Rated M for Mature

Sex and Sexuality in Video Games

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Playing for intimacy:
Love, lust, and desire
in the pursuit of
embodied design

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Imagine a game with no conflict. Can you? Would it be fun, interesting, shallow, or boring? Frederick Berg Olsen's *The Lady and Otto* (2005) is one such game. In this "Nordic larp," players are told to act the parts of either the Lady or Otto (who have practically identical roles) as they are prompted with a scene. Example scenes include "Otto is in the bathroom, the lock has jammed," and "Lady is climbing into bed. Otto can't sleep." Players then feel their way around the scene until they reach a point of conflict; at this point, a referee intervenes with a whistle. They must then stop and attempt the scene again, this time avoiding the conflict. Play continues like this for about two hours, and while the game may not be a particularly fun one, it certainly makes a point about the centrality of conflict to narrative. Surely interesting games and narratives alike incorporate conflict on some level, but why do game mechanics focus specifically on the simulation of violent and misogynist conflict, in particular? This essay is about the new subjectivities produced by games that deviate from the military-entertainment complex that

fundamentally permeates our culture of play. How can we design games to challenge the violent and misogynist status quo of the industry, and what new cultures might emerge when we do?

The video game industry has been heavily critiqued for its overtly military motifs. And although there has been a considerable backlash against media effects approaches that essentialize this phenomenon by assuming that players of violent games will reproduce violence elsewhere in their lives, there have recently been several other approaches that recognize the ways in which violent games are, instead, by-products of the military-industrial complex (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Crogan 2011). If game design is left to the machinations of industry, then it is only violence that will be reproduced through games. The endless reproduction of military and consumer motifs within the market is, according to Stiegler (2014), a symptom of a social system that has begun to consume itself.

To paraphrase Swedish game designer Emma Wieslander's (2004a) provocative question, why do we produce games in which our avatars are far more likely to experience violence and even death than love and physical intimacy? There is hope, however. Therapeutic techniques can be developed to promote healthy economies of discourse and desire, as Stiegler proposes,[1] and in this way they can promote processes of individuation that do not result in the ceaseless repetition of banality. For this reason, we argue that it is important to explore game mechanics that have been developed through communities that are not fundamentally linked to mass-market commercial industries. If games are to produce environments of care for players, game mechanics must be sought in new spaces entirely.

Specifically, we are interested in mechanics that have been cultivated by thoughtful designers with an interest in activism and social resistance. This paper considers three specific sex mechanics devised for use in Nordic larp[2]—an avant-garde school of live-action role-playing game design—as a key site of inquiry because of their historical positionality as a response to Weislander's challenge in that they were designed specifically to respond to the apparent lack of sex techniques in gaming (Stenros 2013). These techniques include face-to-face narrative disclosure, an arm-touching technique known as *ars amandi*, and visual simulation using phallic props. This chapter will explore the scope of experimental methods of sexual embodiment in Nordic larp communities in order to create a framework that reads the game mechanics of sex as a set of bodily techniques with concrete design implications. The techniques described here evoke new potentials of individuation and provoke dialogue among and between participants.

Critiques of violence

Game studies scholars have always been troubled by the promiscuity of violence in video games. One need only gaze at the bestselling games of 2013 to observe how intimately related the two are. In a list (Fiscal Times 2013) of 2013's top ten bestselling games, eight of the ten games employ mechanics that require the player to engage in direct combat, use guns for killing or self-defense, or command digital others to brawl to the death. Seven of these eight are sequels to other games as well. Just as these games epitomize the industrial replication of violence, they also epitomize the degree to which violence is linked to industrial processes that excel at replicating themselves. To turn on a console is to flirt with violent media, and to flirt with violent media is to be subject to the production of violence itself.

Reactions to this play have taken many forms in the history of game studies. Some moments (Anderson, Gentile and Buckley 2007) emphasize how violent video games produce violent behaviors within children, yet other critics argue to the contrary. Games do not produce violent players, scholars like Jenkins (2014) claim. Rather, players have the agency to interpret games however they like and in doing so resist replicating problematic narrative tropes. Recent work in critical game studies offers a middle-ground approach that rethinks the polemics of these viewpoints. It is perhaps best synthesized by Crogan (2011): "[Media studies and video games researchers] throw the baby out with the bathwater, avoiding the question concerning technoculture's relation to war and the military that computer games pose so insistently beyond the media effects debate, which itself is unable to articulate it adequately in these terms." The production of electronic games is fundamentally adjacent to the production of military power. It is this sense of feedback that must be untangled if we are to recognize the political affordances of violent games at all.

