

“My Games are . . . Unconventional”: Intersections of game and BDSM studies

Sexualities

0(0) 1–17

© The Author(s) 2020



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1363460720964092

journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Tanja Sihvonen**

University of Vaasa, Finland

J Tuomas Harviainen 

Tampere University, Finland

Abstract

This article examines connections between games and BDSM (consensual bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism), theoretically speaking (in their respective research areas) as well as in practice. A common grounding behind these connections is the consideration of play as a foundational component in games and game studies as well as in BDSM practices and the studies of BDSM as a cultural phenomenon. We identify five sets of relevant connections. First, there are direct comparisons between the two types of play. Second, several live-action role-playing games have been made about BDSM, or for BDSM. Third, many other games have borrowed ideas from BDSM, as well, as have some BDSM activities, in turn, from games and play. Fourth, queer game studies frequently discuss subversive and transgressive play practices, which provide a fruitful context for analyzing play elements in BDSM, and BDSM-inspired elements in games. And fifth, both games and BDSM are frequently discussed in the research contexts related to performance, theater, and rituals, which forms a potential bridge between these activities. Through this five-strand exploratory analysis, we show how deeply interconnected these two realms are, even if the connection is only rarely mentioned, and to this date, not fully recognized as a valid research topic.

Keywords

Games, play, sadomasochism, BDSM, role-play, role-playing games, queer games

Corresponding author:

J Tuomas Harviainen, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland.

Email: tuomas.harviainen@tuni.fi

Introduction

Game studies and research on sex, sexuality, and gender have many overlapping interests, although the intersections between these areas of inquiry have not always been explicit. Research drawing from these two areas and combining the scholarly interests of both of them has, to date, been surprisingly rare. Largely building on queer, fringe, and non-normative sexuality and sexual practices in games and play (e.g. Consalvo, 2003; Ruberg, 2019; Shaw, 2013; Sihvonen and Stenros, 2018, 2019), theoretical insights on sexuality, gender, and eroticism within the field of game studies have shown promising signs of expansion in the recent years. Studies of sexuality and gender, on the other hand, have dealt with themes such as same-sex sexuality, trans issues, kink, and non-monogamy for a long time, but only in the past 15 years have they begun to particularly consider the importance of materialist media or specific distribution practices in negotiating these (see O’Riordan and Phillips, 2007; Rambukkana, 2015). Furthermore, research on play—a key concept in both fields—as an essential constituent of sexual practices is currently helping game researchers and sexuality scholars to engage in closer dialogue (see e.g. Paasonen, 2017, 2018).

Game studies and sexuality studies thus share much common ground, which can be seen in the area combining the research interests of games and BDSM (consensual bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism). Theoretically speaking, tensions created by rule-based power structures and limitations to agency can be regarded structurally similar in both fields. The genre of games most suitable for this kind of exploratory probing is the role-playing game (RPG) with its focus on characters, narratives, and performances, and with its reliance on both pre-scripted and ad hoc storylines, or progression of events. Although we focus on looking into the intersections between BDSM and PRGs, in particular, we do not want to suggest that only RPGs are interesting in this respect. Also simulations, adventure games, sex games, and so on can fruitfully be analyzed in this context, and we eagerly anticipate reading such studies in the future.

It could be argued that digital RPGs, at least in their multiplayer forms, are equally well suited for BDSM-related activities as live action role-play (larp), but it is likely that in single-player RPGs BDSM is equally common, albeit probably taking very different forms. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that role-play can also take place outside of what we call “role-playing games”; role-play can be observed in the player’s lusty attitude in many kinds of game settings (Stenros and Sihvonen, 2020). In single-player games like *The Sims*, for example, decisively creating power imbalances and certain types of relationship structures between player characters is an essential part of the role-play possibilities harnessed by the player (see Sihvonen, 2011: 153–154). This discussion exemplifies the important conceptual division between game and play: games are rule-bound objects and systems, whereas play is an activity that has many forms and can take place in relation to games or outside of them (see e.g. Harviainen and Stenros, in press; Klabbers, 2009).

In this theoretical article, we examine the ways in which games or gameplay and BDSM as practices, as well as game studies and research on kink, have interacted over the years. We also look at some areas in which they could have interacted, had people seen overlapping interests and references. Using a semi-systematic review, we identify five separate yet interconnected strands that together form an uneasy but hopefully inspiring corpus of texts. Through the review, we aim at answering the research question: *what are the interconnections that can be found between gameplay and BDSM on the one hand, and game studies and BDSM studies, on the other?* As we argue below, this is a connection which makes certain phenomena in human sexuality particularly visible, and therefore carries significance far beyond the confines of the at first glance quite limited-seeming topic.

Background and methodology

“BDSM,” and “kink,” “somasochism,” and “SM” are umbrella concepts, under which fall a variety of practices and thought structures (Harviainen, 2015a; Weinberg, 2006). These labels denote both discursive spheres and particular subcultures, out of which “sadism” can conceptually be traced back to the works of Donatien Alphonse François de Sade, and “masochism” to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s novel *Venus in Furs* (*Venus im Pelz*, 1870), and the coining of the appellation by sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing in 1886 from the two, for the purpose of defining them as pathologies. It must, however, be already noted here that while de Sade’s works at the surface may look similar to modern-day conceptions of somasochism (and inspire instances of such play), and while they certainly contain instances of sadistic play and games, they almost solely deal with *abuse*. This must be differentiated from BDSM, where consent is a defining factor (e.g. Mokros et al., 2010; Nitschke et al., 2009). This parallels the ways in which the Abu Ghraib torture photographs from the Iraq War in 2004 did not depict somasochism, no matter the allusions to such supposed similarities in the popular press (Weiss, 2011). Von Sacher-Masoch’s work (1870) can be considered to be on the borderline, as the protagonist very clearly pressures his partner, at least early on, to participate in fulfilling his fantasies of humiliation.

