

Unsettling Identification: Bodies, Boys Love, and Visual Novels as Transgender Architecture

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INTRODUCTION

Although player-protagonist identification in games is often considered to be straightforward, the notion that identification with onscreen bodies is meant to be easy operates on an inherently cisgender logic. Because of the messy relationships that many transgender people have with their bodies, trans experiences of embodiment fundamentally exist at odds to the way that many games expect their players to control and relate to their protagonists, and this makes it difficult to read most triple-A games in productively trans ways. However, an alternative mode of embodiment can be found in the genre of visual novels (VNs), which present protagonist bodies that are inherently contested through both ludic and narrative means. The gameplay of a VN is very different from many other games, and consists of clicking through text projected over two-dimensional visuals, and making decisions at certain points in the story. And while not every visual novel speaks to trans experiences, there are nevertheless a host of VNs which present uncontrollable and uninhabitable bodies, in a way that is sympathetic to experiences of difficult transgender embodiment.

Although visual novels span a host of genres, the most common is the dating-simulation game, a genre fundamentally about the intersection of bodies, which involves romancing one of a suite of possible love interests. In particular, I take as my object of study the dating-sim subgenre of “boys love” (BL) visual novels: male/male romance texts which are assumed to be for a non-male audience (McLelland and Welker 2015), and feature a “fluid oscillation of viewpoint” between the two leads, which encourages the audience to identify with both characters (Saito 2011, 186). Boys love VNs tell stories about bodies that are actively positioned at odds to each other, and leave it to the player to choose their own meaning. This is done through the presentation of the same body in multiple ways; it is almost standard within the genre to have branching plotlines, all considered to be equally ‘true’ game-states, as well as a number of abortive ‘bad ends’ which branch off early and are considered to be ‘failed’ scenarios (Ganzon 2018). These multiple instances of the same bodies prompt players to have multiple relationships to these bodies, which impact and revise each other. And the way this undermines the idea that any one body can be narratively and viscerally centralised resonates with transgender experiences.

In order to explore the concept of BL protagonist as contested body with trans potentialities, this paper will analyse the boys love VN *Hashihime of the Old Book Town* (ADELTA 2019). *Hashihime*’s protagonist Tamamori gains the ability to travel

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back in time after a friend dies in mysterious circumstances, and moves through multiple timelines to try prevent this outcome. The time-loop conceit, and the way that bodies overlap and contradict each other as Tamamori progresses, makes explicit the logic of the multiple-route stories in BL VNs: that the bodies in these games, and the meanings they hold, cannot be comfortably cobbled into a single narrative of identification. As the body becomes overexposed through repetition, the accumulation of bodily meanings undermines the notion that a body should be a home. The idea of the body as home is a deeply contested one in trans studies, both in terms of the common narrative of gender transition as a journey ‘homeward’, and the idea that a body should be a home at all. But this concept is not an apolitical one, and ‘home’ has historically been a space from which people have been excluded on the grounds of class, race, or queerness. As Nael Bhanji puts it, the centrality of home in transgender narratives establishes a rhetoric where “the proper solution to painfully wrong embodiment is to migrate to the right body”, heedless of the fact that this migration may not be accessible or desirable (2012, 166). And, because of their ‘unhomed’ relationship between the bodies of player and protagonist, boys love VNs can provide a fruitful site for theorising models of transgender embodiment in games.

My argument here is not that boys love games are inherently trans texts, but that the ambivalent relationships many of them have with the concept of the body can be read in meaningfully trans ways. Ultimately, these games can serve as a form of what Crawford (2015) calls transgender architecture: structures which speak to trans experiences because they destabilise the body through ludic and narrative processes, which place it in constant flux and a perpetual state of transformation.

BIO

Gawain Lucian Lax is a game studies PhD candidate at Monash University, in the School of Media, Film and Journalism. His thesis work focuses on Japanese boys love games, and the ways they can be used to theorise models of transgender embodiment. More broadly, his research interests include fan studies, dating-simulation games, mobile games, and transgender game studies.

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