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Playing at Women and Men: A Discourse Analysis of Gender and Sexuality Performance in an Online Play-by-Post Role-Playing Game

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PLAYING AT WOMEN AND MEN: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF

GENDER AND SEXUALITY PERFORMANCE IN AN ONLINE

PLAY-BY-POST ROLE-PLAYING GAME

By

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B.A. University of Maine at Machias, 2014

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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An Abstract of the Thesis Presented

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Online play-by-post role-playing games mark the discursive intersection between computer-mediated-communication and gaming. The performance of gender and sexuality is an important aspect of online play-by-post role-playing games.

Although play-by-post role-playing games are open world and do not have the same graphical and technological constraints as other forms of gaming, the performances on them are governed by both explicit and implicit rules. Performances of gender and sexuality are also governed by cultural standards. This thesis seeks to describe how players perform gender and sexuality within these boundaries.

This thesis describes the performance of gender and sexuality on the website *Another Day in Paradise*. I located meaningful performances of gender and sexuality within discourse pulled from *Another Day in Paradise*. I then organized these performances into themes. These

themes were further organized into three clusters. Performances of gender and sexuality in romantic interactions include expectations of men and women have of each other while courting. Self-aware gender expectations show characters as aware of how they perform gender and sexuality in traditional ways and draw on popular tropes. Performance of gender and sexuality in non-romantic interactions portrays how gender and sexuality are performed between friends and in parent-child relationships.

Analysis of these thematic clusters portrays traditional, heteronormative, and patriarchal performances of gender and sexuality. Men are shown as having power, not just in romantic relationships but in familial and plutonic relationships as well, while women are shown as subservient to men.

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For Mom, who made my education her priority from an early age; who taught me to type because it would be important one day; who never missed an event; and who taught me that it was okay to have some fun along the way.

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For Kenneth, who has seen the worst of me and who brings out the best in me.

For Eric, who read every draft and soothed every fear.

For Kristin and Nate, whose feedback encouraged me to see new possibilities.

And finally, for everyone who has promised to buy me a drink when this is all over.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE:

WHAT ARE PLAY-BY-POST ROLE-PLAYING GAMES AND WHY EXAMINE

THEM?

The term "role-playing game" has a rich history, and it would be difficult to pin down an exact moment when they became popular. For example, as children the Brontë siblings created fantasy worlds and acted them out together (Shulevitz 2016). This example is one early version of role-playing. The tabletop dice game *Dungeons & Dragons*, created in 1974 and played in small groups in person with a combination of pencil and paper and the spoken word, took role-playing games to the next level by creating sets of formalized rules for players to follow. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, players take on the role of characters in a unique world mediated by a third party "Dungeon Master" or DM. Simon Parkin (2016) explains how, in two different parts of the world, what started as *Dungeons & Dragons* grew into computer mediated role-playing games. According to Parkin (2016) a man named Henk Rogers played *Dungeons & Dragons* as an undergraduate student in Hawaii. When Rogers moved to Tokyo he couldn't find anyone to play with, and so he created a computer game where the computer had the capacity to act as the DM and the player was able to make decisions about his or her character (p. 45). Although Roger's *The Black Onyx* had some success, its successor, *Dragon Quest*, has sold more than 60 million games (Parkin, 2016, p. 45). Meanwhile in Essex, a man named Richard Bartle created the game *MUD1* in 1978, a game originally played on teletype in which every players' actions were viewable on a printout (*MUD* can refer to the game, *MUD*, or can be used as an acronym for Multi User Dungeon, a game genre. *MUD1* is used to distinguish the game *MUD* from Multi User Dungeons as a genre). *MUD1's* contribution to online role-playing games was the concept

of merit-based character levels, a contribution that has spawned and is now evident in nearly every major video game (Parkin 2016, p. 49).

In the case of *The Black Onyx* and *MUD1*, role-playing games have continually progressed in terms of graphics and character ability. However, there is one genre of role-playing game that does not heavily rely on graphics. Play-by-post role-playing games, (PBP RPGs), are similar to *Dungeons & Dragons* and *MUD* in that players are not limited by the graphical capabilities of their computers: in PBP RPGs, the game is constructed by the written word. The earliest forms of play-by-post games were played via paper mail. However, free forum-hosting websites make it possible for anyone with a computer and access to the internet to create their own PBP RPG, and thousands of different games exist. Unlike when play-by-post games were played by mail, forum-hosted PBP RPGs are accessible to multiple people at a time and game play can be much more instantaneous than when people had to rely on mail carriers to deliver the next round of gaming. These games are open world and open concept: without the constraint of graphics, anything can happen and can take place anywhere in that game's world. Unlike *Dungeons & Dragons* or *MUD1*, many of these games do not have fighting components, and while games have administrators to settle disputes, there is rarely need for the dice-rolled decision making that occurs in other role-playing games.

Although online PBP RPGs have existed for well over 20 years, very little has been written about them. Scholars have tended to focus on broader topics such as computer-mediated communication, video games and general role-playing games. PBP RPGs share similarities to, but are unique from, these other subjects. They mark the intersection between computer-mediated communication and gaming, and as such have some of the capacities and limitations of both. Players create characters, and with these characters, they interact with one another.

Through these interactions, they play with each other's discourses. In this thesis I describe ways players play with discourse in a game setting. First, however, I describe play-by-post role-playing games in more detail, examining some of the player expectations in these games, some of the research that has already been done surrounding these games, and why I will specifically focus on the performance of gender and sexuality within these games.

1.1. Player expectations in play-by-post role-playing games

Play-by-post role-playing games are valued for a number of reasons. For example, they can be used for educational purposes, they can be used to develop literacy skills, and they can be used to socialize. At their core, however, they are a genre of game and are primarily focused on entertainment. Participants play by writing from the point of view of characters they create to inhabit a shared fictional world.

There are countless PBP RPGs online. Some games last only a few weeks or a few months, while others last for years. PBP Resource sites such as *Caution To the Wind* (cttw.jcink.net) and *Shine* (shine.jcink.net) help players locate potential games, introduce newcomers to such games, and allow game administrators to advertise their sites to prospective players.

Both *Caution to the Wind* and *Shine* have sections where game advertising can take place. One section is for site advertisements which are sorted by genres and subgenres. For example, on *Caution to the Wind*, there is a section specifically for Science Fiction and Fantasy games. Within that section, games are further sorted as "Harry Potter," meaning any game taking place in the *Harry Potter* universe; "Supernatural," meaning any game with supernatural creatures; "DC/Marvel" meaning any game taking place in the *DC* or *Marvel* universes; "Based on" meaning any science fiction or fantasy game based on any fandom other than *Harry Potter*

or *DC/Marvel*; "Crossovers," meaning any science fiction or fantasy game based on two or more fandoms; and "Other," where all other science fiction and fantasy games would be advertised. Advertisements that are sorted by genre can help players locate games that take place in the worlds they want to play in.

There are factors other than genre which affect which site a player selects. In addition to their advertisement sections, *Caution to the Wind* and *Shine* both also have areas where players who are seeking a new site can write what they are looking for and where game administrators can advertise directly to players. This section helps players who are either looking for an obscure genre, or players who care about game aspects in addition to genre. There are many factors that influence players when choosing a game. For example, some players may enjoy large sites with lots of players, while others may enjoy a more close-knit environment. Some players may be online several times a day and may want a game that has other players keeping a similar pace, while other players may play less frequently and may not want the pressure to write that often.

Regardless of how a player chooses a site, once on the site, all players must have a collective understanding of what the game is and how it works in order to play together. Although PBP RPGs are open-world rather than "on-the-rails" games, meaning that players have the freedom to create their own storylines and their characters are not tightly bound by the game, there are rules, both explicit and implicit, governing game-play. These rules set out expectations for players and help delineate both the capacities and limitations of these game types. Some of these rules are determined by the genre of the game. For example, a "real life" game will likely not allow characters who can do magic. Other rules may be explicitly created by the administrators of the game, who are charged with keeping the game running and making it fun

for everyone. Other rules may be implicit rules in the sense that they are created within a specific

site's culture, but may be implied rather than firmly stated.

1.1.1. Explicit Rules

Explicit rules are rules that are posted on the PBP RPG websites. These are the

guidelines site administrators give their members to follow, and these rules can affect the way

that players interact with each other. Some of the most common explicit rules include CBox

rules, registration rules, character creation rules, graphics rules, in-character rules, and out-of-

character rules.

1.1.1.1. CBOX Rules

Many PBP RPG sites feature Chat-Boxes (CBOXs) where players can interact with each

other out of character. Rules regulating how the chat box can be used are either posted in the

general rules forum or near the chat box itself. Often, these rules include whether or not it is okay

to advertise for other sites in the CBOX; whether or not members are allowed to use explicit

language in the CBOX; and whether or not the same player is allowed to post multiple times in a

row in the CBOX, an act which is known as CBOX spamming.

One of the many challenges site administrators face with website creation is keeping the

website active. Players may join a site for a short period of time before leaving, and keeping

enough players in the game to keep the game going is a major task of administrators. Because the

CBOX is often the first place a guest interacts with established players on a site, CBOX rules can

help shape a guest's perception of the site.

1.1.1.2. Registration Rules

Registration rules refer to regulations about how a player should register his or her

character. Generally the rules regard formatting, such as whether or not the character's full name

should be included and whether it should be in proper capitalization, all caps, or all lower-case font. These rules help the board look uniform and may make the site appear more professional. For example, on the site hogwarts-school.net, a PBP RPG site that has been open since 2000, the registration rules say:

> You have the ability, as you register, to choose your username. We advise that you keep the name appropriate. With this user account you are about to register, you agree to never give your password out to another person except an administrator, for your protection and for validity reasons. You also agree to NEVER use another person's account for any reason. We also HIGHLY recommend you use a complex and unique password for your account, to prevent account theft. [. . .] Please be certain to register your username as your character's first and last name. (Registration Agreement)

In this example, the administrators do not specify whether or not the names should be capitalized or lower-case, which may be a result of having the font specifications built into the board itself. However, they do specify that the player should register with the first and last name of their character, and that the names should be "appropriate," although they leave it up to the player to infer what is appropriate versus inappropriate.

1.1.1.3. Character Creation Rules

Character creation rules regulate the numbers and types of characters that are allowed to be created on any given site. On *Another Day in Paradise*, the rule regarding character creation states, "At our site, we don't have character limits or caps to balance out ratios. We happily allow people to play who they please as they please [. . .] Due to JCINK's [Terms of Service], we do not allow any playbys or characters under the age of eighteen on site. Please keep in mind *some* character permissions are bought from the store, just to keep people active and reward you for

posting" (Steve Rayger, Rules, 2016). One interesting thing to note about this rule is that instead of delineating "only," it delineates "all." By saying "we don't have character limits or caps to balance out ratios," the rule guide is making a reference to the fact that some sites *do* limit the number or characters that can be created or do enforce ratios, such as making one male character for every one female character created.

1.1.1.4. Graphics Rules

Graphics rules regulate the types of graphics that can be used to represent a character. There are several different types of graphics these rules can refer to, including avatars, signatures, and templates. Avatars are pictures on one side--usually the left side--of posts which are supposed to directly represent what the character being portrayed looks like. Signatures are similar to avatars in representing characters, but they come at the end of posts, and while some are images, others are quotes that are supposed to represent the character in some way. On the resource site *Caution to the Wind,* a current trend is to use the signature as a way to give a status update about the player. For example, the player Isabella Swan has a signature that says, "January 21st: School has begun but I'm still around!"

Typically, the same avatar and signature will be attached to every post made by a specific character and can serve as a visual aid to help other players remember who that character is. Sometimes, avatars and signatures will be made to go together, using, for example, images from the same photo shoot in a similar graphic style. These are known as graphic sets.

In addition to avatars, signatures, and graphic sets, there are post templates. Post templates can be used to format posts. They can be as simple as changing the background color, font color, and font of a post, or they can be very complicated, with images hovering over text, scrolls, and song lyrics. Some templates are used to visually represent notes in a notebook or text

messages in phones. Some players will use the same template for their character over and over again, while other players will use different templates in each thread.

There are many types of graphics rules. Rules for avatars and signatures discuss the size of the graphics allowed and the types of people who can be used to represent characters, such as celebrities, models, youtubers, musicians, or real people. Graphics rules may also state how close to a character's age the representing face must be: For example, a site may state that the celebrity must be within 5 years of the age of the character. This rule is referred to by Les (2015) who wrote, "I joined but left [a site] because you had the 5 year rule in place and I made my character within those boundaries and it was denied because you said 'He looks to [sic] old to be that age'."

Rules regarding templates may specify how wide a template is allowed to be, but may also specify how complicated a template is allowed to be. For example, administrators who want their site to be mobile-friendly may discourage or even ban templates where a player has to hover their mouse over an image for the words to appear. On some sites, templates are not allowed at all, and on other sites only a specific set of templates is permitted.

Players who enjoy graphics may feel stifled if their preferred graphics are not allowed on a site. Other players may prefer the faster loading speeds on websites with fewer graphics, or the fact that sites without graphics tend to show up easier on phones. Additionally, players with vision impairments may find that certain types of graphics, such as a post template with a small font or certain colors, hurt their eyes.

1.1.1.5. In-Character Rules

In-character rules discuss the ways characters can interact with one another. One major in-character rule that comes up on most boards is a rule against what is known as godmoding. According to forumroleplay.com (n.d.; a RPG resource site):

Godmoding refers to several types of bad roleplay as an umbrella term. All godmoding attempts to shift the roleplay in the godmoding player's favor. In essence, godmoding is any attempt at giving a roleplaying character an advantage that does not normally exist in-game. The word comes from video games, where godmode includes "features such as invincibility, unlimited ammunition or lives, or similar power boosts" (Godmoding). Forum roleplay players can't use exploits or cheat codes to power-up their characters--but certain roleplay behaviors can achieve virtually similar results.

Godmoding is almost always explicitly against the rules as it makes the game unfair to other players. One example of Godmoding would be if on a real-life site, two characters were fighting and one player wrote that their character became invisible and flew away. Because of the genre of the site, the player would be giving their character super-powers that other characters on the site would not have access to. This is a very obvious example, but Godmoding can be more subtle than that, and some players, especially players new to RPing, may not realize that what they are doing constitutes as Godmoding.

One example of this would be if two players were writing a scene. Player 1 is writing from the point of view of Bill while Player 2 is writing from the point of view of George. If Player 1 wrote "Bill punched George in the face," Player 2 could make a case that Player 1 was Godmoding because Player 1 assumes by writing that sentence that George would not dodge their fist. Player 1 could avoid this claim of Godmoding either by discussing the scene ahead of time with Player 2, where they could both decide ahead of time whether or not Bill's punch would land, or by writing a more open-ended sentence that would allow Player 2 to react, such as, "Bill aimed a punch at George's face." This second sentence would allow Player 2 to decide whether George dodges or is hit.

