

A New Home for Porn: Adult Video Games and the Necessity of Independent Platforms

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on adult video games – featuring sexual or pornographic material (Hatfield 2010; Lankoski et al. 2022; Romero 2013) – and their eventual presence on digital independent platforms. It emerges from a PhD chapter exploring the content and cultural responses to the genre, and sex in gaming generally. This paper presents a theoretical argument on independent platforms being necessary to the continued expansion of adult gaming, as alternative avenues potentially negating excessive content restrictions associated with mainstream channels like console and storefront spaces (Romero 2013, 280-283). By conducting a historical analysis into previous discourses around sex in gaming – specifically, in a USA context – it suggests a contradictory culture rejecting adult gaming and pushes diverse sexual content to independent platforms. Using this exploration, I contextually interrogate gaming sites *Nutaku.net* and *Itch.io* as spaces for these games to be published without being subject to selective reviewing, excessive content restrictions, and potentially suppressive practices. Instead, I argue them as offering autonomy to the inclusion of sexual content – both heterosexual and queer sexual inclusion – and contribute them as sites to interrogate cultural contexts surrounding sexual representations and alternative regulatory practices from this mainstream USA context, and current stability of adult gaming following this turbulent history.

Whilst it may be explored elsewhere, this paper explores it within the USA. Discourses around sex and the adult gaming genre can be implied through its industry structures and fairly limited documented histories from academic and journalistic sources, most likely due to adult gaming historically existing in underground or unlicensed spaces. Using these sources as reference points, I engage in the previous responses to adult game content, which seemingly created a turbulent and controversial narrative (Beck 2018; Romero 2013) and vague definitions of sexual material (Clough 2022, 28-30). I argue this as unfortunately generalizing sex in gaming, alienating adult video games from belonging in the wider (USA) games ecosystem and pushed to independent platforms. However, through this narrative, digital “adult-friendly” platforms like *Nutaku.net* and *Itch.io* – and the rise of crowdfunding for self-publishing erotic games (Lankoski and Dymek 2020; Lankoski et al. 2022) – appear to be “open” for erotic content. Here, they seemingly allow games that feature and offer sexual experiences a platform to be published, where previously otherwise denied.

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Arguably, in this USA history, sex is an established part of gaming – from phallic-joysticks (Romero 2013, 10-11) to now influencing design aspects and experiences of video games (Clough 2022; Lauteria and Wysocki 2015; Kaser 2020). The strive for adult content in gaming has not been straightforward, with early examples attracting controversy from harmful inclusions (Mills 2015), calls for stronger regulation and erasure of erotic content from console and storefront platforms (Clough 2022; Lauteria and Wysocki 2015; Romero 2013). These anxieties seemingly continued, with companies like Nintendo and Sony reportedly “distancing” themselves from “harmful” material in their releases and platforms for not “suing” their brand image (Clayman 2007; Lauteria 2015; Sinclair 2007). Uncertainty around sexual representation is further implicitly evident in content classification, with structures like Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) using descriptors as “Mature” or “Adults Only” to describe “suitability” for certain audiences yet are vague definitions not distinguishing differences in content ratings (Clough 2022, 28-30). Despite their purpose, these vague definitions – and prior responses – to adult material has generalized sexual representation, opening it to potential misinterpretations or even be inappropriately filtered from the subjective practices of such systems (Clough 2022, 30-31).

What this suggests is a culture seemingly “unwelcoming” to sex (Krzywinska 2015), preferring to suppress displays of explicit (and queer) sexuality, potentially creating pressures to censor or restrict content for lower classification and appeal to publisher demands, hoping to be distributed by mainstream channels. Yet, this culture is “accepting” of other “harmful” content, with games featuring extreme violence being classed as “Teen” and distributed in these spaces, but presence of sex immediately pushing games to “Mature” or “Adults Only” ratings, potentially requiring content alteration (Clough 2022, 28; Romero 2013, 280-283). More puzzlingly, this culture may be contradictory and inconsistent, with erotic-indie games reportedly censored upon release, but violence and nudity being permitted in AAA titles (Kuhnke 2022). Even beyond, other digital spaces have similarly been unwelcoming to independent pornographic production, with some notably banning sex workers due to external financial pressures (Cole 2018; Lankoski et al. 2022). Various questions emerge from this: how can adult video games – recognised by sexual and stimulating content (Kaser 2020; Romero 2013) – be distributed if there are systems implicitly designed to oppose it? Is this a narrative suggesting a sanitisation of game content or sexual identities, and limiting what experiences video games *can* or *should* offer?

From tracing this complex history, I draw upon the independent sites of *Nutaku.net* and *Itch.io* – and even crowdfunding approaches (Lankoski and Dymek 2020; Lankoski et al. 2022) – as demonstrating this prior alienation and present the current stability of adult gaming. With dedicated spaces, they appear to divert from such restrictive and inconsistent environments. Instead, they offer opportunities to feature sexual content – both heterosexual and queer – to be commercially published without concerns of subjective filtering or rejection. For *Itch.io*, there is greater autonomy to create experiences for desiring audiences through self-publishing, separate from these sexually limiting politics of mainstream platforms. *Nutaku.net* exemplifies a change in distribution marketplaces, purposeful for platforming and developing games with sexual representations and explicit expressions of other sexualities. I conclude that these independent spaces are essential to adult video games, as they appear to offer respite from the restrictive politics within the USA ecosystem and its platforms, allowing sexual content and experiences to be “welcomed” and encouraged. They highlight an expansion of what video games *can* offer, providing platforms for the continued growth of adult gaming. They represent not only the previous cultural – and potentially suppressive – responses to the genre but offer more perspectives to its history and future not only dependent on its turbulent beginnings. Now in a new home, adult video games provide experiences once fleeting but are now here to stay.

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