BDSM refers to *consensual* erotic experiences between individuals that encompass a wide range of interactions. Classically, for Freud, sadism and masochism are as if active and passive forms of the same “perversion” that are inextricably linked and often found in the same person (Freud, 1938: 570). It is quite likely that dominance and submission have always been part of human sexuality and erotic play, but naming these “common perversions” also gave people the possibility to claim these titles as both private and collective identities (see Rambukkana, 2007: 69–70). Some of the practices and identities counted within the field of BDSM are furthermore only connected by association, not by any similarity (Alison et al., 2001). For example, as individual activities bondage, spanking, and exaggerated dominant self-presentation have little in common, yet they may well be (and often are) present in the same situation. Naturally, this identity-centric view of BDSM

practices has accentuated their positive interpretation, which is a fairly new development in the long history of regarding them as pathologies and even criminal offenses.

For the purposes of this article “BDSM,” “kink,” “somasochism,” and “SM” are used interchangeably, although the authors are well aware of the distinct conceptual, practical, and political fields that these appellations open up. The discursive spheres brought about by these varying concepts is an enticing topic of its own but cannot effectively be summarized and operationalized in this article that is focused on the interlinkages between games and BDSM as well as the research on both fields. We have therefore made the decision that in the context of this article we will talk about “BDSM” as a general concept referring to dominance and submission as erotic practices, aesthetics, and performances, and situate BDSM research alongside studies of similar topics and themes within the field of game studies. For the sake of readability, we at times use the word “somasochism” interchangeably with BDSM. In cases where a specific activity is compared, we use a specific term, such as D/s, which denotes a Dominant/submissive dynamic and/or relationship.

If somasochism and BDSM have been difficult objects of study for academic research—even in research areas of sexual practices and subcultures—game studies has had an equally (if not more) complicated relationship with sexual themes over the years (Harviainen et al., 2016; Wysocki and Lauteria, 2015). This applies to both game design and game research, so it is not surprising that explicit mentions and manifestations of BDSM-related topics are few and far between. There are a few notable exceptions of games that employ a mechanic or a viewpoint familiar to us from BDSM. For instance, Robert Yang’s indie games *Hurt Me Plenty* (2014) and *Rinse and Repeat* (2015) explore power dynamics and the importance of consent through play mechanics that are clearly BDSM-inspired (Dale, 2015). The issue of non-consent in games and game design is also a fascinating topic (e.g. games that are “so hard it hurts,” and such examples as the “flying penises” attacks in *Second Life*, and the off-character gendered violence against queer and “non-normative” players in many massively multiplayer online worlds; see Bakioglu, 2009). Investigating the implications of consent breaches in games/play and BDSM would merit a study of their own.

In the field of game studies, there are only a few recent examples of explicitly BDSM-related research. Victor Navarro-Remesal and Shaila Garcia-Catalán’s (2015) article employs the concept of “directed freedom” while looking into BDSM as an inspiration for the construction of game player’s agency, and Bonnie Ruberg’s dissertation (2015) proposes the use of kink as an analytical lens framing “the relationship between media object (video game) and subject (player) by emphasizing the importance of giving voice to bodies in pain” (p. 69). The recent thesis by Maxwell Lander (2019) examines ways in which queer BDSM can inform the design of independent games. Despite these examples, it is difficult to delineate where exactly existing research on games, or the design of games, displays clear connections to BDSM. As an indirect consequence of this,

this study consists of a convenience sample collected by the authors over a period of nine years in connection to their other research projects. We have selected representative strands of existing intersections that go beyond the surface.

As a consequence, certain types of interlinkages have purposefully been ignored here. These are all of the type in which representations of characters and BDSM practices have been used in games purely as visual or audiovisual elements of “decoration,” such as a character walking to a kinky playroom in a video game, as in e.g. *Max Payne* (Remedy Entertainment, 2001), the display of BDSM paraphernalia as scenic props, and so forth. While such props and playspaces are in many ways essential for certain types of BDSM behavior and play (Siegel, 1995), they do not alone qualify as anchors in considering the associations between games/play and BDSM. In essence, just because the stage has been decorated with elements commonly associated with BDSM, it does not mean the activity or interaction that takes place on that stage is sadomasochistic. However, if game elements (for example, narrative devices) address the topic, as in the case of the non-player character Millie Perkins in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar Games, 2004), the situation is very different.

Therefore, in this article, BDSM is expected to manifest itself through actual gameplay practices or game mechanics rather than aesthetic choice in order to be incorporated in our five-strand categorization. Likewise, not all BDSM is sexual, and not everyone has a sexual relationship or use value to their BDSM practices (Newmahr, 2011; see also Cardoso, 2018; Williams et al., 2016)—a borderline that is very difficult to define in the first place. There are player behaviors that seem to incorporate “non-sexual” BDSM practices, such as the use and investigation of game characters in expressing hurt and “moaning,” as possible non-explicit modes of titillation. We therefore focus on the sexual side of the phenomenon, as no research appears to exist on the connections of gaming and non-sexual BDSM. When it comes to digital games, the enactment of game rules and mechanics is thought to include play practices resulting from mods and the incorporation of modding practices, as well.

