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"C'mon! Make me a man!": Persona 4, Digital Bodies, and Queer Potentiality

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In her 2009 article "Putting the Gay in Games: Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Video Games," Adrienne Shaw poses an extremely valid question to the fields both of video game theory and queer theory: "Why then, when video games have been a popular medium since the 1970s, are questions about the representation of diverse sexualities and gendered identities only now being discussed?" (230). As Shaw notes, the relatively nascent field of video game studies has rarely turned its eye towards the question of queer sexuality and gaming, with a much larger body of work existing on questions of race, the presence of male or female characters, or the omnipresent question of video game violence. Intriguingly, however, Shaw's question of a renewed academic study of queer sexualities and gaming finds a stopping point even within the article that specifically calls for it.

Through a series of interviews with game developers and a sample of contemporary popular games, Shaw focuses upon "the attitudes of those in the video game development community, the construction of the gamer audience, the expected backlash for having GLBT content," and ultimately "the potential for representing sexual and gendered identities in the medium" (230). The purpose of her project is, in many ways, one of explanation and correction, as Shaw focuses primarily on presence of material rather than analysis of it. In fact, Shaw is quite explicit about her project's lack of engagement in larger theoretical concepts about deviant sexualities and gaming, as her interest is "not whether video games can be 'queered,' but rather how members of the industry understand the place of and problems surrounding the representation of different sexual and gender identities within video games" (232).

Admittedly, my own interests lie *precisely* in this question of whether video games can, in fact, be "queered"—particularly around the subject of the digital body. This paper is an attempt to open up the question of queering games by first offering a short theoretical history of performativity and the digitally "free" body in both queer and gaming history, followed by an examination of two particular teenage digital bodies in the 2008 PlayStation 2 role-playing game *Persona 4*: a young punk named Kanji terrified that he might be gay, and his relationship with a young cross-dressing female detective named Naoto. Rather than the liberating realm of bodily escape that critics like Edward

Castronova (2005) and Miroslaw Filiciak (2003) suggest the digital body provides, I read *Persona 4*'s construction, deployment, and control of Naoto and Kanji's bodies as a meta-commentary on the means by which the idealized vision of queer utopia within the digital is disrupted by the player's engagement in the game's encoded processes. While the game does ultimately engage the player in a series of actions meant to intervene and ultimately destroy the prospect of "trans"-gressive bodies, the ruptures this creates in exposing and involving the player in queer play (so to speak) offer a fascinating tension between the game's intended outcomes and the result brought about through engagement in its procedural rhetoric. In so doing, I hope to reveal some of the ways in which game theory and queer theory can enter into a discussion with one another that can potentially expand the definition of both fields.

Theoretical Crossroads: On Butler and Bogost

In his works *Unit Operations* and *Persuasive Games*, video game theorist Ian Bogost develops a theory of what he calls procedural rhetoric: namely, the ways in which a persuasive argument is developed in a game via the various structures and policies written into the game's programming in computer code. Rather than studying purely visual or verbal rhetoric in games, Bogost suggests looking at the way in which games interact ideologically with their players by the encoded controls or rules of the virtual environment. Instead of an insulated, objective realm where the player experiments without impacting "real" life, Bogost argues that virtual worlds are in fact an open two-way exchange "through which players and their ideas can enter and exit the game, taking and leaving their residue in both directions" (2006, 135). To play a game is both to act upon it and be acted upon in return; the player's participation in the game subjects them to means of control not only in questions of how high their character can jump, but in what moral choices the game extends to them to make. As Bogost suggests in *Persuasive Games,* players must ask themselves, "What rules does the game enforce, and how do those rules correlate, correspond, or conflict with an existing morality outside the game?" (2007, 284). Asking such questions, as game critic Simon Penny adds, dismantles the idea of complete freedom within a digital world, particularly since "[e]ach work affords, accommodates, or permits only certain types of behavior. So, the user's behavior is constrained and in a sense, modeled. The quality of this behavior becomes a key component in the user's experience" (2004, 83).

