

Queer Aesthetics in Robert Yang's *Marathon* (2018)

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Introduction

Globally speaking, this paper is part of a greater theoretical project I am currently pursuing which aims to find avenues out of what, for the purposes of this talk, I will summarize, concisely albeit reductively, as queer game studies' problematic over-investment in representation (problematic because it runs the risk of reducing video games to their manifest content, thereby eschewing possibilities for more complex analyses of gamic queerness). As a way to explore one possible answer to this problem, I want in this presentation to begin thinking through the ways in which queer theoretical approaches to game studies might benefit from an encounter with both media-materialist and aesthetic approaches to media studies.

While the phrase "queer aesthetics" suggests a concern for how a game's queerness resonates sensorially with players, I want to use it here to talk about what can be queer about a video game's relations to what intermedialist Eric Méchoulan has called the greater intermedial *milieu* of any given media object (that is, the intertextual and intermedial web an object is always already part of and enmeshed with). For my purposes, then, "queer aesthetics" designates, first and foremost, the affective dimension of a specific readerly or analytical attitude towards all elements of a game and not just its manifest content. By creating a back and forth between a singular object-turned-theoretical tool and its greater intermedial *milieu*, such an attitude, I argue, necessarily operates by setting up an intertextual and intermedial framework of analysis, on the one hand, and allowing, on the other hand, that reciprocal theoretical moves that occur between the general and the particular can be useful and valid.

Specifically within this paper, then, "queer aesthetics" designates the combination of interdisciplinary and intermedial lenses that I deploy in order to shed light on one particular game's queer(ing) mechanisms. The game I have chosen for my case study is NYU-based artist, indie game maker and academic Robert Yang's endurance sex game *Marathon*, which he developed in just six hours for Nordic Game Jam 2018. As will become clear as the paper unfolds, however, I also take "queer aesthetics" to designate the medial relationships that connect Yang's video game to other time-based media objects. While this presentation is too short to explore all of these, after outlining the larger video gamic landscape wherein Yang's game situates itself, I will show how focusing primarily on *Marathon*'s relation to earlier experimental films that explore interconnected experiences of queer time and pleasure is absolutely crucial to gaining a clear grasp of the game's mechanisms, and more importantly still, of its contributions, as both an object and a theoretical tool, to the sorts of intermedial relations that video games entertain with prior media texts.

***Marathon* in the Context of Other Video Games**

In *Marathon*, a large, disembodied penis looms large in the left side of the screen. The player's sole possible mode of engagement with the game is to "jerk off" this giant phallus by rhythmically clicking on the space bar. From this perspective, *Marathon* fits into a subgenre of erotic games that I would call "stimulation games." At the "high end" of this register are humorous and sophisticated indie offerings, such as the Danish games *Dark Room Sex Game* (students at IT University Copenhagen, Nordic Game Jam 2008) and *La Petite Mort* (Loveable Hat Cult, 2016).

In the former, players use Nintendo Wiimote controllers or a keyboard to produce an aural response to simulated, rhythmical touch, and the goal is for players to bring one another to (simulated) climax. While *Dark Room* is a multiplayer game for two and up to four players in “orgy” mode, *La Petite Mort* is a tablet game where a solitary player stimulates a pixelated vulva-like organism to orgasm. The other end of the spectrum is occupied by free online browser games such as *Jerk off the Cock 5* (available on 2games.com), where the mouse is used to stroke and jerk a man’s penis until he “cums” while moaning loudly.

If the aforementioned games tend to take climax as their end goal and encourage players to get there sooner rather than later, *Marathon* asks players to consistently maintain the penis’s erection angle within a range that is delineated by markings at both the lower and upper parts of the frame. Clicking too slowly lets the penis grow flaccid until it can no longer get hard and, the moment it drops below the lower marking, the game is over. Conversely, masturbation that is too vigorous lets the penis rise above the outlined zone, leading to premature climax and, thus, also to the game’s end. For as long as the penis is maintained erect within the acceptable range, a crowd of small, faceless, humanoid characters begins to form, raising their arms towards the giant upright penis and cheering it on. The longer it stays erect, the larger and louder the crowd grows. In his artist’s statement for the game, Yang writes that he “wanted to test endurance, and how long a player would be able to keep edging themselves without getting sloppy and/or bored.”