In the following sections, we identify and examine five essential strands that host actual, practice-related connections, coming from both the interlinkages between gameplay and BDSM as embodied practices, as well as game research and the research on BDSM with a more theoretical orientation. By doing so, we bring forth both new knowledge (Galliers, 1992) and provide future researchers with a reading list of essential works that exist in the wheel, so that no proverbial wheels need to be re-invented. We believe that together, these strands illustrate the many ways in which the two areas intersect and converge, and thereby also contribute to the understanding of certain forms of sexual expression as a kind of play, a topic to which we turn next, in the first strand.

Strand one: Direct comparisons

The first strand comprises a handful of scholarly texts that discuss a direct link between BDSM and games. They can furthermore be divided into two central

categories: (1) comparisons and (2) studies of online play. Only a few comparisons exist, if one takes a purist stance on what counts as gameplay (more on this below, under Strand Five). For example, Suits (1978) argues that any sexual activity that does not focus on achieving orgasms can be seen as a type of game. While he does not mention BDSM (or its kin) per se, many sadomasochistic practices can be regarded to fulfill this criterion. Before him, Georges Bataille (1952) used games as a metaphor for the alternative morality that can take place in transgressive sexual behavior, an issue that brings forth also the challenges with non-consensual sadism in fiction (see e.g., Beauvoir, 1953; Carter, 1978). And for Betcher (1987) and Sutton-Smith (1997), sexuality is a form of adult play (see also Stenros, 2015). Yet in all of these cases, if we want to see a connection to BDSM, we need to read between the lines.

Explicit mentions that fall into this category are rare. Cross and Matheson (2006), in their study of perspectives on sadomasochism and practitioners' viewpoints and values, note that some forms of online BDSM role-play resemble tabletop role-playing, and mention *Dungeons & Dragons* as a comparison point. This is an apt comparison that goes beyond just online environments: the role of a dominant in a BDSM session has scripting power very close to that of a Dungeon Master in tabletop RPGs (Harviainen, 2015b). In contrast, the similarly named Dungeon Monitors of BDSM parties (e.g. Weiss, 2011) hold the power to stop or prevent certain activities, but they do not participate in the scripting or direction of sessions, and thus fall outside of the role-playing part. Harviainen (2011a, 2011b) has done a trait-analytic comparison between physically conducted sadomasochistic play and live-action role-playing. The ways in which BDSM sessions are a type of play, but not games, have however been discussed by numerous authors over time.

For example, Margot Weiss (2011), referring to Bateson's (1955) views, notes how a session is a form of play, set apart from regular life with its own rules. She furthermore accurately points out (Weiss, 2011: viii) that the word "*play*" may in this context refer to an instance of BDSM activity ("enjoys some play") or a type of activity ("wax play"), and is also sometimes used to describe BDSM events ("play parties"; see also e.g. Franklin-Reible, 2006; Newmahr, 2010; and especially Simula, 2018 for a review of many topical works). It is likewise certainly no accident that the title of Staci Newmahr's (2011) book includes the word "*Playing*," in addition to discussing the ways in which risk-taking in sadomasochism can be seen as *edgeplay*, in relation to the *edgework* that is necessary to maintain the skills and competencies that a practitioner of higher-risk BDSM requires. Playfulness appears to be, in fact, a key factor for many BDSM practitioners (see Prior and Williams, 2015).

Since the seminal work of Geoff Mains (1984), the word "*play*" has been intermixed with the way sadomasochist activities are often performed, even when that play is serious, or someone's everyday lifestyle (see Dancer et al., 2006). In this kind of way, "*play*" had been used already earlier, especially by Michel Foucault (e.g., 1984). His usage of the words play and game, however, is rather simplistic

from the perspective of contemporary—let alone current-day—game studies. This conceptual context is furthermore made even more problematic by considering the multiple interpretations of the French words “jeux/joier” in this regard (a similar, later challenge can be found in Faccio et al., 2016, regarding Italian words). In general BDSM-related literature, the word “play” in this context seems to be used to denote an activity that is (1) temporary, (2) not serious, and (3) enjoyable (e.g., Brandhurst, 2011). For example, in a non-BDSM context, Katherine Frank (2013) describes a gay male interviewee, who said that whenever he sees a park in a new city, he knows where to find “play” there.

Many authors have, furthermore, engaged with this topic under various terms, often focusing on the important concept of “fantasy” which, as pointed out by Bateson (1955), ties in many ways to activities of play or games. Williams and Storm (2012), for instance, discuss the ways in which professional dominatrices work with the fantasies of their clients. All of this ties into the ways in which the possibility of a playful approach to sexuality has become a new kind of standard in many parts of the world, due to reproductive control and the way it has liberated especially women to enjoy and explore their sexualities more freely, even if still often bound by societal expectations. Giddens (1993) calls this “plastic sexuality,” which is decentered, liberated from a direct tie to reproduction, and mainly conducted for the sake of pleasure. And while the oldest documented historical examples of what would now be termed sadomasochism were indeed tied to reproductive capability (see e.g. Harviainen, 2015a), it can be argued that in addition to same-sex erotic encounters, sadomasochism has been one of the few areas in which people have been able to experiment with their sexualities in a plastic, playful way for a long time before the advent of modern contraceptives. The discussion of that play as “play,” however, appears to be an invention only a few centuries old. While there are also similarities to “sacred kink” in modern pagan movements, and to the long-existing tradition of religious flagellation, BDSM stands apart from those activities precisely because of its playful nature.