If this modeling of behavior through gameplay mechanics is a way of constructing and enforcing a particular ideological performance within the game, I am struck by its

possible impact on another theoretical field deeply interested in questions of control and ideology. Bogost never cites her by name, but I find a distinct similarity between his idea of procedural rhetoric's persuasive force being enacted through repetitive, encoded processes, and Judith Butler's groundbreaking queer theoretical work in *Bodies That Matter* on the societal codes that construct and configure the body. In a famous line from the book's introduction that strongly resembles Penny's comments about gaming, Butler asks, "[t]o what extent is 'sex' a constrained production, a forcible effect, one which sets the limits to what will qualify as a body by regulating the terms by which bodies are and are not sustained?" (1993, 23). Over the course of the text, Butler undertakes deconstructing the means by which sex and gender are naturalized, in particular through the repetition and performance of gendered concepts. To return to the title pun, "matter" is invested with meaning not by an a priori essence, but in how it is shaped and transformed by the discourse around it. For Butler, "the body is not an independent materiality that is invested by power relations external to it, but it is that for which materialization and investiture are coextensive" (34). Instead of a heteronormative conceptualization of natural bodies that arrive with "pure" ideas of gender and sex, Butler conceives of a way in which bodies are constantly in the process of "bounding, forming, and deforming," which "is animated by a set of founding prohibitions" (55).

Thus, as Butler notes in *Gender Trouble*, if the illusion of agency "rel[ies] on the consistent and repeated invocation of rules that condition and restrict" (198), we must also consider the dynamic of actions between player and game via the established rules of play. Markku Eskelinen and Ragnhild Tronstad, in an essay aptly titled "Video Games and Configurative Performances," call for an articulation in video games of "a philosophy of action," which examines "the availability of certain intertwined modalities of action to find out what is possible, necessary, prohibited, permitted, or obligatory to do in the game, and what the players do or could know, believe, or wish regarding those action schemes" (2003, 213). Alexander Galloway usefully complicates this idea of action beyond the player, as the video game is an "action-based medium" (2006, 4) not merely of the player upon the machine but of the machine back towards her; the two actions exist as a single, unified phenomenon where "the action of the machine is just as important as the action of the operator" (5).

So what can be done in this borderland of control, performance, and repetition between game theory and queer theory? One possible avenue might lie in exploring the potential ramifications of Bogost's idea of "residue" in relationship to Butlerian

concepts of performativity—particularly in examining what kind of residue is both left and taken away by the player in their excursions into digital play, and its impact on the body. Rather than positioning the digital realm, as some critics in both queer and game theory have suggested, as a place where the body is finally free from physical constraint, the following section hopes to trace how various critics have begun to unpack how cycles of bodily power relations and prohibitions akin to those we see in Butler end up being enforced through certain forms of actions as established by the game's processes. From this, a central question emerges: what repetitions of gendered and sexual performance through the body are encouraged by games, and in our "interactions" with games—not simply of player upon machine, but machine and player in tandem creating new possibilities—how might we find ways to reconsider or even resist these repetitions?

"Any Kind of Body They Desire": Digital Embodiment and Queerness

To begin a discussion of utopian digital bodies, it is essential to start with their most cited forebear in Donna Haraway's influential "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In the manifesto, Haraway looks towards a fusion of the mechanical and the organic that has the power to disrupt and subvert societal norms. As she states, "[t]he cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence" (2003, 517). As critics like Mimi Nguyen (2003) and Anne Allison (2001) have explored in greater detail, the queer potentiality of Haraway's cyborg as a perverse oppositional force is evident, as it challenges many of the heteronormative perceptions about the body and its purity that govern larger societal conceptions of sexuality. Such possibilities were clearly evident to Butler as well, given that a line from Haraway's manifesto is the very first epigraph of the introduction to *Bodies That Matter*: namely, "Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best other beings encapsulated by skin?" (1993, 1).

While Butler is more interested in disrupting the epistemological certainty of "matter" and bodies in physical spaces, later queer critics and feminists drawing on Butler have taken on this question of where the body ends as it relates to cyberspace. As Alexander Galloway notes, "the place of the body is central to cyberfeminism. Yet in this analysis, bodies are not natural objects made of flesh and blood, but rather are complex intersections of materiality and meaning" (2004, 190). This act of redefining the body in relation to digital realms has taken on a utopian cast; Hannu Eerikäinen, in a discussion

of cyberfeminism, suggests that the field "rewrites human corporeality into a posthuman morphology of the subject living in a new kind of artificial paradise of prosthetic supplementation" (2000, 59). Such trends can also be seen in what is called the "cyberqueer," as articulated by Nina Wakeford. While not espousing a paradise, Wakeford does recognize the online world as holding the allure of offering queer bodies a venue "with a particular focus on the advantages compared to 'real' physically-located space" (2002, 410). If the flesh is bound to a series of constraints—geographical location, bodily appearance, and so forth—the potential of a new realm of experiences that can exceed the limits of the body holds a very notable appeal.