A third form of Godmoding involves using out-of-character knowledge to control in-character behavior. For example, say Player 1, playing Bill, and Player 2, playing George, are writing a thread together, and Player 1 wrote: "Bill sat on a bench. He was worried about his math test; he didn't think he had done as well as he could have. He heard footsteps and plastered a smile on his face, pretending for all the world to see that he was okay." Player 2 would be Godmoding if they wrote, "George saw Bill on the bench. Bill smiled, but George could see through it. He sat down next to Bill and said, 'Are you worried about your math test?'" Bill's actual actions from the first post do not give George enough information to ask that specific a question. By writing it that way, it is as if George has the ability to read Bill's mind.

Although the first form of Godmoding in the example above, where a player uses abilities that clearly do not fit within the genre, is relatively uncommon, the latter two forms can be quite common and are sometimes hotly debated.

1.1.1.6. Out-of-Character Rules

Out-of-character rules discuss the ways players can interact with one another, whether in the CBox, in private messages, or in out-of-character sections of the board. Out-of-character rules may include regulations about things players may not say to each other. For example, there may be rules against harassment or discrimination. On *Another Day in Paradise*, the rule states: "all we really ask is that people be respectful of each other" (Steve Rayger, Rules, 2016). This is an umbrella rule which may include regulations against harassment or discrimination, but those injunctions are not explicitly stated.

1.1.2. Implicit Rules

Implicit rules of PBP RPGs are rules that are not written out in a site's rules page but may be enforced by the interactions of players. Although these rules are not stated explicitly, there are

websites where players discuss the consequences of breaking some of these implicit rules. *RPGfix*, for example, is an RPG Resource site used mainly by administrators of RPGs to discuss site building and rule enforcement. In the RPG forum of RPGfix, players debate and discuss some of these implicit rules.

1.1.2.1. In-Character Drama

In-character drama relates to things that happen to characters or between characters, typically in a way that is intended to stir up the plot. Sometimes in-character drama happens organically within a thread, while other times it is planned out ahead of time by the players. In a thread on *RPGfix*, players discussed implicit rules regarding in-character drama. Death Kitten (2016) writes:

> There's a fine line behind stirring shit for the character just because and dropping
> challenging situations on them to encourage character development. I've seen people do
> the former to their characters, and end up alienating everyone else in the game because
> they didn't actually think about the consequences of what they were doing and what
> they'd set their character up for. I truly believe nearly any situation that your characters
> come out of alive can be worked through eventually, but some people don't seem to
> actually consider the reactions of other characters and players, and don't bother to
> actually discuss what they were trying for either preemptively or after the fact when
> things blow up in their face. But, yeah, if things go too smooth, it's really no fun.

This comment is an excellent example of an implicit rule regarding in-character drama. There is an expectation when players are writing together that there will be drama of some sort-- otherwise, things would "go too smooth" and there would be nothing to play with. However, there is also a rule being expressed here that players will consider how their actions will affect

the other people they are playing with or risk alienating other players. In a game that relies heavily on interactions between players, this failure can significantly discourage gameplay.

1.1.2.2. Treatment of New Players

In order for a PBP RPG site to persist and flourish, it has to be able to attract new members and keep them on the board. The nature of PBP RPGs is that people join and leave sites regularly. Administrators have to be able to continuously refresh the board with new players or the site will die. One of the things this leads to is implicit rules regarding the way existing players treat new players.

Caution 2.0, an RPG Resource site, has a forum for site requests. This is a place where players can say what they're looking for in a site and administrators can post directed advertisements in an attempt to attract these players to their board. Often, these requests have a line in them regarding how new players are treated. For example, LightwoodBane (2016) wrote in their site request that they were looking for a, "clique free environment. Meaning welcoming to new members and will [roleplay] with them etc and not be ignored etc." New players may try out a couple of different sites at the same time before settling down to one site. On the one hand, this request means that they can be risky to play with because there is no certainty that they will stick around. However, sites that involve new members early on are more likely to keep those members. Korinxyla (2014) discussed this trend: "The community is the biggest part [of joining a new forum]. If people don't talk to newcomers in the cbox/chat/pm and immediately involve them in plots or discussions, they will typically leave." Administrators can not, on their own, control whether or not a new player will feel welcome on their site. Instead, creating a welcoming environment becomes a shared responsibility for all members of a site to draw new members in and keep them there.

1.1.2.3. CBOX Rules

Another area where there may be implicit rules is the CBOX. On the resource site *Caution 2.0*, players discussed reasons they did not join an RPG site. Rixton (2015) writes "i didn't join because the last thing i want to see in the cbox every time i log on is a bunch of people giving status updates about what they're doing around the site. 'oh i just finished m app!' 'just posted a want ad, go check it out!' 'please someone plot with me!' like ???? no. stop begging for attention please." In the same thread, another player, Malone (2015), wrote, "i didn't join because i mentioned that i only play males and then about five people hounded me in the cbox by shoving the want ads in my face with varying numbers of exclamation points after." Although there are rarely explicit rules on site stating that the CBOX should not be used to promote in-character activity, there is clearly an implicit expectation by some players that the CBOX should not be used in this way.

Switchblade (2015) describes a pet peeve regarding both CBOXs and new players:

as an extension of cbox related peeves, it's always so disheartening to creep around a new site and post in the cbox only for the other members to talk over or around you. it's even worse when i'm a member of the site that a guestie is curious about, but the other members choose to continue their conversation rather than greet and/or include the guest.

Thus, another implicit CBox rule refers to the inclusion of new people talking in the CBox. It is interesting to note that several of these implicit CBox rules intersect with rules regarding treatment of new players.

Now that we have an understanding of some of the player expectations of PBP RPGs, let us examine some of the scholarship that already exists regarding PBP RPGs. Examining this scholarship allows us to understand what has been written and where we can go next.

1.2. Scholarship on PBP RPGs

PBP RPGs have received little attention from scholars. A few studies explore PBP RPGs from an education perspective. Although the ways that RPGs are used for educational purposes is interesting, it is only one way to conceptualize these games. In order to gain a deeper understanding of PBP RPGs, I examine how tangential studies can be used to understand PBP RPGs. In particular, I argue that research about video games, computer-mediated communication, and discourse theory can be used to help examine PBP RPGs.

1.2.1. Education Research

The relation of PBP RPGs and education is one area of existing research. Education research, in this case, situates PBP RPGs as a way to engage students in learning. Because what students find interesting changes year to year, educators must also be flexible in what they incorporate in their teaching methods. Some educators have looked at the use of RPGs as a strategy for connecting with their students' interests. As previously explored, RPGs are designed to be entertaining, which may help engage students with challenging material. For example, they can be used to teach students how to argue collaboratively: as students assume different roles around a specific subject, they have to learn how to view situations from another person's point of view which can teach them how to frame their arguments for larger audiences (Doerr-Stevens et al, 2011, p. 33). RPGs have also been used to help students learn refusal techniques in foreign languages (Vilar-Beltrán & Melchor-Cuoto, 2013). One of the few essays specifically examining PBP RPGs over other types of RPGs uses this approach in order to utilize the unique asynchronous timing of posts in PBP RPGs. Asynchronous timing allows students to write on their own timeframes and to play both at school and at home (Doerr-Stevens et al, 2011, p. 34). In this way RPGs are capable of increasing the reach of education by adjusting to students'

schedules. Education research shows how RPGs can be utilized by educators. However, it fails to show how PBP RPGs are already being used.

1.2.2. Video Game Research

A second area of tangential research concerns video games. Looking at these studies can help move towards an understanding of PBP RPGs because they are both games. It is necessary to understand that PBP RPGs are, first and foremost, a form of entertainment. Individuals choose to play role-playing games during their free time. There is no monetary value, and there are plenty of other entertainment choices, but these gamers are interested in role-playing games, some of which have large time commitments. This concern is especially true of online role-playing games in which other players are often counting on players to interact online with some frequency. There are certain PBP RPGs, for example, which require players to log in a minimum of once per day in order to retain their character. If players were not entertained by role-playing games, they would choose not to play them.

Wirth, Ryffel, Von Pape, and Karnowski (2013) identify six main factors which contribute to RPG enjoyment: exploratory behavior, spatial presence, competence, breaks in self-efficacy, suspension and solution, and simulated experiences of life. The first three factors concern how players engage with the game, whereas the latter three factors are temporal and concern how the game story is told. Wirth et al. argue that being good at a game, being able to immerse oneself in the game, and having a large world to explore increases game enjoyment. Additionally, that enjoyment is affected by the mechanisms of the game itself, including the extent to which players believe they are the cause of outcomes in the game, and the quality of the narratives of the game over time (2013, p. 261). There are various types of role-playing games. Typically more task-oriented or "on-the rails" games have fewer places to explore in the world,

whereas games that are more character driven tend to have a much vaster world. PBP RPGs often have no overarching quests, and much of game-play is contingent on characters running into each other in different areas in forum "worlds." As graphics in console-based and online role-playing games become more representational, players may find themselves more immersed in the game. Although play-by-post role-playing games are relatively devoid of graphics, recent trends in PBP RPGs, such as using a picture of a celebrity to represent a character, creating daily outfits for characters on fashion websites and linking them to the game, and using templates to design the written word in different fonts and dynamics may be the PBP RPG version of creating spatial presence.

The factor of competence may mean that players find they enjoy games more the longer they play them, as game competence with all video games tends to grow over time. In RPGs that depend on graphics, players may realize their potential to alter the game based on the way their reactions to adversaries influence how quickly the adversary is taken down. Typically the storylines in these games have solid beginnings, middles, and ends told over the course of the game. PBP RPGs, in contrast, have more fluid narratives that often do not have clear endings, but rather flow into each other. Players can directly influence these narratives, and often directly create and set the pace for the ways these storylines play out.

In addition to the research by Wirth et al, there is plenty of scholarship regarding video games that may be relevant when examining PBP RPGs. One section of scholarship contains video games and morality. Questions of what is and is not moral can become sticky when dealing with virtual worlds. In *A Rape in Cyberspace* Dibbel (1998) describes an instance where a character in an RPG used an in-game voodoo doll to force other characters to perform detailed sexual acts against the players' wills. Researchers are not only concerned with in-game morality,

but also with how the use of RPGs affects players' perceptions of morality outside of the game. A wealth of literature exists examining moral discourse in RPGS. When players discuss their reasoning for making decisions in real-time while playing games, their reasons are made up in equal part of strategic decisions and decisions based on moral reasoning (Krcmar & Cignel, 2016). This suggests that decisions made during gaming is not detached from a player's moral compass. Passmore and Holder (2014) even suggest that using videogames can enhance pro-social behavior by exposing gamers to moral choices in which gamers can choose pro-social options. Although players may not choose the pro-social option every time, the exposure to the moral choices increases their understanding of the complexities of morality. Grizzard et al. (2014) suggest that feeling guilt while playing morally reprehensible characters in video games can increase moral sensitivity outside of the game (pp. 499-500). Although this research examines video games in general, the implications for PBP RPGs are strong: Since most collaborative games require villains, it is important to know that there are pro-social benefits to playing these characters.

Morality, however, does not simply refer to which characters are created or what characters are played. Nakamura (2012) discusses the ways that race, gender, and sexuality affect gaming. According to Nakamura:

> Just like the difficulty level one chooses when playing a game, these advantages [of being a white male] gradually become *invisible* as the player becomes immersed in the game. What does become noticeable are deviations from this norm--when a quest is "too hard" the player may become aware of the difficulty setting that they chose, but otherwise that decision *as* a decision fades into the background. This is, indeed, how privilege works in "real life" (Nakamura, 2012).

Nakamura uses gaming as a metaphor for how privilege works in real life. However, she points out that this metaphor is imperfect: She discusses privilege as something active that one person does to another person, rather than something that just happens to someone. Additionally, she discusses the fact that gaming is seen as such a heteronormatively white masculine activity "women of color gamers who publicly identify with the culture of gaming find themselves shunned, mocked, and generally treated in ways that are far worse than one could find in almost any other social context" (para.12). PBP RPGs, on the other hand, are almost exclusively played by females. This is one gaming avenue women can play without being shunned. In that environment, men may be the ones on the outside. People of color and gay people may still experience being a social outcast in this environment.

In light of the problem of racism and sexism in the gaming community comes the question of how to solve this question. There are two major schools of thought: Either game producers need to become more diverse, or game players need to become more diverse (Nakamura and Wagner 2014). This translates to a question that comes up in PBP RPG communities: Is it the responsibility of site administrators to create an open and inclusive environment, or is it the responsibility of players to foster an open and inclusive community, or is it some combination?

Video game research can be used to understand PBP RPGs as entertainment. However, as most of the video games researched are based more in graphics than PBP RPGs, these research fails to examine discourse as a medium for game-play, which is pivotal in PBP RPGs.

1.2.3. Computer-Mediated Communication Research

Another way to examine PBP RPGs is as computer-mediated communication. Since PBP RPGs are conducted in online forums, looking at online interaction in other websites can help

deepen an understanding of communication in PBP RPGs. Computer-mediated communication comes in many forms, and can include such things as emails, instant messages, social media, chat rooms, and forums. Research into different types of computer-mediated communication may connect with different aspects of PBP RPGs. For example, research on instant messages may help unlock what is occurring in PBP RPG CBOXs, while research on emails can almost directly correlate to private messages that occur between players on PBP RPG sites. However, one thing that separates the gaming aspect of PBP RPGs from other forms of computer-mediated communication is the fact that they represent virtual worlds. Crystal (2006) makes this distinction when discussing MUDs, writing:

> Emails, chatgroups, instant messages, and the Web all have one thing in common: they are all electronic interactions where the subject-matter comprises--apart from the occasional aberration--real things in the real world. [Virtual worlds are] a very different scenario: electronic interaction where the subject-matter is totally imaginary. All communication between participants takes place with reference to the characters, events, and environments of a virtual world. (p. 178)

MUDs have many similarities to PBP RPGs, though the focus on multi-user dungeons tends to be more battle-system oriented than many PBP RPGs and tend to have shorter sections of discourse at a time. However, many of the constraints to studying these forms of interaction remain the same for both games. Crystal (2006) writes that when he was trying to study MUDs, he had a hard time finding logs of interactions, and the logs he did locate tended to be "sanitized in various ways, with presumably sensitive information deleted" (p. 199). This is a constraint which limits the study of PBP RPGs as well: Administrators may choose to delete material that they do not want on their sites.

As mentioned earlier, one of the main tasks of PBP RPG administrators and players is to create a welcoming site for players. However, there are specific challenges inherit with the medium the sites use. Computer-mediated communication can be a source for difficult discourse because of the supposed anonymity online. According to Nakamura (2014), "those who doubt that racism (and its frequent companion, sexism) is still a serious problem or who believe that it is 'personal' rather than pervasive throughout societal institutions need only look to the Internet for proof that this is *not* so" (p. 82). The internet can be rife with racial and sexist slurs. PBP RPGs are, in and of themselves, no exception to this rule. However, because PBP RPGs have administrators who can edit content or ban members, racist, sexist, and homophobic comments tend to be more mediated in PBP RPGs than in other forms of computer-mediated communication, this racism, sexism, and homophobia presents itself in other ways. For example, people often use white models or actors to represent their characters rather than people of color. This concern is so prevalent that there are site requests on *Caution* specifically asking if a person of color character would be accepted in the community. Racism may also be presented by judging where people come from. Batty (2015) wrote of one RPG site, "I didn't join because your site because [sic] you ostracized me for not speaking English as a first language despite my having better English than most of your administrators." This shows a perception of racism against people who are non-Native-English speakers, and, at the level of site administrator, shows a racial power dynamic.