The role of commercial video games within the military-entertainment complex is almost universally met with concern by scholars. Halter (2006) argues that games serve as metaphors for the landscape of war. They help to reveal how the practices of war shifted over time. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter suggest that war relates to the acquisition of capital and point to the ways in which these concepts of empire form the backbone of many video games. Crogan (2011) suggests the military-entertainment complex is so deeply embedded within the heart of computer games that it makes no sense to oppose the two; to speak of computer games is to think through the marriage of entertainment and warfare. Finally, Trammell and Sinnreich (2014) posit that locative games, altered reality games, and gamification are

evidence of the ways games transformed from a social metaphor of war to a social instrument of control and coercion.

Video games captivate players within a feedback loop of control. As players input commands, the machine responds by providing players with new situations, inputs, stimuli, and conditions. Crogan (2011) refers to this as the cybernetic aspects of video game systems. Cybernetics, as defined by Edwards (1997), was developed as a language to unify an array of diverse scientific modes. It was a theory of absolute regulation, which promised that the good society would be produced though the merger of bodies, machines, and mathematics. If scientists could ascertain how social configurations worked as social systems, they could be made to run more efficiently though emerging technology. Video games are a peculiar residue of this scientific moment in the mid-twentieth century, but significantly, the feedback systems they produce are devised by software engineers and marketing teams, not social scientists.

Commercial video games are tools of control and coercion, designed to model things that sell, not things that might contribute toward a social good. So it should come as no surprise that violence is so frequently reproduced in games, because violence has always sold when prominently featured in radio, television, film, and art. Because violence is most troubling when it appears in games, given the cybernetics upon which game systems have been modeled, it is important to critique these emergences and recognize how work on violence in games might be considered as supplementary to other related phenomena.

Techniques of care

Stenros offers a catalog of sex mechanics utilized in Nordic larp, moving forward from a quote offered by Wieslander: "In most larps there is, strangely enough, a far higher risk of the character getting killed than making love. It seems that amorous interaction such as lovemaking, cuddling, hugging or just holding hands in a sensual or sexual manner, is quite taboo." This idea caught fire in the Nordic larp community, as Stenros observes: "The Nordic larp community took this lack as a challenge. Over the years numerous different types of amorous interaction techniques were developed." His essay, "Amorous Bodies in Play," is an effort to catalog and discuss the differences between some of these sex mechanics. Implicit in this discussion is the idea that violence is poisonous, and therefore its opposite, sensuality, has the possibility to be therapeutic. Here, however, we question whether the two

terms should be set in opposition to one another at all, or if violence and sensuality occupy the same problematically visceral category.

It is important to take into account the degree that amorous techniques in role-playing games constitute a sense of care. And, if they do, how could this sensibility translate to video games? It is one thing for two players to kiss one another in a larp; it is arguably another for one *Second Life* avatar to kiss another. Additionally, live-action role-playing games offer a way to understand the design affordances of amorous mechanics within a playspace, and they help us to understand these mechanics.

Care, for Heidegger (2008), can be understood as a set of practices that constitute one's *being* in the world. Heidegger argued that *being* relates to deliberate action or care. This perspective differs from prior ontological maneuvers that can be roughly considered Platonist or Aristotelian. The quality of one's existence depends on the forms of action one takes. Given that techniques, if anything, are culturally transmitted forms of action,[3] the techniques and mechanics that constitute and govern one's actions are, in this sense, directly related to the quality of one's existence and life.

Unlike other media, video games necessitate that players take action within them. As such, they are intimately related to the very essences of the players participating in the game. For Steigler it is important, then, to consider the nature of the technologies we see as essential to our lives. He argues that the techniques and technologies that are produced by the logic of the market tend to be poisonous in nature. For this reason, we believe that the first step in defining a therapeutic ethic of game design must be a critique of the market. Such a critical lens provides practitioners with the intellectual purchase to critique otherwise innocuous products and allows them the tools to design games in a way that deliberately resists the capture of capital.

