How Visual Novel Games colonize sexuality to situating sexualities

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

There has been a rise in scholarly interventions in how Queer sexualities have been represented and enacted in Visual Novel Dating Games, such as *Dream Daddy: Dad Dating Simulator (*Game Grumps 2007*)*, *Uncle Neighbor: Uncle Dating Simulator* (GameUncle 2020) and *Validate: Struggling Singles in Your Area* (Veritable Joy Studios 2022). Regarding the representation of queer sexualities and sexual practices in visual novel games, many scholars are concerned if these types of games accurately reflect Queer experiences at all (Ruberg 2015). There is praise for the potential transgressive queer politics embodied in these games, but many are also aware of their shortcomings of artificial representation of queer experiences (Schaufert 2018).

This research project seeks to complicate how Queer Visual Novel dating games engages with topics of queerness as many of these games and discourse about them have not expanded queerness to an intersectional and anti-colonial framework that includes race, ethnicity, and class. Queer Visual Novel games are doing so much more than failing queer representation, rather they are creating worlds devoid of topics of race, gender, and other forms of identity that is antithetical to queerness itself. The two games of *Dream Daddy* and UncleNeighbor are gesturing to a type of game design that could be understood as a universal sexuality where topics of Queerness is detached from its situatedness, burrowing from Donna Haraway's concept of situated knowledges (Haraway 1988). Dream Daddy exemplifies an unsituated and decontextualized queerness, if one can argue it is queer at all! UncleNeighbor embodies the call for more explicit queerness, like the discourse around these games, but does so in a narrow way that falls back into stereotypes centering around the gaymer (Shaw 2017). Finally, the game of *Validate: Struggling Singles in Your Area* potentially embodies the theoretical remedy of embodying situated queerness and how queerness explicitly operates under systems of oppression. Yet the game was only a demo and already garnered a lot of criticism because it did not follow the lead of *Dream Daddy*.

By deploying an intersectional feminist approach that complicates these types of games, we see how many queer visual novel dating games are creating worlds that enact narratives of a post-racial, post-feminist, and even post-queer world. In doing so these games actively perpetuates tenants of white supremacy that is harmful to queer futures despite having novel queer representation and elements. This intersectional feminist approach of drawing out a critically situated sexuality is inspired by Black and Chicana feminist thinkers like Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Anzaldua, and adreinne maree brown.

My intervention in complicating the placement of sexuality and sex in visual novels dating games is done in two major ways. First, analyzing sex and sexuality in visual novel games with close attention to how important social identifies, like race and class have been deployed in the game further complicates these games' regarding queerness. Through a close reading of the text narrative, characters, and images in the game of Dream Daddy and Uncle Neighbor, we can see problematic trends of fetishizing people of color for the colonial gaze resurface despite how games like *Dream Daddy* goes to length to sanitize its content for a broad audience. Because of this, they contribute to a violent white colonial fantasy taking root in these queer worlds. By comparing these games to *Validate*, a game that subverts and is hostile to this white colonial fantasy, we can witness queer worlds that is conversation with marginalized experiences of struggle and celebration.

This leads to the second point that there are indeed "successful" representations of queerness precisely because they reject the universalization of queer representation in the genre of visual novel dating games. This sparks the need to explicitly embody situated sexuality in the game's narrative that is intersectional, messy, imperfect, and antagonistic through its queer representation. An excellent rendering of situating sexuality in a visual novel game is seen in the upcoming game of *Validate: Struggling Singles in Your Area*. Set the release in June 2022 on its Steam page it states that "twelve struggling singles in their twenties navigate through the trying ordeals of capitalism to find meaning in their lives. Includes a hint of love, cosplay, and even mediocre mixtapes in the mix." It is worthy to note that this project was initiated by Queer Black and Brown game makers that center narratives how ones intersecting identities like race, gender, and astrological sign, shapes one's sex, sexuality, and sexual adventures embody the call for Queergaming and challenging hegemony in games (Chang 2017).

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