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Author(s): Karhulahti, Veli-Matti; Saarenmaa, Laura; Brown, Ashley ML

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Sexuality and Play – Introduction

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Veli-Matti Karhulahti vmmkar[a]utu.fi University of Turku University of Jyväskylä

Laura Saarenmaa laura.saarenmaa[a]utu.fi University of Turku

Ashley ML Brown ashley[a]eae.utah.edu University of Utah

Welcome, dear reader, to our *WiderScreen* special issue! We, the editors of this collection, have carefully collated the readings found here in a celebration of intersecting play(fulness) and sex(uality). While this conceptual duo has been frequently referenced at least since Karl Groos' (1901) study of human play in general and Sidney and Shirley Kaplan's (1981) work on digital games and sex in particular, research on the explicit relationship between play(fulness) and sex(uality) has remained relatively undeveloped (see Harvinainen et al. 2018).

The call for papers produced a great number of submission, of which we could unfortunately accept only a few. Our review process was long, playful, and rigorous, which resulted in the lowest acceptance rate in the history of the journal. We look much forward to seeing all the texts that did not make it to this special issue soon to be published somewhere else! In total, we are proud to present five full articles (two of which in an interview form), two book reviews, and a conference report. The common thread which strings them all together are play's capacity to enable experimentation with and embodiment of sex and sexuality.

Our first article is an interview between Jess Marcotte and Kara Stone entitled "Questions on Queer Game Design: An Interview". The paper is a back and forth between the authors who discuss their own scholarly and design approaches to making games for and building queer communities. Central to the article is the idea that queer game maker spaces are ones with a reduced pressure to make commercially viable titles. This is not to suggest that making commercially viable titles is undesirable or unachievable by non-hegemonic gamemakers, but rather to highlight the freedoms afforded by making games in an indie-dev space. According to Marcotte and Stone, not being beholden to shareholders has thus allowed for freedom, creativity, and playfulness to thrive – producing games about sex and sexuality in an earnest and experimental way, which is difficult in the AAA context.

As the Marcotte and Stone article discusses the playfulness of queer game development space, the next article talks about play happening in queer spaces. In "Gaming with Gender Performativity, Sexuality, and Community", Michael Anthony DeAnda writes about the playful nature of Drag Bingo in gay bars. For the host Sofanda Booz, Drag Bingo is – in addition to allowing for losing and winning (which is important too) – a chance to give back to the LGBTQ+ community through charity, to play with conceptions of gender and sexuality, and to creatively express herself in an environment where the stakes, like in bingo, are low.

After the two interviews, we present three original research articles. "The Pro Strats of Healsluts: Overwatch, Sexuality, and Perverting the Mechanics of Play" by Kyle Bohunicky and Jordan Youngblood discusses the phenomenon of 'healslutting', a term that is given to the rethinking of healing player characters in games like Overwatch as a type of sexual submission. This reimagining of a fairly asexual mechanic like removing player damage so that they may continue to fight in a battle is done with the intent of adding additional interest to the gameplay, or so the Reddit community r/healsluts professes. Bohunicky and Youngblood argue that healslutting provides both an impetus and forum for discussing and playing with sexual identities. This is particularly useful for populations for whom taking a sexually subservient role would be considered wrong or emasculating. As in DeAnda's interview, Bohunicky and Youngblood demonstrate how play spaces allow for the exploration of identities with lower stakes.

The second research article, “On the Importance of Queer Romances: Role-play as Exploration and Performance of Sexuality” by Tanja Sihvonen and Jaakko Stenros, analyses the appearance of queer identities and content in role-playing games through looking at players’ explorations and performances as well as the content in the games themselves. The article illustrates how games with queer content, such as Dragon Age and Mass Effect, may allow players to play with gender and sexual identities, but in a somewhat limited way. Other role-playing forms like tabletop and LARP foster more player creativity with less boundaries to gendered and sexual expression with regard to content. However, because these forms of role-play are social, they entail collective acknowledgement and participation of queerness, which may again, in turn, be limited by existing hegemonic norms. Hence, the article functions as a companion to the above studies by illustrating the boundaries and limits of games as playful spaces of exploration and queer expression.

In the third article, ”Vakava leikki – Tiedonjakaminen, identiteetti ja leikillisuus suomalaisen seksichatin nimimerkeissä” [Serious play – Information, Identity and Playfulness in Finnish Sexchat Pseudonyms], Lasse Hämäläinen and Ari Haasio shed light on the lingual and textual playfulness through the analysis of Finnish sexchat-pseudonyms. The analysis of the material – 1488 pseudonyms collected from popular Finnish sexchat site herkkku.net – combines onomastics and information science research methodology. The authors discuss the findings in terms of identity formation, information sharing and lingual-sexual play, and suggest that in sexchat pseudonyms playfulness is a subsidiary factor to detailed definitions and information on sexual identities and sexual preferences.

In addition, this special issue contains two book reviews and a conference report. Miguel Sicart reviews Susanna Paasonen’s *Many Splendored Things*, addressing the book’s strengths in taking new looks at old theories regarding the relationship between power, play, and sexuality. Next, Sabine Harrer reviews the classic *Sex in Videogames* by Brenda Brathwaite. Harrer approaches the book as a historical account of how sex has been treated in the gaming industry. She observes the lack of reflexivity and insight into who’s pleasure is being exhibited and at whose expense, ending with a post #GamerGate and #MeToo contextualization. Lastly, Valtteri Kauraoja provides a report of the *3rd Sexual Cultures* conference that was organized in University of Turku in May this year.

Overall, the collection of articles here represent a variety of insights and positions on the topic of sexuality and play. Together, they illustrate how playful environments can allow for diverse expressions of gender and sexuality in independent game developer cultures (Marcotte and Stone), gay bar bingo nights (DeAnda), and in actual gamer communities (Youngblood and Bohunicky). Although play offers great affordances to this expression, as outlined in the review of *Many Splendored Things* (Sicart), there are real world and in-game limitations to this expression (Sihvonen and Stenros), which are both a factor of the zeitgeist in which the games are made and by the personalities and dispositions of the people who make them (Harrer). As such, we hope this special issue advances the understanding of how sex, sexuality, play, and playfulness are now connected in academia (Kauraoja) as well as outside of it.

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