“Can You Toss Me That Shirt Behind You?”

Beefcakes, Ambiguous Masculinities, and Pornographic Bodies in the Video Game *Coming Out on Top*

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Introduction

Class is over. Mark heads to the frat house where Brad lives to tutor him. Brad might be an excellent football player, but he is definitely not the best in English composition. Finding the entrance door unlocked, Mark gets in, goes upstairs, and enters Brad’s room. “Mark, that’s you?” asks Brad. “I just hopped out of the shower, give me a sec.” Brad appears a few seconds later, shirtless (see Figure 1). His well-defined pecs and impressive biceps are usually noticeable underneath his white T-shirt, but Mark is now speechless in front of Brad’s eight pack and hairy ginger torso. “Can you toss me that shirt behind you?” he asks, smiling. As Mark hopes Brad does not notice the swell in his jeans, the two young men sit at Brad’s desk and start working on his essay.

While Brad is a fictive character from the video game *Coming Out on Top* (abbreviated *COOT* hereafter; 2014), his young, attractive, bodybuilder physique is reminiscent of the beefcakes popularized in photographs, drawings, and films in the 1950s, especially in US culture. As Thierry Hoquet (2011) explains, the term “beefcake” refers to a substance that contributes to weight gain and is used to sculpt one’s body; it presents the body as a machine capable of transforming proteins into muscles. Nowadays, beefcakes can be seen on the cover of fitness and gay men’s lifestyle magazines, in Hollywood superhero films, and even in the music industry, with singers like Dan Reynolds of Imagine Dragons, who gives shirtless performances and sometimes sings while wearing the rainbow flag, presenting himself as an LGBT+ ally and as an object of desire at the same time.

Of special interest for this paper is the growing number of bodybuilders who post photos and videos on Instagram and YouTube, and advertise for their OnlyFans pages (Bernstein 2019; Ryan 2019, 119–36). Often, on these pages, erotic and pornographic content is available in exchange for money—from full frontal nudity to muscle worship and solo masturbation. Entire websites now specialize in muscle pornography: PumpingMuscle.com contains hours-long footage of naked bodybuilders filmed from suggestive angles, whereas TheBestFlex.com contains profiles of more than a thousand bodybuilders who can be contacted for cam shows, custom videos, and meet ups. As websites like these gain popularity, the boundary between bodybuilding, eroticism, and pornography becomes increasingly blurred. Progressively, the buff body has become part of what Susan Sontag (1982) has called the “pornographic imagination.”

COOT is a comedy dating simulator and visual novel. It tells the story of Mark Matthews, a college student who recently made his coming out. The game focuses on Mark's final year in university, his friendship with his two roommates, and his romantic and sexual life. The main storyline allows the player to romance six characters, from the cliché anatomy professor to the slacker football player to the anti-conformist punk singer. The game contains erotic and pornographic elements, notably double entendres, explicit sexual references, and images of the protagonist having sex with other characters. An update to the game added the Brofinder app, an app similar to Grindr or Scruff that can be used by Mark/the player to date twelve additional characters. In contrast with the main storyline, these dates mostly consist in one-night stands.

In this paper, I argue that the cast of *COOT* is composed of several beefcakes (see Figure 2) who perpetuate and transform the imagery of the beefcake that has been present in US gay culture since the 1950s. More specifically, I am interested in the beefcake as an ambiguous, homoerotic, and pornographic icon, and in the dialogue between this icon and *COOT*, one of the first video games to be specifically targeted at gay men. While *COOT* contains numerous comic elements (see Poirier-Poulin forthcoming) and summarizing it only as a pornographic game would be a mistake, in this paper I specifically focus on the sexual content of the game, situating my analysis within the scholarship on representations of the gay male body in media. My research thus falls within current attempts to bridge the gap between game studies, porn studies, and gender and sexuality studies, and wishes to extend the aesthetic and symbolic history of the beefcake to the world of video games.

Figure 1.
Brad just hopped out of the shower. Screenshot by the author.

