, but more as reactive instances or basic descriptions than as a focus of study. Intriguingly, this wave also appears to have been eclectic in its stigma avoidance, the same way as later design literature (e.g., Brathwaite, 2006), in that it was blatant in some regards (e.g., in discussing sexual violence) but at the same time presented a sense of remoteness to the subject at hand. The social aspects of the second wave significantly changed this.

THE SECOND WAVE: SEX AS A METHODOLOGICAL SIDE NOTE

Starting with the increased interest in game studies that came with the so-called Year One (2001), and ending in 2008, the second wave of sexuality in game studies is characterised by the last of MUD and chatroom studies and the rise in popularity of massive multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs). Generally, game studies experienced a boom in publications with a focus on digital games and the resurgence in the popularity of fantasy and fantasy role playing games, booms which to some extent at least justify the "beginning of the discipline" hype. Early research publications centred on sexuality in the second wave utilised terminology from studies of chatrooms and MUDs, such as 'cybersex', to discuss what may have been better termed 'erotic role play' (Campbell, 2004; Döring, 2004; Waskul, 2003). Nevertheless, Dennis Waskul's (2003) analysis of sex in MUDs as a Simmelian adventure, John Campbell's (2004) account of gay men's identity play in chatrooms, and Nicola Döring's (2004) analysis of the affordances of online environments for women to express themselves sexually represent an attachment to the virtual environments, concepts and constructs of the first wave.

Dependence on not only sexual play as identity work, but also on researching chatrooms and MUDs indicates a reliance on the work and terminology of the previous wave and its debates about the realness of the virtual. The works of Waskul (2003) Campbell (2004) and Döring (2004) did, however, help to establish the prevalence and playfulness of sexuality in online communities. The time period of the second wave also still saw the publications of some works

that may more appropriately be considered to be a part of the first wave (e.g., Nephew, 2003, 2006), as they were strongly based on data and methodology from the preceding decade.

Just as discussions of the ubiquitousness of online sexuality reached its prime, a parallel conversation began sparked by the film adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* and the supposed 'sexlessness' of fantasy literary, film, and game genres (Caldecott, 2008; Smol, 2004)[1]. Fans of the fantasy genre have often complained that the lack of overt sexuality in prominent 'high' fantasy novels is indicative of immaturity. Such conversations merge together well with second wave discussions about the relative immaturity of sexual content found within digital games (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006) or the lack of sexual content altogether (Burn, 2006), even outside of the fantasy genre. These discourses soon made their way also into game studies research. To understand the second wave, it is therefore necessary to look at the context that sparked it alongside the formalization of the discipline itself.

More so than films and books, mainstream games (or at least their publishers) during the second wave were reluctant to engage with sexuality on any meaningful level. The infamous Hot Coffee Mod[2] for the already controversial *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, cut out from the game but included in its data, was found and 'leaked' in 2005. It eventually led to a re-structuring of many review and age limit processes (Brathwaite, 2006). Whether this reluctance was due to the increasing presence of ratings review boards, such as the founding of the Pan European Game Information (PEGI) system in 2003, or the change of the Entertainment Software Review Board's (ESRB) 'mature sexual themes' rating to 'sexual themes' in 2004, or to a media-induced moral panic it is hard to say. The media panic over sexuality in digital games continued as the popularity of MMORPGs grew and players and parents alike became confronted with the uncomfortable fact adults and children were playing together online. Cautionary reports of paedophilia in *World of Warcraft* emerged from journalistic sources (Wachowski, 2007) and the

[1] Anna Smol (2004) has documented the Victorian and Edwardian tendency to censor and re-appropriate medieval stories for the consumption of children. By the time *The Hobbit* was published in 1937, the fantasy genre had been well established as the domain of children. When *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was released as a motion picture, a common complaint on forums and in chatrooms was centred on the supposedly prudish treatment of love and sexuality between characters. For a journalistic rant on the subject, see: Barrowcliffe, M. (2007). *The Elfish Gene: Dungeons, Dragons and Growing Up Strange*. MacMillian: New York.

[2] The Hot Coffee Mod (2005) was an inaccessible minigame left in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas,* which allowed fully clothed characters to mimic poorly animated sexual intercourse. Modders, however, soon found a way to access it (see Brathwaite, 2006, ch. 4, for details).

moral panic which afflicted arcades decades earlier resurfaced (Williams, 2006). Research on games and sexuality from this time period, especially post-Hot-Coffee, reflects this context. Within the time window of the second wave, studying sexuality in games was risky in the sense that any open discussion on the topic could possibly "infect" its scholars with the game-sex stigma brought forth by Grand Theft Auto. Many researchers nevertheless embraced the topic.