This question of what advantages digital realms provide to the body has become a core focus of game theory as well, materialized more concretely in the form of the digital avatar. As Laetitia Wilson suggests in an analysis of avatars, "Could not the possibility to explore a plurality of personalities allow for empowerment and self-realization beyond the hegemony of 'real' life norms and habitual social conventions?" (2003, 4). In his essay "Hyperidentities," Miroslaw Filiciak moves even further, claiming that this exploration of digital personalities is not just a form of empowerment, but a cyborgian fusion of man and machine where "[t]he subject (player) and the 'other' (the onscreen avatar) do not stand at the opposite sides of the mirror anymore—they become one" (2003, 91). This moment of suturing is linked directly to what the digital body provides to the confined physical flesh, as avatars represent "a longed-for chance of expressing ourselves beyond physical limitations…a post-modern dream being realized" (100). The heavily implied utopian vision of a realm at last capable of providing expression outside the body—of moving "beyond" the physical—is made decidedly explicit by Edward Castronova in his description of synthetic worlds:

The Earth is very nice, but there are experiences we can imagine in our minds that we cannot have here. We cannot switch from male to female and back again; we cannot become fat or thin as we wish…People entering a synthetic world can have, in principle, any kind of body they desire. At a stroke, this feature of synthetic worlds removes from the social calculus all the unfortunate effects that derive from the body. (2005, 25-26)

Castronova's mention of the malleability of sex and the body in a digital world—the ability to switch "from male to female and back again"—would seem to offer a sort of disruptive, unhindered queer playground for identity, being freed from the "unfortunate effects" of the body. However, both queer critics and gaming critics have

found this dream of being "freed" from the body problematic. Mary Bryson, in an examination of lesbian online communities, finds that the physical world and its control of the body never fully leaves, as the enforcement of gendered behaviors, gestures, and identity performances online "caution against monolithic utopian conclusions concerning the transformative potential of the Internet for QLBT women" (2004, 249). Wilson, following her first, optimistic question about the potentiality of avatars in gaming, offers a more cynical second option, wondering if such hopes are "merely a symptom of digital utopianism" when in fact games are "bits and bytes and habitual social conventions [that] merely cycle through their programmatic repetitions at a remove from tangible encounters" (4). And in comparison to Castronova's dream of complete bodily freedom, Martti Lahti states that the procedural rhetoric of games in fact "sets limits to the mutability of the body," offering a limited range of forms for avatars that "invoke and reinforce a narrow set of highly codified, preexisting categories" (2003, 167). Thus, the utopic dream to leave the "social calculus" of the player's own body behind is hindered not only by the cybernetic interface between player and machine which *fuses* rather than liberates the body, but the constructed rules laid out within that interface for creating bodies which so often adhere to the social conventions the player potentially sought to escape.

Penetrating the Facility: Kanji's Queer Panic

It would then seem more productive, rather than pursuing potentially non-existent digital utopias, to seek out places of tension and rupture within the existing framework of gaming and see how a queer consideration of the body might reveal particularly fraught examples of this. I turn now to the image of Kanji and Naoto in *Persona 4* as an example of how the seemingly utopian possibilities of digital bodies are foreclosed and rendered inaccessible to specifically queer characters—and how these foreclosures draw attention to themselves, thus breaking down the apparent "resolution" to gendered identity that the player participates in bringing about. *Persona 4*'s plot revolves around a murder mystery in a mostly quiet Japanese town, where people have abruptly disappeared only to later turn up dead. Upon investigating, the player discovers the existence of an alternate world that these victims have been thrown into; within the world, the abducted individual comes face to face with their "shadow," an embodiment of their deepest fears, and is eventually destroyed by the shadow if the player does not intervene in time. As the male leader of a group of adventuring teenagers, the player is tasked with the goal of entering this alternate universe and—

through the process of fighting various enemies across multiple floors of themed dungeons—reaching and saving each abducted person before their shadow awakens.