Although there is a wealth of research on computer-mediated communication, the vast majority of it deals with people talking about real-world things. This is different from PBP RPGs, which fall into the category of virtual worlds. Previous research on virtual worlds online focused on MUDs, which take place in real-time. PBP RPGs, on the other hand, have a unique

asynchronous time component which means that players have time to think before they write their reactions. In any given PBP RPG website, players create characters to play with in a particular setting, and write back and forth with each other. However, players are not necessarily creating a cohesive narrative. There is not a definitive beginning, middle, or end to many sites. Sites may be created and dwindle down before being taken offline, while others may exist indefinitely. Although administrators often create plots for characters to relate to, players can have several tangential threads going with multiple players and characters at any given time. Characters may interact once, not interact for a long time, and then interact again, and things that are happening in one thread may or may not effect things happening in another thread. Research on MUDs, which take place in real-time, tend to miss these nuances that occur within PBP RPGs.

1.2.4. Discourse Research

Discourse theory can be used to help unpack PBP RPGs. Although face-to-face interactions take place in real time, while PBP RPGs have asynchronous timing, both involve using discourse to react to what another person--or player--does. According to Gee (2011), "discourse analysis is the study of language at use in the world" (p. 1). Any single PBP RPG site constitutes a world for the characters on that site, with the threads and posts existing as language at use in that world. This characteristic of PBP RPG sites makes discourse analysis an ideal way to get at the language being used on these sites. Crystal (2006) also makes the case for using discourse theory to study online virtual worlds. He compares them to discourse, stating that, "the language of virtual worlds, as of chatgroups in general, is difficult to study, as was informal face-to-face conversation in the early days of linguistic research" (p. 199). One of the reasons online discourse can be difficult to study is that online writers may choose to use what Crystal (2006)

terms "netspeak" (p. 19). Online discourse is written, not spoken, and involves "a type of language displaying features that are unique to the internet" (Crystal 2006, p. 20). This may include such things as emoticons, which are symbols that, when typed, carry meaning, but that cannot be spoken, such as :) standing for a smile. It also includes language specific to online interaction. For example, in PBP RPGs, players may use the word "tag" to denote when it is another player's turn to post. Because of netspeak, online discourse analysis is different from analyzing discourse in face-to-face interactions.

Gee (2011) emphasizes taking this language in context. Context here refers not only to the other things that are happening to characters on the site, but it also can include understanding the context of PBP RPGs in general: Real people have created these characters and are playing with them on the site. This means that although discourse can be found on the site, it is necessarily different from discourse between two people face to face in real life, not only because it is typed rather than spoken, but because it is being used as a medium to foster and promote game play.

So far, we have examined how education research has looked at PBP RPGs, as well as how related research on gaming, computer-mediated communication, and discourse theory can be used to gain a deeper insight on PBP RPGs. Although each of these tangential researches make contributions, because they do not focus specifically on PBP RPGs, they miss important elements of what is going on in PBP RPGs. Gaming research misses the discourse element of PBP RPGs, while research on computer-mediated communication and discourse theory tended to focus specifically on the language without focusing on the game or on gameplay. In my thesis, I look at how discourse is used as an element of gaming. Because this topic is so broad, I have further focused on gender and sexuality in PBP RPGs.

1.3. A Focus on Gender and Sexuality in PBP RPGs

There are a number of interesting aspects of discourse in PBP RPGs. For example, it would be possible to study how age is constituted and performed, how race is constituted and performed, or how fantasy is constituted and performed. Sexuality is an especially interesting possibility because it is something that is recently starting to be explicitly addressed on RPG websites. For example, character applications on some websites are now asking questions about character sexuality and gender, and are including options such as "Gender-non-binary." Players are also beginning to question and push back against websites that require gender disclosure, either of the players or of the characters, or that try to break things too cleanly into heteronormative binaries. For example, in a thread where players discuss current RP trends that they like and dislike, Mal's Left Eye (2015) wrote, "One trend I'm really liking is asking for members [sic] pronouns, either in the app or on the member list or something. It's great to make sure you're not accidentally misgendering people - there's definitely a tendency to default to female pronouns!" Another player described the rising trend in playing with gender and sexuality, writing, "I *love* that gender is becoming a more prominent Thing in the roleplaying scene. I remember a few years ago I wanted to make a transgender character (as a trans person myself) and it got rejected out of hand. Very nice to see it being more prevalent" (Umbra Bitch, 2016). With gender and sexuality becoming a topic of interest within the RPG community, it seems like an ideal place to build the foundation for scholarship on PBP RPGs.

Gender and sexuality play a major role in PBP RPGs because of the types of subjects that come up in PBP RPGs as well as the types of people who play PBP RPGs. For example, unlike with most graphic-based video games, PBP RPGs are almost exclusively played by female players. This gender dominance is not unprecedented, especially as much--though not all--of

what is written in PBP RPG falls into the category of what Joanna Russ (1985) would term "sexual fantasy" (p. 79). Women have been writing sexual fantasies for and with each other for a number of years. Russ discusses fanfiction written by female fans of *Star Trek* for female fans of *Star Trek* which depicts sexual fantasies of the characters Kirk and Spock in relationships with each other. Russ (1985) spoke with writers of some of this fiction to try to learn the motive for women writing sexual fantasies about two male characters:

> One of K/S's best writers says, "The problem is [women who] don't like their own bodies enough, they can't see themselves saving the universe once a week, they can't let their own sexuality out without becoming dependents or victims. So Kirk and Spock do it for them." She notes also, "the sex in Trek fiction (written by women for women) is female sexuality. . . The readers. . . want to be strong, beautiful, complete adults who choose to love without limits, to trust utterly and never have their trust betrayed. . . ." (p. 85).

This description may or may not serve to explain fully why women engage in this type of writing, but it does show that women have been engaging in writing sexual fantasies even outside of PBP RPGs. PBP RPGs are a medium through which fantasies cannot only be written out, but can be played with as a game. As women have already tended to write out fantasies, it makes sense that a disproportionate number of the players of these games would be women.

This disproportionate level of female players leads to an asymmetrical gendering of the characters as well. Many players will write significantly more female characters than male characters, a trend which is so prevalent that many sites have taken to setting explicit rules regarding ratios of male characters to female characters.

1.3.1. The Performative Approach

One ongoing conversation regarding gender and sexuality is the extent to which gender and sexuality are biologically determined versus the extent to which they are socially constructed. Characters in PBP RPGs are given gender and sexuality by the players writing them. There is not a biological component to these characters, which makes them an interesting site to look at the ways in which gender and sexuality are socially constituted and performed. Players are creating character with a certain gender and sexuality, and this helps determine what they write about the character and how they have the character interact with others. Depending on the player, they may drawn upon television tropes, video game tropes, politics, or culture to help determine how they think characters who identify as "men" behave versus how they think characters who identify as "women" behave.

Perhaps the most well-known and oft cited theorist examining sexuality as a performance of identity is Judith Butler (2008), who looks at the intersection of gender and sexuality as a violation of what she terms the "heterosexual contract" (p. 101). Within this view, our society has influenced us to value heterosexuality and heterosexual norms, and we perform both gender and sexuality within this system. Within this performative approach, gender and sexuality as terms are often conflated and can be used interchangeably as both are seen as performed rather than innate. Butler (2008) defines performance in terms of bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds. According to Butler (2008), we are so entrenched in the act or performance of gender that we cannot separate what is natural from what is performed.

Butler (2008) states that gender is "not a stable identity," and this declaration seems to hold true throughout the theoretical positions of sexuality as performed identity. Shaka McGlotten (2007), for example, perceived identity as something that could be *sought*. This idea

of identity implies that it is not something permanent or fixed to the person; rather, it is something a person can reach for and maybe hold onto for a time. According to Butler (2008), gender and sexuality, when understood in this way, is determined not by biology but by a series of "stylized and repetitious acts" (p. 97).

1.3.2. Stylized and Repetitious Acts

Gender has long been seen as a biological binary: that biological aspects of an individual determines its gender and the possibilities for how to perform one's gender. By contrast, Judith Butler (2008) writes that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time--an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (p. 97). For Butler, it is not bodies which create gender; rather, it is the performance of certain behaviors that constitutes and creates an idea of gender. Society has expectations for what it means to be a man or be a woman, and men and women acknowledge these expectations, repurpose them, and act in certain ways because of them. This approach flips the biological explanation on its head. At a very over-simplified level, this theory argues against the assumption that biological aspects determine gender performance. Instead, gender performance constitutes itself in the stylized repetition of acts. According to Butler (2004):

> Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, bearing their imprint, formed within the crucible of social life, the body is only later, and with some uncertainty, that to which I lay claim as my own (p. 21).

Although she acknowledges here that there is a biological component to a human body, she also explains that this biological component does not change the socially constructed nature of sexuality. It is more complicated than that. Bodies are already in society, and cannot be fully separated from society, but they are still stylized by the way that we use them. This may relate to Veblen's concept of "trained incapacity" (Burke, 1954, p. 7): If we live in a culture that ascribes certain traits to certain sexes, and has done so as long as any of us can remember, we may be blind to the ways these are trained traits rather than given traits.

These stylized and repetitious acts begin to be performed from the time a child is first conceived. Prospective fathers may discuss wanting a son to play ball with while mothers may want a daughter they can dress in nice clothing, as if these activities are exclusive to the genders. These script are performed over and over again, even amongst those who educate themselves about gender and sexuality. Cordelia Fine (2010) quotes a pregnancy journal written by educational researcher Kara Smith shortly after she learned the sex of her baby:

> He was a boy. He was 'stronger' now than the child I had known only one minute before. He did not need to be addressed with such light and fluffy language, such as 'little one.'... Thus, I lowered my voice to a deeper octave. It lost its tenderness. The tone in my voice was more articulate and short, whereas, before, the pitch in my voice was high and feminine. I wanted him to be 'strong' and 'athletic,' therefore, I had to speak to him with a stereotypical 'strong,' 'masculine' voice to encourage this 'innate strength' (p. 193).

Before her son was even born, Smith found herself relating to him in a gendered way. She talked to him differently than she had before she knew his gender--and this from a woman who studied gender and education.

Butler (2004) argues that gender is like an historical script being performed over and over again by different actors: Each person can do something a little different with the role, but if they go too far off script they receive backlash from the other performers--in this case, from other people in society. Sometimes, the mere fear of repercussion is enough to keep the script at status quo. One mother, in an attempt to practice a more gender-fluid parenting style, allowed her son to wear a dress to school, but said that she and her son's other mother "told him that it's very likely that some of the kids might laugh at him or tell him the boys don't wear dresses" (Goldberg 2013, p. 53). Even if no other repercussions follow, this exchange between mother and son recreates the script that dresses are inherently feminine.

Nor is Goldberg unaware of this recreation: She explains that she packs her son a change of clothes and tells him that he can wear the dress underneath sweatpants and a sweatshirt if he wants to wear it privately, adding that "even as I suggest these things, hoping he goes for them, I feel cheapened" (Goldberg 2013, p. 53) Wanting the script to change--wanting her son to be free to wear a dress if that's what he wants--is not enough to allow her to throw the script out and create an entirely new one for him. This is because the script is performed for an audience. By allowing her son to wear a dress in school, she is opening him up to the possibility of facing repercussions for breaking away from gender norms, a reality she is aware of:

> In the circle of my son's elementary school, the circle has widened beyond the point
> where I can guarantee his safety. Here, he's one of 800 kids, the eldest of whom are bona
> fide teenagers. Here, I cannot follow him around like a one-woman PR firm, putting a
> positive, protective spin on his outfit. Here, I don't dictate the social codes, cannot pre-
> screen each interaction to ensure that no one taunts him, baits him, spits on him, pisses in
> his locker, beats him up [. . .] I think of fourteen-year-old Lawrence King, wearing high

heels and makeup to his California junior high school, shot to death by a classmate in

February 2008. I think of the "It Gets Better" project, and I don't want my kids to know

that it could get worse, much worse [. . .] I think of Shiloh Jolie-Pitt and Constance

getting to take her girlfriend to the prom and of how much I am rooting for that girl in her

suit and that boy--this boy--in his dress. But that morning in that elementary school

hallway, I desperately want that girl, that boy, to be someone else's kid (Goldberg 2013,

p. 56-7).

One of the important things to understand about this section of narrative is that it refers to real-world examples of times when breaking away from gender norms has resulted in dangerous repercussions. Although there are examples of success in the text, it is the examples of failure that clearly weigh on her mind. Repercussions for breaking away from gender norms not only repudiate the *one*, but they dissuade the *many* from trying. Although this does not completely prevent the recreation of gender norms, it limits the amount of recreation that can be done to any script at any time.

1.3.3. PBP RPGs and Sexuality

Although the characters in PBP RPGs may not understand gender and gender norms, the players who have created them likely do. The performance of gender and sexuality are narrative constraints that players can play with in the context of PBP RPGs, and players can choose whether or not to have their characters follow societal scripts. Some players may choose to have their characters follow the socio-historical scripts closely, while others may choose to have their characters deviate from the scripts. Regardless, gender and sexuality play a role in PBP RPGs.

Players may also face repercussions in game based on whether or not they show acknowledgment of the proper social scripts. In order to play the game, a player must write and

have people respond. A player may fear having their character deviate too far from social norms would make it difficult for other people to play with them, and so they may choose not to deviate. On the other hand, a player may choose to deviate a lot in order to make their character seem interesting enough to draw other players.

1.4. Conclusion

Now that I have examined what PBP RPGs are and how they have been conceptualized up to this point, it is possible to understand some of the work that needs to be done to further our understanding of PBP RPGs. In this thesis I use discourse theory to describe how gender and sexuality--used, in this case, interchangeably--is performed, stylized, and repeated within the context of online PBP RPGs. This analysis draws on and expounds upon some of the research that has already been done on gaming and virtual worlds, grounding this research within the context of PBP RPGs, a context which has not been explored to its fullest extent. In the upcoming chapter, I describe my methods of analysis.

CHAPTER TWO:

RESEARCHING MUNDANE PERFORMANCES

Because there is so little research available on communication in PBP RPGs, I chose to

do a descriptive analysis. A descriptive analysis will allow me to highlight the discourse used to

perform sexuality and the ways that discourse is picked up or rejected in game-play. This

method is a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach to this question. According to

Silverman (2014), an important distinction between qualitative and quantitative research is that

quantitative research begins with a hypothesis which it then tests with data, whereas qualitative

research uses data to form a hypothesis. With regards to my research, I am starting with data

from a PBP RPG site and describing how it is used. This method aligns closely with qualitative

research methods. In order to accomplish this, I had to choose a site to analyze, select discourse

within that site to analyze, and decide how to analyze the discourse so that I could describe it in a

meaningful way.