Emerging studies of MMORPGs during this time began discussing sexual relationships between players, and between characters (Boellstorff, 2008; MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, 2008; Sixma, 2008; Taylor, 2006). From social network analysis of how in-game romantic partners connected outside of *EverQuest* (Taylor, 2006), to an account of the rules involved in a Gorean community on *Second Life* (Sixma, 2008), the second half of the second wave represents a departure from the moral panics of journalists and (by its own accounts at least) takes a step toward an open account of sexuality in games. We see this shift toward openness and away from sensationalism as the defining factor between the first and second wave. However, many of the studies limited their account of player sexuality to only a few pages in passing with little analysis and description of the activities and their meaning (Boellstorff, 2008; MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, 2008; Taylor, 2006). Reading through these early accounts shows that sexuality was often mentioned more or less only to pay homage to the particular type of thematic analysis being used, and not because the researchers wanted to, or felt comfortable, discussing it. This may not be the truth, but the image is so clear that it exemplifies the apparent awkwardness of the puberty metaphor. By mentioning sexuality more as an aside than as a topic, the subject's lack of more than a vague presence becomes particularly conspicuous. However limited, studies focusing on MMORPGs and virtual worlds in which players were able to create their own content through auxiliary sources, such as modifications to the game code and forums, nevertheless highlighted the creative work undertaken by players to include diverse forms of sexuality in their play.

The second wave furthermore brought forth one set of research texts that at first glance at least had no shame or awkwardness whatsoever discussing sexuality in games: design research. Most prominently exemplified by Brenda Brathwaite's *Sex in Video Games* (2006), this approach documented design decisions, processes, censorship and so forth related to sexual topics in digital gaming. A deeper look at those, however, still points to an awkwardness typical of the second wave, that of risk avoidance through selective topic representation. For example,

Brathwaite (ibid.) is candid on her topics, yet carefully recommends making sure game sexuality does not intrude on e.g., those designers who would feel comfortable with it. Likewise, she describes ways of avoiding addressing the topic explicitly in public speaking. This way the stigma of "tainted by sex" is still present, in avoidance procedures.

While the second wave went for descriptive (if often still somewhat shallow) accuracy and occasionally also descriptions of personal experiences, its central focus is on stigma avoidance through discretion and approach vector selection. Its puberty is a stereotypically high school type mixture of bravado and shy curiosity. The key that started the third way to which we turn next, in our opinion, was the transformation from this mixture into a kind of non-apologetic lived experience approach.

THE THIRD WAVE: PERSONAL RELATIONS

The current, third wave (2009 till present) is primarily characterised by in some sense a growing maturity, both in terms of digital games' increased willingness to engage with topics and themes often considered "mature" in media ratings (as in "just for adults", e.g., sexuality - and especially its variations) and by increased nuance and space within the field to describe sexuality, at least to some extent inspired by developments within gender studies and queer theory. Examples of this maturity come from discussions concerning the ethics of play (Sicart, 2009; Brown, 2015; Linderoth & Mortensen, 2015), particularly with difficult concepts such as sexual violence (Montola, 2010), a return to seeing some sexual activities as potentially games (Brown, 2012; Harviainen, 2011) and finally legal and popular concerns about perceptions of safety and responsibility in playful environments (Entertainment Software Rating Board, 2012; McCurley, 2010).

In making a broad generalisation, the topics of conversation in the third wave have not changed, but the academic response to them has, as has the extent to which the researchers now analyse their topics. Rather than fuelling fears of moral panics or not daring to engage with sexuality in games beyond a few pages, the third wave sees scholars confronting how games and players appropriate sexual themes for play. Subjects and methods still carry the broad range of approaches, from a focus on flirting, gender hegemonies, verbal harassment and sexual orientation (e.g., Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012) to explicit descriptions of sexual acts in

MMORPGs (e.g., Brown, 2015; Valkyrie, 2011) Additionally, an effort is made to connect these acts to larger theories to deepen our understanding of morality, ethics, and social norms.