These events eventually bring about Naoto's arrival in the town, summoned by local police to help investigate the crimes. When first introduced, she is performing the identity of a male, cross-dressing as a boy ace detective to investigate the details of the murders—and her first source of questioning is Kanji. As the son of a textile shop owner, Kanji's natural gifts for sewing and design cause him to be ostracized by his peers, leading to him reimagining himself as a leather-clad fighter who regularly gets into battles with peers and police. A later conversation reveals that this reimagining was linked not only to his sewing, but his desires as well; early encounters with girls were mostly unsuccessful, and as Kanji admits, "So I started thinking…What if I'm the type who never gets interested in girls? And I couldn't accept that, so I kept spinning it around and around in my head." It is thus appropriate that the player's first encounter with Kanji is happening upon him talking to Naoto, who is still performing as a boy and asking questions about the recent murders. Misinterpreting her "interest" in him as potentially romantic, Kanji mutters under his breath as she walks away, "Did he say he was interested? He's a guy…and I'm a guy…But he's interested in me?"

From the outset, the two are linked through a queer cycle of performativity and interest: Kanji acting more "manly" to disguise his potential fear at being gay and seeing Naoto as both threat and possible liaison, and Naoto dressing as a man in order to be the detective she has always aspired to and to satisfy her interest in the case. Their queerness is constantly alluded to in comments by the player's teammates, noting that "I get this weird feeling about them" and that "there's something funny going on here—I can sense it." What exactly is "funny" becomes evident upon Kanji's abduction and appearance on television at night, where his "shadow"—having switched his usual attire of leather for nothing more than a few small scraps of cloth—appears in the midst of a giant steamy bathhouse and speaks to the viewers in an incredibly exaggerated feminine lisp: "Hel-*lo*, dear viewers… it's time for 'Bad, Bad Bathhouse.' Tonight, I'll introduce a superb site for those searching for sublime love that surpasses the separation of the sexes. I'm your host, Kanji Tatsumi, serving you this scandalously special sneak-in report! Goodness gracious, just *imagine* the things that might happen to me there!"

The clear resemblance to a modern reality show, meant for the "dear viewers" who will have a chance to peek into Kanji's scandalous desires, at once invokes the voyeuristic

pleasure of viewing a forbidden desire while also mimicking the player's own tenuous relationship between spectator and actor while playing the game itself. As Marie-Laure Ryan notes,

without [the] possibility of watching an image of the game-world, players would have no idea of the consequences of their actions, and they would not be able to play the game intelligently. This means that players are not only agents but also spectators of their own pretended actions. The game experience is therefore halfway between living life and watching a movie (2006, 190).

In this case, the game suggests that the player imagine herself as the audience to (and thus non-active participant in) Kanji's queer desires, yet it is precisely due to the player's actions in moving the plot forward that such an imagination comes to fruition; they will not just "imagine" the "things that might happen to me in there," but will actively bring them about by progressing further into the level. In fact, by progressing through the level, some of those "things" will in fact happen to the player's avatar *as well*, collapsing the barrier between the viewed queer subject who has things happen "to me" and the viewer who "sneaks in" to watch.

Perhaps most intriguingly, *Persona 4* explicitly invites the player to recognize how her own desires have not only continued these deviant actions, but even shaped the environment they take place in—only to quickly shut off this revelation. Should the player reach the last "true" dungeon of the game, the final boss—a goddess who inflicts the world with the heavy fog and shadows of the other dimension—reveals to the party that the game's dungeons (known collectively as the Midnight Channel) were brought into being by those *who watch*, not just those within it: "it was always your individual wills that would determine what appeared on it. Humans ache to expose their suppressed sides, while the prying eyes around them are curious to see them laid bare. The want to show, and the want to see…I granted a 'window' that catered to both." This tension between "showing" and "seeing," which lingers at the very heart of the player/avatar relationship, is thrown into disarray, along with the player's complicity in the queer desires placed on display before her. At the last possible moment of gameplay (and, depending on the player, as much as 80 to 90 hours of game time from the narrative's origins), the game throws an abrupt wrench in the gears in terms of the player's relationship to bodies within the game—and then, by killing the boss and destroying the Channel to "win" the game, requests that the player move on as if no such revelation took place.

