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Virtual Queerness: Resisting Heteronormativity in Online Spaces

Denise Springett

As outlined in the first chapter of *TechnoFeminism*, many second-wave feminisms theorized technology as “an extension of patriarchal and capitalist domination” and therefore “mainly dismissed technoscience as inherently patriarchal and malignant” (Wajeman 29); however, virtual spaces can, and are, being used by individuals and groups in ways that resist heteropatriarchal constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality. By drawing on poststructuralist queer theory, this paper investigates digital publication and virtual embodiment as sites in cyberspace where the ideological frameworks of heteropatriarchy are meaningfully challenged. First, while the “coming out” narratives published in analogue memoirs often uphold the hegemony of static binary sexed, gendered, and sexual identities, the virtual space provides an opportunity to self-publish dynamic narratives of being and becoming a subject of sex, gender, and desire. In order to demonstrate the resistive potential of virtually published queer narratives, two coming-out videos by popular content creators Shane Dawson and Ricky Dillon are analyzed. Second, it is argued that virtual embodiments afforded by online profiles and avatars in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) operate as a site for creating queer identities and practices in opposition to the static, binary definitions of sex, gender, and sexuality hegemonized by heteropatriarchy.

Heteropatriarchy as a sociopolitical system naturalizes male dominance and sexist violence in large part due to the hegemony of heteronormative ideologies of sex, gender, and sexuality (Hooks 24). That is, in order to sustain systems of male dominance, heteropatriarchy normalizes the organization of society around “man” and “woman” as defined by heteronormative configurations of sex, gender, and desire: while a “man” is male, masculine, and desires women, a “woman” is female, feminine, and is desired by/available to men. Furthermore, the heteropatriarchal gender relations are in part naturalized and sustained through privileging such practices as monogamous marriage, expressing a stable gender that aligns with the sex assigned at birth, and the biological production of children (Jeppesen 494). One way to resist heteronormative and patriarchal frameworks, therefore, is to engage in practices that destabilize dichotomous binary identities, static identities, and (re)productive sexuality.

One way that queer people's experiences and identities have been co-opted into a heteronormative metanarrative is through the structure of "coming out." Cover and Prosser discuss the practice of coming out as "a performative act articulating and stabilizing non-heterosexual identity" (85). Through researching the relationship between masculinity and sexual coming-out narratives in various forms, they determine five defining characteristics of coming-out narratives that support heteronormativity:

- (1) feelings of isolation or loneliness as a young boy; (2) self-perceiving as masculine but as not meeting expectations of hegemonic or hyper-masculinity; (3) having always known one is gay as a child but not necessarily knowing the name for it; (4) a moment of bravery in either a first sexual encounter or in disclosing and confessing a non-heteronormative sexual identity; and (5) typically coming to a sense of belonging to a community or online community or through a coupled relationship (85).

Therefore, by perpetuating the linear timeline of coming out, the person is ultimately perpetuating a heteronormative ideology that they have a stable, but fundamentally Other identity. Importantly, print-based publications of coming-out narratives are themselves static narrations of a sexual identity because, once published, the author cannot add to or retract parts of the narrative on a regular basis. Therefore, coming-out narratives in non-virtual spaces often follow a structure that represents queer identities as static, essential, and fundamentally different from the cisgender, heterosexual norm.

Meanwhile, the introduction of virtual space, and consequential accessibility of self-publishing, created a shift in the coming-out narrative toward audiovisual formats shared via social media networks such as YouTube (Cover and Prosser 84). The shift from physical to virtual publication also creates the opportunity to continuously publish; where printed text cannot be changed once published, content creators have the ability to build upon or delete their previously published material. The ease of publication afforded by virtual space thus allows for dynamic, rather than static, narratives of sex, gender, and sexuality. The ability to publish dynamic coming-out narratives not only resists the static sexed, gendered, and sexual identity upon which heteronormativity is predicated, but it also allows people to archive their identity process rather than consolidate their experiences into one cohesive narrative. As a researcher of transgender autobiographies, Reid Lodge argues that "as trans people [...] find new platforms to tell trans stories, our conversations surrounding sex and gender expand, become more nuanced, and we are able to articulate new ways of understanding and embodying gender" (69).

The virtual space provides such new platforms where people of all genders can represent their experiences instead of having their experiences represented in a heteronormative discourse to make them legible to cis, straight people. Moreover, by accessing narratives about sex, gender, and sexuality through virtual spaces, people who benefit from heteronormativity cultivate awareness of its function in society. Engagement with non-heteronormative narratives simultaneously humanizes the Other and encourages people to question their systematic Othering in the first place. Therefore, the ability to engage in dynamic, nuanced dialogues, which are not fitted to a heteronormative narrative, provides the opportunity to resist the hegemonic understanding of static, binary identities.