Finally, the ability of technology to bring people together is, for Steigler, its ultimate potential. Steigler explains that Simondon's idea of individuation must be updated to encompass the potentials of collaborative work. Instead of techniques and technologies working to distinguish one person from another, they can also work to help groups define their own collective identities (Crogan 2010). For instance, the technology of open source computer software allows for a collective sensibility around design that is somewhat free from the demands of the market, whereas proprietary software like Adobe Dreamweaver encourages users to respond to the aesthetics of the market and produces a sense of individuality that is necessarily attached to the product's own affordances. In this way, those who work with open source software may court a sense of collective configurability that ranges far beyond the walled gardens of Adobe.

Amorous techniques in Nordic larp allow a space of care for both the self and others. These techniques coalesce diegetically around ideas of character. Role-playing presupposes a fundamental distinction between player and character. Nordic larp techniques exemplify how expectations of and rituals for enacting care are different for the player and the character. Players are not expected to care for one another in-game, for example, although this sense of care may be taken up by the group or community in structures outside of the narrative of the game. Instead, players play at care for one another during the course of the game by embodying characters that care for one another within the narrative context. Nordic larp designers have addressed this difference in two ways: first, with play techniques that allow characters to seamlessly simulate experiences within the diegesis of the game; and second, with practices external to the gameplay that provide space and guidance for the players to think through, process, and otherwise make sense of their in-game experiences.

As Stenros notes, techniques are developed to provide a means for experiencing something that is either impossible (time travel) or impractical (swordfighting) to simulate. Techniques imposed for practicality reasons arise out of a concern for safety and take for granted a certain disjunction between the in-game experience of the character versus the out-of-game experience of the player. Just as "boffer" (foam-padded) weapons emulate real swords because the latter can seriously harm players, sex also has potential to negatively affect the player. The attempt to find a correlative "safety" mechanic for simulating sexual encounters, therefore, highlights the similarities between violence and sex. It is a fallacy to stage violence and sexuality in binary opposition given their visceral similarities and subsequent exploitation in the commercial sector. That said, designers greet both forms with different tactics of censorship, and it must be acknowledged that explorations of queer sexuality within games are as rare as explorations of pacifism. Game designers work, instead, to offer intricate technology trees that reinforce the barbarism of unending and total war and often consign to represent sexuality with boobs, chauvinism, objectification, and other common tropes of heteronormative sociality.

While such intervening techniques acknowledge the dissociation between player and character, Nordic larps focus on the hard-core[4] aims to dissolve these boundaries as much as possible. The premium placed on immersion encourages players to experience their characters' journeys as completely as possible. Nordic larp appeals primarily to embodied practices that produce affects within players. The call for sex techniques, therefore, arises from a sensibility that encourages players to aim for affective resonance (known as "bleed"[5]) while, somewhat paradoxically, acknowledges that the residue of that bleed is unpredictable and somewhat uncontrollable.

The technicity of sexuality

Several techniques for simulating physically and emotionally intimate experiences have been developed and used in Nordic larp, to varying success. Here, we will represent the spectrum of existing techniques with an analysis of three specific mechanics and the games for which they were developed.

The first technique was developed for a game called *Summer Lovin'* (2014).[6] *Summer Lovin'* tells the story of three sexual encounters between acquaintances at a summer music festival and encourages exploring the awkward (and therefore "realistic") aspects of sex, as opposed to the romanticized versions depicted in most popular media. This involves two players sitting knee-to-knee, holding hands, and maintaining eye contact while verbally describing their characters' actions and feelings technique, which Stenros identifies as *establishing the events*. This portion relies on verbalizing and narrating physical encounters, which served the writers' vision to "force people to talk about sex, to verbalize both what actually goes down in a sexual situation and the feelings involved" (Lindahl, Nilsen and Westerling 2014). Here, the Game Master's responsibility is to keep the players on track with describing with specificity their physical actions *as well as* their internal reactions to what is taking place.