It is thus no surprise that most of the direct connections we found in our study appear to better fit the second category, that of online versions of sadomasochistic practices. Brief examples of such include calls for the sense of authenticity in such play recorded by Mortensen (2003), a description of Gorean communities in the virtual world *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003) by Sixma (2009), and Frank’s (2013) forays into the study of various types of group sex online, rough play included. More extensive cases include Brown’s (2015) book on sexuality in online role-playing that includes material on, for instance, the enactment of rape fantasies in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), and Harviainen’s (2015b) study of game-like narratives in especially online sadomasochism. Many massively multiplayer online RPGs, such as *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*, indeed seem to have sparked BDSM-related play practices, and thus studies on sexuality and these games touch upon BDSM thematics, as well. Even more direct options for BDSM play can be found in the specialized player-created interactive mods for

single-player RPGs, such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011) (see Majkowski, 2019).

Strand two: Live-action role-playing

The second strand can be identified in the context of live-action role-playing, or larp, which has borrowed certain practices, such as safewords and consent negotiation mechanisms, from kink BDSM (e.g. Harviainen, 2011b). Another obvious connection can be discovered in their association with (theatrical) play (this will be further addressed under Strand Five). Larps and kink practices are easy bedfellows, as both are embodied and delimited activities involving an imbalance of power and guided by pre-set rules. What is interesting about these case examples is that the borrowing of rules and game mechanics appears to have been done separately in many different communities, and the source has been rather explicit. It appears that whereas many gaming communities have shied away from sex-related content, or have incorporated elements typical to toxic masculinity already decades before the #GamerGate movement (see, e.g. Fine, 1983), live-action role-players have had no problem borrowing ideas from BDSM communities, while keeping their games (when wanted) BDSM-free (see Koljonen et al., 2019).

Larps inspired by sadomasochism, or ones that explore kink themes, while clearly niche, are surprisingly numerous as well. Examples from around the world include the Finnish *SoftCore* and U.S.-based *Blue Threads* game series, and individual Nordic games such as *Inside Hamlet*; *Pan*; *Baphomet*, *Kink & Coffee*, and *Spells of Pain*. All of these examples date from this Millennium, with several of them having seen multiple runs in different countries. In such cases, the challenge appears to have been how to keep the role-playing activity in the center, without the games delving too deeply into only the sexual aspects (e.g. Harviainen, 2010). Advanced BDSM sessions, in turn, have also obviously borrowed elements from live-action role-playing, whether explicitly or just by similarity (Harviainen, 2011b). For example, people may create quite deep characters and scenarios (e.g. “interrogation of Jane, a spy, by Michael, a military officer, in the year 1941”) for BDSM purposes. In such a situation, the only thing setting the two activities apart from each other is the primary goal of the activity—whether the role-play is done for the sake of shared physical pleasure or for fostering further narratives.

Strand three: Adaptive ethics and practices

The third strand is a direct continuation of the previous one: the practical applications of BDSM culture in games also have theoretical implications. This discussion is just beginning to emerge, but some thinking has been done on how BDSM can help us better understand boundary phenomena related to games, such as the magic circle (Vossen, 2018). One example of this is work on pervasive gaming (play that takes place interspersed with everyday life; see Montola et al., 2009) and how

it draws in many ways on dynamics very similar to (or even derived from) the total power exchanges of 24/7 D/s arrangements (as per Dancer et al., 2006).

Another important theoretical area is situating BDSM in relation to play, and particularly norm-defying play (e.g. Stenros, 2015, 2018). We expect this area to significantly grow in the near future, as questions of in-game morality and its effects become more popular. They have likewise been with us, at least on an abstract level, for a long time: Huizinga (1939) already mentions alternative moralities, and Bataille's (1952) interpretation of the morality of play, mentioned above, builds on his talks with religion and game scholar Roger Caillois (Bataille, 1952), who was in turn influenced by Huizinga's views on the separation of play from mundane life. This is significant, because gameplay sets its own rules, which may contradict the moralities of everyday life.

In practice, this means that for a boxer, *not* to try to hit an opponent is the wrong thing (see Suits, 1978), whereas trying to hit someone in a bar brawl is not accepted by the law. In a similar fashion, the BDSM context often expects a dominant participant to hit a submissive participant, to humiliate them, and so forth (Harviainen, 2015a). The acceptance of this expectation is underscored by discursive means. For example, in a BDSM session one "gives" pain, rather than "inflicts" it. Through this method, the alternative morality of the situation is made clear, and more easily separated from, e.g., domestic violence. By setting and emphasizing the play frame, the participants protect themselves and each other, and distance themselves from the possibility of interpreting the activities as criminal offenses.

Strand four: Queer game studies

The fourth area of inquiry into the connections between gameplay and BDSM can be located in the emerging field of queer game studies. "Queer" in this context does not only refer to "sexually transgressive," but to the practices of doing something against the grain, in a subversive or dissident manner (see Sihvonen and Stenros, 2018, 2019). In this way, BDSM can loosely be grouped under queer or transgressive sexual practices, the analysis of which may benefit from queer theory and queer game studies (e.g. Ruberg and Phillips, 2018; Ruberg and Shaw, 2017), as well. For instance, the dialogue between Jack Halberstam's (2011) work on queer art of failure and Jesper Juul's (2013) work on failure in games has been insightful in relation to the masochism relating to subjecting oneself to the rules of game (Ruberg, 2017). Similarly, Ruberg (2018: 543) reminds us that queerness and games share an ethos characterized by play, as play figures in queer communities and BDSM practices in the language used, as well as in the ways play helps us disrupt and reimagine new ways of being and acting.