The digital games released in the third wave take seriously prior criticism about the immature treatment of sexuality, focus on heterosexual narratives and poor treatment of women (both avatars and players). Games such as BioWare's *Dragon Age* franchise proved that games could tell meaningful sexual stories, be inclusive, and maintain commercial viability - even as they generate controversy. However, while *Dragon Age* is praised for its advancements, scholars point out the industry as a whole still leaves much to be desired. As noted by Tanya Krzywinska (2012), the news media's take on sexuality in games tends to focus on sensationalist rhetoric which cautions consumers against dangerous or morally corrupting content. The result of such rhetoric has meant that sex is often represented as little more than a cheap laugh, an approach also seen during the earlier waves (Brathwaite, 2006). As Rob Gallagher (2012) points out, the Wii game *No More Heroes* makes a joke of using the Wiimote as a phallus and requires players to make rapid up-and-down motions, mimicking male masturbation, to recharge weapons.

Just as games are praised or critiqued for their treatment of sexuality, studies highlighted players' creative responses to industrial limitations in the third wave. The use of Machinima videos, careful positioning of avatars and the misappropriation of emotes in games such as *World of Warcraft* was noted by Henry Lowood (2011) as a way in which players were able to implement auxiliary resources in order to tell sexual stories. Likewise, Annika Waern (2011) found that *Dragon Age: Origins* players used forums and blogs to express their romantic feelings toward non-player characters. A recently published study focusing on World of Warcraft erotic role player communities additionally found that if sexual content is not coded into a game, players will make clever use of resources to implement it themselves nevertheless (Brown, 2015; see also Brathwaite, 2006, on emergent sex play). Such studies highlight the discrepancy between what adult players want and what is acceptable to ratings boards, governing bodies and retailers, through showing how players account for the limitation of encoded game content by creating their own.

Additionally, during this wave, we see an increased finesse in the application of qualitative interview methods, autoethnographies, and textual analysis. Together, they fostered descriptions of the often grey areas of ethics and biases. Researchers studying such a personal and politically

charged topic are often confronted with a mixture of awkward feelings and emotions. Furthermore, it is easily assumed that to give an honest account of such feelings and bias is a risky endeavour which could lead to accusations of unprofessional conduct (see e.g., Frank, 2013). Nevertheless, scholars such as Jenny Sundén (2012) have stepped forward with open accounts of the very complex, real, and human emotions which come from studying sexual topics.

A sign of maturation is also that the subject is garnering interest from scholars outside game studies. For example, sexologist Kate Frank (2013, pp. 174-181) devotes a part of her book to analysing group sex as play in *Second Life*, and the way it differs from the conventions of the physical world – or how it does not, and J. Tuomas Harviainen (2015) has adopted game studies' frameworks to analysing the narratives created by online sadomasochist play. Likewise, the study of the impact of technology on sexuality is increasingly, we believe, approaching the areas of game studies (see e.g., De Vries and Mint, 2011). In many ways, however, the reactionary stances of the works from the third wave still reflect the awkwardness of the preceding waves. It is just the individual relationship to games and sexuality, rather than the communal one, which is now the cause of the queasiness and which can easily lead an author towards an apologetic tone.

DISCUSSION

As the beginning of this article noted, history is created by those who write it. The areas of research this article has chosen to highlight were done to be as inclusive as possible, although there is likely still to be an exclusionary bias. Although as researchers we know not to make generalisations without representative and unbiased sampling, the temptation to pick out general themes and movements within the study of sexuality in games is too fruitful to ignore.

Through critically evaluating the past 37 years of sexuality in game studies, this article has identified two key descriptors which characterise the research as a whole: risk-aware and awkward. The subject of the risk and the awkwardness just changes from one wave to the next due to cultural and theoretical shifts, radically so, but is at all times focused on the negotiation of social stigma (as per Goffman, 1963) relating to discussions of, and working with, sexuality. Even solitary play is now often social, as its practices are shared online, and this has large ramifications for the entire hobby, including its study (Harviainen, Gough & Sköld, 2012). As the introduction explained, risk and awkwardness are typically descriptors of the phase of growth

and identity work also known as puberty. If we think back to our own lives and our own histories, we might be able to say our puberties were spent taking risks to gain a sense of independence from our parents, awkwardly coming to terms with our sexuality, and dreaming about our futures. It is for this reason that puberty is such an apt metaphor for the current state of game studies. However, not only is game studies in a state of puberty, but it has been continually in this state for decades.