2.1. Site Selection

In order to describe how sexuality discourse is played with in PBP RPGs, it was first

necessary to have an example of an RPG. Because I am doing a descriptive, qualitative analysis,

I was looking for one good example from which I could develop rich, thick description.

According to Fusch and Ness (2015), the difference between rich data and thick data is that rich

refers to the quality of the data whereas thick refers to the quantity of the data. In order to

achieve data saturation, it is necessary to have a balance between rich and thick data: There must

be numerous yet nuanced examples. By choosing one site, I could ensure that I was not only

collecting a significant quantity of data, but that the data was also rich.

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of PBP RPGs online at any given time. For any one of them, it would be possible to describe how sexuality discourse is performed and played with. As I chose one site to analyze, I narrowed my selection so that I chose a mundane site that was accessible to me and had enough data to work with.

2.1.1. The Mundane

There are two direction I could have gone when choosing a site to work with: I either could have chosen a site that was an extreme example rich with references to sexuality, such as a BDSM site or an LGBT-Only site, or I could have chosen a mundane example. Of the two, I chose mundane. Ihde (2012) writes of using minimalist examples: "in ordinary or mundane life, such experiences can be a vivid example of the most valued type of experience" (p. 29). On a site that emphasizes sexuality, such as a BDSM site or an LGBT-only site, players may be more aware than usual of the roles gender and sexuality play on their characters. This emphasis may also be true with sites set in historical periods or in specific fandoms. Describing a mundane site gives a rich example of how people play with sexuality every day, perhaps without always being conscious of doing so. For this reason, I looked for a site within the "Real Life" genre that took place right around the present day, rather than many years in the future or in the past.

2.1.2. Accessibility

In order to analyze a site, it had to be accessible to me. This meant that, although there are PBP RPG sites in many different languages, I was looking for a site written in English. Additionally, I was looking for a public site where I could access all information without logging in rather than a site that was private to its members. By choosing a public forum that could be accessed by anyone with an internet connection, the information on the board constituted a public space, and using this data did not require IRB approval.

2.1.3. Rich Interaction

In addition to a mundane site that was accessible to me, when choosing a site I was looking for a site with enough interactions to analyze. I looked for a site that had been open for a few months as those are typically sites with more players and characters and higher levels of activity.

With these factors in mind, I chose the site *Another Day in Paradise* to analyze. Although the site has since been repurposed, at the time of analysis *Another Day in Paradise* was a present-day, real-life site set in California with a large corpus of posts available, and I selected it specifically because it was a mundane rather than an exceptional example of a PBP RPG.

2.2. Discourse Selection

At the time this research was conducted, *Another Day in Paradise* was a public forum and therefore did not require IRB approval to research. However, out of respect for the fact that writers likely did not intend for their writing to be analyzed when they wrote it, I posted a thread on the board letting players know that I would be researching posts on the site. I gave players an opportunity to opt in or opt out of having their writing analyzed. Of the fourteen players active on the site when I posted the thread, five players asked to have their writing omitted and nine players chose to allow their writing to be examined. All of the players responded to my thread. This study restricts analysis to the discourse of players who agreed to being studied. Additionally, in the study, the alias of players in the thesis matches the alias they used on the site; however, at the request of some players, some character names have been changed.

The nature of PBP RPGs is ever-changing. For example, in the time since I gathered discourse from *Another Day in Paradise*, the site's genre has changed and it has become a futuristic, post-apocalyptic site. To ensure that all of the discourse I was looking at came from

approximately the same period in the site's history, I looked exclusively at discourse that was active rather than archived when I entered the site. However, to also ensure that the discourse was naturally-occurring rather than sanitized, I only looked at discourse that had been written prior to when I wrote the thread telling players that I would be analyzing the discourse. The posts were written between June 9, 2016 and July 24, 2016. Once I removed the players who asked to be excluded, this equated to over 300 single-spaced pages of discourse. From this available discourse, I further narrowed my focus based on the type of thread. *Another Day in Paradise* had three main types of threads: character applications, out-of-character threads, and in-character threads.

2.2.1. Character Applications

Character applications are the first stop for new players to create their characters and let other players know about them. For example, the character application for Andrew Ivory, played by Jessie, looks like this:

FIRST LAST:

info here

name: andrew ivory

nickname: andy, drew

hometown: santa cruz

status: unhappily married and having an affair

andrew maximus ivory was born and raised in santa cruz. when your mother is a world famous singer and your father is the president of a major construction company you have to keep up appearances. his childhood was not the most normal especially since most of it he was raised by nannies since his parents were gone most of the time. even when his

parents were home they were strict with their only child. they monitored everything he watched and everything he did. he never got to travel with his mother around the world because she wanted him to have an education.

his parents wanted him to be the perfect son, the star pupil, since they had a reputation to maintain. he was kind of overshadowed by his parents' success, but they played the perfect happy family in front of the cameras. he excelled in school mainly due to his parents pushing him into his studies. his parents even chose his friends for him, which he only had one best friend growing up. little did his parents know that he had a huge crush on his best friend which in time would turn into something more.

not only did his parents choose his friends, but they also chose who he dated much to his dismay. he never dated one person for long, probably because he was never interested in them. upon discovering he had a crush on his best friend, he realized he was gay. he never told his parents though since he didn't think his parents would react well. there was only one person he told and that was his best friend.

his father got him a job at the construction company's office as a receptionist when he was eighteen. he wasn't that happy about it, but it was a job and it gave him something to do. something else that kind of twisted his world upside down was his parents put him through an arranged marriage when he was nineteen. he and his new wife spent their honeymoon in paris, france which happened to be ten days. they didn't have sex though because he couldn't get into it. the only time he could ever have sex with his wife was if he was thinking about his best friend. he only thought of continuing the family line, but nothing else with her really although he does try to be the best loving husband he can be. when she lost their baby of course he was devastated, but that did not mean he had

feelings for her or loved her. he was trying to not ruin his family's reputation. he plays the lovey dovey husband when he's around his parents though.

when he was twenty he and his best friend snuck into a club with a fake id on hand. that was where he got really drunk and admitted his true feelings to his best friend and then they slept together and he ended up waking up in his best friend's bed. that was when his affair, now secret boyfriend, started and it continues to this day. the only time he is truly happy is with his boyfriend.

friends

growing up he didn't have many friends. the only friends he had growing up had to be people who wouldn't get him in trouble, who his parents chose. he's now starting to make his own friends. once you become a friend of his, he remains loyal to you until you do something to lose his trust then he'll cut you out. he gets really affectionate with his friends. he's the type of friend who's a good listener and will listen to someone venting if they really need it. he will be the shoulder to cry on if one of his friends needs it.

enemies

like everyone, he has his breaking point. he will defend his friends so don't say anything bad about them. he tries not to get into fights, but if he has to he will. if you lose his trust, he'll completely cut you out of his life.

lovers

he's had some ex-girlfriends in the past, but they never lasted long. right now he's locked in the love department. he is in an arranged marriage, but he isn't in love with her at all. he's also having an affair with his best friend turned secret boyfriend.

Character applications are often quite long as they contain information about the character's appearance, personality, and history, as well as suggestions for potential plots. *Another Day in Paradise* had shipper applications. The term "shipper" means that the applications not only tell about the characters' personality and history but also encourage plotting between players. Other players can reply to applications suggesting plots before the players start writing together. For example, in reply to Jessie's character, the player Bobbie replied with her character, Amber Barton:

> Hey hey! Amber has added Andrew to her phone for the sole purpose of bothering him now. Which means she likes him enough to keep talking to him. And if he let her, she'd bother him in person, too. She swears she only annoys people she likes. Also, she will forever call him "Andrew Andrew Ivory". Or at least "Andrew Andrew" because she's a brat like that. She'll probably treat him the way she would treat a brother.

Although character applications can be quite interesting and contain assumptions regarding gender and sexuality, I ultimately chose to exclude character applications from my analysis. I am interested in the way that sexuality discourse is used in game-play, and while sexuality discourse certainly occurs within the confines of application threads, the game-play aspect did not seem as rich in character applications as it was in in-character threads.

2.2.2. Out-of-character Threads

Out-of-character threads refer to any posted interactions that occur between two or more players on the board rather than between two or more characters. For example, players may post memes for each others' enjoyment, or may write about their personal lives. These threads are essentially online chatgroups and bulletin boards, both of which have been studied before. For this reason, I also chose to exclude out-of-character threads from my analysis.

2.2.3. In-character Threads

In-character threads refer to any posted interactions that occur between characters on the board. These posted interactions are separated into threads, which are interactions that take place in a specific time and place in the virtual world. Threads can range anywhere from one post to several posts long, and each post can range from a few sentences to several paragraphs long depending on the content. A post that is supposed to represent a text message may be quite short, for example, while posts that are supposed to depict face-to-face interactions between characters may be longer.

In my analysis, I specifically examined in-character threads that were at least two posts long. Because I am examining discourse, I examined threads that depicted interactions between two or more characters, rather than threads that had no replies. This equates to just over 100 pages of single-spaced discourse.

In my analysis, I display posts with the name of the character in bold, and the player's name in parenthesis next to it. Multiple posts within the same thread will be stacked one on top of the other, as they appear on the site, with the name of the thread and the thread's location following, as in the example below:

Katrina Parker (Anya): hey.. you're Harley right? Dominic's wife?

This is Katrina.

Harley King (Katniss): Well i would be asking who is asking about me and the fact I'm dom's wife! Okay hi did I happen to take something from you? Or how don you know Dom I mean I love meeting his friends that are girls. ("Best Intentions"; Texts)

In this example, Anya and Katniss are two players writing from the points of view of their characters Katrina Parker and Harley King, respectively. This thread is titled "Best Intentions"

and was located in the Texts forum on *Another Day in Paradise.* Due to the nature of online discourse, there will be spelling and grammar mistakes within the context of the posts. These are intentionally retained, though I will not write [sic] in every instance as it would distract from the content.

2.3. Doing Discourse Analysis

After selecting the for analysis, my next step was to read and re-read all of it. I read looking for instances where an assumption about gender or sexuality was stated by one player and then was picked up by another character and either reiterated or rejected. This focus draws on Butler's idea of stylized repetitions of acts: I specifically looked for instances where acts were being repeated or rejected. At first, I simply separated these instances from the text surrounding them so that I could look at them. According to Ihde (2012) it is important to "horizontalize or equalize all immediate phenomena. Negatively put, do not assume an initial hierarchy of 'realities'" (p. 20). When I first separated the data, I did not attempt to describe the instances: I simply noticed them and separated them. After I horizontalized the data in this way, I reread my instances and began looking for themes.

Butler's (2008) concept of performance looks at the way things are said--or performed-- and why they are performed in that way rather than other ways they could be performed. Understanding that there are multiple ways to phrase things and to position the narrator is pivotal in analyzing how sexuality is performed and played with in PBP RPGs. Alongside Butler, I used Gee's (2014) tools for discourse analysis in order to examine PBP RPGs. Gee's tools are useful over other types of analysis because they concentrate on the way that discourse is used between people in context using four major categories: language and context; saying, doing, and deigning; building things in the world; and theoretical tools. Although Gee focuses on

transcribed discourse between people and I will be looking at co-written threads in a game, the focus he has on the way that language, grammar, and context work together is relevant in analyzing the threads. This approach makes more sense for my research question than, for example, a structural analysis because I am not looking at how PBP RPGs are structured. PBP RPGs have a specific structure which is determined in large by the media type itself. What I am interested in is how players play within that predetermined structure in order to create meaning.

Although there are many possible units of analysis with which to examine PBP RPGs, I looked at what discourse regarding sexuality was picked up and reiterated and what discourse was ignored or rejected. This ties together with Butler's (2008) concept that there are certain scripts that are repeated and performed over and over again. One example comes from a thread titled "A Night Out":

> **Andrew Ivory (Jessie):** It had been too long since he and his wife had been out in public together [. . .] They had been married for about three years and he still wasn't comfortable with their marriage[. . .]
>
> **Holland Ivory (Bobbie):** It was funny how, after three years of marriage, every date still felt like something real[. . .] ("A Night Out"; Fine Dining).

This interaction is an example of the type of discourse I analyzed. In this excerpt, the players are playing with the concept of married life between a man and a woman. One repetition I pick up from this is that the length of their marriage is stated by Jessie and then is repeated by Bobbie as one of the ties holding this thread together. However, the way the two characters feel about those three years seems very different: Andrew is uncomfortable, while to Holland "every date still feels like something real." In this example, Jessie and Bobbie are playing with the concept of a

three-year marriage between a man and a woman, and are coming to different decisions as to what that marriage feels like.

My first step was to simply notice that this repetition was occurring. Next, I reread it along with other repetitions and rejections and looked for a theme. Was this repetition of the length of their marriage simply a polite repetition by Bobbie to show Jessie she was paying attention to what had been written before, or was there something else happening? This question could not be answered until after I saw other instances and noticed patterns in the interactions.

Once I noticed patterns in the interactions and located themes, I organized the themes, differentiating between themes that occurred mainly in romantic interactions, themes in which the players explicitly drew upon gender and sexuality, and themes that occurred mainly in non-romantic interactions. For each theme I selected an examplar section of threads to depict the theme for analysis. There may have been many examples of a theme, or only a few, but I chose what seemed like the best example.

In my analysis, I describe each of the themes that I located in the discourse. Afterwards, I reflect on and discuss this analysis. Drawing upon previous scholarship and my analysis, I describe what is now known about discourse in PBP RPGs that was previously unknown, and I discuss further scholarship that can be done.

CHAPTER THREE:

A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF INTERACTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Upon examining the data from *Another Day in Paradise,* I located themes regarding the performance of gender and sexuality in online play-by-post role-playing games. Looking at these themes, both individually and collectively, provides a basis to understand how players perform gender and sexuality within the context of PBP RPGs. Gender and sexuality contribute to game play and discourse among players. In this chapter I analyze and describe the performance of gender and sexuality in romantic interactions, the self-aware performance of gender and sexuality, and the performance of gender and sexuality in non-romantic interactions.

3.1. Performance of Gender and Sexuality in Romantic Interactions

Romantic interactions on *Another Day in Paradise* range from single moments of flirtation to established long-term relationships. Regardless of how long the relationship has been occurring, however, threads involving romantic interactions are distinct from other threads. The sexuality of characters is often made explicit within these threads, if for no other reason than because the genders of the characters are explicitly stated. The roles characters take in these relationships, their interactions with each other, and their interactions with outside parties regarding the relationship are all part of how gender and sexuality is performed within romantic interactions. It is important to keep in mind that the performance of characters' gender is separate from the gender of the players themselves. Often, player genders are not made explicit, and for the purpose of this analysis I will be looking specifically at the performance of gender and sexuality as constituted through character disourse, not the performance of gender and sexuality of the players themselves.