Kanji's particular level within the Midnight Channel is, as previously mentioned, a large wooden bathhouse that the player must fight through, attempting to pick out enemies in the midst of the lingering steam which covers most of the scenery. The motif of steam, while clearly playing on the "steaminess" of Kanji's suppressed desires, also points to the larger rhetoric of concealment and uncertainty. As the player moves through the dungeon, her spatial experience mimics the larger confusion of Kanji's sexual needs: objects appear and disappear, bodies are harder to locate. Along the way, Kanji's shadow continues to stress the queer context of the level, lisping to the player that "at last, I've *penetrated* the facility" and that this "steamy paradise" has his body "tingling with excitement"; he then urges the player "onward and deeper" to find him, moving closer to the intended goal of a "charming encounter." In many ways, the level becomes a body itself for the player to queerly experience via the avatar, penetrating deeper (often literally penetrating, as the main character's weapon is a large sword) with each floor of the dungeon and experiencing a set of increasingly sexualized enemies—large snakes, cupids with bows and arrows, and finally muscled wrestlers—in pursuit of finally reaching the central "charming" encounter with Kanji. The "tingling excitement" of the shadow's body is passed to the player through the conduit of the avatar, as the growing difficulty and added tension of approaching the boss battle as each floor is defeated inspire a physical reaction in the player as well.

When the player at last reaches Kanji, the game reveals him in a heated debate with his shadow, who at last explicitly invokes the word 'queer' while declaring *women* to be the source of all his problems:

Ohh, how I hate girls. So arrogant and self-centered. They cry if you get angry, they gossip behind your back, they spread nasty lies…they look at me like I'm some disgusting THING and say that I'm a weirdo. Laughing at me, all the while! "You like to sew? What a queer!" "Painting is so not you." "But you're a guy." "Why don't you act like a guy?" "Why aren't you manly?" What does it mean to "be a guy"? What does it mean to be "manly"? Girls are so scary…Men are much better. They'd never say those awful, degrading things. Yes, I vastly prefer men.

Each comment links to a question of performativity, with—in a rather fascinating inversion of hegemonic expectations—the female community as arbiters and controllers of heteronormative behavior, while the male community offers acceptance, respect, and the freedom to determine manliness. Being a "queer," rather than a label instituted by male peers as a failure to meet certain expectations of behavior, is here

declared by the shadow as a failure to live up to the *other* sex's assumptions of male identity. Yet the shadow's idyllic construction of a safe space within the confines of male discourse intriguingly both elides the prominent existence of homosocial communities where men *do* say those "awful, degrading things" in judgment of behavior **[1]** while at the same time highlighting the extent of the fantasy necessary to imagine the Midnight Channel—or any environment—as a place where the rules of masculinity no longer apply. In order to sustain this dream (and in a decidedly Foucauldian move) the shadow's language also suggests a replacement of bodies for discourse: men are preferred because of what they might *not say,* rather than the previously mentioned desire for what they might *do*. The body-driven dream of "things that might happen to me there" is reassembled into the avoidance of masculine labeling through language. Thus again, the "social calculus of the body" decidedly intervenes within the digital fantasy of the bathhouse; the previously quasi-utopian landscape of unrestricted queer play provides as chimeric a potential for escaping the defining structures of the body as the shadow's imagined male discourse community.

The weight and expectation of "manliness" bleeds over into the boss battle that follows, as the shadow transforms into a large, muscular body divided down the middle into white and black halves; the two large arms carry Mars symbols as weapons, while Kanji's torso emerges out of the neck surrounded by roses. It is flanked by two similarly muscular servants, titled "Nice Guy" and "Tough Guy," that respectively heal the shadow and attack the player. While there is a clear evoking and mingling of the gay manga genres known as *bara* and *yaoi* (*bara* being akin to a more masculine, "bear" depiction of gay desire, while *yaoi* takes a more feminine approach) in the two wrestlers, the shadow's neck wreath, and the roles of effeminate "nice guy" and overtly masculine "tough guy," the split black/white appearance of all three bodies also indicates a mixing and rupturing of sexual expectations along the lines of race as well as gender. The shadow's repeated taunt during the battle, claiming "You don't accept me! You'll never accept me," further stresses the threat these queer bodies represent to the larger social order—and subsequently, the bodies are knocked out of existence by the player and her party of fellow adventurers. Kanji is "saved" from his shadow by her efforts, and in a scene meant to show his "acceptance" of his fears, claims that the issue was never sexuality at all: "I've known all this time I had something like you [the shadow]. It ain't a matter of guys or chicks. I'm just scared shitless of being rejected. I'm a total pansy who tries to make everyone hate me."