The figure of the beefcake as a homoerotic and pornographic symbol has gotten some attention in film studies, media studies, and sociology (e.g., Waugh 1996; Lahti 1998; Alvarez 2007; Rushing 2008; Richardson 2010); however, research on that topic in game studies remains scarce. Marc Ouellette (2013) has proposed a framework for theorizing LGBT+ characters in video games by drawing on slash fiction, queer theory, and physique magazines and peplum films. Meanwhile, Nathan Thompson (2018) has investigated the creation of "sexified" male characters and explicit sex modifications in the fan community of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), showing that pornographic modding can be a powerful way to claim heteronormative gaming spaces. Though not directly related to the beefcake, a number of scholars have explored various forms of queerness and masculinities in video games: Todd Harper (2017) has read the male Commander Shepard of the *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007, 2010, 2012) as a closeted gay man; Jordan Youngblood (2018) has examined how LGBT+ identity in *Mass Effect 2* and *3* is linked to militarism and national identity, and made complicit with neocolonialism; Braidon Schaufert (2018) has argued that *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (2017) situates the queer erotic figure of the daddy within a suburban, upper-middle class homonormative fantasy; and Nicholas Taylor and Shira Chess have examined homoerotic aggression between white heterosexual male players, interpreting it as "hypermasculine fantasies of domination and violence" that reveal the vulnerability of heteronormative masculinity (2018, 274). Finally, indie game designer Robert Yang has used the same beefcake character

Figure 2.
The beefy cast of *Coming Out on Top*. Upper row: Mark (in the middle) and the six characters who can be romanced. Lower row: the twelve characters with whom Mark can have a "bonus date." Title image retrieved from obscurasoft.com.

in a number of his games, an invitation to the assumed gay male player to desire and worship him. Depending on the game, the player can spank the character in a consensual BDSM session (*Hurt Me Plenty* 2014), watch him erotically suck a popsicle (*Succulent* 2015), look at him, lying on his back, shirtless, a noticeable bulge in his jeans, holding a beer and smoking a cigarette (the title screen of *Radiator 2*, 2016), or help him wash his body in the public showers of a gym (*Rinse and Repeat HD* 2018).

As mentioned by Thompson, the inclusion of erotic and pornographic content in video games through virtual human bodies "troubles the notion that pleasure and eroticism need to come from human actors" (2018, 195). In *COOT*, the player can literally engage in sex through his avatar,[1] choose among a few sex positions, decide if he wants to wear condoms, and explore different sexual fantasies and kinks. Although sex in video games might a priori seem to be limited to onscreen representation, I would follow Linda Williams (2008) and argue that images and sound—and text in the case of video games—have the power to activate our whole sensorium through inter-sensorial exchanges; the attraction is directed to the flesh, and video games, just like pornographic films, have the power to put the player in a sex mood. *COOT* prompts the player to engage in its "libidinal economy," pushing him to use his memory and imagination to creatively engage with its narrative, make decisions, and imagine what certain actions feel like (Krzywinska 2018).

In the following pages, I first introduce the figure of the beefcake and highlight its queer potential. Then, drawing on close reading (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011), I read the beefcake in *COOT* as a queer hypermasculine figure and as a pornographic body. I finally conclude by acknowledging the limitations of this imagery and proposing further research avenues.

Beefcakes, Bodybuilders, and Ambiguous Masculinities

The cult of the beefcake is mainly associated with the work of Bob Mizer (as well as Richard Fontaine and Bruce Bellas), who founded the Athletic Model Guild in 1945. In a few years, Mizer became known for his photos and films showing well-oiled muscles, bulging crotches, and young bodybuilders wearing only posing straps, loincloths, or swimsuits (Escoffier 2009, 17, 52). Although the pumped-up image had originally been popularized in the 1930s with the Santa Monica's Muscle Beach, Mizer gave it a homoerotic twist, transforming what was the US ideal of manhood (Cagle 2000) into a sexually desirable body. The *Physique Pictorial* magazine he founded in 1951, as well as the posing, wrestling, and narrative films he made (see Waugh 1996, 258–66), largely helped him achieve this project. As Daniel Wenger notes, the emblems of straight masculinity that gay men had been discreetly looking at for a long time suddenly got infused with a new meaning: "the very men who had looked stoic and impassive in the straight magazines seemed, under Mizer's direction, to be having fun" (2016, para. 4). Ultimately, under the pretext that men were exposing their body to represent sport, art, or nature was an "unapologetic celebration of flesh, community, and ambiguous masculinity" (Waugh 2000, 123).

It is interesting to examine bodybuilding in relation to queer pornography, and the complex interplay of alibi and pleasure that this tradition occasioned in queer spectators. As noted by Thomas Waugh (2004), looking at bodybuilding served as an alibi for eroticism and queer lust, but also as a denial of the self, a way to pretend that one was not really queer. The beefcake imagery pushed gay men to become enactors of desire, to read the beefcake as desirable, and to see what other people could not see. Talking more specifically about the posing film, Waugh highlights how the models often look at the camera—at the filmmaker and at the spectator—"as if asking for directions or mistrusting the motive" (1996, 258). Just like physique magazines, physique films were licit at the time, though gay men were arrested and convicted through sodomy and obscenity laws, complicating how these media were used, what kinds of desires were allowed, and blurring the boundary between the homosocial and the homoerotic (Waugh 2004).