Indeed, within Yang’s own body of work, *Marathon* complements other experiments that combine duration and sexual tension, such as the driving game *Stick Shift* (2015), where a driver must sexually satisfy his car by switching gears at the exact right time (here, the car’s speedometer occupies a similar function to the delineated area of arousal in *Marathon*). Most obviously, *Marathon*’s mechanics turn on the interplay of attention and boredom (to succeed, the player must pay relentless attention to the penis’s level, but this is in itself boring), since its gameplay mirrors how both sexual activity and video gameplay depend on participants’ negotiations of the attention-boredom continuum. What is more, since there is no prescribed duration for the game (Yang terms it a “0-99 hours game”), a player could, in theory, keep going forever, which also means that the game is not, in fact, “winnable.” Thus, in addition to being simultaneously a dig at and a celebration of phallocentrism writ large (this paradox is in itself fascinating, but a subject for another paper entirely), Yang’s game ostensibly positions itself within a larger group of games—ranging from notoriously unwinnable games like *Tetris* (Pajitnov, 1984) and *Candy Crush* (King, 2012) to games without a clear win/lose structure, like *Dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy, 2012) and *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016)—that explore counter play from a game mechanical viewpoint and/or from the perspectives of affect, trauma, or queer theory, by questioning the very notions of outcome and success, skill acquisition and productivity, linear time and progression, as well as those of pleasure (in both gameplay and sex) and, ultimately, play itself.

While I do not deny that an analysis that contextualizes *Marathon* within a wider corpus of similar works and that draws on contemporary queer and affect theory approaches to video games does offer effective inroads into an analysis of Yang’s game, I want to suggest that the above-outlined observations are not in and of themselves sufficient to get to the heart of *Marathon*’s conceptual richness, nor to grasp fully how a discussion of Yang’s game might contribute to bring together queer theoretical and aesthetic/materialist approaches to video game scholarship.

***Marathon* within the Context of the Queer Intermedial Cultural Archive**

Beyond the explicitly gay visual content of *Marathon*, and the game's disruption of what constitutes play or gaming—a disruption which could perfectly well be theorized through the sole lens of queer theory—I want to argue here that *Marathon*'s regime of queer temporality works not only to subvert notions of play, time, and playtime, as well as of affect and embodiment, but that it also traces a lineage of referentiality across media and, from within that lineage, is able to contribute a queer video game perspective on the long-standing opposition between stillness and movement, or discretization and continuity, that is fundamental to both analogue and digital time-based media.

To clarify my point, let me begin by briefly retracing the lineage, which takes the shape of an intermedial loop, by which *Marathon* is intimately connected to a diptych of two well-known experimental films by Andy Warhol whose central subject is, at its most basic, boredom or photographic stasis within film (stillness being, of course, what Laura Mulvey has termed the introduction of death within the moving flux of the film reel 24 frames a second). *Empire* (1964) is an 8-hour film that consists of a continuous still shot of the famous New York City landmark, while *Blow Job* (1964) focuses on a male subject's face (DeVeren Bookwalter, uncredited) as he allegedly receives a 35-minute blow job. Typically understood as exercises in watching time pass (Buchloh, Remes), these films also work through film's rapport to both death (photography or, life frozen into a death-mask, to paraphrase Susan Sontag's famous formulation) and life (figured here through the shock value of full-on eroticism, which finds its formal echo in the jolting to life occasioned by tiny moments of movement or change within the films).