3.1.1. I Dig Guys, Not Girls

Sexuality is a term which can be used to mean sexual identity. The term sexual identity, however, brings to mind connotations of identifying with sexuality. Making sexuality an explicit part of one's identity is different from having a sexual preference. Whether or not sexuality should be part of one's identity, and whether or not this sexual identity should be openly expressed, is in contention on *Another Day in Paradise.* This tension leads to the theme "I dig guys, not girls," which is exemplified in a thread between Kyle Geline (Tia) and Grayson Hall (Lopez). In the thread, the two are interacting for the first time and have the following exchange:

> **Kyle Geline (Tia):** Dig guys, not chicks. Have about two female friends who I do considered those I dig of but nothing else than of that.
>
> **Grayson Hall (Lopez):** I don't really spread it around but hey, I don't know you, and now you've played the sexuality card already, so I'm bi, but people usually think that because I do ballet I'm gay so I steer away from that. Also, ballerinas. How could I be gay when I'm around girls in leotards most of the time
>
> **Kyle Geline (Tia):** well, I am in the same strip club as women so I get asked if I am straight. I tell them, hell fucking no. But, I do have a friend who doesn't give a fuck of what I am. She still asks for a lap dance. LOL. ("Holing out for a Hero;" Texts)

In this thread, the character Kyle explicitly states his sexual preference without being asked. Although the character, Grayson, responds in kind, he also states "I don't really spread it around," and refers to Kyle's expression as playing "the sexuality card," both of which are small admonishments against stating sexuality so explicitly so early in their interaction. Thus, while both characters state their sexual preferences, Grayson's character seems to reject that the conversation should have gone in that direction.

Within this interaction, there is an implicit heteronormative assumption, which Grayson points out when he refers to Kyle playing the "sexuality card." The assumption is that if Kyle were straight, he would not feel the need to state his sexuality so explicitly.

3.1.2. Performance of Sexual Fantasies

One way in which PBP RPG threads are used is as a means to play out common sexual fantasies. For example, one thread depicts a young woman, Delaney Novak (Laura) having a small house fire and a fireman, Davis Reeve (Allie), coming to her rescue. In the thread, the two characters openly flirt with one another. The character, Davis Reeve (Allie) thinks about Delany, writing that "she was pretty, sexy even, though she looked a little young to own a beach house" while the character Delaney Novak (Laura) is portrayed as fantasizing about them: "she is day dreaming about a better meeting, maybe a club, they could drink, dance (she bets he's a great dancer) and they would come back to her place" ("Just Like Fire;" Houses).

In this example, the thread between the two characters seems created specifically with the intention of perpetuating a common heterosexual sexual fantasy: Specifically, the fantasy of a firefighter coming to the aid of a pretty young rich female and the two of them falling for each other. The interaction is focused on physicality, such as the appearances of the two characters and their physical gestures, which also serves to delineate this as sexual fantasy rather than as a depiction, for example, of two people falling in love, which might have more emotional language rather than physical and sensual language.

3.1.3. Even Though He Didn't Say It, He Loved Her

One common television trope is of the terse and uncommunicative man falling in love. This trope is reproduced on *Another Day in Paradise*, and there relationships between men and women in which men are depicted as being emotionally distant:

Dominic King (Laura): he was the one his mom relied on and even now that's just how his mindset work. granted he's had bea for the last thirteen and now Harley, he never has been big on getting close to many people and therefore he had become quite the master of doing things on his own, saying he was ok [. . .]

he was realizing (hopefully not too late) he was falling for her, it was scary and this whole damn relationship was done backwards. its not like he hated her when he said yes, he knew he had feelings for her, there was something more than just the physical (though that was great) but there was more there, he just didn't quite know how to deal with that, he'd never felt that way before. he had been the guy who kept people at a distance, he didn't want to be hurt again, he didn't want to feel vulnerable but then Harley came and changed all that. he didn't have to say yes, he didn't have to go through with the marriage (he was not drunk) but he wasn't going to leave, was it love ? that was such a scary word, he only really had told two people that his mother and Bea (as his best friend) so it was hard for him to say.

Harley King (Katniss): Dom and from the tone of his voice that he is worried and scared something happen to her but something else was hearing him called her his wife it is rare to hear him calling her that it be with some friends and work also family.! While holding her breath wondering he be happy that she is fine and waiting for someone to sign her out and make sure she eat or sleep but the only thing she sleep will be in Dom arms.

Beatrice Moore (Allie): "Don't worry, Dom will be here. He knows you love him, he'll be here soon." she continued with her comforting, knowing that even though Dom didn't say it, he loved Harley. Dom had told Bea he loved her but on so few occasions. But Bea knew Dom's heart so she heard it even when he didn't say it. That was just the way it had

be with Dom. Harley had to realize that when he was being kind to her, when he thanked her sincerely, when he was being protective of her, it was his way of saying he loved her.

[. . .]

As much as the man tried to bury his emotions, he was driven by them more then he knew.

Dominic King (Laura): yes he had made the dumb move, he had freaked out and lied about hayden, not just that but gave some stupid ass lie saying he had been at work, he knew it was stupid the moment he said it. Harley had been pissed, he knew she had every right to be but that first night? that was the night she had stayed at Bea's, he was a mess, he didn't even have the energy to get a drink, he felt like he didn't deserve that.

[. . .]

was it too late? he was realizing he was head over heels in love with her, he wouldn't quite say it was denial, maybe a little but he hadn't allowed himself to feel it , he knew he had feelings but he was terrified. he can have a gun pointed at his head, he can be the driver in a high speed police chase, he can do a whole list of stupid shit but dealing with emotions ? no, he doesn't , he is better at running but he wasn't, he wasn't going to run, not this time, this was real ("How to Save a Life;" Santa Cruz Memorial Hospital)

This theme incorporates different gender assumptions. The first assumption is that men are out of touch with their emotions, while women are not only in touch with their own emotions but with the emotions of men close to them. Dominic is depicted as only just realizing his love for Harley, while Beatrice seems to already know Dominic is in love with Harley, stating that "Bea knew Dom's heart." This trope perpetuates a common gender assumption: It says that emotions, other than anger, are for women rather than men. Additionally, it draws on a romantic trope that

women should be able to know what men want even if the men don not express it or even know those desires themselves.

This interaction also indicates that women should assume that men will not communicate with them on an emotional level. Beatrice's character says that, "Harley had to realize that when he was being kind to her, when he thanked her sincerely, when he was being protective of her, it was his way of saying he loved her." This statement assumes that Harley should accept never hearing from her husband that he loves her, and that she should instead read into his intentions by his actions. The assumption here is that even if Harley is the type of woman who needs to hear statements of love, she should give up that need for the sake of her husband, who is portrayed as incapable of expressing himself.

It is also interesting to note that this theme ties closely with the theme of men as protective. Beatrice equates Dominic protecting Harley as a sign that he loves her. She sees the two things as intrinsically tied to one another.

3.1.4. He Was Going to Make This Night for Her

In interactions regarding dates and dating, the dates themselves are presented as gifts given from men to women. This theme occurs in heterosexual romantic threads. One example comes from a thread between the character Nate Grey, played by Nate, and the character Kacey Harper, played by Jackie, which included the following:

Nate Grey (Nate): Nate had been planning on treating Kacey to a special night that she deserves [. . .] he turned to face Kacey. "I know this isn't much but I promise I will make this weekend special for you."

Kacey Harper (Jackie): Once in their room she grinned at Nate it was the most beautiful place she had ever stayed in. "I love it nate. This is beautiful and the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me."

Nate Grey (Nate): "That is good to hear, I was worried you would be disappointed with the accommodation. You deserve to be treated like a princess every once in a while."

("date weekend;" Elsewhere).

In this thread, Nate, a male character, and Kacey, a female character, have taken a trip together for a weekend. It can be presumed from the discourse that Nate's character is the one who planned the weekend accommodations for his girlfriend Kacey. She did not plan it, nor did they decide together on the accommodations: He specifically was the one to plan the trip. He says that he wants to make the weekend special *for Kacey*. This is a key phrase: He doesn't want to make it special for the both of them, and he supposedly wasn't considering his own preferences when making the accommodations. Instead, it is considered a form of pampering for the female in the relationship. The character Kacey repeats this, stating that it is "the sweetest thing anyone has ever done *for me*." Thus, their date weekend is treated as a gift that the male character, Nate, is giving to the female character, Kacey. It is not considered a mutually beneficial arrangement; rather, it is considered something that he is doing specifically for her.

Nate's character also says to Kacey that he is treating her "like a princess." This comment calls to mind the concept of medieval chivalry. However, it also calls to mind other princess tropes, such as the trope of the princess sitting in a tower while she waits for a man to rescue her. This context describes how the idea of treating a woman like a princess relates to the idea that women do not and should not play an active role in their relationships and dates with men.

This theme draws upon assumptions about the role of men and women in a heterosexual relationship. It shows men making the first move in these relationships and taking a more active role in the relationship while women are expected to show gratitude for being pampered with dates. The reversal of this, with women planning dates and treating it like a gift for men, did not occur in the data set I analyzed, and in the majority of threads using this theme, both the male character and the female character embraced the theme. The closest example of discourse that challenges this theme was in a thread between Andrew Ivory and Holland Ivory:

> **Andrew Ivory (Jessie):** He was going to make this night for her.
>
> **Holland Ivory (Bobbie):** it took her approximately three seconds to realize that he was making a solid effort to ensure that this night was what she wanted it to be [. . .]
>
> She wasn't the only one participating in this date. He might as well enjoy it as much as possible, too. ("A Night Out;" Fine Dining)

In this example, the male character, Andrew, is still the one to make the first move. He is the one who plans and suggests the date. However, the female character Holland Ivory rejects the idea that the date is exclusively for her, stating that "he might as well enjoy it as much as possible, too." Although the phrase "as much as possible" could be interpreted to mean that he, as a man, is not likely to enjoy it as much as she would, in this particular instance it probably has more to do with the characters themselves: Andrew and Holland are in an arranged, loveless marriage, and the whole of the thread depicts the two of them trying to make the best of a situation that neither of them are quite happy with. Thus, in this case "as much as possible" likely refers more to the context of the thread as a whole than to how Holland feels about Andrew's role in the date, and the rest of the sentiment that Andrew and Holland should both enjoy it can hold some weight. Still, while Holland's character partially rejects the idea of dates being a gift specifically

for the woman, Andrew's character still plays to the theme, and is still the first one to make a move in the relationship.

3.1.5. He Referred To His Friends As Girlfriends

One theme involves extramarital affairs. Specifically, the theme constructs heterosexual relationships in which the husband cheats on his wife. The reversal of this, with the wife cheating on her husband, is not depicted in the data, and, in fact, women are shown to have an aversion to cheating on their husbands:

Creed Evans (Allie): They had a bit of a steamy affair going on. One that had involved many passionate encounters. And yet, she wasn't under his spell like other girls. He often referred to his affairs as his girlfriends, because most of them were under the impression that they were in fact dating Creed. Thea had never been fooled into believing his slick words, she had never fallen victim to the hope that he might change and leave his wife for her. That made her one of his favorites

Thea Carter (Bobbie): Creed. He was always a good time, and generally out for fun that met her standards without any real expectations in return. But that sort of fun... Well, it seemed to contradict the thin silver band on her left ring finger. It wasn't something Thea was used to having to think about. In the past, she'd always prided herself on the fact that she could do whatever she wanted to with whoever she wished and it wouldn't bother anyone at all because there was never a commitment. That ring said differently, though. However accidental her marriage to Mike might have been, it still existed, and she wasn't quite sure how to cope with it yet. ("Addicted;" Addictions Nightclub).

In this scenario the male character, Creed, is sleeping with multiple women whom he consciously refers to as girlfriends because "most of them were under the impression that they

were [. . .] dating" him. Not only does he cheat on his wife, but he consciously lies to the women he is cheating with to make them feel he is committed to them. This discourse contrasts with Thea's report that she "prided herself on the fact that she could do whatever she wanted to with whoever she wished and it wouldn't bother anyone at all because there was never a commitment." In this case, although both Creed and Thea are characterized as promiscuous, Creed, the male, is depicted it not only promiscuous but also dishonest and emotionally manipulative, whereas Thea makes a point of not committing to men because she does not want to be dishonest with them.

Within this theme, not only is the man seen as intentionally cheating on women, but women are assumed to be easily manipulated into believing men are emotionally honest. Creed says Thea is "one of his favorites" specifically because she accepts his promiscuity and that is seen as different for him. This seems to indicate that Creed would be happier if he didn't have to lie to women, but that he feels like he must emotionally manipulate them in order to continue to enjoy his promiscuity, which he is not willing to give up.

Additionally, while Creed and Thea are both married in this thread, for Creed it is taken as given that he would have an affair with a woman who is not his wife. Thea, on the other hand, states that sleeping with Creed would "contradict the thin silver band on her left ring finger." She sees her commitment to her husband as in opposition to relations with other men, whereas Creed does not see his commitment to his wife as opposing his relations with other women.

3.1.5.1. He May Be a Lot of Things, But He's Not a Cheater

In opposition to the Men Cheat, Women Don't theme is the Real Men Don't Cheat theme, which is most noticeably depicted in a thread between Dominic King and Beatrice Moore:

Beatrice Moore (Allie): They had always talked about going to Sirens, mostly joking but Bea was honestly looking forward to it. And so it had been decided that they would get a nice dinner and, with Harley's blessing hopefully, would hit up Sirens afterwards

Dominic King (Laura): before he would have been for the strip club but now he's married and he maybe a lot of things but a cheater? he was not.

[. . .]

he could have been that guy who played the field, who used his step father's name and reputation to his advantage to get who he wanted , no he wasn't ever doing that because despite the fact (pre Harley) he had issues with settling down he didn't cheat and he didn't lie and manipulate someone to sleep with him. he sits at the end of the bed, you know if Harley gets pissed you owe me and i am not getting the couch.

Beatrice Moore (Allie): "If you want to go see the strippers, you'll put on the shirt." she stated bluntly, figuring there was no way he could pass up the opportunity to see the strippers. Bea knew Dom was a good man, a faithful man, he always had been loyal. But to her strippers weren't cheating, because they were sort of like porn stars. It was all fake. Their affection was paid for and you weren't even allowed to touch them, what was there to be jealous of? Of course Bea hadn't wanted to be the one to ask Harley's permission so she had left that up to Dom.

[. . .]

"Fine, if she gets mad you can have my bed. But if you don't hurry up the strippers will all be in their fifties and breaking their hips by the time we get there!" she whined again playfully with a laugh.

In this example, the male character Dominic makes a point of not wanting to cheat on his wife, and his friend Beatrice reiterates that she does not see Dominic as a man who would cheat. However, even in this thread, they both allude to the fact that Dominic is a deviation from the kind of man who would cheat on his wife easily.

Although Dominic is seen in the above scenario as a good man who would not cheat on his wife, both Dominic and Beatrice allude to the fact that his wife, Harley, may not appreciate his going to a strip club. Unlike in the previous theme, they do consider Harley's feelings on the matter. However, they do not actually speak with Harley about it, and the assumption inherent in the statement that *if* Harley is mad Dominic will take Beatrice's bed is that the two of them intend to go to the strip club regardless of how Harley feels about it. Thus even as Dominic is depicted as a good, faithful guy, it is simultaneously depicted that his sexual desires should be fulfilled even if doing so upset his wife. In this case, the assumption is that a good man does not have to consider his wife's feelings as equal to his own: It is enough that he considers her feelings at all.