Hoquet (2011) provides interesting insights on the ambiguity of the beefcake. According to him, the beefcake performs his masculinity, parades, and shows confidence without falling within the ideal of classic masculinity. The beefcake is somewhat of a player, Hoquet writes: he is aware of his virility—which he voluntarily displays by inflating his muscles and flexing—and often has a knowing, flirtatious smile—"an invitation to lust, but also the mark of an incorrigible second degree" (Hoquet 2011, 12, my translation). The beefcake proudly showed his (naked) body at times when homosexuality was a crime, longing for his body to be gazed upon and allowing the clandestine desire of anonymous observers (Hoquet 2011). For Hoquet, the beefcake thus appears as a consumable sexual object, and the possibility of purchasing physique magazines or mail-order films in which he featured—I would add—plays with the gay man's sexual fantasy of ownership over the beefcake and his masculine, straight-looking body.

This idea of ambiguous masculinity can be traced back to the figure of the bodybuilder. In his foundational "Bodybuilder Americanus," Sam Fussell (1994) argues that the bodybuilder challenges the heteronormative gender division and might not be as "manly" as we tend to think; he is more in line with the circus tradition of the bearded lady than the strong man, he says. According to Fussell, the bodybuilder can be interpreted as making a vocation of recreation—using his muscles to raise eyebrows rather than to build bridges—and thus challenging puritanical and utilitarian views of masculinity. The bodybuilder also takes the traditional female role of the body as object, shaving his body to ensure that it can be seen without obstruction and adopting a distinct walk, "elbows held wide from the body, thighs spread far apart"; each of his movement is self-conscious (Fussell 1994, 45). For Fussell, the bodybuilder is intimately related to camp aesthetic and the idea of artifice, exaggeration, and performance, as theorized by Sontag (1982). To some extent, this ambiguity has been transferred to the beefcake, who is also an adept of fitness culture.

In the context of gay culture, fitness and muscles come to have additional meanings and can be interpreted in light of radical body politics. As highlighted by Martti Lahti, "gay men have often appropriated images of heterosexual masculinity to put into question the dominant definitions of homosexuality that

locate it between genders, neither in the sphere of femininity nor in the sphere of masculinity" (1998, 187). The gay beefcake thus seeks to physically produce the hypermasculine, challenging the trope of the gay male body as effeminate (Hoquet 2011), while advertising himself as an object of desire. In contrast with his straight counterpart, the gay beefcake is not flirting subtly nor pretending to be innocent: his "gay" muscles are meant to be an erotic turn-on (Halperin 1995, 117). By doing so, the gay beefcake disrupts the visual norms of straight masculinity, which imposes discretion and asks that male beauty be on display only casually (Halperin 1995, 117). "Gay" muscles are therefore ironic: they subvert the patriarchal and heterosexual power traditionally associated with muscles (Pronger 2000) and in a certain way "homosexualize" the masculine body. Instead of being an instrument to ward off other men, these muscles are a homoerotic enticement (Pronger 2000). The gay beefcake thus becomes a potential threat for straight men, who are left without any unquestionably heterosexual identity and risk homoerotic identification and stigmatization (Healey 1994), leading to a form of homohysteria (Anderson 2011). As I shall now demonstrate, *COOT* builds on this queer potential to appropriate and transform hypermasculinity.

Queering the Hypermasculine Body in *Coming Out on Top*

Several scholars have explored the representation of masculinity in video games in relation to violence, militarism, and sports (e.g., Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter 2003, 253–56; Blackburn 2018; Burrill 2018; Ouellette and Conway 2018; Conway 2020), highlighting the many ways these themes intersect to give rise to a hypermasculine ideal. Also known as the "macho personality," hypermasculinity has been traditionally associated with careless sexual attitude towards women, the view that violence is manly, and the belief that danger is exciting (Mosher and Sirkin 1984). Pushing this definition further, Amanda Phillips (2017) has made a strong case for theorizing hypermasculinity in video games in relation to hardness; it manifests through firm and muscular bodies, hard penises, physical strength, emotional and physical responses that are restricted to anger and violence, an impenetrable self-assurance, and the rejection of weakness. Along the same lines, Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett (2017) have shown how hypermasculinity in video games manifests through characters who are presented as superhuman—unique specimens of manhood saving the day—a man-versus-world mentality, derogatory language to refer to the Other (see also Lizardi 2009), and harder difficulty levels (Salter and Blodgett 2017, 23, 78, 82–83, 85). Duke Nukem (*Duke Nukem 3D* 1996) might be the most emblematic, over the top, example of hypermasculinity in games, but he is far from being the only one: other examples notably include Kratos (*God of War* 2005), Geralt of Rivia (*The Witcher* 2007), Chris Redfield (*Resident Evil 5* 2009), Franklin Clinton (*Grand Theft Auto V* 2013), Sam "Serious" Stone (*Serious Sam 4* 2020), and the list goes on.