With its emphasis on narrative over embodied practice, this technique may seem to impose the greatest distance between the player and their character. However, the affective resonance of the liveness and unpredictability of the encounter is in no way mitigated, as one interviewed player reported: "The incredible amount of nervous energy was there. Obviously the nudity and physical sensations were not." In this way, *Summer Lovin'* deliberately acknowledges and works to delve into the multiple ways in which sexual encounters affect us, outside of the erotic. While this technique does elicit certain sensations, some players experience frustration when running up against the "translation" issue of the visceral to the cerebral. Another player reports: "I would get all tongue-tied and nervous trying to talk out things that I normally do without talking. I can simultaneously interpret English/French, but not body/description."

Ars amandi, on the other hand, takes up the issue of embodiment by emphasizing the tactile experience of intimate encounters. Developed by larpwright Emma Wieslander (2014) in a deliberate effort to rectify what she saw as an imbalance in larp designs, this technique aims at tapping into physical sensuality while still providing a barrier between the player and sexual arousal. *Ars amandi* involves players touching each other's hands, arms, shoulders, and neck as a way of simulating intimacy. This technique was originally developed for a game called *Mellan Himmel och Hav (Between*

Heaven and Sea) (2003), in which the erogenous zones of the characters in-game *were* the arms. Since then, however, it has been widely adopted and adapted for use in a variety of different games, representing anything from kissing to sexual intercourse, depending on the context (Figtree 2013). In this way, while perhaps not as explicit as *Summer Lovin'*, *ars amandi* focuses on simulating an embodied sense of sensuality for the player. Although other storytelling methods must set the scene of the game, *ars amandi* has the capacity to elicit extremely strong experiences for the player. There are even some reports of relationships having begun out of game due to the technique.

A third technique, known as Phallus Play, also operates symbolically, but is more overtly sexual in content. This technique relies on the use of a phallic prop, such as a dildo, to mime a sexual encounter. Players using this technique remain fully clothed, so the prop is used merely to signify sexual contact, not to enact it physically. This technique, therefore, operates similarly to *ars amandi* in its symbolic representation of physical intimacy, but it is more similar to narrative techniques in its emphasis on creating a vivid and provocative scene for viewers, rather than a sensual experience for players. As organizer Tor Kjetil Edland (2012) reports, "Ars amandi felt more sensual and erotic, while doing a scene with the phallus method felt more like watching a hot sex scene in a movie." One particularly interesting tenet of this technique is that the phallus is intended to represent sexual aggression, so it can be used by and with characters of any gender. Outside of in-game practices, the wider context and implications of the techniques must also be taken into consideration, and one major drawback to this technique therefore is the reification of heteronormative phallocentric interaction as "standard."

While the Nordic larp community has made efforts to design techniques that allow for expressing sexual intimacy between two or more partners and allowing for various combinations of genders, it is interesting to note that no formal attention has been paid to the expression of "self-love." Although many designers emphasize that since sex is a natural and common life experience, it must, therefore, play a part in larps that aspire to naturalism, masturbation is prominently missing from these stories. Perhaps it is because such solitary scenes would often take place in private and therefore, arguably, outside the diegesis of the game. The possibility remains that solitary techniques have not been considered because there is no need to establish safety from oneself. If sex techniques are created in an effort to provide players with a mechanism through which to police their personal boundaries, then it stands to reason that a player need not protect herself from her own advances, or at least knows when to back off. The lack of attention to techniques for simulating masturbation points to the fact that techniques for sex exist as a safety

measure, because sex is not necessarily always a technique of care but rather, as in real life, carries with it the potential for eliciting discomfort at best and trauma at worst. Without a clear vision on the designer's behalf regarding how sex and sexuality will be implemented in games, and without player consent that this manner of play is worth exploring, the deliberate nature of the act is lost. Implementations of sexuality in games run the risk of transforming the sacred into the banal, and as such, they must be considered with care by both designers and players.

Automating sexuality

Because of the ways that feedback has been hard-baked into the design of video games, it has been argued by theorists such as Frasca (2003), Bogost (2010), and Flanagan (2009, 2010) that games can function as excellent persuasive tools. Going a step further, Flanagan (2010) has even argued that games are specifically useful for addressing issues of social justice: "Games are particularly well-suited to supporting educational or activist programs in which the fostering of empathy is a key outcome. This is because games allow players to inhabit the roles and perspectives of other people or groups in a uniquely immersive way." Although games are often able to produce affects of fear, care, concern, or excitement within their players, Flanagan (2010) continues, they are rarely accurate simulations of the phenomenon they aim to model. In this sense, the focus which Nordic larp places on the hard-core and sometimes precise replication of sexual encounters is at odds with Flanagan's (2010) concept of critical play, which utilizes game mechanics in order to produce radical social change as opposed to radical subject experiences.