3.1.6. Trust Means Not Asking Questions

On a site that emphasizes romantic interactions between characters, trust is a subject that is bound to come up. For example, trust comes up in conjunction with threads about cheating, and this theme is closely related to the theme about men cheating on women. However, the Trust Means Not Asking Questions theme is unusual in that it positions the word trust as meaning the same thing as blind faith:

Katrina Parker (Anya): he never mentioned me?

Harley King (Katniss): Not really if your like and ex we really don't talk about the ex's at all. It's like a bad karma.

Katrina Parker (Anya): well I'm kind of an ex but it's a little more than that.. you really should talk to him

Harley King (Katniss): and what you mean by more [. . .] you going to talk I'm not asking him any questions unless it's seriously

Katrina Parker (Anya): I think it's kind of interesting that you didn't know about me.

Harley King (Katniss): Not really it should be interesting about it I don't talk my exs

Katrina Parker (Anya): hate to break it to you darling, but he's kept a big secret from you.

Harley King (Katniss): Oh sweetheart he doesn't need to tell me things about we have trust and we don't lie to each other ("Best Intentions;" Texts)

This interaction is interesting because it shows two very different understandings of what it means to be in a committed relationship. The character Katrina seems to be arguing that relationships are built on communication, arguing that Harley ought to have a discussion with her husband about Katrina. Harley, on the other hand, rejects this idea, saying that she will only talk to her husband about something "serious," and indicates that she does not need to communicate with her husband because she trusts him. This interaction is based on the tension between these two understandings of relationships.

One interesting aspect of this interaction is that the character Harley does ask questions and expect answers from Katrina. Although this is her first time interacting with Katrina, she asks her for answers, choosing to gain information from her first rather than from the husband that she is simultaneously claiming to trust. This discourse expectation may tie into the theme that men are bad at expressing their emotions. Rather than asking her husband to discuss his

emotions with her, Harley finds it easier to discuss the matter with a stranger because at least she is a woman.

3.1.7. Relax, I Don't Want Your Husband

Jealousy is explored in narrative interactions, but it is not given equal treatment between men and women. Instead, jealously is mainly depicted as something occurring between women about men. This construction relates to the theme that men cheat but women don't. Women in this theme are shown as a threat to each other:

> **Harley King (Katniss):** I'm not threaten by you he loves me I would notice if something wrong.
>
> [. . .]Well I knew he was spending time with someone [. . .]but I know it's not with a mother girl or he knows for a fact what I will do.
>
> **Harley King (Katniss):** You know what it sounds to me your jealous??
>
> **Katrina Parker (Anya):** please enlighten me about what there is to be jealous about? [. . .]
>
> And you really don't have to explain anything to me. Relax I don't want your husband. ("Best Intentions;" Texts).

In this example, both women accuse the other in the party of being jealous. Harley does so outright, while Katrina's statement of "I don't want your husband" indicates that she believes Harley to either be jealous of her or threatened by her. This theme is interesting because not only does it seem to be specific to women, but also because the implication seems to be that if Katrina *did* want her husband, Harley would have something to worry about. This reinforces the concept of men as promiscuous without regard to their husbands. Although Harley claims that her

husband loves her, she also feels that the other woman she is talking to is a threat to her relationship with him.

3.1.8. If She Wanted Something, He Gave It to Her

One theme that emerges in heterosexual interactions is that when men love women, they give women certain choices. These choices are depicted as being at the man's discretion, while the woman is expected to be grateful for having choices. One example of this comes from a thread between Creed Evans and Aurelia Evans, a married couple:

Creed Evans (Allie): creed had let reli make all the decisions for the house, only putting in his say here and there. it was her home, the one she wanted[. . .]

Aurelia Evans (Bobbie): Her new apartment was nothing like the home they had shared. She'd taken care to decorate in a dark, ornate fashion, very different from the sleek modern furnishings she would have preferred. There were paintings on the walls, but not a single photograph. She'd only taken one with her, and that would remain hidden in the drawer of her nightstand.

Creed Evans (Allie): creed did everything for her. if she wanted something, if she wanted to go somewhere, anything she asked creed did gladly. there were times she had wanted something completely ridiculous but he had given in anyways, because she was reli and she was the most important person in his life. ("I'm Friends with the Monster;" Apartments)

In order to fully understand the implications of this interaction, it is necessary first to have a bit of context about the characters. Gee (2011) defines context, writing that it "includes the physical setting in which the communication takes place and everything in it [. . .]; what has previously been said and done by those involved in the communication; and any shared knowledge those

involved have, including shared cultural knowledge" (p. 12). The interaction above occurs in an apartment Aurelia has rented as a response to Creed cheating on her and refusing to stop. Keeping this context in mind, the interaction holds more weight. By comparing the home that he let her decorate to her apartment, Creed is saying that she should be happier in the home that she decorated, regardless of what's happening in their relationship.

It is particularly interesting to note that Creed says that he *let* Aurelia make the decisions regarding the house. By saying that he let her do this, he is saying that the decision was really his to make but that he allowed her the privilege of making the choice. This stance constitutes a patriarchal view of their relationship: There is the implication that if she wasn't "the most important person in his life," he could decide not to permit her the same level of choice. He chooses to give her this limited choice, and it is constructed as a sign that he loves her that he gives her any choice at all. However, he is free to decide how far that choice extends, and he does not permit her to choose to limit his promiscuity.

3.2. Explicit Performances of Gender and Sexuality

3.2.1. In An Apocalypse, I Would Find You and Make You Protect Me

Protection and safety are explored within *Another Day in Paradise*. Specifically, one theme portrays men as protecting women. This patriarchal theme constructs women as weak and in need of protection, while men situated as the ones to protect them. Specifically, men are constructed as protecting women from bodily threats, generally in the form of other men. One example of this theme comes in a thread between Beatrice Moore and Dominic King:

> **Beatrice Moore (Allie):** "You know if we were ever in a zombie apocalypse I would find you and make you protect me." she mused out loud with a light laugh, "Otherwise I'm going to be that girl who gets her arm cut off by Brad Pitt in World War Z.."

Dominic King (Laura): tonight was hanging out with Bea, she had been their roommate ever since she had gotten attacked. really she didn't get badly injured but the guy wasn't caught, call him overprotective but he did not want bea to be alone.

Beatrice Moore (Allie): Bea had really enjoyed being Dom's roommate and she had to wonder why they hadn't considered this arrangement sooner. [. . .]Of course, she had every intention of moving back into her own place soon. She could have lived with her friends forever, but they would be wanting their privacy soon and she missed her old apartment.

But living with Dom definitely had it's perks. [. . .]Of course she would have a hard time fighting Dom, he definitely had the advantage, but that didn't mean she couldn't threaten him. He was like a big brother in a lot of ways. He was taller and stronger then her, but she would still pretend like she stood a chance. ("Bring the Camera;" Sirens)

An interesting aspect of this example is that Beatrice, the female character, is the one to initiate the conversation regarding protection and safety. She is the one claiming that Dominic is taller and stronger than her, and while Dominic seems to reiterate this belief, referring to himself as "overprotective," it is initially Beatrice who seems to be reaching for this protection. This gender performance serves to reproduce the patriarchal assumption that men protect women, and also re-enforces the idea that women desire this patriarchal arrangement.

3.2.1.1. What Concerned Her Was His Compliance

The reversal of this theme, in which females offer protection to males, is also performed on *Another Day in Paradise*. However, this reversal is performed differently than the initial theme:

Beatrice Moore (Allie): As soon as Dom had texted her he was having a panic attack, Bea had clocked out of work.

[. . .]

once she understood the details she knew that he was indeed having a panic attack. This calmed her down a little, as panic attacks were generally easy fixes, but she wasn't about to abandon him in his time of need.

[. . .]

But Bea rushed in, still wearing her scrubs with the butterflies on them, catching the attention of Dom's coworkers.

Dominic King (Laura): dom was never one that liked to show weakness, let others in but this was different, it most definitey was. he hadn't actually experienced a panic attack, he knew what one was of course but he is quite glad he hadn't had one.

Dominic King (Laura): dom really hated this feeling, so out of control and he definitely isn't one to admit it but he was scared, fucking scared because he couldn't breathe. he hadn't really felt like this, even when he came back from war, when he found out about his dick of a step father, that his mother was 'put away for safe keeping' or whatever shit his step father went on about he didn't quite feel like this. of course then he was pissed, besides the fact he knew his mother didn't try to kill himself, he knew he didn't go broke on his own but this ? well as unfortunate as it was his step father's moves, they weren't exactly a huge surprise, he hated this guy from day one but finding out he had a son ? he had no idea, it was a total change, he had not even been thinking about the possibility and he panicked.

Beatrice Moore (Allie): What concerned Bea the most wasn't his elevated blood pressure, the sweating or the trouble breathing. It was the compliance. It was like Dom was a zombie version of himself, allowing her to drag him around like a rag doll. In all

the years he'd been her best friend they never once fought, Bea understood Dom too well

to ever get mad at him, even if a situation got heated. But he had always been stubborn

without fail. He never would have allowed her to fix his clothes or drive his car without a

single argument. ("One call away;" SCPD)

In this interaction, the character Beatrice shows up to protect the character Dominic. However,

she is protecting him from himself rather than an outside physical threat. She is not portrayed as

protecting him from an assailant, as in the previous theme. Instead, she is protecting him from

his own emotional response to a situation. This performance reproduces the stereotype that men

are physically strong while women are emotionally stable and are the caretakers of men's

emotions.

Additionally, while Beatrice does not hesitate to go to Dominic in his time of need, it is

portrayed as an anomaly. Dominic complains about being seen as weak, and Beatrice also

alludes to the fact that it is not normal for him to be reliant on her. Thus, even though in this

interaction she is the one protecting him, it still reproduces the idea that the normal course of

events is for guys to protect girls, while this reversal is seen as counter to the normal course of

events.

3.2.2. He Thinks I'll Talk to Him If He Keeps My Son Away From Me

Although in *Another Day in Paradise* male characters do not have any more power than

female characters, there are instances where they are performed as if men have control over

women. This performance hearkens back to the patriarchal origins of society in which men

legally and physically had control over women. In this PBP RPG, both male and female

characters perform as if men are in charge. This performance emerges in many themes. In some

examples, such as the theme in which men are shown to *permit* women to choose, as if men are

the ones with control over the relationships, the characters may not be aware of behaving in a manner constructed by gendered expectations. However, there are other examples where male characters are portrayed as consciously controlling or manipulating women in their lives. In the following example, a man is said to be using a woman's child to control her:

> **Katrina Parker (Anya):** I'm sorry you haven't seen Hayden lately. Jace kind of has him right now and things are out of my control. :/
>
> **Dominic King (Laura):** I was wondering what happened, why does Jace have him?' don't you have custody ?
>
> **Katrina Parker (Anya):** I asked him to keep Hayden for a few days while I deal with some stuff and I guess he thinks that he needs to continue to have him for a little longer. We aren't agreeing on custody.
>
> **Dominic King (Laura):** oh ? well did he say when you can get him back?
>
> I haven't seen him either, or heard from jace, now
>
> I know why.
>
> **Katrina Parker (Anya):** he keeps trying together to talk to him about something personal and he thinks that I'll talk to him this way. ("Careful What You Wish For;" Texts)

In this example, the character Jace is said to be intentionally withholding Katrina's child from her in order to manipulate her into talking with him. In the interaction between Katrina and Dominic, it is acknowledged that Katrina has custody over Hayden, which seems to indicate that she has the legal backing to reclaim her son, however, Katrina says that "things are out of my control." This response seems to indicate that she at least sees Jace as having the control in this particular situation, and Jace is depicted as using that control to his advantage. This formation is different

from suggesting control based on word choice: Jace is said to intentionally be trying to control Katrina.

3.2.2.1. You must be so proud to call her your wife

One variation of the theme that men are controlling is the theme that wives belong to men. Once again, this idea hearkens back to patriarchal societies in which husbands could exert social control over their wives, with wives legally considered the chattel of men. In a conversation between two women, Katrina Parker (Anya) and Harley King (Katniss), Harley King (Katniss) admits that she was once a criminal, and Katrina Parker (Anya) sarcastically replies "Dominic must be so proud to call you his wife" ("Best Intentions;" Texts). Several times within that same thread, both parties referred to Harley as Dominic's wife, rather than by her name or her own merit. That particular line, however, is telling because of the use of the word "proud," which conveys ideas of personal achievement. Used in this instance, it is as if saying the things that Harley does reflect personally on Dominic as if they are his own achievements-- or, in this case, his deficiencies.

3.2.3. Cook Him Dinner to Remind Him What a Good Thing He Has

One theme concerns the idea that in a house containing both males and females, the female is the one who should do domestic pursuits such as cooking and cleaning. An example of this theme occurs between Harley King and Beatrice Moore, who are discussing ways Harley can resolve a conflict with her husband:

> **Harley King (Katniss):** I should cook him dinner meaning order take out or the fire department will be on scene
>
> **Beatrice Moore (Allie):** how about when you stay with me I can teach you to cook a few things?

i love cooking! then you can make him dinner and remind him of what a good thing he

has <3

Harley King (Katniss): You would show me how to cook I never learn and would like

to be the very good wife who cooks and cleans and look after her husband. ("Need a good

reason!!!;" Texts)

One interesting aspect of this example is that there is not an assumption that women have a

natural affinity for cooking and cleaning: the character Harley acknowledges that she is not a

good cook as she has never learned how to cook. However, there is an underlying assumption

that she *should* learn to cook as it is a responsibility of females. When Harley says that she will

order take-out, Beatrice rejects the option, offering instead to teach Harley to cook so that Harley

can show her husband "what a good thing he has." This statement is particularly interesting

because it says that Harley has to be able to cook in order to show her worth to her husband.

Harley's character reiterates this assumption, saying she "would like to be the very good wife

who cooks and cleans and look after her husband." Again this response plays off the idea that a

wife brings value to a relationship through her domestic abilities, rather than any other qualities

she may possess, and that to lack in those domestic abilities prevents a woman from being a good

wife.

One thread, between the female character Mackenzie Paulson and the male character

Ariel Hargreaves, attempts to reverse this assumption by positioning Mackenzie as the athletic

character and Ariel as the domestic character:

Mackenzie Paulson (Bobbie): "How do we have no food? Did you like inhale an entire

pizza last night?" Max teased, her gaze shifting from the refrigerator to her roommate.

"Like really. Sometimes our kitchen looks like it ought to belong to a frat house." The

claim wasn't true. Not really. Where she happened to fail at all things stereotypically feminine, Ariel could usually fill in the gaps. At the very least, his baking put her to shame.