YouTube videos are one example of virtual publication which present the opportunity to resist heteronormative narratives of gender and sexuality. Two specific videos that resist heteronormative coming-out narratives are Shane Dawson's video entitled "I'm Bisexual" and Ricky Dillon's video entitled "My Sexuality." Shane introduces his video by explaining that he has been "sexually confused" (Dawson 1:03) his whole life. Although this statement mimics the heteronormative discourse of always having known one is different, Shane's admission of confusion does not support heteronormative binaries. Rather, he is expressing the inability of heteronormative systems to articulate his experience of gender and sexuality. Further, he admits that he would "always wish that he was gay" (1:14). In this statement, he is describing how proclamations of essential gayness fit within the heteronormative narrative as the non-normative Other. He is expressing his desire to be sexually recognized because being the Other is still having one's identity validated by the larger social narratives. Later, Shane cites his reasoning for publishing this video: "there's a lot of coming out videos of people who are gay or lesbian and they're so confident and they're like 'I've known since I was five,' and like 'I've always been gay' ... I'm not that. I don't know who I am one hundred percent" (2:20–2:48). Although Shane does not use the language of queer theory, he is expressing how the heteronormative heterosexual/homosexual binary, and its relationship to the gender binary, does not apply to his life experience because he cannot pinpoint his identity on one or the other side of the dichotomy.

Furthermore, Shane expresses the uncertainty of his identity: it is not an entity to be fully known, but rather a collection of experiences throughout his sexed, gendered, and sexual life. By describing his experience of identity as a collection of (seemingly contradictory) experiences, Shane also interrogates identity politics. That is, by questioning the certainty of his own identity, Shane implicitly challenges social hierarchies based on statically identified groups. Rather than

express his experience of oppression due to a static identity, he tries to find a way of expressing his experiences outside of the heteronormative identity binaries. Although in claiming that he is bisexual he seems to be clearly labelling himself, bisexuality has two meanings: heteronormatively it can mean attracted to the same and opposite sex or gender, but non-heteronormatively it can simply mean attracted to two groups of people. Although Shane does not explicitly state what bisexuality means to him, his video remains useful as a queer coming-out narrative because Shane's identity and desire(s) are framed as dynamic and not wholly knowable. Resisting heteronormativity is not about turning toward a social model of sameness; rather, it is a movement against dichotomous binary identity systems that result in unequal and unjust power relations. Ultimately, Shane's video is an example of virtual publication directly challenging heteronormativity by expressing that it is not a universal model for understanding or expressing human experiences of sexed, gendered, and sexual identities.

Ricky's video similarly rejects the notion of a static and easily categorized sexual identity as he discusses his relationship to asexuality, that is, "as someone who does not experience sexual attraction" (Carrigan 93). He begins by acknowledging that "this is 'technically' a 'coming-out video'" (Dillon 0:18–0:20). His use of air quotations when making this statement, however, demonstrates an acknowledgment of the heteronormative framework he is expected to use to explain his sexuality and a signal to the viewer that this video will not follow this heteronormative narrative structure. Later, he explains that when asked about his sexual identity, his "simple answer is: 'I'm nothing; I'm none of the above'" (0:37). While Shane's bisexuality disrupts the heterosexual/homosexual binary of heteronormativity by asserting his existence *between*, Ricky's notion of "none of the above" works to disrupt the naturalized dichotomy of heterosexual/homosexual by asserting an existence separate from or *outside* the two options.

Ricky goes on to discuss his sexual and romantic experiences, saying that he has had numerous girlfriends and one boyfriend (3:45–6:03). The most significant part of the history Ricky gives about his romantic and sexual life is his confession that he was driven to date because of "society, peer pressure almost" (4:06); he explains, "all I ever knew was 'I'm a boy. I have to date a girl. I have to marry her'" (4:28). In this confession, Ricky has clearly explained that he acted a particular way because of the social value placed on following heteronormative expectations of relationships. This admission of social pressure to abide by the heteronormative expectations therefore explicitly challenges the operation of heteronormativity in contemporary Western society by explaining how cis-heterosex-

uality is naturalized only because the members of a society internalize it. Finally, Ricky concludes the video by asserting “I still really am not sure. Again, adding on, this could very well change in a couple years” (8:00–8:06). This statement serves as an anti-conclusion of sorts as he is refusing to statically and definitively identify himself; rather, he uses the platform of a video blog to express his relationship to sex, gender, and sexuality at a particular moment in time while acknowledging that this relationship may change in the future. Ultimately, both Shane Dawson and Ricky Dillon use the virtual space of YouTube in ways that resist hetero-patriarchal social relations by sharing their narratives of sex, gender, and sexuality without falling into the heteronormative narrative structure of coming out.

Another way that resisting heteronormativity occurs in the virtual space is through virtual embodiment. That is, through the creation of accounts, profiles, and avatars, the virtual space provides users with “the ability to transcend bodily gender limitations and construct gender(less) identities” (Marciano 826). The multiplicity of embodied identity experiences afforded by virtual presences directly challenges the static binary identities upon which heteronormativity is predicated; one’s physical body is no longer the only embodiment they navigate. Where heteropatriarchy operates by ascribing static identities to physical bodies that determine their value in a social hierarchy, virtual embodiment invites people to experience multiple embodiments and thereby makes impossible a hierarchal organization of humans based on their bodies.