This tension, between means and ends, is the core problematic for the design of radical video games. If Nordic larp offers a glimpse at how a near-perfect simulation works as a means to produce affects and subjectivities within player groups, then Flanagan's call for an ethic of activism within game design prompts us to question the ultimate aim of these games. The inclusion of sex mechanics is an insufficient justification for an ethic of activism and care in game design. Critical approaches to sex mechanics in games read them as the beginning of one of many important conversations, not an end. In many ways the critical apparatus of the Nordic larp community has been the dialogue produced within the community, not the mechanics of the games. The example of *Kapo* below points to how sex mechanics function as a site of discursivity amongst community members and questions whether this discursivity can be replicated within video games.

Transformative reports

Because the tradition of Nordic larp often produces a wealth of documentation about game events, it is not difficult to locate examples from the community that speak to the ways the implementation of sex through clever game mechanics can yield a radical player experience. It is important, for this reason, to rely upon some of this documentation to consider the use of sex mechanics in Nordic larp and glean some insight as to how it offers transformative potentials for design—be they helpful or harmful.

Player Kalle Grill (2012) addresses the ways in which sex mechanics can prompt a transformative dialogue in his reflections on his experience playing *Kapo*, a larp infamous for its level of gritty intensity. The characters in *Kapo*, a Stanford Prison Experiment-like larp designed to explore power, had been placed in a concentration camp in present-day Copenhagen. Conditions in the camp were brutal, and characters experienced torture, humiliation, starvation, sleep deprivation, beatings, and, of course, rapes. Kapo employed the *ars amandi* technique, and Grill goes into extensive detail about the various ways it occurred throughout the game (both positively and negatively). Grill acknowledges the ways in which simulating sex can have a much deeper effect on the player than violence because

> the physical circumstances differ. Player and character share bodies and sexuality is strongly connected to the body.
>
> Though whether we are sexually attracted or not of course depends on many other factors, when there is attraction it is both strongly felt in the body and directed at another body. Hostility, in contrast, is more in the mind and is directed at personalities and perhaps social roles, not so much at bodies.

Grill goes on to discuss how this bodily confusion establishes something very different in rape scenarios than in other violent scenarios because, although the violent aspect of it remains almost fully within the diegesis of the game, the sexual attraction is pervasive and potentially even pleasurable to the player.

Grill asserts that there is social merit to this type of experiment, stating

> I think it is good that we can experience rape from the inside of a rapist by larping. We can do so, of course, only to the extent that we can experience anything by larping. It is not the real thing, but it gives us an experience much richer than any other art form and so it can provide valuable teachings about who we are and could be under other circumstances. In the case of non-consensual sex, it can teach us something about our too many depraved fellow human beings who actually rape and abuse.

Although Grill suggests that there is potential for positive societal transformation due to larp experiences such as this, *Kapo* also exemplifies how sex in and of itself is not necessarily the antithesis of violence, precisely *because* these simulated experiences can affect players in such lasting and significant ways. This is also why additional safety techniques surrounding the use of sex simulation techniques, such as the use of safe words like "cut" and "brake," have been developed and continue to be hotly debated.

For a particularly powerful example of the ways in which game experiences can bleed into players' lives outside of the game, we could again look to *Mellan himmel och hav*, the game for which Emma Wieslander developed her *ars amandi* technique. Many of the participants in this game were so strongly affected by their in-game experiences that they took up new intimate relationships in the real world, even after the game had ended. Some players broke up with their former partners, and others were influenced to explore new sexual orientations and polyamorous relationship models. Such lasting effects have the power to be both positive (encouraging open-mindedness and progressive social change) and negative (in their tendency to be somewhat insularly focused), as noted by two voices from the community:

> The participants were suddenly thrown into situations where they had physical contact with people they would normally, for one reason or another, never touch. As a consequence, very many of the participants were smitten with a poly-sexual analysis of human relations—and they took it into practise, because they had experienced that these ideas functioned. A big number of break-ups, amorous adventures, and attempts to establish new norms followed among the players. Heterosexuality and monogamy were undermined among the participants to the benefit of polygamy and a general questioning of gender. (Gerge and Widing 2006)

Gerge and Widing go on to describe how the people who participated in *Mellan himmel och hav* felt an almost "cultish" bond, and some had the tendency to judge or ostracize members of the community who had not shared in the experience and therefore did not share the same values and beliefs borne of embodied play.