But if intermedial relations between photography and film are constitutive of Warhol's experiments, the films' relation to short one-reelers of a different genre is equally crucial to their analysis. Indeed, as Thomas Waugh has argued, "(...) porn, pure and simple, is exactly the contextual framework that is indispensable for understanding [Warhol's] films." (*Pop Out, Queer Warhol* p. 64-65) The lineage that connects Warhol's films to filmic pornography is further highlighted by a later, much lesser-known film (not made by Warhol though it is definitely in his vein), which renders even more explicit the connection between filmic experiments in "see[ing] time go by," in Warhol's own words, and sexual pleasure: this is James Broughton and Joel Singer's *Hermes Bird* (1979), which treated spectators to eleven minutes of a penis becoming erect in extreme slow motion, and which thus constitutes the closest filmic predecessor to Yang's game. However, if pornography is the medial referent behind Warhol's experimental cinema, Warhol's films (and their own heirs, such as *Hermes Bird*) are a direct influence on Yang's experimental porn game. This, in short, is the queer intermedial loop, which moves from filmic pornography to experimental film to video games and back, which constitutes the intermedial *milieu* of Yang's game.

There is, however, one fundamental difference between the above-described filmic experiments and *Marathon*. In his book on *The Cinema of Stasis*, which dedicates a chapter to Warhol's films, Justin Remes puts forward a unique argument when he suggests that films such as *Empire* or *Blow Job* were in fact "not designed to be viewed in silence from beginning to end (an experience that would likely bore even the most ardent fan of Warhol's cinema) but are [instead] best understood as furniture films, works designed to be viewed partially and distractedly." In this way, he argues, "in Warhol's cinema, the rigid and predetermined temporality of traditional motion pictures gives way to one that is open-ended and amorphous." (p.29)

Robert Yang's game, on the other hand, relies heavily on the player's minute observation of what goes on within the frame so as to be able to keep the game going. In this way, *Marathon* is, at first sight at least, a counter-Warholian experiment, since partial attention is impossible while playing *Marathon* because of the effort required to maintain one's erection level within acceptable levels.

But this is precisely where the intermedial loop that connects filmic pornography to Warhol, and Warhol back to pornography by way of Yang and gaming, allows for an opening that is resolutely material, since it has to do with the ontology of media themselves: As we have seen, the rhythmical clicking that is required to maintain the penis within an acceptable range is in fact quite fast-paced; indeed, the player soon learns that fluid movements, obtained by holding down the space bar, only lead to premature climax, while withholding clicks altogether leads to rapid loss of erection and, consequently, game over. Within the static frame of *Marathon*, however, the short bursts of clicks and accompanying movements have another effect: they constitute so many rapid snapshots, like an endless succession of still frames. Thus, it is *Marathon's* mechanics which are in themselves queer, but least of all because they require players to masturbate a giant penis; instead, it is by turning players into manic editors, who splice the game's temporal texture at rapid, regular intervals in order, paradoxically, to keep its time flow alive, that *Marathon* offers a truly queer working through (part remediation, part intermedial hallucination) of the fundamental ontological issues at the heart of time-based media of reproduction, both analogue and digital, and of the cinema most particularly.

Conclusion

What is queerest about *Marathon*, then, is not its overt phallogentric focus, nor even its disruptive sense of play, pleasure, and temporality; no, what is so very queer about *Marathon* is that it is a game that primarily thinks of itself not *as* a game but *of* another medium or media or, even, as a mediator among media. To put it differently: queer aesthetics, as I have sought to theorize it both in and through Yang's *Marathon* is less about overt content and player's experiences of a game than it is about that game's own queered experience of its own mediality.

Thus, the concept of "queer aesthetics" as I have theorized it in this presentation ultimately designates a totality comprised of: 1) the flows of affect that connect a singular object of analysis (the game *Marathon*) to the readerly attitude and theoretical tools deployed to make sense of it, and 2) a singular object of analysis taken itself as a conceptual tool which can be put in the service, not only of decoding itself, but of contributing to the analysis of greater medial relations between video games and other media. If a philosophy of video games has been practiced in this paper, in other words, it is above all of a performative nature: thus, while the general aim of my paper has been to explore video games' investment in other media in the broadest of terms, I also want to be clear that the method I have put forward here has less to do with the specifics of a particular concept, and more to do with proposing a general way of "doing theory" by attempting to provide a possible model for thinking of concepts and objects as phenomenologically interconnected within a greater web of media and affects.

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