Queer game studies is an exciting, albeit relatively unestablished amalgam in itself. It is a compound of queer theory and game studies, and its direct linkages with BDSM practices are only emerging as of late (see, e.g. Lander, 2019; Ruberg, 2018). Queer game studies can perhaps most fruitfully be regarded as a context of

research which brings together diverging viewpoints on sexuality, in general, and aims at building theory around transgression, subversion, and “otherness” in sexual behaviors, orientations, and identities (e.g. Shaw, 2015). It also has an emphasized pragmatic motivation as it aims to advance the recognition of independent game designers (Ruberg, 2020) many of whom are working on issues and thematics related to non-normative sexuality and gender. There are interesting avenues that this field of inquiry has begun to explore, such as the work done in digital indie games where BDSM themes are explicitly investigated. In addition to Robert Yang’s work already mentioned, there are games such as *Mighty Jill Off* (Anthropy, 2008) and *Sex with Stalin* (Boobs Dev, 2019) that explicitly approach questions of pain, intimacy, and power in very different but equally enticing ways (see also Anthropy, 2012).

Strand five: Games, performance, and rituals

The fifth strand we have identified is more tenebrous than the others, but probably among the most important ones on this list. Many theoretical frameworks and research on both games and BDSM draw from the same roots, studies and viewpoints on rituals, performativity, drama, and theater. In a sense, a triangle of similarity could in many cases be drawn from the two connections, instead of the current v-shapes. For example, recent studies on BDSM as ritual (e.g. Carlström, 2015, 2016, 2018) reflect the same factors and elements as studies of games as rituals (e.g. Harviainen and Lieberoth, 2012). Likewise, already Mains (2002) noted as early as in the 1980s how much certain role-play oriented BDSM sessions resembled both rituals and psychodrama (see also Harviainen, 2011a; Martin, 2011).

BDSM is often linked to performativity, as well, because of the dramatic, accentuated performances of gender (Alison et al., 2001) and of power structures (Harviainen, 2015a). Yet analyses of its theatricality, compared to, for example, works on role-play as a form of, or related to, theater, are surprisingly rare. The key exception to this is Deleuze’s (1967) controversial piece, in which he draws from purely literary sources and concludes that BDSM is a theatrical, cold, and cruel activity. Edgley (2015), drawing on the works of Erving Goffman (a favorite of also many game scholars), presents a more balanced view on how the play can be prepared “backstage” but happens “front stage.” Edgley, however, claims that in [BD]SM, people do not think of themselves as “performing,” so the applicability of his ideas directly to game studies remains somewhat problematic. However, as Judith Butler (e.g. 1990) reminds us, those who do not see themselves as “performing” are a core component of performativity.

The performativity aspect of both gameplay and BDSM practices connects directly with classic discussions of games and rituals, and the similarities and relationships between them. For example, Johan Huizinga (1939) and Roger Caillois (1960, 1961) both observed the ways in which games, play, and rituals relate to each other, as activities with their separate rules and spatial presence

distinct from everyday life. Scholars of eroticism and performativity, in turn, have often been in close co-operation with researchers of rituals. As noted, Georges Bataille's (1952) views on sexual play were inspired by his discussions with Roger Caillois, and Richard Schechner's (e.g. 1988) highly influential writings on performativity gained their concepts of ritualistic and liminality from Victor Turner (e.g. 1982). These issues are vital for our understanding of sexuality as play and as playful, even if the concepts require one extra stage of transposition within the research that currently exists.

Discussion: Limits

It is important to note that in addition to the ones we have examined in this article, other discussions about the intersections of BDSM and games also do take place. However, they often happen in the outskirts of academia, in venues such as Lyst Summit, Arse Elektronika (e.g. Grenzfurthner et al., 2013), and *The Queerness and Games Conference*. These conventions and conferences do not necessarily always publish proceedings, which means the observations and conversations carried out there stay within the confines of the initiated and those at present. Furthermore, many of these events are oriented more toward practitioners than academics. As a result, what they do produce on the topic of BDSM and games among studies of sexuality and technology, for instance, is often of interest, but hard to cite—if one can get one's hands on the publications in the first place, that is.

Likewise, it is not exactly known how many live-action RPGs actually use mechanics, ideas, or topics borrowed from BDSM communities, or vice versa. Documentation on such ephemeral play and gaming practices is still sparse, and its dispersal would possibly be stigmatizing for the players/practitioners in many communities. Therefore, we can safely say only that such transfer exists, not how popular or influential it is. However, what we can say with some certainty, following Harviainen and Frank (2016), is that the language relating to sex, especially alternative sexualities such as BDSM, shows a propensity not toward associations with games, but rather to play. Likewise, BDSM practices are also studied in play and toy research (e.g. Heljakka, 2016), which may yield more interesting avenues to the study of the phenomenon in the future, outside the confines of the often rigid ludology context (see Stenros, 2015). As game studies has sometimes been too focused on rules, structures, definitions, and conceptualizations of whether something is a game or not, play and toy research begin by observing play behavior in practice, in various embodied and situated contexts. These starting points may open up exciting viewpoints to the research of play, sexuality, and BDSM-related practices that are outside of the reach of game studies, at present.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that further correspondences could likely be found "one step away" in many directions. Works that discuss BDSM as serious leisure (e.g. Sprott and Williams, 2019) or the aesthetics of bodies in BDSM, clearly have similarities to discussions of similar topics in games. We have noted some of the key references in earlier sections of this article, but to explore those

similarities in depth would require the space of several publications. Authors such as Williams et al. (2016), exploring the leisure angle with games and play in BDSM terminology as their starting point, and Cardoso (2018) looking at bodies in BDSM, have already opened up these pathways. They have however not yet directly engaged the game studies context. We hope that our article will provide a useful stepping-stone for these kinds of analyses in the future.