COOT contrasts with the hypermasculine ideal on several levels; the most explicit one probably being the presence of characters who use their muscles to build homoerotic relationships with each other and with the assumed gay male player. While the game casts Mark as a hero to be admired because of his coming

out, coming out alone is not enough: Mark must come out *on top*, and in order to do so, he must enter the dating scene. After coming out to his friends, Mark immediately goes to the gay bar with Penny to celebrate. There, he meets the first potential love interest of the game, and his epic journey truly starts. This early encounter sets the tone for the rest of the game: (almost) every day in the life of Mark consists in meeting men with whom he will have the chance to have sex sooner or later.

The muscles of the game characters are not those that signify physical strength, but the muscles of the gay beefcake, i.e., those that are explicitly designed to solicit desire and that visibly inscribe on the surface of the gay male body their own erotic desire (Halperin 1995, 117). In a segment of the game, Ian asks Mark to come to a frat party with him in exchange for later being his wingman. Shirtless, he says with a hint of a smile: "Check out the gunboats. Am I not equipped to be the greatest wingman of all time?" The game characters are aware of their own beefcake physique and use it to their advantage. All of them even have a typical pose that accentuates and eroticizes the nicer parts of their body, especially when they are shirtless: Ian is very proud of his big arms and often crosses them, making them look even bigger; Alex tends to put his hands on his hips, proudly showing his pecs and his eight pack; and Brad, who has an overall athletic body, usually stands with his arms along his torso or behind him, allowing the player to observe his chest, abs, and arms without anything obstructing his view. These poses are a feature common to the visual novel genre (Bruno 2017), but in the case of *COOT* can also be put in continuity with the poses adopted by the beefcake.

The game, which was advertised as set "in a world where all men are gay (nearly all of them, anyway),"[2] is somewhat reminiscent of Tom of Finland's utopian idea of creating, through his drawings, a "Tomland," i.e., a place where all men are willing to have sex with other men (Lahti 1998). This is especially transgressive in the world of video games considering the abundance of games that associate muscles with brutal strength and killing. As Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter argue, the historical ties between the video game medium and the US military-industrial complex as well as the fact that games are still mostly designed for young straight men have led the game industry to represent men according to an ideal of "militarized masculinity," i.e., to put male protagonists in situations that "mobilize fantasies of instrumental domination and annihilation" and to create games "revolving around issues of war, conquest, and combat" (2003, 255). In *COOT*, rather than using the mouse to shoot at enemies and engage in ultraviolence, the player uses it to have sex and even fall in love. The player does not conquer newly discovered territories but conquer (or con-queer) other men, and hopefully, the heart of a potential love interest. It is especially interesting to see how the hypermasculine ideal is queered through two characters—Phil, the military man, and Brad, the jock—whose stories take place in environments that are known for being homophobic and heterosexist but also for their homosexual practices (Zeeland 1996; Pronger 1999; Messner 2001; Belkin 2012).

The ideal of militarized masculinity more specifically is queered through the character of Phil, a gay Afro-American marine who is currently going to

military school. While Phil comes back from bootcamp rather cold and distant, and gets harassed throughout the game by two homophobic marine fellows—the embodiment of toxic masculinity—he ends up enjoying his time with Mark after slightly distancing himself from military life. He apologizes for having been "a little harsh" and mentions that "bootcamp really does a number with your head." A priori, Phil seems to portray the ideal of militarized masculinity: he is strict, disciplined, and appears as physically and psychologically strong; however, the fact that he is being considered for the Reconnaissance program, and therefore for military operations that focus more on exploration and information acquisition than on military combat, opens the door for an ambiguous, even queer version of militarized masculinity. The fact that he must repeatedly avoid a physical confrontation with the two toxic marines to keep a clean record and make it to Recon is also telling. Phil is not the classic "White Messiah" that we tend to see in shooter games (Gray 2014, 20–21), but a queer beefcake of colour who enjoys trivia quiz, helps his father who is running for state Senate, and does not mind kissing his boyfriend while wearing his military uniform (see Figure 3). Let's not forget that being openly gay in the US military forces has only been allowed since 2012!