The sidestepping of "something *like* you" suggests the unspeakability of Kanji's queerness; indeed, the only specific invocation of his sexuality is the "queer" epithet ascribed to the girls at school. Yet for the remainder of the game it hovers, and the threat of his body disrupts the normative homosocial space inhabited by the player avatar and his friends. One scene in particular highlights this tension: on a school camping trip, Kanji shares a tent with the player and fellow adventurer Yosuke. After a short conversation, Yosuke begins to quiz Kanji, asking, "This is as good a time as any, so I want you to be honest with us. A-are you really…you know?" Kanji's response—"Am I really what?"—is met with an allusion to the even more unspeakable act: "What I mean is, uh…are we gonna be safe alone with you?" Despite the player's various forays into demon-filled dungeons, wielding massive weaponry, and casting magical spells, what constitutes a risk to "safety" is not the threat of monsters but the lurking possibility of the queer body within the player's midst. For the rest of the game, then, Kanji will be on a quest to "prove" that his desires follow a non-queer path—but as hard as he tries, the body he feels the closest attraction to is still his queer partner, Naoto.

"You Needn't Suffer Anymore": Naoto's Impossible Needs

Sometime after Kanji is rescued from the shadow world, the player discovers that Naoto, in an attempt to discover the culprit behind the kidnappings, has allowed herself to be abducted. At this point, the knowledge of her identity as a girl is still hidden; the police and school community believe her to be "the Detective Prince," heir to a lineage of male detectives from the Shirogane family. After being thrown into the other world, however, a dark, imposing image of Naoto appears on television at midnight, declaring to viewers, "I will be experimenter and experimentee both in a forbidden yet wonderful bodily alteration process! You shall witness my departure into a new realm…The moment of a new birth! From the chosen day forth, I shall walk a completely different path in life! And I will share this glorious occasion, this memorable day, with all of you!" As the shadow walks away, its surroundings look like what appears to be a futuristic laboratory, surrounded by blinking lights and terminals while bathed in an eerie green hue.

Here the game immediately establishes an epistemological model for experiencing Naoto's "other" self, as upon reaching the laboratory through exploring the shadow world, the dungeon is described as "a secret lair for a superhero"—somewhere hidden away and escaped to as a means of exchanging identities. Unlike the majority of the game's dungeons, where the player ascends a series of floors to reach a final boss battle,

Naoto's dungeon is a descent downward; the player moves spatially deeper into the mystery of Naoto's identity, and is forced to obtain and locate a series of keys that "identify" them as able to pass into further restricted areas. In fact, they must backtrack at one point to an already-cleared floor and open a locked "research" section in order to progress further. The linear progression of climbing upward to a set goal is replaced with a winding set of locked doors and shifting targets. Even the usual premise of the shadow taunting the player forward (or pleading for rescue) is replaced by a mechanical alarm system: "ATTENTION INTRUDERS! LEAVE THE FACILITY IMMEDIATELY! I REPEAT: LEAVE THE FACILITY IMMEDIATELY!" Instead of encouragement, the player is warded off and redirected, signifying a discovery not meant to be found.

After overcoming these obstacles and reaching the bottom of the dungeon, however, the player discovers Naoto in a room with one particular centerpiece: a gleaming operating table complete with blood-stained laser and an enormous oscillating saw. This table is the place where Naoto will undergo the aforementioned body alteration procedure, intended to allow Naoto to at last become a fully male detective. In a mixture of Naoto's shame of both being young and cross-gendered, the shadow mimics a moment from her childhood, weeping gently while saying "I wanna be a grown-up. I wanna be a big boy right now…Then they'll see who I am." Taunting Naoto's inability to fully complete this change until now, the shadow marks the distinction between the masculine name Naoto has assumed and the failure of her body to uphold it: "But a name doesn't change the truth. It doesn't let you cross the barrier between the sexes. How could you become an ideal man when you were never a male to begin with?" The shadow then turns to the operating table as the means of enacting this barrier crossing, a process through which Naoto can enter the male-oriented society of police work and thus "needn't suffer anymore."

In centering this scene of digital queer unveiling—of Naoto's "coming out," so to speak —around the image of the operating table, *Persona 4* depicts a complex weaving of the desire to modify the physical flesh mixed with the supposed utopian ease of fluid bodies within gaming. Jay Prosser, who has written extensively on transsexuality and the process of transforming the body physically, notes in his book *Second Skins* that "[i]f the urge to break out of one's skin or bodily encasing is not a metaphor, the skin—as the surface mediating 'inside' and 'outside' the body—presents itself as the point of contact between material body and body image, between visible and felt matter" (1998, 70). If the avatar is seen to be similarly as a point of contact between the material body and a

