Dragonborn is for Porn. The intertextual semiotics of the *TESV: Skyrim* fan made pornographic modifications

Tomasz Z. Majkowski
Jagiellonian University in Krakow
Grodzka 64
31-044 Kraków, Poland
+48 505 917 375
tomasz.majkowski@uj.edu.pl

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The presentation will analyze common themes in erotic and pornographic fan modifications for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) in order to establish their relation with the game itself and its various intertexts. Relying on Michael Riffatere's concept of intertextual semiotics (Riffaterre 1978, 1985), already applied in mod-oriented research (Majkowski 2016), I will present the most important aesthetic sources of commonly employed erotic imaginary and analyze reasons for employing such themes in relation to *Skyrim*. This way I will try to answer the question whether fan-made pornography is at least partially dependent on the aesthetics of the game being modded, or there is a general pool of pornographic imaginary commonly shared within the modding community and used regardless of the source game's specificity.

Pornographic fan-made modifications for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* enjoy quite a popularity: according to the hosting website, LoversLab.com, *SexLab* mod – the animation framework upon which complex pornographic mods are based – has been downloaded over 3,5 million times. Those numbers are probably even greater, as the main website is not the only host for the framework, which is also distributed through an informal network of cloud hosting services. The framework itself only enables the display of pornographic animations in the game and their specifies conditions such as possible actors. Upon it, hundreds of mods are built, from simple modifications adding prostitutes to the gameworld to extremely complex erotic remakes of the entire game experience – not to mention thousands of animations.

Yet, despite their popularity and diversity, pornographic *Skyrim* mods are under-researched, and for a good reason. Engaging with *SexLab*-based content is an extremely unpleasant experience, as both mods themselves and their culture are unmistakably misogynistic, built upon rape fantasies and related to every kind of sexual violence imaginable, from sexual slavery to forced bestiality, cannibalism and body mutilation. As such, they hardly fit optimistic portraits of the modding culture, usually described as creative, pro-active and learning-based (Champion 2013; Monterrat, Lavoué, and George 2012; Unger 2012). Simultaneously, the lack of homoerotic content and extreme misogyny makes LoversLab.com community stand apart from most widespread descriptions of fan-made erotica, supposedly subversive

towards heteronormativity (Busse and Gray 2011; Tosenberger 2008; Lauteria 2012). It can be claimed that *SexLab* and its dependencies are linked to resistance and counterplay (Meades 2015) because they constitute a reaction to the sexlessness of *Skyrim* itself, and an attempt at reclaiming sexuality (Wysocki 2015; Sihvonen 2011). However, *SexLab*-based content is opposing mostly inclusive and gender-equality-related aspects of *The Elder Scroll* series, and therefore can hardly be considered a voice of the oppressed. Finally, by ostentatiously counterpointing the game lore, they hardly contribute to shared storytelling practices analyzed in non-pornographic mods (Puente and Tosca 2013).

It is also easy to dismiss the entire LoversLab.com culture as a safe space for misogynistic incel gamers celebrating their violent fantasies (Apperley 2016; Dematagoda 2017; Nagle 2017). But such a unified perspective, even if justified, does not explain the relation between the game content and the pornographic imagery, and hardly engages with the question whether *Skyrim* itself somehow opens up for certain types of erotica, enabling violent and disturbing fantasies. It is a troublesome thought, given the role the game and its producer plays in creating and sustaining the modding community (Kücklich 2005; Sotamaa 2010). The aim of my research is, therefore, to approach *SexLab*-based mods content and refer it both to the game (on aesthetic, narrative and gameplay levels), and to the extra-*Skyrim* contexts: mainstream pornography, fan-oriented erotica, fan-created pornography and eroticism in the sword and sorcery genre.

The research itself is based on Michael Riffatere's theory of intertextual semiotics. It argues that when the user of a narrative form, such as narrative-rich cRPG game, identifies an element that seems out of place and incoherent, she can tie the catachrestic element to another text and explain its meaning. Even though Riffatere originally deals with poetry, the phenomenon itself is clearly observed in popular form, for example when implausible elements of the text (such as an action-adventure game protagonist's resistance to firearms damage) are explained through their relation with the genre convention. In relation to the practice of modifying games, the theory allows understanding every mod as a material evidence of such interpretative practice, an attempt at mending what is perceived as incoherent and broken by introducing elements of another text into the game. Such a perspective was already introduced by Tomasz Z. Majkowski in a DiGRA 2016 talk regarding immersive and lore-friendly modifications. In this talk I propose to take the concept one step further, to research mods not so overtly intended to mend what is perceived as broken.

Skyrim seems to be a game inviting extreme interpretations – for example, the neo-Nazi one (Bjørkelo Forthcoming). It is, therefore, my claim that extreme, yet recurring themes (such as slavery, BDSM, bestiality and fixation on oral sex and lactation), readily presented in *SexLab*-based mods, are related to what is perceived by their authors as an omission within the game itself and reflect their own ideas of what a cRPG game set against early medieval Nordic aesthetics should be. By analyzing mods' content it is possible to both uncover *Skyrim* traits fueling such fantasies and describe a shared worldview of *SexLab*-based content creators and users, regarding the game itself and its contexts, such as sword and sorcery fiction, the Viking age, Western and Japanese RPG legacy, among others. To this end, I will not only track down the sources of erotic imaginary, but also compare *Skyrim*-related content to pornographic mods for other games, available on LoversLab.com: other Bethesda titles, such as earlier *The Elder Scrolls* games and *Fallout* series, and *The Sims 4*, to pinpoint differences between them and dentify the specificity of the game in question. This way the research will serve two purposes: it will confirm the validity of intertextual semiotics-based approach to research mods, and contribute to a better

understanding of an ongoing debate regarding the historical veracity of contemporary digital games, especially regarding the portrayal of women.

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