Conclusion

As we hope to have made clear in this article, game studies and research on sex, sexuality, and gender have multiple overlapping topics and themes of interest, as well as common methodological groundings, although the realization of these interconnections has not always been explicit or clear. In the past decade, research focusing on queer game studies, gender, and sexual practices in games have furthermore guided the attention of game researchers toward topics close to BDSM research. Promising avenues of further study are opened up via the concept of play in all of its polymorphism, as previously separate areas of adult play, sexual practices as play, and play as an essential element in all varieties of games and gameplay practices are being discussed and brought together. Play is a foundational component in both games and game studies as well as BDSM practices and their study.

In this article, we have identified five strands of relevant connections between these two realms of knowledge. First, there are direct comparisons and associations between the two types of activities, mostly conceptualized as “play.” Second, several live-action RPGs have been made about BDSM, or for BDSM. Third, many other games have borrowed ideas from BDSM, as well, as have some BDSM activities, in turn, from games and play. Fourth, queer game studies and queer theory at large have opened up new avenues for discussing subversive and transgressive play practices that often involve BDSM elements, and vice versa. Fifth, both games and BDSM are frequently discussed in the theoretical context of rituals, performativity, drama, and theater, which forms a potential bridge between these activities as well. This area of inquiry is the most tenuous and underdeveloped as of yet, but we think there is a lot of promise in this association.

Through this five-strand exploratory analysis, we have shown how deeply interconnected these two realms are, even if the connection is only rarely mentioned, and to this date, not fully recognized as a valid research topic. The connections are therefore far more subtle and profound than one would initially expect. Understanding the ways in which sadomasochism connects with play and games is significant in that the contradictory nature of the involved activities—pain as pleasure, humiliation as enjoyable, performativity as authentic—reveals many ways in which sexuality can and indeed should in our opinion be viewed as first and foremost play. The study of this area opens up avenues for sex research also in other, more mainstream fields, because in BDSM, these aspects are more visible than they tend to be in the stereotypical “vanilla” bedroom.

Exploring this connection also provides sexologists an access to tools and correspondences discovered by game and play scholars, many of which not only assist sex research, but also help de-pathologize certain sexual phenomena. We therefore hope that this review will be used by others as an expansion of their sexological toolkit. These phenomena deserve more research, especially on the topics of performance and authenticity, the ways in which sex can be playful and serious at the same time (and how it thus ties into the discussions of “serious play”), and on how to make sexually interesting, even visceral games that nevertheless still provide the players with sufficient feelings of safety.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Dr. Jaakko Stenros for initiating this research project, and the participants of the 3rd Sexual Cultures Conference: PLAY, for their feedback on an early draft of this article.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

J Tuomas Harviainen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6085-5663>

References

- Alison L, Santtila P, Sandnabba NK, et al. (2001) Sadomasochistically oriented behavior. Diversity in practice and meaning. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 30(1): 1–12.
- Anthropy A (2008) *Mighty Jill Off*. 2D platform indie freeware game. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mighty_Jill_Off
- Anthropy A (2012) *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters. How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*. New York: Seven Stories.
- Bakioglu B (2009) Spectacular interventions in Second Life: Goon culture, grieving, and disruption in virtual spaces. *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* 1(3).
- Bataille G (1952) *L'erotisme*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.
- Bateson G (1955/2000) A theory of play and fantasy. In: Bateson G (ed.) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, pp.177–193.
- Beauvoir S (1953) *Must We Burn Sade?* London: Peter Neville.
- Betcher W (1987) *Intimate Play: Creating Romance in Everyday Life*. New York: Penguin.
- Bethesda Softworks (2011) *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.
- Blizzard Entertainment (2004) *World of Warcraft*.
- Brandhurst C (2011) *Kinky Sex: Die etwas härtere Nummer*. München: Wilhelm Heyne.

- Brown A (2015) *Sexuality in Role-Playing Games*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Butler J (1990) *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Caillois R (1960) *Man and the Sacred*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Caillois R (1961) *Man, Play and Games*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Cardoso D (2018) Bodies and BDSM: Redefining sex through kinky erotics. *Journal of Sexual Medicine* 15(7): 931–932.
- Carlström C (2015) Fantasies becoming practice: BDSM as ritual. In: Larsson M and Johnsdotter S (eds) *Sexual Fantasies: At the Convergence of the Cultural and the Individual*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Carlström C (2016) *BDSM: Paradoxernas praktiker*. PhD Thesis, Malmö högskola, Sweden.
- Carlström C (2018) BDSM, interaction rituals and open bodies. *Sexuality & Culture* 22: 209–219.
- Carter A (1978) *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*. New York: Pantheon.
- Consalvo M (2003) Hot dates and fairy tale romances: Studying sexuality in games. In: Wolf M and Perron B (eds) *The Video Game Theory Reader*. New York: Routledge, pp.171–195.
- Cross PA and Matheson K (2006) Understanding sadomasochism: An empirical examination of four perspectives. In: Kleinplatz PJ and Moser C (eds) *Sadomasochism: Powerful Pleasures*. New York: Haworth, pp.133–166.
- Dale B (2015) Brooklyn game creator asks: How do you code consent? Technically, Jan 8, 2015. Available at: <https://technical.ly/brooklyn/2015/01/08/robert-yang-hurt-me-plenty/> (accessed 15 September 2020).
- Dancer PL, Kleinplatz PJ and Moser C (2006) 24/7 SM slavery. In: Kleinplatz PJ and Moser C (eds) *Sadomasochism: Powerful Pleasures*. New York: Haworth, pp.81–101.
- Deleuze G (1967) *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch – Le froid et le cruel*. Paris: Les éditions de Minuit.
- Edgley C (2015) Sex as theater: Action, character, and the erotic. In: Weinberg TS and Newmahr S (eds) *Selves, Symbols and Sexualities: An Interactionist Anthology*. Los Angeles: Sage, pp.55–72.
- Faccio E, Casinia C and Cipolletta S (2016) Forbidden games: The construction of sexuality and sexual pleasure by BDSM ‘players’. *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 16(7): 752–764.
- Fine GA (1983) *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault M (1984) *L’usage des plaisirs*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Frank K (2013) *Plays well in Groups: A Journey through the World of Group Sex*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Franklin-Reible H (2006) Deviant leisure: Uncovering the “goods” in transgressive behaviour. *Leisure/Loisir* 30(1): 55–71.
- Freud S (1938) *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*. New York: Modern Library.
- Galliers RD (1992) Choosing information systems research approaches. In: Galliers RD (ed.) *Information Systems Research: Issues, Methods and Practical Guidelines*. Oxford: Blackwell Scientific, pp.144–162.
- Giddens A (1993) *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love & Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) *Single-player digital game*. Developer: Rockstar North.
- Grenzfurthner J, Friesinger G and Fabry D (eds) (2013) *Screw the System. Explorations of Spaces, Games and Politics through Sexuality and Technology*. San Francisco: Re-Search.

