A Queer Little Story: Orgasms, Heteronormativity, and Video Game Narrative

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ABSTRACT
Over the last decade-and-a-half of video game studies, many have theorized on the complex relationship between video games and narrative (Aarseth 2004; Juul, Raessens, and Goldstein 2005; Koenitz et al. 2013; Murray 2004). These conversations have been a productive means of situating a complex new medium into the parameters of older forms of storytelling. This paper playfully pushes at the margins of this conversation by suggesting, in part, that the conversation of whether video games are narratives is entirely subsumed in masculine, heteronormative concepts of what a narrative is in the first place.

Building off of the works of Teresa DeLauretis (De Lauretis 1984) and Judith Roof (1996), I would like to suggest a reconceptualization of the video game narrative, by illustrating how narrative, itself, builds off of masculine and heteronormative conceptualizations of the climax. Roof, in particular, asserts that “Narrative and sexuality operate within the reproductive and/or productive, metaphorically heterosexual ideology that also underwrites the naturalized understanding of the shape and meaning of life” (1996, xxvii). By borrowing the same terminology – the expectation of climax, for instance, there is a masculine heteronormativity that underwrites the cultural understanding of what narrative means. We expect certain things: buildup, climax, catharsis, in a way that allows it to run parallel to masculine, heterosexual orgasms and pleasure. Roof explains that these predilections guide how we judge and interpret all narrative form: “Without the expectation of an ending, we have difficulty discerning a story, its pleasures, terrors, lessons, its making sense of things, its usefulness as catharsis or panacea” (1996, 6). The narrative that does not emulate heterosexual orgasm is simply not recognizable as a narrative.

This paper complicates Roof’s important work by applying it to the (already complex) space of gaming narratives. If Roof is correct and our expectations of narrative structure are entirely contingent on the masculine heterosexual orgasm, then it becomes necessary to rethink how we conceptualize the notion of video game narrative. Gaming narratives, of course, are difficult (in part) because they are incomplete, lacking traditional climax or catharsis. As explained by Espen Aarseth (2004), “The gameworld is its own rewards, and the end, if and when it comes, does not offer dramatic satisfaction, but a feeling of limbo. There is no turning back, and no going forward. You are no longer employed by the game. Time to buy another” (p. 51). Given the often non-linear, often fragmented style of storytelling present in many video games, and a focus on small points of completion – rather than one specific climactic focus –
the video game becomes a ripe space for considering how alternative pleasures can be achieved in narratives. In other words, the video game is not about climax – it is about the pleasure that exists in the middle spaces the spaces where, Roof contends, queer narrative thrives. She explains that just as heterosexual narrative is dependent on climax and literary orgasm, queer narrative exists in the never-ending middle that is dependent on alternative pleasures.

In many ways, this shift of focus from the traditional understanding of narrative to a queer and feminist narrative also provides a new lens for scholars studying the pervasiveness of masculinity embedded into gaming culture. While scholars have studied the inherent masculinity of the video game industry (Consalvo 2008; Fron et al. 2007), game culture (Burrill 2008; Salter and Blodgett 2012), and the games themselves (Cassell and Jenkins 2000), I posit that it is equally useful for feminist, queer, and intersectional scholars to study the structure of the very narrative form of video games.

In my paper, I postulate that the video game narrative, and the accompanying debates are forever bound in this pre-established conception of the narrative, vis-à-vis heteronormativity, climaxes, and the pleasure of an orgasmic end. Instead, I propose that the video game might be so difficult to understand as a narrative because it exists (as Aarseth claims) in a space of “limbo” – a space equivalent to Roof’s queer narrative “middle.” The paper reconsiders the video game narrative from this lens, in order to discuss ways that feminist and queer scholars might use narrative theory to appropriate video game narrative and shift it from it’s typical identification with heterosexual culture.

Keywords
Narrative, video game, queer, feminist

BIBLIOGRAPHY