Ariel Hargreaves (Lopez): "I was up late writing, it just kind of happens,"he replied, "three in the morning isn't real, and the pizza I ate didn't count." His whole life schedule was reasonably out of whack, but the nature of his career of choice was that inspiration struck at strange times and he just had to roll with it. On the plus side he did have a lot of time to *stop* the kitchen from looking fratty. It way only clean because he had inherited his mother's domesticity.

Mackenzie Paulson (Bobbie): Letting out a laugh, Max shook her head. What Ari ate when he was writing didn't count just like what Max ate after a ridiculous training session didn't count. Entire pizzas be damned. It was no wonder they ran out of food on a regular basis. ("Nothing in the Cage of My Ribcage;" Apartments)

Although this scene depicts a reversal between the roles these two particular roommates play in their relationship, where the female Mackenzie is not domestic and the male Ariel is domestic, the way that this is portrayed is as being abnormal, with the embedded assumption that women should be, or more often are, domestic. Both characters seem to resist gendered expectations, but in order to be accepted as realistic characters, that resistance has to be explained within the narrative. Mackenzie refers to cleaning and baking as "stereotypically feminine". Furthermore, rather than simply claiming to like domestic pursuits or have a natural affinity for them, Ariel says that the kitchen is "only clean because he had inherited his *mother's* domesticity." This discourse again underscores the assumption that is normally women who are the domestic ones in a household.

Mackenzie and Ariel also keep referring to the idea that messy kitchen is reminiscent of a frat house. Although initially this statement may not seem gendered, using Gee's (2014) "why this, not that" tool, we are able to delve a little deeper into the statement. If they simply wanted to express the fact that college students often have messy kitchens, they might have said the kitchen looked like it belonged in a college dormitory or a common room or a sorority. However, the metaphor they keep drawing on is that of a fraternity house: a house shared by multiple young men. This once again showcases the assumption that while women are expected to have a handle on domestic pursuits, no such expectation exists for men, and in fact it is assumed that several men living together would make a mess.

3.2.4. She Forced Her Feet Into Beautiful But Painful Shoes

Due to the nature of PBP RPGs, which are reliant on text-based descriptions rather than graphics to allow players to create mental images of characters and actions, the narrative emphasizes character descriptions. How these descriptions are expressed, however, are gendered. One theme within the discourse on *Another Day in Paradise* depicts women as caring about physical appearance, and shows men as not caring about physical appearances. An interaction between two strangers, Charlotte Olsen and Jackson Sullivan, shows this difference explicitly:

Charlotte Olsen (Allie): she began her Saturday morning by fixing her hair so that not a strand was out of place, and applying her make up. All of this was done before she slipped into a sleek skirt suit, and forced her feet into a beautiful but painful pair of heels.

Jackson Sullivan (Carrie): After finally forcing himself to get out of bed, he proceeded to stumble around his house in the dark to get ready.

Charlotte Olsen (Allie): Now that she was paying attention she noticed he was a rather attractive guy. Not that she spent her time checking men out

Jackson Sullivan (Carrie): He wouldn't deny that underneath the tough exterior and meticulous appearance that she was somewhat cute. It didn't hurt that he was fond of blondes. But he couldn't help but be ever so slightly intimidated by her well put together appearance and his smile briefly faltered as he considered his own appearance. Too tired to care this morning, he had thrown on a pair of well-worn cargo shorts, an old concert shirt, a green light weight jacket, and a pair of his most comfortable sandals. ("Diva is the Female Version of a Hustla;" Coffee Shops).

In this example, although the full outfits of both characters are described, the narrative suggests that the female character, Charlotte, took time and effort to put together her appearance while the male character, Jackson, "stumbled around [. . .] in the dark to get ready." The specific vocabulary used is also gendered. Charlotte is said to have "slipped into" her suit, which is graceful vocabulary, whereas Jackson is said to have "thrown on" his shorts, which is a much more rough verb.

Within this theme, women are shown as caring about their appearances, and men are shown as *not* caring about their appearances. It is this dichotomy which is interesting, as if women are expected to look put together while men are not. In fact, clothing can be used to call a man's masculinity into question:

Harley King (Katniss): when did DOm have a thing for tiaras???

Beatrice Moore (Allie): that is the tiara dom wears to tea parties 😊

killian's daughter made him wear it, but i don't think she forced him to keep it 😊lmao

Harley King (Katniss): what his own tiara omg for tea parties. when did he babysat must have been when we were broken up.

I need to tease him this ask if we have girls is he going to play tea parties.. and why is there no picture of this at all?? ("Learning New Secrets;" Texts)

In this example, it is depicted as not culturally acceptable for a man to wear a tiara. Not only do Harley and Beatrice react to finding a tiara in Dominic's closet, but even after realizing that he had it because he was playing dress-up with his boss's daughter, they find it funny enough that they make plans to tease him for it. This ties together with Butler's concept of performance: In this example, Dominic has pushed against the pre-approved script of what men are allowed to wear, and by planning to mock him for it, Harley and Beatrice use a common gender script to tease him.

3.2.4.1. No Ripping Off the Dress Until After the Date

One variation of the theme that women rather than men care about appearances is that women care about appearances for the sake of impressing men. This variaton relies upon a subtle but noticeable difference. In this theme variation, women are still the ones putting time and effort into their appearances, but they do so in order to gain a positive reaction from the men in their lives:

Jasmine Houghton (Allie): well i'll be sure to dress sexy for you

but no ripping off the dress until after the date 😜

Lorenzo Giovanni (Jackie): I honestly don't know if I can sit through a whole dinner with you in a sexy dress. ("Date Night;" Texts)

In this example, the character Jasmine explicitly states that she is dressing a particular way for Lorenzo, and Lorenzo responds in kind, showing appreciation for the effort she plans to put into her appearance. This variation is in contrast to the previous thread between Charlotte Olsen and

Jackson Sullivan in which Jackson had reported to be intimidated by her appearance. In this case, Jasmine's appearance is seen almost as fulfilling a sexual fantasy for Lorenzo.

3.3. Performance of Gender and Sexuality in Non-Romantic Interactions

3.3.1. After All, They Were Adults Now

The majority of the characters portrayed in PBP RPGs are in their late teens or early twenties. It is therefore unsurprising that the transition from adolescence into adulthood is explored. There is, however, a role that gender and sexuality play in performances of that transition. One major role that gender plays is that it is used as a factor determining when that transition occurs:

> **Beatrice Moore (Allie):** Bea had been insisting that since Dom had run off and gotten married they needed to choose more adult past times. Up until then their time together had been spent at the bar, or drinking at their apartments, or eating way too much food and binge watching Netflix. You know, the sort of things immature teenagers would do. And so Bea had made them a reservation at a nice restaurant.
>
> [. . .]
>
> After all, they were adults now. Adults who went to dinner...and then planned to hit the strip club after.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Really when it came down to it, they should never have been allowed to become adults. Bea imagined they'd be 72 and still crashing out wasted on Dom's couch after watching too many episodes of shows like "Naked and Afraid".
>
> **Dominic King (Laura):** somehow Bea convinced him they could be the adults they were supposed to be and go to a fancy dinner, and then a strip club.

Beatrice Moore (Allie): "The point? We're adults Dom, you're a husband now, that's a husband shirt... Put it on."

In this example, the transition to adulthood is perpetuated not by the age of the character but by the character's, Dominic's, new role as a husband. There is an inherent assumption within this discourse that an unmarried man is an adolescent while a married man is an adult.

One interesting aspect of this theme is that instead of Dominic being the one to make the first move, as described in other themes, Beatrice, his female friend, is the one to decide that he is now an adult and must enjoy more adult activities. Thus, while it is his gendered role as *husband* that supposedly classes him as an adult, he is seen as needing the influence of a female to see that and assume the role correctly. The assumption that men mature more slowly than women is discussed by Kimmel (2008) who states of young men that "in another era, these guys would undoubtedly be poised to take their place in the adult world, taking the first steps toward becoming the nation's future professionals, entrepreneurs, and business leaders [. . .] Today, many of these young men [. . .] are more likely to feel anxious and uncertain" (p. 3). In this theme, the female is seen as the one who is capable of understanding the need to transition to adulthood and guiding men into appropriate behavior, while the male is seen as ignorant to the need to transition.

3.3.2. I Will Confiscate the Legos of Any Little Boy Who Hurts Her

Although much of the material on *Another Day in Paradise* concerns adult relationships, relationships between parents and children are also explored. Because *Another Day in Paradise* only has adult-aged characters on its site, however, interactions between parents and children are discussed between adults, often with the child out of the scene. One such interaction occurs

between two friends, Jonah Lauchlan and Jackson Sullivan, as they discuss Jonah's newly

adopted daughter:

> **Jonah Lauchlan (Allie):** you've got to help me scare off all her future boyfriends
>
> **Jackson Sullivan (Carrie):** do you want dibs on the baseball bat or shotgun when we
>
> scare away these guys?
>
> **Jonah Lauchlan (Allie):** shotgun, definitely
>
> you can pretend to be the uncle who's staying with us since he just got out of prison and
>
> we'll follow them in the car and just drive by and stare randomly through out the date..
>
> **Jackson Sullivan (Carrie):** i can do the intense stare. probably need to work on my
>
> prison lingo though. but i've got time. she'll start dating in like 5 years you think?
>
> **Jonah Lauchlan (Allie):** I don't know if it's a good idea for us to stare down her
>
> playground boyfriend
>
> then again maybe it's better to build our reputation early
>
> by the time she's in high school nobody will want to deal with us so they will refuse to
>
> date her
>
> **Jackson Sullivan (Carrie):** it is never too early to start building a reputation. i will
>
> gladly confiscate the legos of anyone little boy who hurts her. ("Broseph, Jonah's Boo;"
>
> Texts)

In this interaction, Jonah and Jackson seem to be drawing intentionally on gender stereotypes

regarding parenting. They use the trope about a father protecting his daughter with a shotgun as

they fantasize about Jonah's new role as a father. Although they seem to be having fun with this

trope, they are simultaneously playing into and perpetuating it. Jonah and Jackson seem to

believe that Jonah's job as a father is to protect his child, and they see future boyfriends as a

threat to her. This ties into the theme that men protect women, rather than the other way around, and situates girls as the possessions of their fathers.

There is a range of performances of gender and sexuality on *Another Day in Paradise*. Performances of gender and sexuality in romantic interactions include expectations of men and women have of each other while courting. Self-aware gender expectations show characters as aware of how they perform gender and sexuality in traditional ways and draw on popular tropes. Performance of gender and sexuality in non-romantic interactions portrays how gender and sexuality are performed between friends and in parent-child relationships. Now that I have described the performance of gender and sexuality, I discuss the relations among these thematic clusters, the implications of this analysis, and ways to further this research going forward.

CHAPTER FOUR:

DON'T ROCK THE BOAT--A DISCUSSION OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

PERFORMANCES ON *ANOTHER DAY IN PARADISE*

The analysis of how gender and sexuality is performed on *Another Day in Paradise* describes the performance of gender and sexuality in romantic interactions, the explicit performance of gender and sexuality, and the performance of gender and sexuality in non-romantic interactions. Given these themes, I discuss what my analysis of the discourse on *Another Day in Paradise* says about performances of patriarchy, the concepts of good men and good women, and the concepts of bad men and bad women. I then discuss how these performances relate to the phenomenon of PBP RPGs, and possibilities for further research.

4.1. Performances of Patriarchy

One thing that is readily noticeable in the analysis of *Another Day in Paradise* is that many of the themes, when taken together, portray a traditional, heteronormative, and patriarchal world. Men are shown as having power, not just in romantic relationships but in familial and plutonic relationships as well, while women are shown as subservient to men. There are two major ways that this is displayed: The first is that women are portrayed as belonging to men, while the second is that men are portrayed as being physically strong while women are portrayed as being emotionally stable.

4.1.1. Women Belong to Men

On *Another Day in Paradise,* there is a gendered hierarchy, with men having power over women in relationships. This hierarchy is evident in the theme of choice-making, for example, when men give women the option to choose as if the choice itself forms intimacy, as well as in the theme where men are depicted as gifting dates to women, rather than discussing dates

beforehand and choosing the date together. Tannen (1990) discusses this tendency for men to make decisions without consulting women as a source of common marital conflict: Men tend to perceive discussing things with their wife beforehand as "seeking permission" (p. 26) and thus as a challenge to their independence, whereas women tend to perceive it as a sign that their lives are intertwined and that they are intimate with one another.

Interestingly on *Another Day in Paradise*, the female characters are not portrayed as fighting against the male characters' tendency to make decisions. Instead, they expect and incorporate this tendency. For example, when the character Nate Grey (Nate) told Kacey Harper (Jackie) that he was going to "make this weekend special for [her]" she responded by saying that it was "the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for [her]" ("date weekend;" elsewhere). This thread is a performance of a man making a decision and a woman accepting that decision. According to Gee (2014), language is used as a way to build identities. By conducting language in this way, with Nate gifting Kacey with a date, the discourse positions Nate as caregiver and Kacey as being cared for. It is an asymmetrical power hierarchy performed by both writers. Similarly, when Creed Evans (Allie) said that he "let reli make all the decisions for the house" ("I'm Friends with the Monster;" Apartments) the writer is positioning Creed as being in a position of power--the one with the ability to *let* Reli do something.

In the examples above, the hierarchy between men and women is tied to choice-making. However, this is not the only way that the patriarchal hierarchy is performed in the discourse. Not only does this hierarchy exist in conversations directly between men and women, but it is shown in discussions between women about men and between men about women. For example, when Katrina Parker (Anya) says to Harley King (Katniss) "Dominic must be so proud to call you his wife" ("Best Intentions;" Texts) the player is positioning Dominic as being dominant in

the relationship. The word proud is often associated with how parents feel about their children. By using it to describe how a husband may feel about his wife positions the husband as having power over his wife. Nor does Harley's writer perform Harley as contesting this. The player could, for example, have replied to that statement by saying "I have a name" or by saying "My past has nothing to do with Dominic." By not doing so, the player allows the concept of pride to be associated with Dominic's relationship with Harley. The player performs the character in a way that makes it clear that it does not seem strange to Harley that the language is being used in that way: If it did seem strange, she would say something about it.

4.1.2. Men Are Strong; Women Are Emotional

In addition to men being depicted as having power over women, men are also performed as being physically strong, while women are performed as having high emotional intelligence. This is a heteronormative portrayal of gender and sexuality, and is also tied together with the idea of patriarchy. Men who are physically strong can protect their families from physical threats, while women with emotional stability have the ability to take care of families and raise emotionally competent children. This understanding of gender relies on patriarchal gender expectations.

Men are depicted as strong in a number of ways. For example, the threads that deal with sexual fantasies place men in positions of power. In one such thread, the male character is a firefighter while the female character is a young, rich woman with a beach house. This automatically puts the man in a position of power. He is depicted as having a career which pits him against danger on a daily basis, whereas she is portrayed as being incapable of making a simple dinner without causing a fire. Within the context of the narrative, her incompetence serves to highlight his competence. He steps in, saving her from herself in a physical way:

Putting out the fire and applying lotion to her hand to prevent a burn. It would be an entirely different scene if instead of portraying a firefighter busting in to save her, he were her next door neighbor coming to make her a cup of tea and talk to her about her feelings on the fire. The writers chose to perform his character as coming in and doing something physical to help her: His strength and power is what is used to make the scene appealing.