Dialogue in meatspace

Perhaps what Nordic larp does best in its approach to sex (and violence)—and what video games could benefit from incorporating as well—is acknowledging how much the fictional experiences within games can affect "real" life

and deliberately implementing systems for effectively coping with this. For example, both the narrative description technique and Phallus Play incorporate the use of "inner monologues." In these monologues, characters describe not only their actions, but also how they are feeling and how they hope the scene will play out. Although this is not a required element of *ars amandi*, it is an extremely common element of all Nordic larp. This metatechnique encourages reflexivity about the game and helps create an environment in which the consequences of one's actions carry a substantial weight.

While inner monologues are done in-character, Nordic larp also provides a structure for players to "debrief" after a game's conclusion. These sessions are often facilitated by game organizers and involve solitary reflection, discussion with a partner or in a small group, or even roundtable conversations with the entire cast. Debriefing is an essential element of Nordic larp where players recount their in-game experiences and share how those scenes made them feel. Processing scenes that involved sex and intimacy, therefore, often play a prominent part in debriefing.

Intimate video play

Immersion, though not always a point of discussion in video game design, is a topical subject in conversations regarding theater and larp (White, Harviainen and Care Boss 2012). Still, as video games become more immersive, it becomes easier to imagine the ways they might work to model complex modes of sexuality. Though the hard-core and realistic simulations of the Nordic larp community are in some ways an extreme lens through which the embodiment of sex in games can be viewed, such a viewpoint is a necessary one to consider given aspirations of realism and immersion considered central to the marketing of many mass-market video games.

Sex mechanics in games should not be considered in opposition to violence. Instead they have much in common with the principles of violent game design insofar as they are related to the production of affect within players. Though violent game mechanics and sexual game mechanics have been designed to evoke feelings, they are seldom devised in a way that produces dialogue. What would it mean for a computer to prompt player reflection after a steamy encounter in a game like *Leisure Suit Larry*? Can a sense of dialogue be provoked within the auspices of a computer game, or is the game instead a one-way discussion between designer and player?

A true sense of discourse may be conspicuously absent from computer games, given that it is limited to the imaginations of the writers who must attend to all potentials of the dialogue when programming the game. This

apparent drawback, however, can also be a strength. Techniques like "cut" and "break" have been implemented in Nordic larp as a way for players to mitigate the effects of an emotionally harmful or difficult situation. Unfortunately, players facing these difficult situations often report feeling uncomfortable with having to break up the diegetic action of other players participating in the scene. In a single-player computer game, however, "cut" and "break" can be implemented almost flawlessly, and uncomfortable players can end a scene, without a sense of social pressure, whenever they like. What is absent remains a second person with whom to discuss the scene afterward.

Perhaps massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are the space where these various perspectives ultimately converge. While game designers have structural control over many elements of the MMORPG environment, players also host discussions with one another in these worlds. In these games, moderators could take the time to encourage debrief sessions during moments of the visceral. After the excitement of the raid, players could gather to discuss their feelings; characters with in-game relationships could meet in preprogrammed spaces that offer moderators who are trained to counsel during moments of stress. Even in computer games like *Mass Effect*, where sex and sexuality play a well-fleshed-out narrative role, companies should consider offering online counseling as an option to players after dramatic moments.

The suggestion that intimacy should be implemented alongside mechanics that facilitate counseling is surely a daunting one for designers hoping to produce safe, thoughtful games. And, just as sex can be implemented poorly in games, discourse can also be poorly facilitated by inexperienced counselors or worse, automation. As techniques and technologies of sex allow for more embodiment, it is important that they are facilitated in a deliberate fashion between caring partners. Sadly, it is more likely that we will see a vibrating wiimote implemented as the special "touch of love" ability of a corseted villainess before it is included in the arsenal of MMORPG players seeking to get to know each other in a more caring way (wiimote is the name of a piece of technology used with the Wii video game system). This is the precise logic of the market that developers must resist: instead of reducing sexuality to the logic of marketing, they should design games with mechanics that allow interested and caring players to interact with one another in a way that is more than the ceaseless repetition of violence. This, however, is unlikely, as visceral embodied modes of interaction open the door to a litany of legal problems that invariably reinforce the idea that we, as a society, should make war and not love.

