

TankSpanking and HealSluts: Exploring Kink and Playful Intimacy

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a work-in-progress of digital ethnography and reports on data collected from qualitative online surveys and interviews with participants who combine their gaming with elements from BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Sadism, and Masochism) roleplay. Using a grounded theory approach, the qualitative investigation focuses on ‘how’ rather than ‘why’ people play (c.f. Shaw 2014; Paasonen 2018, p.125). Findings explore intimate play of sexual partners and participants engaged in kink online gaming communities. In this, ‘Dom’, ‘Sub’ and ‘Switch’ BDSM dynamics in digital games are often played through the appropriation of ‘Tank’, ‘Healer’, and DPS (Damage Per Second) class roles. In addition to ‘in-game’ play dynamic experiences, this research expands into observing kink practices, such as: the negotiations of consent, the use of bluetooth sex toys, communicative masturbation, cuckholding or trading, and cosmetic customisation.

In feminist game studies of playing in romantic relationships, previous research has examined the gendered dynamics of playing as support characters—also referred to as ‘healers’ (Butt 2016). The assignment of gendered assumptions to healers often reflects societal norms of heteronormative dynamics and binary traditional gender roles. As observed, a consequence of this heteronormativity and the feminisation of ‘healers’ has led to the pressuring of ‘girlfriends’ to be self-sacrificing and play support for their ‘boyfriends’ (c.f. Butt 2016.; Ratan et al. 2015). In growing the literature of people’s experiences of play and romantic interpersonal dynamics this research reports on the experiences and practices of sexual intimacy in games.

The theoretical framework is informed by Susanna Paasonen’s theory of ‘affective amplification’ in her work on sex and play (2018) and entwines affect, performativity, and critical identity theories to adjust our understanding of sexuality in lenses of attunement, resonances, becoming, and ‘bodily horizons of possibility’ (Ibid., p.132). Affective amplification considers how the virtual playgrounds (c.f. Massumi 2002) of digital games intensifies and gives different embodied affordances to its participation and play. In this research, sexual exploitation is regarded as a ‘pursuit of pleasure to its own end’ with sexuality as ‘practices for their own sake’ (Paasonen 2018, pp.4-9). We refrain from moralising sexuality as hierarchical sets of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ practices

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(Ibid., p.128) so as to open the discussions of kink and play beyond the lenses of psychoanalysis, power dynamics, or ‘traumatic’ and ‘therapeutic’ processes of sexual exploration.

To enrich our understanding of people’s sex and play experiences in gaming, this research explores people’s engagement with prosuming pornography, sexual citizenship (Ibid., p.78), consent and safety, creative negotiations of appetites (Ibid., p.2), plasticity of desires (Ibid., p.95), transformative and queering bodies (pp.150-151), orientations and attunements towards future playscapes and embodied becomings (p.132).

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BIO

Mahli-Ann Butt is a doctoral candidate at the University of Sydney. She is the consigliere for the game studies student journal, *Press Start Journal*, and holds an open seat on the executive board for the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA). Her research focuses on gaming culture, affective labour and diversity.

Fae Daunt is a lecturer in game design and programming at SAE Melbourne during the day, sleep deprived game developer by night. Fae spent 5 years working as an application developer, building project for large firms around Australia, specialising in UX and was more than surprised to see how much of a jump start it gave her in the game industry. For the last 5 years she has been teaching while researching and creating projects with small teams, such as her current project “The Stranger Next Door”, an exploration into real time narrative and meta data.