On the other hand, the game interestingly queers the ideal of the hypermasculine jock through the character of Brad, the quarterback of the Orlin University football team. Brad first appears as the stereotypical jock who has poor grades, lives in a frat house with his teammates, and is willing to pay Mark to write his essays for him. As the story unfolds, the player realizes that Brad lacks confidence and can be surprisingly good at school. It is noteworthy that Brad plays quarterback, a prestigious offensive position often associated

Figure 3.
Phil kisses Mark before leaving for Recon. Screenshot by the author.

with hypermasculinity but that is also rather homoerotic, as Brad highlights it himself. In the standard football formation, the quarterback is situated right behind the centre and places his hands under the centre's rear, ready to catch the snap. *COOT* makes the homoerotic aspect of playing quarterback (and centre) rather obvious, with Mark dreaming that he is practising snapping techniques with Brad while only wearing shoulder pads and briefs[3]—a "practice" session that slowly transforms into a sexual intercourse. It is also probably more than mere coincidence that the name of the football team in which Brad plays, the (Orlin) Otters, is a label used in the gay community to refer to hairy gay men with lean muscle mass. Brad's queer masculinity takes on greater significance considering that he aspires to join the National Football League (NFL), which is historically known for its heterosexist and homophobic culture (Morton 2013; Chadiha 2019), and which as of May 2021 has still not had any openly queer player in its teams (Ryan 2019; Hohler 2020).

In short, *COOT* queers the hypermasculine body through its beefy characters who behave in a non-hypermasculine way. The beefcakes of *COOT* thus do not fully correspond to hard masculinity when it comes to their psychology and their action; that being said, as I will now demonstrate, their bodies are still physically hard—muscular and erected—and must be situated within the logic of pornography.

The Beefcake as a Pornographic Body

While the beefcake originally fell within erotic and glamour imagery, the beefcake is becoming increasingly pornified, and trying to preserve his innocence under the traditional alibi of sports, art, and nature now seems to be a wasted effort. In what follows, I pursue my analysis of the beefcake in *COOT* by reading it as a pornographic body.

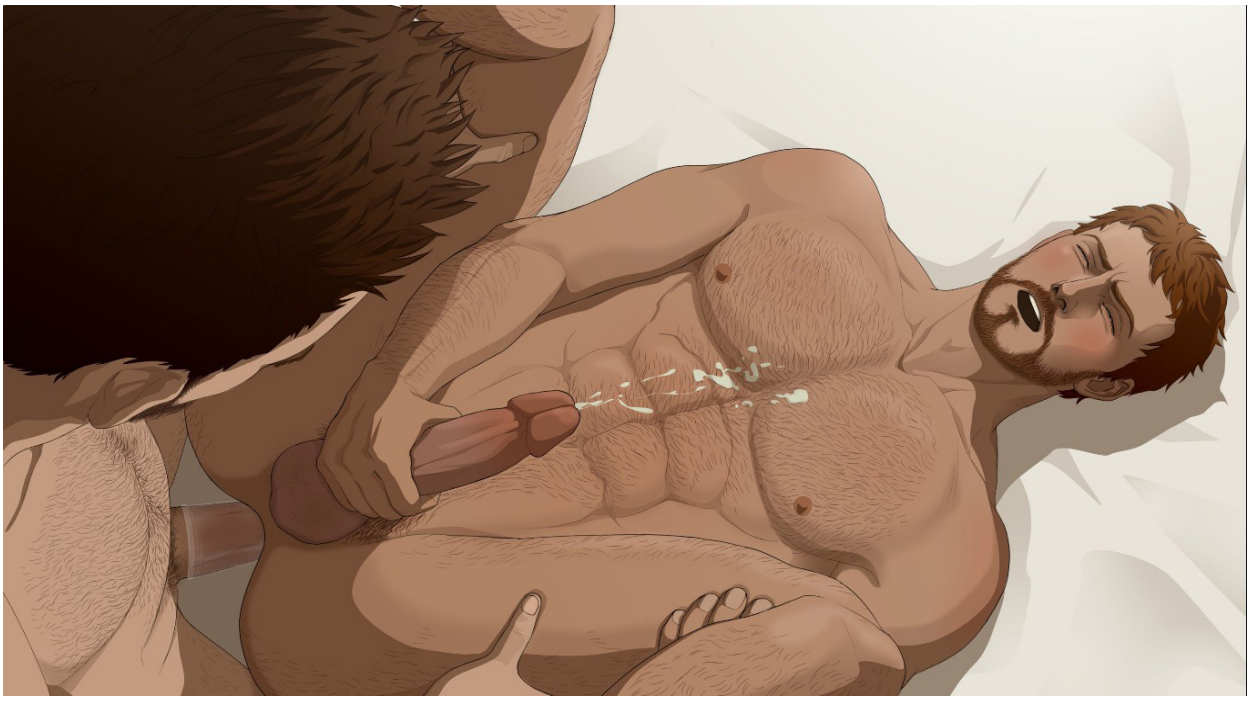
In "Straight Internet and the Natrificial," Adam Geczy proposes a strong definition of the pornographic body. According to him,