Intimacy in games has the potential to allow us to imagine games as emotive spaces of self-betterment. But, without discourse, this space of

growth can easily turn poisonous, producing effects of carnality akin to the barbarism of video game violence. Ultimately, because discourse is so integral to the transformative and critical aspects of all Nordic larp, it is this space of dialogue that needs encouragement alongside all sex mechanics in games. Just as the violence in games is problematic only insofar as it is produced without critique or conscience, so is sexuality. We will inevitably feel intimacy in new and profound ways as games continue to be developed, and it is important for developers to consider the ways that players can be urged to reflect upon these experiences.

Notes

1 Bernard Stiegler draws on Derrida's work in *Plato's Pharmacy* to define technologies and techniques as either poisonous or therapeutic. This distinction follows from Plato's dialogue in *The Phaedrus* wherein medicines are defined with both terms: therapeutic when they are used to cure ailments and poisonous when abused or administered improperly. The metaphor is invoked in *The Phaedrus* as a way to critique language, rhetoric, and therefore truth as these modes of knowledge can be understood as techniques and technologies, which can either help or harm a population. We have adapted this language here in order to consider games as techniques of play with a set of both therapeutic and poisonous potentials that must be critically addressed.

2 "Larp" as a term is derived from the abbreviated form of "live-action role-play" and is used in this paper as a way to define all games of this genre. Nordic larps are generally designed with the intent of using games as a means of exploring deeper social issues and questions about human experience, as opposed to creating an escapist fantasy in which to play out the traditional "hack and slash" hero's journey. For example, Wieslander developed the *ars amandi* technique for the game *Mellan Himmel Och Hav* (*Between Heaven and Sea*), which created a fantasy world in which to explore new ways of assigning and expressing gender and relationships. More recently, the games *Summer Lovin'* and *Just A Little Lovin'* developed new techniques to suit their unique purposes. *Summer Lovin'*, which utilizes a descriptive technique, was designed with the intention of encouraging people to feel comfortable talking about sex, and *Just A Little Lovin'*, which employs the use of prop dildos, is an emotionally intense game about the AIDS pandemic in New York in the 1980s. For more examples and definitions of Nordic larp please see *The Nordic Larp Wiki* (nordiclarp.org/wiki/).

3 Technique, drawn from the Greek word τέχνη (techne) meaning craftsmanship, craft, or art, implies an approach toward production that emphasizes the cultural, shared, and embodied aspects of the act. This definition has been expanded to specifically delineate many embodied practices of shared cultural behaviors by Marcel Mauss in his essay "Techniques of the Body." Importantly, bodily techniques are learned cultural behaviors, even techniques as common as walking, washing, and jumping.

4   Hard-core as in its musical equivalent "hardcore music," which lays claim to an authenticity that is produced by pushing boundaries and doing things to the extreme. In one famous instance, players of the Nordic larp System Danmark, who took the roles of street people, allowed other players to urinate on them in accordance with the dogma of the game's diegesis. Although such play was forbidden in the game, a culture of support for hard-core behavior helped to justify and encourage this form of player action.

5   "Bleed" is a specific term used by the Nordic larp community referring to the experience of fictional, in-game, character experiences "bleeding out" into the player's day-to-day life, or, alternatively, the player's personal background "bleeding in" and affecting their in-game character. For more on bleed, see Lizzie Stark's (2012a, b) essay "Nordic Larp for Noobs" and Sarah Lynn Bowman's (2013) presentation "Bleed: How Emotions Affect Role-Playing Experiences".

6   *Summer Lovin'*, though closely related to Nordic larp, particularly in its emphasis on using gameplay to explore emotions, is technically a Jeepform game. Jeepform games combine elements of narrative tabletop games with live-action role-playing but are less concerned with naturalistic immersion. For more on Jeepform see Lizzie Stark's (2012a, b) primer, "Jeepform for Noobs" and the Jeepform website, jeepen.org.

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