As this article's account of the first wave (1978-2000) of sexuality in game studies illustrated, early works were rife with turmoil and change, as scholars struggled to find or make theories to accurately suit the changing state of the social world. Theoretical risks centred on the power of virtual space to shape social interaction were taken, with some being rewarded. Methodological practices handed down by the parents of sociology, anthropology, and media studies were implemented, modified, and structure so as to have relevance to the playful and imaginary. Thematically, studies in the first wave honed in on awkward and uncomfortable aspects of sexuality in games and asked what playing with topics such as sexual violence (Fine, 1983), infidelity and the 'fake-lesbian syndrome' (Turkle, 1995, p.223) might mean for player identity, social interaction, or the sense of self. The first wave can be characterised as pubescent through its struggle to find, use, or create sufficient theories and methodologies from parent disciplines to account for the effects of rapidly changing technology.

Likewise, the second wave (2001-2008) can also be shown to demonstrate the pubescent characteristics of risk and awkwardness. Out of growing discussions about the omnipresence of sex in online environments, and the characterisation of the entire fantasy genre as sexless, emerged an awkward but more open and honest focus on digital games which highlighted their amorality and risk. Scandals such as the Hot Coffee Mod, along with the rise of game classification systems like PEGI and the ESRB refining their warning labels concerning sexual content, are indicative of a moral panic concerning game's treatment of sexuality. This, coupled with rising concerns over adults and children playing together in MMORPGs, fuelled a moral panic reminiscent of arcades in the 70s and 80s. From a focus on the risks of engaging with digital sexuality in the first half of the second wave came the first, often awkward, open discussions of sexuality in the second half. Studies of MMORPGs and virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* produced largely descriptive studies of player behaviour

without connecting it to previously established theory, or making obvious the challenges such behaviours present to theoretical conceptions of sexuality.

The third, current wave (2009-present) of sexuality in game studies can be characterised by the efforts taken to grow and sophisticate the subfield, through a variety of in-depth accounts of sexual and sex-related phenomena in games and more open, less dogmatic methodologies. This is not to suggest that the study of sexuality within game studies has fully matured, on the contrary, but rather that some sense of stability in the field has been reached, which has allowed for nuance, detail and selected focus to emerge in scholarly accounts. It also implicates an increase in both intra-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary inclusivity.

CONCLUSIONS

As a field, game studies has changed, if not grown up, and focusing on its treatment of sexual topics is a useful way to illustrate the process. From making bold statements about the power of the game and the virtual, to moral panics, to contributing to a nuanced account of the ethics of sexuality, game studies is evolving. Although there is a temptation to suggest that this evolution is a progression, we need to avoid thinking in such linear terms, lest we reduce ourselves to teenagers who think conspicuous consumption makes them 'grown up'. Metaphoric projection shows that the concept of perpetual puberty is indeed an apt fit for the topic, a framework that appears to explain what is taking place in the field regarding sexuality. The ideas which game studies consumes do not contribute to a vertical growth, nor should they. Instead, the cultural environments and theoretical developments within which it exists have over the years guided researchers to examine game content's relationship to external values, then to new theories and methodologies, and finally to the researchers' own sexual and gender identities.

The narrative that game studies appears to be creating through its discussion of sex is still quite instance-based: instead of engagement with the theme of sexuality itself, and what it may represent to players and play in a larger context, researchers are happy to settle for analysing titillating case examples. We find a broadening of the metaphor of sexuality-as-game-content, but not yet any real projections where that narrative metaphor might be taking the field. It is almost as if, when it comes to sexuality, the field does not even want to grow up. In this sense, the puberty metaphor deployed in this article is accurate: the narrative told by the literature is indeed

awkward and risk-awareness related. As noted by Waskul (2014), technology plays a key role in modern society in *anticipatory sexual socialization* – voluntary preparation for anticipated future sexual roles. In the same way, the study of sexuality in games is still currently more interested in preparing and especially reacting, rather than in projecting a more nuanced picture of game sexuality as a roadmap towards a more fulfilling future.

If game studies can be said to grow at all, it is a horizontal growth, which pulls more scholars into its folds, diversifies discussion, and allows shifts and changes to take place, changes which contribute to our understanding of games and of ourselves. Although game studies' relationship with sexuality has become more nuanced, it is still very much a risky and awkward sub-discipline to navigate. This places it exactly where it probably should be, given the cultures within which it has to operate - in a perpetual state of puberty. With puberty come changes to our body of knowledge, the occasional growing pains when disciplines, theories, or methodologies clash, but also with it come cyclical progress and development, processes that are essentially 'good' characteristics to have. For that reason, let us hope game studies never grows up.

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