> The porn body, in tune with the repetitive pattern of pornography itself, is a body made, molded, and mediated, and thus worn, for immaterial representation. It is at once extremely physical and disembodied, virtual. Just as the moving image is a composite of different frames and angles, the porn body is a specific fashion object: a tissue of partial objects in which natural and fetish have become confounded, or fused. (2014, 174)

Interestingly, Geczy's description has some resonance with the body of the beefcake. The beefy body is moulded and sculpted through rigorous diet and training. Like the pornographic actor, the beefcake exhibits his ideal body through photos, films, and videos that are increasingly available online, transposing his thick, two hundred pound very material body into the immaterial, disembodied space. The body of the beefcake is also in tune with the repetitive pattern of pornography: it is the product of numerous series and repetitions of the same exercises, and of training sessions done several times a week. The beefy body is dissected and reduced to its components, i.e., to the different body parts on which the beefcake separately works at the gym (leg day, arm day, etc.), which he

flexes separately when he poses, and which are shown separately in pornographic videos through close-ups. The ultimate goal of the beefcake is to gather all these ideal body parts and create a "specific fashion object" (Geczy 2014, 174).

As highlighted by Geczy (2014), the pornographic body has imposed itself on the spectator, allowing them to achieve what they otherwise could not without the assistance of pornography: climax. The pornographic body has also imposed



Figures 4–5.
Mark is having sex with Brad. Screenshots by the author.

itself on purely virtual bodies, notably those of *COOT*, making them part of its "total universe" (Sontag 1982, 228) and transforming them into beefy pornographic bodies—i.e., bodies that are "muscular, thin but not too thin, hairy but not too hairy, with ample dicks, and offered up for regular servings of sex, the apparent raison d'être of the gay male body" (Harper 2015, para. 9). The possibility to customize these bodies in *COOT* through beard and body hair options is reflective of their

Figures 6–7.
Mark is having sex with Ian. Screenshots by the author.

consumable nature and of a desire to satisfy the player's taste. The pornographic beefcakes of *COOT* are bodies that the player wants and is encouraged to get by the game: dating each of the eighteen characters gives the player the opportunity to unlock unique erotic and pornographic pictures that can be later consulted in the gallery. The characters' buff bodies are there to be "collected" by Mark, becoming possessions of the player; sex is not an end in itself but a "commodified game dynamic" (Hart 2018, 158) that allows the player to complete his collection—the only way to really "beat" the game—and to earn achievements. Through these game mechanics, *COOT* makes visible certain aspects of gay culture that are already game-like, whether it is opening Grindr and choosing among a selection of men which one to go on a date with (like the player does when he decides which character's route he wants to complete), or the ludic vocabulary some gay men use online to invite other men to have sex—"Looking to play?"—portraying sex as something "casual, fun, and obligation free" (Race 2015, 259).

The pornification of the beefcake in *COOT* is especially noticeable in the way sex is represented onscreen. Each sex scene is usually composed of two images: the first one shows the game characters having hardcore sex, sweating, moaning, and getting close to climax (see Figures 4 and 6), while the second one, almost identical to the previous one, shows the characters reaching climax, as attested by the money shot and the description of the narrator (see Figures 5 and 7). For example, while having sex with Brad, the player reads:

> You grip his thighs and pump hard, lost in the sensation. / As you shift your angle, you see his body shudder and convulse. His grunts turn to moans. / The heat of your breath and bodies and sex fill the room. The strained groans of your animal voices envelop the air. / ...You comply and push harder, faster, pressure building, imagining your jizz in him. Fucking your spunk deep inside him. / ...You clench your ass tight, thrust your enraged cock one last time into the darkest depth of his asshole, and cum like a thunderstorm.