In their research focused on transgender people’s online experiences, Maciano et al. describe how cyberspace is employed by some transgender users as an alternative sphere to the physical world, one that offers opportunities otherwise unavailable in offline spaces (830). Notably, the researchers find that experiences in the online world are not understood as inauthentic. For instance, they report that “many transgender women who participate in the newsgroup maintain virtual relationships while hiding their biological sex [which] allow them to feel like ‘real biological women’ in a way that cannot be achieved in the offline world, not even by sex reassignment surgery” (830). Although this language reinforces heteronormative assumptions about dichotomous sex, gender, and sexual identities, the ability to experience multiple gendered embodiments in the virtual space provides a validation to transgender people’s experiences of sex, gender, and sexuality. Furthermore, by understanding virtual embodiments as authentic identity experiences separate from a physical body, the practice directly resists the heteronormative assumption that one’s identity should be legible based on physical sex characteristics. Therefore, the possibility for multiple virtual embodiments presents a site

for resisting heteronormative identities based on static alignment on one side of a sex–gender dichotomy.

The final aspect of heteronormativity that this paper addresses with relation to virtual spaces is the possibility for resistance afforded by cybersexuality. As stated earlier, the notion that sex is morally justified only if it is for the purpose of biological reproduction is a fundamental framework of heteronormativity (Jepesen 494). Therefore, it is significant that virtual spaces present the opportunity for pleasurable erotic experiences that serve no reproductive function. That is, engaging with one’s sexual desires over a platform that inhibits physical contact, regardless of the participants’ sexes, genders, or sexual identities, works to resist the hegemony of (re)productive sex. Zek Cypress Valkyrie, researcher of cybersexuality in MMORPGs, found that “MMORPGs introduce additional (gendered) bodies, a virtual space in which to interact, and an entire community of players all of which may broaden or inhibit cybersexual experiences” (78). That is, the avatars in MMORPGs act as representations of differently sexed, gendered, and sexual virtual embodiments. The advantage that Valkyrie finds with the avatars in MMORPGs is the ability to control the avatar’s actions through commands in the game: “being able to use those bodies and draw them into cybersex broadened scripts for erotic play” (83). They continue by discussing how avatars challenge heteronormative sexual standards by creating “cybersex experiences with at least four distinct bodies (two virtual and two solid)” (91). The concept of broadening sexual scripts beyond one cisgender man and one cisgender woman is significant when considering heteronormative expectations of sexuality. By expanding the possibilities for sexual interaction, virtual embodiment represents the possibility of engaging in pleasure-producing sex outside of heteronormative expectations.

Moreover, the sexual script within the games can be inscribed with new meanings and rewritten by the participants. For example, Valkyrie describes players using existing commands and adding customized text in order to give existing emotes new meaning; for example, the command for bending over could be used to mimic sexual acts between avatars (84). By taking existing commands within the game and using them in a cybersexual context, the players have the opportunity to experience sexuality outside of the monogamous (re)productive sex accepted by heteronormative society. Finally, some players develop the skill of writing new commands, called macros, for their avatars. These macros resist heteronormativity by creating the possibility of engaging in diverse and non-reproductive sexual acts between avatars. Additionally, these macros have the possibility of rewriting heteronormative gendered practices. Valkyrie describes one example of a player

who, by using a macro, was able to make their avatar pet others with affection (85). By rewriting the code of the game for their avatar, this player is ascribing a capacity for affection to their masculine character. Within heteronormative society, hegemonic masculinity is founded upon “emotional stoicism, physical toughness, and autonomy” (Way et al. 241). Since displays of affection resist the hegemonic ideal of a strong, independent, and emotionally distant masculinity, the macro that enables a masculine avatar to pet lovingly fundamentally resists the hegemony of toxic masculinity. Ultimately, the practices of cybersexuality in MMORPGs work to resist heteronormativity by first practising sexuality with more than two bodies; second, by ascribing sexually pleasurable rather than reproductive meaning to existing avatar actions; and third, by rewriting the coding of the game to practice non-heteronormative gender roles like affectionate masculinities.

To conclude, according to a queer poststructuralist perspective, the virtual space is a site of resistance against heteronormativity because the possibility for self-publication and virtual embodiment presents opportunities for dynamic and plural understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality. This paper outlines three main ways that the virtual space is being used to resist heteronormative ideology. First, although formally published experiences of queerness typically fall into a heteronormative narrative of essential difference, virtual spaces provide an opportunity for individuals to continuously write and rewrite their identity as an archived collection of experiences. As demonstrated through a discourse analysis of two popular coming-out videos, many individuals find the virtual space to be a platform where they can express their frustration with heteronormative expectations of identity. Second, the possibility for virtual embodiment encourages individuals to experience a plurality of identity: through profiles, pseudonyms, and avatars, individuals can virtually embody multiple differently sexed and gendered bodies. Finally, avatars provide a particularly rich site for heteronormative resistance because they are able to engage in non-heteronormative gender and sexual behaviors; the gestures and text in MMORPGs allow individuals to practice non-reproductive cybersex and to practise non-hegemonic gender performances such as masculinities based on love and affection rather than stoicism and toughness. Ultimately, the virtual is another realm where heteronormativity can be meaningfully challenged in heteropatriarchal cultures.

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