desired body image—a place in which the flesh can be broken out from—what significance can be taken from the game's insistence on directing us to what will occur to Naoto's digital flesh? Given Castronova's dream of sex exchange "at a stroke," Naoto's virtual body is still governed by the fact that she is not a "real" man; the utopian vision of barrier disruption is promptly restrained by the shadow's reminder that merely "a name" cannot change bodily truth. Naoto's potentially queer body, even within a world that can alter the depiction of the avatar with a few changes of lines of code, can instead only be transformed through the tearing and violence of the saw; even the image of the laser, a futuristic means of cutting and severing, is shown to be covered with blood and fluids. The inescapability of the skin is once again placed before the player, as the dream of being free of the flesh in inhabiting a digital avatar suddenly points to the "residue" of the body within the game.

More than this, the possibility of bodily transformation is not an act to be desired, but a terrifying, disruptive process; the saw gleams, hovers over the table menacingly, and in the battle that follows, the boss taunts the player with the endless threat of cutting flesh: "No no, that will never do! Patients must lie still for me to drill proper holes into them!" At one point, the player and his party members are referred to as "irritating patients," and the offer that "you'll all become your new selves" is given a decidedly menacing edge. Far from a liberating process, the potentially transformative body is rendered as a subject under attack, at risk from being pierced, shattered, and ultimately eliminated. The fear of losing wholeness—of having holes drilled in the self—is, in many ways, a reaction to the implied physical connection between the avatar and the player, where the player recognizes damage done to the avatar's body as happening to "me." As Bob Rehak notes, "imagining ourselves as the addressee of the computer screen's discourse, the 'I' misrecognizing itself in the computer's 'YOU,' is part of video games' lure" (2003, 112). The game constantly invokes this relationship between the self and other, as each encounter with a shadow begins with a character's denial of the shadow's role in their identity, declaring "You're not me!", only to realize after fighting that "I was wrong…I am you. And you are me." The struggle between this dynamic—what is both "me" and "not me"—plays out continually in *Persona 4*, often threatening to derail the experience of gameplay into what Bogost calls "simulation fever," where "the struggle between the omissions and inclusions of a source system and the player's subjective response to those decisions" throws the player out of the illusion of the game and calls attention to the constructed nature of its ideology (2006, 132).

In response to this threat, the game deploys none other than Kanji, who in the midst of the revelations about Naoto simply declares that "we'll just do our job and kick the shadow's ass." The irony of this statement—of the player "doing their job" to defeat Naoto's queer self—relates to the impossibility of doing anything *other* than that job. The player is bound to this negative relationship with the shadow precisely due to the form of *Persona 4*'s encoded narrative; no possible outcome exists in the game code for Naoto to undergo the process of transformation, nor is there any other option given to the player than to fight against her achieving it. As Henry Jenkins notes, the struggle of developing a gaming narrative revolves around "trying to determine how much plot will create a compelling framework and how much freedom players can enjoy at a local level without totally derailing the larger narrative trajectory" (2004, 126). While the saw looms threateningly over Naoto's digital body, it will never fall—precisely because the game's narrative is structured in such a way that it will never supply the player with the freedom to pursue a future where it does. Losing to the boss loops the player back to the main menu, where they will fight the shadow again and again until it is defeated. The narrative is, in a sense, stuck in an atrophied state until the desired outcome of defeating the boss is accomplished.

While the game offers no freedom in terms of offering Naoto the prospect of transsexuality, it does, however, allow the player to push her towards heteronormativity; later in the game, the player can choose to begin dating Naoto, where dialogue options allow the player to tell her that "they are happy that she's a girl," and in a direct connection to her performance of gender, encourage her to wear a form-fitting red dress and speak in a higher, more feminine pitch. In the original Japanese version of the game, the encouragement is even more jarring; rather than asking Naoto to speak in a higher voice, the player can tell Naoto to stop using the masculine pronoun for "I" and switch to the feminine version—to literally assume a new name for the self that matches the gender of her body. Similarly, while the player can initiate a relationship with Kanji as friends, no homosexual possibilities exist for the player to pursue with him. To answer Bogost's question of instituted moralities, the game's rules define a moral outcome in which heterosexual gender performances are allowed to be shaped, while the presence of queer potentiality is never anything but a threatening, sinister shadow that must be physically battled and destroyed.