- Halberstam J (2011) *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Harviainen JT (2010) Pehmoydin: Sex, death and decadence. In: Stenros J and Montola M (eds) *Nordic Larp*. Stockholm: Fëa Livia, pp.110–115.
- Harviainen JT (2011a) The larping that is not larp. In: Henriksen TD, Bierlich C, Hansen KF, et al. (eds) *Think Larp. Academic Writings from KP2011*. Copenhagen: RollespilsAkademiet, pp.172–193.
- Harviainen JT (2011b) Sadomasochist role-playing as live-action role-playing: A trait-descriptive analysis. *International Journal of Role-Playing* 2: 59–70.
- Harviainen JT (2015a) Information literacies of self-identified sadomasochists: An ethnographic case study. *Journal of Documentation* 71(3): 423–439.
- Harviainen JT (2015b) Scripting beloved discomfort: Narratives, fantasies and authenticity in online sadomasochism. In: Hatavara M, Hyvärinen M, Mäkelä M, et al. (eds) *Narrative Theory, Literature, and New Media*. New York: Routledge, pp.106–121.
- Harviainen JT, Brown AML and Suominen J (2016) Three waves of awkwardness: A meta-analysis of sex in game studies. *Games and Culture* 13(6): 605–623.
- Harviainen JT and Frank K (2016) Group sex as play: Rules and transgression in shared non-monogamy. *Games and Culture* 13(3): 220–239.
- Harviainen JT and Lieberoth A (2012) Similarity of social information processes in games and rituals: Magical interfaces. *Simulation & Gaming* 43(3): 528–549.
- Harviainen JT and Stenros J (in press) Central theories of games and play. In: Vesa M (ed.) *Organizational Gamification: Theories and Practices of Ludified Work in Late Modernity*. New York: Routledge.
- Heljakka K (2016) Fifty shades of toys: Notions of play and things for play in the Fifty Shades of Grey canon. *Intensities: The Journal of Cult Media* 8: 59–73.
- Huizinga J (1939) *Homo ludens: Versuch einer Bestimmung des Spielelements der Kultur*. Amsterdam: Pantheon Akademische Verlagsanstalt.
- Juul J (2013) *The Art of Failure. An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Klabbers JHG (2009) *The Magic Circle: Principles of Gaming & Simulation*. 3rd and revised ed. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Koljonen J, Stenros J, Grove AS, et al. (eds) (2019) *Larp Design: Creating Role-Play Experiences*. Copenhagen: Bifrost.
- Lander M (2019) PowerGaming: Queer BDSM and weird little games. Master's Thesis, OCAD University, Canada.
- Mains G (1984/2002) *Urban Aborigines. A Celebration of Leather Sexuality*. 3rd ed. Los Angeles: Daedalus Publishing.
- Majkowski TZ (2019) Dragonborn is for Porn. The intertextual semiotics of the TESV: Skyrim fan made pornographic modifications. In: *Abstract Proceedings of the DiGRA International Conference*, Kyoto, Japan, 6-10 August 2019.
- Martin R (2011) Powerful exchanges: Ritual and subjectivity in Berlin's BDSM scene. PhD Thesis, Princeton University, USA.
- Max Payne* (2001) *Single-player digital game*. Developer: Remedy Entertainment.
- Mokros A, Osterheider M, Hucker SJ, et al. (2010) Psychopathy and sexual sadism. *Law and Human Behavior* 35(3): 188–199.
- Montola M, Stenros J and Waern A (2009) *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design*. Amsterdam: Morgan Kaufmann.
- Mortensen TE (2003) Pleasures of the player: Flow and control in online games. PhD Thesis, University of Bergen, Norway.