Although each sex scene is composed of still images, the first image is usually shown as a close-up or medium close-up of the beefy, naked bodies of the characters. The camera then slowly moves towards their buttocks and erected penises, showing a meat shot, and then progressively moves backward, allowing the player to see the scene in its whole and conveying pleasure by maximally exposing the bodies of the characters (following William 1989 and Melendez 2004). Throughout the scene, the player is teased by the slow movement of the camera and the detailed descriptions of the narrator but ultimately sees his curiosity and voyeuristic pleasure satisfied. In a few sex scenes,[4] the entire image or the character sprite slightly moves up and down, or from the left to the right, faster and faster, reproducing the movement of penetrative sex and showing that hardcore sex is taking place; in other instances, the image shakes a little, reproducing the characters' climax. The combination of text and images in these scenes as well as the movement of the camera bring the game experience close to the experience of watching pornography. (It is not very surprising that the player only needs one hand to play the game!) As Williams (2008) writes, "when the moving image

shows two (or more) beings touching, tasting, smelling, and rubbing up against one another…in watching them I am solicited sexually too" (20). The beefcakes of *COOT* are not just eye candy for the player: they become sexually arousing bodies and seeing them engaging in sex leads to mimetic identification.

While in terms of gameplay Mark's gaze is the gaze of identification—the player controls Mark, can customize his name, and picks his response to a particular situation from several options—the pornographic scenes complicate this gaze and transform it into desire. Identification and desire, famously conceptualized as two distinct axes by Laura Mulvey (1975), are here combined in a way that is strongly reminiscent of what Robert Rushing (2008) describes in his work on peplum films, also known for their beefy protagonists. In *COOT*, "desire and identification function less as separate axes than as pneumatic or hydraulic flows, capable of moving in multiple and even contradictory directions at the same time" (Rushing 2008, 172). The player is in presence of a gaze "saturated by same-sex desire" and is "tricked into believing that this is the gaze of identification" (Rushing 2008, 171). Gerald Voorhees's (2014) proposition to position queer desire rather than identification as the fundamental structure governing the relationship between the player and the game protagonist applies especially well to *COOT*. Although the assumed gay male player might relate to some events Mark goes through (notably his coming out), the fact that the player sees Mark's attractive body onscreen several times and sees other male characters desiring it transforms Mark into an object of desire. This feeling is reinforced by the fact that Mark is involved in the majority of the suggestive or explicit pictures of the gallery (he is shown in sixty-two of the seventy pictures to be exact, most of the time having sex); as the player unlocks more and more explicit content, Mark's body slowly transforms into a pornographic spectacle.

Interestingly, despite its explicit gay content, *COOT* adopts at times the aesthetic of gay-for-pay pornography. While many of the game characters are introduced to the player as gay, a few of them are not: Ian has a girlfriend, Brad might succumb to the sexual advances of Daisy, Luke feels lonely and is "just looking" for a friend, and the macho cop Cesar is baiting gay men as part of a sting operation. Before getting to know all of the game characters, the player has time to wonder about their sexual orientation, to desire their consumable, straight-looking buff body, and to hope that they are willing to engage in sex with Mark whether they are gay or not. Just like with Bob Mizer's beefcakes, looking at these characters leads to a complex interplay of alibi and pleasure, with both Mark and the player wondering if they are really allowed to look at these seemingly straight characters and get aroused by them, leading to the feeling that a taboo is being transgressed. Trying to figure out the sexual orientation of each character becomes a form of play (and even a tease) that is reminiscent of gay men trying to figure out the sexual orientation of strangers, or wondering if certain performers in gay pornography are really gay and if the confession-like videos in which they perform their straightness are genuine.

Like the gay-for-pay performers of Corbin Fisher and Str8chaser, the characters of *COOT* are generally young middle-class men who work out, do

sports, and sometimes talk about girls. Ian is the bro character *par excellence*: he is messy, shamelessly masturbates in the shower, calls the player "dude," and talks about his big arms. In addition, the name of the app Mark uses to hook up—Brofinder—sounds more like the name of an app to find straight bros than a dating app for gay men, to the point of confusing one of the game characters. Indeed, when Mark arrives at Luke's house willing to have sex, Luke explains that he was just looking for a bro to watch a film with—he did not know that "Streamflix and Chill" had a sexual connotation. Fortunately for Mark (and for the player), Luke ends up having "dude sex" with him and concludes the date by telling him that he is open to try out "different things" with him in the future.