One gendered expectation that is portrayed is that women should be able to understand how a man is feeling based on his actions alone. Aurelia Evans should know that Creed loves her because he let her choose what items to decorate their house with ("I'm Friends with the Monster;" Apartments). Harley King should know that Dominic loves her because he is protective of her ("How to Save a Life;" Santa Cruz Memorial Hospital). In these examples, the man is excused from having to communicate his emotions. Instead, the expectation is that his wife should be able to read his emotions through his actions alone. It is a performance of men as emotionally stunted and of women as emotionally omniscient.

4.2. The Moralities of Men and Women

Another Day in Paradise is a game, and like most games, it has both protagonists and antagonists in any given narrative situation. Because of the nature of the game, most characters have moments where they are portrayed as behaving in good ways and they have moments where they are portrayed as behaving in bad ways. However, it is often clear within the course of the narrative when the characters are supposed to be good versus when the characters are supposed to be bad. In order for those moments to be explicit to the reader, there are gendered assumptions about what it is to be a good man and what it is to be a good woman. Embedded in this is an implicit desire for good men, good women, and good relationships. When falling into the expectations of what it means to be a good man, or a good woman, or in a good relationship,

the characters are seen as good, and when failing those expectations, the characters are depicted as wanting in some way.

4.2.1. What Makes a Good Man?

There are numerous examples of masculinity on *Another Day in Paradise*. The character Creed Evans, for examples, is depicted a smooth-talking womanizer, while Dominic King is portrayed as steadfast and loyal to his family and friends. Although *Another Day in Paradise* does not necessarily have heroes and villains, a reader can decide from the clues given in the discourse whether a character is generally good, generally bad, or somewhere in between. Certain clues can be used to decide whether or not a man is acting like a good guy in any given scene.

4.2.1.1. Good Men Don't Lie

Men are performed as considering their own personal needs above the needs of the women in their lives. Nate Grey (Nate), for example, dates his daughter's best friend without discussing it with his daughter; Creed Evans (Allie) sleeps with a myriad of women who are not his wife; and Dominic King (Laura) learns that he has a five-year-old son and does not tell his wife. In all three of these examples, the characters are either caught in the lie and get in trouble for it or feel guilty about lying in the first place. These are indicators for the reader that lying is not what good guys do: when men lie, the lie itself positions them as being in the wrong.

That is different, however, from the action associated with the lie. For example, in the thread between Beatrice Moore (Allie) and Dominic King (Laura) where they discuss going to a strip club, it is iterated and reiterated in the thread that Dominic is a good guy. Even though he is planning to go to a strip club and both characters acknowledge that his wife may not like him going to a strip club, it is depicted as all right for him to do so as long as he tells his wife he is

going to go. Lying would cause the action to be bad; as long as he tells the truth about it, it is permissible, regardless of how his wife feels about it.

One thing that is interesting with this portrayal of men is that often it is performed that if a man were to lie, the woman would believe him. Creed Evans (Allie), for example, discusses women as being "under his spell" ("Addicted;" Addictions Nightclub). The gender expectation seems to be that men can manipulate women, but that good men would not. This expectation goes further than just the surface: In addition to saying that good men don't lie, it says that men, in general, are smarter than women, while women are gullible. Although good men do not take advantage of this, it is still taken as given that any man could get away with lying.

4.2.1.2. Good Men Don't Let Women Get Hurt

When Jackson Sullivan (Carrie) is discussing his friend's daughter and says, "I will gladly confiscate the legos of anyone little boy who hurts her" ("Broseph;" Texts) there is something inherently charming in the sentence, even as the reader knows that he is saying it part in jest. The child he is discussing is only an infant, and he is already describing ways he plans to protect her from being hurt. The assumption that men should be protecting women goes hand in hand with the assumption that men are physically strong. It would be very different if he were to say, "I hope children pick on her so that she learns to be tough from an early age." Were he to have said that, Jackson's character would come across as a bit of a jerk rather than as a sweetheart. The expectation is that good men do not let women get hurt.

This expectation is explicit within the theme that men protect women. For example, when Beatrice Moore (Allie) says that if there were an apocalypse, she would expect Dominic to protect her ("Bring the Camera;" Sirens) it seems clear that she is complimenting Dominic for

being a good enough man to protect her in the case of an apocalypse. She trusts that he would not let her get hurt, which makes it clear to the reader that she sees him as a good man.

4.2.2. What Makes a Good Woman?

Now that we have examined some of the assumptions about what makes good men and bad men, we should discuss assumptions about what makes women good. Once again, it is clear that there are times when women are seem to be behaving commendably. This is tied to gendered expectations of how women should behave.

4.2.2.1. Good Women Act as Emotional Guides

Just as men are portrayed as being physically strong, women are portrayed as being emotionally stable. And, just as good men are shown to use their strength to keep women safe, good women are shown to use their understanding of emotions to help men navigate their own emotional baggage. They are portrayed as keeping men in line. For example, when Beatrice tells Dominic that as a husband he needs to begin engaging in adult activities, she is acting as his emotional conscience. This situation is an occurrence of her being a good woman because she is ensuring that Dominic fulfills his responsibilities.

Similarly, when Katrina Parker (Anya) says "he keeps trying together to talk to him about something personal and he thinks that I'll talk to him this way" ("Careful what you wish for;" Texts) the indication is that Jace would not have to use her child to manipulate her if she would do her duty and have a personal conversation with him. The fact that she understands why he is keeping her son away from her in and of itself shows a capacity for understanding a man's emotions and how to guide them: She knows that if she engaged in the personal conversation with Jace, the result would be that he would stop keeping her son away from her. It is depicted

that one of her jobs is to keep his emotions balanced: He is not responsible for doing that for himself.

4.2.2.2. Good Women Wait for Good Men

In *Another Day in Paradise* men are shown as engaging in active roles in their relationships. They plan dates, they protect women, and they decide if and when to let women make choices about the relationship. Women, on the other hand, are shown as waiting for men to include them in their lives. For example, after Dominic hides his child from his wife, Harley, she goes to Beatrice's apartment to wait for him to make it up to her. This is a passive response to the situation: She leaves, and she waits for him to come to her. As Walkerdine (1990) points out:

> That the girl appears willingly to accept the position to which she is classically fitted does not, I would argue, tell us something basic about the nature of the female body, nor the female mind, but rather tells us of the power of those practices through which a particular resolution to the struggle is produced. (p. 88)

The fact that female characters are performed as passive in relationships does not mean that females are naturally passive. Instead, what it shows is an acknowledgement that women are *expected* to be more passive. If writers want to make their female character look good, they have to have portray her as being passive, or else explain within the discourse why she is behaving more active than she normally would. For example, when Beatrice goes to help Dominic with his panic attack, it is portrayed as an anomaly. When she says that under other circumstances "[Dominic] never would have allowed her to fix his clothes or drive his car without a single argument" ("One call away;" SCPD) she is acknowledging that on a normal day she would not be taking charge the way that she is in that thread. Because she explains her activity in this way, it can be acknowledged as an exception to how she normally behaves, and does not challenge her

status as a good woman. However, if she were to take charge like that without acknowledging its strangeness, she may be seen as behaving more like a man than like a woman or as trying to control Dominic.

4.2.3. What Makes a Bad Man?

Now that we have examined what makes good men and good women, we should discuss what makes bad men and bad women. Simply not behaving like a good character does not make a character bad. Rather, there are certain trigger behaviors writers can rely on when they want their character to appear bad or immoral. Often, writers seem aware of relying on these tropes. They use phrases such as "Creed believed" or "in his eyes" to emphasize the separation between themselves as the writer and the beliefs of the characters. This may be more apparent when they are writing their character as bad as they themselves do not want to be considered bad.

4.2.3.1. Bad Men Hide Things From Women

Secrecy is depicted on *Another Day in Paradise* as an ultimate form of betrayal. On a narrative level, relationships are shown to deteriorate when men hide things from women. For example, when Dominic hid from his wife, Harley, the fact that he had a child, she moved out. Despite the fact that Harley (Katniss) said, "sweetheart he doesn't need to tell me things about we have trust" ("Best Intentions;" Texts), it is clear from her subsequent reactions that the fact that he hid his relationship with his son is a betrayal of that trust.

Guilt is another trigger to show that the writer believes the character is doing something immoral. When Nate Grey (Nate) expresses guilt about hiding his relationship with his daughter's best friend from his daughter, it is the writer's way of performing that as something to feel guilty about. One interesting thing about using guilt as a writing device is that it serves to lessen the impact of the character's actions. Hiding his relationship with Kacey from his daughter

is positioned as immoral, however, the fact that he feels guilty about it allows the reader to believe that the character is *usually* good.

4.2.4. What Makes a Bad Woman?

Now that we have explored what makes bad men, it is possible to explore what makes bad women. Often, women are depicted as bad when they do not perform gender roles accurately, especially when this is not excused in the narrative in some way. For example, Mackenzie Paulson (Bobbie) is not portrayed as a bad character when she prefers hockey to housekeeping, but this preference is adequately explained within the narrative. If she were simply to be shown making a mess in the apartment without the accompanying explanation, she would have appeared to be a pig.

4.2.4.1. Bad Women Try to Control Men

If a man's control of women is portrayed as par for the course, women trying to control men is depicted as a sign of immorality. This is evident any time a woman is in a position of power over a man. For example, when Beatrice is helping Dominic with his panic attack, she expresses concern that he is listening to her. She is a trained medical professional providing medical aid to a friend, but she is worried that he's listening to her. In this situation Bea is clearly being depicted as a good character. By doing so, and positioning the fact that he listens to her as concerning, the writer is simultaneously setting the precedent that it would not be okay for Bea to expect him to listen to her.

4.3. Gaming: Why Perform This Way?

One of things that makes PBP RPGs unique is that the only limitations to the characters are the limitations imposed by the specific site. Unlike many other game genres, graphics do not limit characters to looking a certain way, and there is not a pre-determined set of character traits

players can choose from. Players are free to be as creative as they want to be with the creation of their characters. Despite this, however, the discourse analysis of PBP RPGs portrays a fairly limited scope of gender and sexuality performance. Characters expectations of gender and sexuality tend to be heteronormative and patriarchal. Additionally, there are many more examples of good characters than of bad characters. Uncovering potential causes for this may inform future research on this topic.

4.3.1. The Player Behind the Keyboard

It is important to keep in mind when analyzing this discourse that there are real players creating each of these characters. PBP RPGs are games: They are meant to be fun, and the characters in them are created for entertainment purposes.

Players may come from different countries and have different backgrounds from one another. However, when selecting a site, they are looking for something they are interested in playing on. The vast selection of PBP RPGs to choose from may cause similar types of players gravitate towards similar sites, creating homogeny. Thus, it may be that heteronormative and patriarchal discourse is especially prevalent on *Another Day in Paradise* because the players who tend to write those kinds of characters tend to write on sites like *Another Day in Paradise.* Additionally, if players are friends with each other outside of their characters, they may be afraid that if they push back against the norms in-character, they will ruin those friendships out-of-character. This may cause them to embrace situations with their characters that they would not normally write themselves.

It is also important to remember why players are writing in the first place. I have already discussed the fact that the majority of players who engage in PBP RPGs are female. Russ (1985) explains that women write pornographic scenes, and writes that:

It's very, very difficult even for art, with its complexity and thoughtfulness, its inevitable

alloy of reflection, its complicated evocations of emotion, to transcend the culture's

givens. To do so in sexual fantasy (necessarily pretty primitive) is, I think, totally

impossible. The [. . .] sex scenes are usually just as thin, just as repetitive, just as stylized,

just as interchangeable, just as full of magic words, as those of male pornography, and

just as anti-art. (85)

While not every interaction on *Another Day in Paradise* is related to sex, sexual fantasy is one

major component of the discourse. A single writer writing independently would have a difficult

time breaking away from stylized gender norms in sexual fantasies, where the roles of men and

women have been so carefully delineated by our cultures. However, writers on PBP RPGs are

not working independently: They are creating a scenes with other people. They are writing and

allowing other players to react and interact. This interaction would make it even harder to

transcend cultural norms.

4.3.2. I Just Want to Play

In addition to certain players gravitating towards certain sites, players may find that the

sites themselves limit which characters they create. The game would be no fun if a player wrote a

post and no one replied to it: Players have to be able to get replies to play the game. Players may

find that if they make a character who is too unrecognizable--for example, if they do not perform

gender expectations correctly--other players may be uncomfortable replying to their threads

because they do not know what kinds of responses they will get. In order to keep the game in

motion, some players may find it necessary to create characters who are not too far out-of-the-

box. This may also serve to explain why when characters do challenge norms, such as

Mackenzie Paulson and Ariel Lopez, those gender discrepancies are carefully explained in the narrative.

Playing on PBP RPGs allows players to write out fantasy scenarios with one another. However, if a player likes writing romance, for example, and there are no potential romantic interests for their character on the site, they may alter their character so that there are more possibilities. These alterations may again lead to a more homogenous site as a whole.

4.4. Where Do We Go Next?

By describing the interactions between characters on *Another Day in Paradise*, I have documented one possibility for how gender and sexuality can be performed in the context of a PBP RPG. The kind of site helps to determine the type of content available. Players have time to think about their replies and write vivid descriptions. On *Another Day in Paradise*, gender and sexuality performances fall within heteronormative and patriarchal expectations. However, this may not be the case on all PBP RPGs.

Another Day in Paradise was selected specifically because it represented an example of the mundane. Within this site, I only examined one month's worth of data. To further our understanding of communication and performance of gender and sexuality on PBP RPGs, additional research could be done to expand upon the range of data gathered.

There are PBP RPG sites which are set up specifically to challenge gender and sexuality norms. For example, there are sites where only LGBT characters are allowed. Analyzing an LGBT-only site would likely produce a very different set of data than collected on *Another Day in Paradise*.

Additionally, I examined only posts that had replies. In other words, the data I collected came only from successful threads. An examination of failed threads may illuminate a different aspect gender and sexuality in PBP RPGs.

4.5. Conclusion

PBP RPGs are a unique site for discourse. Prevalent for numerous years and open to the public, they are at the intersection of computer-mediated communication and gaming. As such, they are an important site of public discourse. I described discourse around gender and sexuality on one PBP RPG, *Another Day in Paradise.* I analyzed themes that cluster in romantic interactions, explicit gender expectations, and non-romantic interactions. Within this thematic analysis, I located a tendency for characters to perform heteronormative, patriarchal interactions. Despite the open-ended nature of PBP RPGs, players still tend to perform male and female characters in culturally-accepted gender scripts. When deviating from these scripts, players are careful to explain their deviation within the narrative. *Another Day in Paradise* is only one PBP RPG, chosen as an example of the mundane. It is possible that less mundane PBP RPGs have a greater range of interaction. To further research on this subject, it would be interesting to explore other types of PBP RPGs.

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