- Navarro-Remesal V and Garcia-Catalán S (2015) Let's play master and servant: BDSM and directed freedom in game design. In: Wysocki M and Lauteria E (eds) *Rated M for Mature: Sex and Sexuality in Video Games*. New York: Bloomsbury, pp.119–131.
- Newmahr S (2010) Rethinking kink: Sadoomasochism as serious leisure. *Qualitative Sociology* 33: 313–331.
- Newmahr S (2011) *Playing on the Edge: Sadoomasochism, Risk, and Intimacy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nitschke J, Osterheider M and Mokros A (2009) A cumulative scale of severe sexual sadism. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment* 2(3): 262–278.
- O'Riordan K and Phillips D (eds) (2007) *Queer Online. Media Technology and Sexuality*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Paasonen S (2017) Many splendored things: Sexuality, playfulness and play. *Sexualities* 21(4): 537–551.
- Paasonen S (2018) *Many Splendored Things: Thinking Sex and Play*. London: Goldsmiths Press.
- Prior EE and Williams DJ (2015) Does BDSM power exchange among women reflect casual leisure? An exploratory qualitative study. *Journal of Positive Sexuality* 1: 12–15.
- Rambukkana N (2007) Taking the leather out of leathersex: The internet, identity, and the sadoomasochistic public sphere. In: O'Riordan K and Phillips D (eds) *Queer Online. Media Technology and Sexuality*. New York: Peter Lang, pp.67–80.
- Rambukkana N (2015) *Fraught Intimacies. Non/Monogamy in the Public Sphere*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Ruberg B (2015) Pixel whipped: Pain, pleasure, and media. PhD Thesis, UC Berkeley, USA.
- Ruberg B (2017) The arts of failure: Jack Halberstam in conversation with Jesper Juul. In: Ruberg B and Shaw A (eds) *Queer Game Studies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp.201–210.
- Ruberg B (2018) Queerness and video games: Queer game studies and new perspectives through play. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24(4): 543–555.
- Ruberg B (2019) *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*. New York: New York University Press.
- Ruberg B (2020) *The Queer Games Avant-Garde. How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Game*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Ruberg B and Phillips A (eds) (2018) Special issue – Queerness and video games. *Game Studies* 18(3).
- Ruberg B and Shaw A (eds) (2017). *Queer Game Studies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Schechner R (1988/2003) *Performance Theory*, Revised and expanded ed. London: Routledge.
- Sex with Stalin* (2019) *Single-player digital game*. Developer: Boobs Dev. Platform: Steam.
- Shaw A (2013) The lost queer potential of Fable. *Culture Digitally*. Available at: <http://culturedigitally.org/2013/10/the-lost-queer-potential-of-fable/> (accessed 15 September 2020).
- Shaw A (2015) Circles, charmed and magic: Queering game studies. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2(2): 64–97.
- Siegel C (1995) *Male Masochism. Modern Revisions of the Story of Love*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Sihvonen T (2011) *Modding The Sims and the Culture of Gaming*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Sihvonen T and Stenros J (2018) Cues for queer play: Carving a possibility space for LGBTQ role-play. In: Harper T, Adams MB and Taylor N (eds) *Queerness in Play*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Sihvonen T and Stenros J (2019) Queering games, play, and culture through transgressive role-playing games. In: Jørgensen K and Karlsen F (eds) *Transgression in Games and Play*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp.115–129.
- Simula BL (2018). Pleasure, power, and pain: A review of the literature on the experiences of BDSM participants. *Sociology Compass* 13(3): e12668.
- Sixma T (2009) The Gorean community in Second Life: Rules of sexual inspired role-play. *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* 1(3).
- Sprott RA and Williams DJ (2019) Is BDSM a sexual orientation or serious leisure? *Current Sexual Health Reports* 11: 75–79.
- Stenros J (2015) Playfulness, play, and games: A constructionist ludology approach. PhD Thesis, University of Tampere, USA.
- Stenros J (2018) Guided by transgressions: Defying norms as an integral part of play. In: Jørgensen K and Karlsen F (eds) *Transgressions in Games and Play*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp.13–25.
- Stenros J and Sihvonen T (2020) Like seeing yourself in the mirror? Solitary role-play as performance and pretend play. *Game Studies* 20(4).
- Suits B (1978) *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Sutton-Smith B (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Turner V (1982) *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications.
- Von Sacher-Masoch L (1870) Venus im Pelz. In: *Das Vermächtnis Kains: I. Die Liebe*. Stuttgart: Kotta.
- Vossen E (2018) The magic circle and consent in gaming practices. In: Gray K, Voorhees G and Vossen E (eds) *Feminism in Play*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Weinberg TS (2006) Sadoomasochism and the social sciences: A review of the sociological and social psychological literature. In: Kleinplatz PJ and Moser C (eds) *Sadoomasochism: Powerful Pleasures*. Binghamton: Harrington Park, pp.17–40.
- Weiss M (2011) *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Pleasure*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Williams DJ, Prior EE, Alvarado T, et al. (2016) Is bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadoomasochism recreational leisure? A descriptive exploratory investigation. *Journal of Sexual Medicine* 13(7): 1091–1094.
- Williams DJ and Storm LE (2012) Unconventional leisure and career: Insights into the work of professional dominatrices. *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality* 15.
- Wysocki M and Lauteria EW (eds) (2015). *Rated M for mature: Sex and Sexuality in Video Games*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Yang R (2014) *Hurt Me Plenty*. A downloadable spanking simulator for Windows, macOS, and Linux. Itch.io. <https://radiatoryang.itch.io/hurt-me-plenty> (accessed 15 September 2020).
- Yang R (2015) *Rinse and Repeat*. A downloadable shower simulator for Windows, macOS, and Linux. Itch.io. <https://radiatoryang.itch.io/rinseandrepeat> (accessed 15 September 2020).

Tanja Sihvonen is Professor of Communication Studies at University of Vaasa, Finland.

J Tuomas Harviainen is Associate Professor of Information Practices at Tampere University, Finland.