Conclusion

This paper explored the representation of the beefcake in *COOT* by drawing on game studies, porn studies, and gender and sexuality studies, aiming to bridge the gap between these fields and to show that the beefcake has made his way to video games. While the beefcake was originally associated with ambiguity and homoeroticism, notably in the work of Bob Mizer, he has increasingly become pornified and is now shown having hardcore sex. The beefcake does not display his pleasure through flirtatious smiles anymore, but through moans and money shots. In the world of video games, the pornographic representation of the beefcake has the potential to queer the hypermasculine, hard body that has been associated with the video game medium since its inception and to challenge gender and sexual norms more broadly. In that sense, showing gay sex onscreen and allowing gay male players to take part in the libidinal economy of the game is especially powerful and transgressive: it is a way to celebrate gay sexuality and the gay male body.

Nevertheless, video games like *COOT* and the like—*My Ex-Boyfriend the Space Tyrant* (2012); *Full Service* (2020); *All Men Are Pigs* (forthcoming)—normalize certain fantasies while also excluding other identities from them. *COOT* challenges hegemonic game culture, but the "Tomland" it proposes to do so only allows certain types of bodies to take part in its fantasy and be legitimate objects of desire: these are the bodies of cisgender gay men who are thin, muscular, able-bodied, and with large penises. The game might not propose characters that fully correspond to the hard masculinity described by Phillips (2017)—and that is for the best—but it still proposes bodies that are physically hard and correspond to Western beauty standards. Additionally, the fact that *COOT* draws at times on the aesthetic of gay-for-pay pornography limits the queer potential of the beefcake and situates gay male identity within heterosexuality. By doing so, *COOT* situates homosexual desire within the heterosexual regime of desire and presents homonormativity as enviable. Such design choices do not challenge but rather uphold dominant heteronormative assumptions, "supporting the violence of heteronormative distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate lives" (Ahmed 2014, 150).

Therefore, *COOT* does not only appropriate and transform hegemonic masculinity and heterosexist discourses, but also circulates them. The beefcake, despite his queer potential, needs to be situated within this "very ambiguous

relationship to male power and privilege, neither fully within it nor fully outside it" (Dyer 2002, 145). He is the result of a combination of forces involving the game industry, its ties to the world of pornography, their relation to the ongoing celebration of hard masculinity, and the mainstream gay complicity in the fantasy that handsome, kind-hearted beefy men could not possibly have anything to do with upholding homonormative values and hegemonic masculinity. As Susanna Paasonen points out, sexual play tends to be seen as positive, light, and happy, and it can be easy to forget "the range of vulnerabilities and anxieties at the heart of sexual lives" (2018, 10).

Since research on the representation of the beefcake in video games is only starting, I would like to conclude this paper by suggesting two research avenues to further develop this reflection. First, the figure of the beefcake is especially noticeable in gay-themed visual novels and dating simulators (e.g., *Full Service*, *All Men Are Pigs*), two genres that often go hand-in-hand and that are still the main venue for erotic and pornographic content in game culture. These games appear as an ideal corpus to further investigate the pornification of the beefcake and could be analyzed from a comparative perspective, notably in relation to *COOT*. Second, fighting games are known for their long tradition of portraying muscular (shirtless) male characters. While game scholars have generally read the muscles of these characters as a symbol of power and strength, I believe that the muscles of characters like Rig and Jann Lee (*Dead or Alive 5* 2012), Miguel Caballero Rojo (*Tekken 7* 2017), and Cody Travers (*Street Fighter V: Arcade Edition* 2018) could also be read as an erotic turn-on for gay male players (no matter if this were the original intention of game designers or not) and could be put in continuity with the tradition of the beefcake.

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Notes

1. In this article, I am specifically interested in *Coming Out on Top* as a game targeted at gay men since this is how the game was advertised. For this reason, I am using the term "gay" (instead of "queer") and the pronouns "he," "him," and "his" (instead of "they") to refer to the player.
2. See the trailer of the game on Steam.
3. It is interesting to note that this transgressive aspect could have been pushed even further if Brad and Mark had been wearing jockstraps (instead of briefs), considering that jockstraps have been appropriated by the gay community as a form of lingerie.
4. This can be observed in the bonus dates of Donovan, Cesar, Terry, Theo, Luke, Pete and Oz, and Jesse and Hugh.

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