If we examine that image of the shadow—specifically Naoto's second "shadow," the version that appears in the boss battle—a further ironic twist appears. The most dangerous form of Naoto's body, which can actually fight and kill the player, is that of

Haraway's cyborg: a half-machine, half-organic flying body whose brain is exposed and metal limbs gleam. It jokes with the player, taunts them, embraces an ironic subject position. The disruptive, utopian, perverse queer cyborg emerges fully manifested in a digital realm, and the player's sole task is to ensure it is destroyed. Far from Filiciak's utopian embrace of hybrid identities, the cyborg is instead situated as the major obstacle in the player's path to continue onward, and the goal of gameplay shifts to saving Naoto from its queer influence. Such a relationship elides out of memory the always-already cyborgian nature of the player's interaction with a mechanical interface through playing a game, and sets up in its place an oppositional divide between the "natural" bodies of the player's party and the "perverse" body of the cyborg other.

Furthering the epistemological construct surrounding Naoto, the shadow (unlike any other boss) is able to "read" the player and their weaknesses, changing its attacks accordingly and "knowing" the right abilities to use while regularly switching its own weaknesses. Yet this knowledge is not sufficient; as the battle continues, this mechanized Naoto begins to slump under the player's attacks, a visual indicator of the player's success as well as a sign of its inevitable doom. There is no way around watching the cyborg Naoto lose; at the scene of its death after being pummeled by the player, its wing engines pop and burst, hovering in air for a few moments before crumpling to the ground and evaporating in a cloud of black smoke. The game provides no residue of the cyborg's demise—it fades into nothingness, an aberration meant only to exist for a moment until conquered by the player.

Coda: "Who I really am"

As the smoke fades, the game cuts to Naoto's "real" body getting up and speaking to the party. After a scene of reconciliation and confession about Naoto's cross-dressing, a female character declares to her, "You must know already what you yearn for isn't to become an adult or become a boy"—to which Naoto replies, "You're absolutely right." Within the confines of the game's procedural rhetoric, Naoto will always come to this answer, always assert the primacy of her "natural body" and foreclose the utopic possibilities of change with the conservative sanctity of the unified flesh. As she states just a few lines later, "What I should yearn for…no, what I must strive for isn't to become a man. It's to accept myself for who I really am." The question of "who I really am," instead of an open ground of experimentation and fluidity, is in *Persona 4* a question always linked to a coherent, controlling body; thus it is not surprising that a few scenes later, when all the characters are brought to the doctor for a medical

checkup, a character reveals the news that Naoto in fact has the largest breasts of any female member of the team. Even while bound and hidden most of the game, Naoto's femaleness—what she "really is"—must be asserted and reminded to the player.

And who she "really is" is crucial most of all to Kanji, the queer colleague she has been tied to from the outset. One final scene exemplifies the endlessly shifting and arbitrary grounds by which *Persona 4*—and all gendered performance—attempt to establish the "natural" boundaries of identity. Naoto, along with the other female members of the team, is eventually entered into a beauty pageant by Yosuke outside of her will. Protesting this turn of events, she considers turning to the school officials for help until Kanji insists otherwise. "I beg you, please be in it," he declares. "If you do, my, uh, *doubts* will finally be cleared." Turning to the one character denied the ability to change her gender, he makes his final plea: "C'mon! Make me a man!" The necessity of an affirmative gender performance—to know that what he wants is really and truly a *girl*—demands Kanji ask of Naoto the one thing she was unable to have: to be "made" a man. The impossibility of this request on multiple levels indicates the difficulty of Castronova's dream of leaving "the social calculus" of the body behind in the digital realm. Far from being able to shift from female to male and back again, the queer bodies at the heart of *Persona 4* find themselves turning to one another for answers to "who I really am"—and find that answer still out of reach. It is in the tension that process brings about that we might find fruitful ground for queer and game studies to meet, to interact, and examine why that question continues to find an answer locked in the rules of the body.

Notes

[1] The idea of a male space outside the rule of female intrusion—where women are seen as annoyances and hindrances that ask the wrong questions and infringe upon male performance—echoes in a rather noticeable way the larger defensive rhetoric surrounding game space by the male-dominated player community; one need look no further than Anita Sarkeesian's attempts to produce her feminist "Tropes vs. Women" series with an entry on video games to see the response from the male gaming community, with "tits or back to the kitchen, bitch" one of the many hundreds of derogatory comments left on her YouTube channel (Watercutter, 2012).

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2 THOUGHTS ON ""C'MON! MAKE ME A MAN!": PERSONA 4, DIGITAL BODIES, AND QUEER POTENTIALITY"

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