

Being Anal About the Rules: How digital media and gamification redefined the sexual practices and culture of the MSM community.

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Abstract

Developing technologies, digital media and mobile internet access have allowed members of the MSM community the opportunity to integrate their lives more fully into a world once dominated by exclusively straight places and communities - the change fostered by hook-up apps and services has taken the socio-sexual interaction of men who have sex with men (MSM) from the old physical community spaces into digital sexual oases.

This paper will discuss from a theoretical standpoint the changing sexual behaviours and new opportunities to create a sense of space for MSM individuals made possible by geolocation-based apps and the emergent playstyles that are born from the app developers', and players', gamification of sexual expression.

Keywords

game studies; queer studies; MSM community; gamification; ludification of culture; grindr;

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Introduction

What I like about Grindr is that it makes every space a potentially gay space... Gay men have plenty of spaces... but there's a lot of places that are still heterosexual. And Grindr gives me the chance to pull out my phone and have a gay bar in my pocket. - Anonymous Interviewee (Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott, 2014)

Historically, negative attitudes towards male on male sexual behaviour has meant that men who have sex with men¹ (MSM) have had to create clandestine, underground communities filled with unspoken rules and conventions in order to ensure that their identities and playful activities remained secret. These safe spaces, or "erotic oases" (Delph, 1978), gave the MSM community a place to explore and develop themselves without fear of societal repercussions. Combined with the technological advancements of smartphones, high speed internet and global positioning system (GPS), we can observe that the traditional space of the erotic oasis has moved from the physical into the digital; essentially creating an augmented, alternate reality where spaces once perceived to be exclusively "straight" have been reconfigured by app developers and MSM to allow for sexual activity (Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott, 2014) - the world is now their proverbial oyster.

This article will reflect on how digital technologies, applications² and platforms such as the aforementioned Grindr, have augmented and redefined more traditional non-digital MSM sexual practices, such as cruising and cottaging³. It will be also discussed that the new reality bears a striking resemblance to augmented reality games, and how considered through the right lens these apps, and the culture surrounding them, can be considered as play. Furthermore, it will also examine the significance of playful design and show how gamified elements in the applications influence MSM dating culture, and in turn how the MSM community subverts the design and scope of apps to allow for a breadth of playstyles.

The history of "hooking-up"

Gay spaces have been documented in western culture since the 19th century in the form of bathhouses, book shops, strip clubs and, of course, cruising erotic oases. The community that surrounded these

¹ This definition will include gay, bisexual, pansexual and straight men who have sex with other men, as well as gender nonconforming or trans spectrum individuals who use these spaces and apps to have sex with men.

² Applications will be referred to as apps.

³ Cruising is a term which describes the activity of going to a physical (usually public) place to find a partner, or partners, to engage in an anonymous sexual encounter. Cottaging is similar to cruising, but applies exclusively to bathrooms.

spaces was often secretive and full of paranoia due to the societally harsh view of non-heterosexual sexual activity (Licoppe, Rivière and Morel, 2016). After the tipping points of the LGBT+ rights movement in the western world, the Stonewall riots of 1969 and the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 triggered a slowly evolving change in attitudes - the MSM and queer community became less apologetic and more overt in their activities, moving from a tight-knit community which largely operated through word of mouth to a more mainstream and connected part of society (Apostolopoulos et al., 2011). Pornography was proliferated through the medium of VHS and Betamax technology for dedicated MSM audiences, and later with the rising popularity of phone sex so too did phone sex lines for MSM audiences. Queerness became an activity that had a larger place in the home via technology, a trend that continues into the 21st century. Most MSM, however, still had to rely on traditional methods of "hooking-up" such as cruising and cottaging to address the desire for physical contact.

In the early 1990's came the first wave of Internet access in the developed world (Bolding et al., 2007). Suddenly, individuals who felt remote and alone because of their sexuality, especially in rural areas, felt part of a larger, vibrant community. Through sites such as Craigslist, BBS⁴ and chat rooms, MSM individuals could engage in activities such as "sexting" and the sharing of erotic images. In the early era of web-based sexual interaction slow internet speeds and the housebound nature of the technology hampered the adoption of this form of play as a viable alternative to cruising and cottaging, which remained popular up until the introduction of newer technologies (Tewksbury, 2008). In these early years, the commercialisation of the web attracted increasing numbers of developers to create services and sites which fostered the start of the change in sexual practices of MSM.

'Web 2.0' brought dating and hook-up sites to a much wider audience than ever before - Gaydar, Gay.com and OKCupid signalled a new beginning in how users could arrange romantic encounters via web-based platforms, with a dedicated and designed service to foster encounters. From the commercial adoption of the internet to the dawn of Web 2.0, sex-related behavioural patterns of MSM changed greatly - in the time between 1993 and 2002 the amount of young men organising their first sexual encounter online had risen from 2.6% to 61% - this was balanced with a fall in cruising and cottaging numbers by a factor of eight (Bolding et al., 2007). This shows that not only did the behavioural patterns themselves change - but arguably the most formative sexual experience of MSM's early life, their "first time", was much more likely to be shaped by technology. During this era online tools became available, such as Squirt, to facilitate practices such as cruising and cottaging by allowing users to add, rate and review the

⁴ BBSes are Bulletin Board Systems, which served as early community forums online.

various erotic oases that they have visited, but these would later be supplanted by GPS-based apps (Tewksbury, 2008).

The smartphone revolution brought MSM spaces into a world once dominated by spaces perceived as straight: there's an app for that. Through KIK, Whatsapp, Snapchat and of course infamous MSM apps like Tinder, Scruff and Grindr the proliferation of the digitally facilitated endless erotic oasis came to fruition. With integrated cameras, the ease of accessibility of these apps through web stores, immediate connectivity and the proliferation of the smartphone, the number of users⁵, or players, on MSM apps has rapidly escalated, and shows no sign of slowing down. Even Grindr alone is available in 192 countries, with 5 to 6 million monthly active players and 2.4 million daily active players (Queer Me Up, 2014). Now more than ever there are novel ways to seek sexual thrills, and the promise of those thrills - and the erotic oasis - stay with you in your pocket, everywhere you go.

The borderless erotic oasis

The shift towards internet based interaction between MSM looking for sexual encounters was revolutionary - it completely changed the way MSM relate to place, their communities and their own sexuality. The digital medium opened up the once rigid and secretive borders of gay spaces and co-situated the diverse MSM community in the geographical context of heteronormative society (Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott, 2014). This brought its own challenges in the form of self-expression in a world where secrecy and paranoia were no longer the aims of the game - clearly evidenced by the fact that now individuals present themselves through the medium of a profile, or what would be called an avatar in game studies terms (Madigan, 2017). This has encouraged users to tell half-truths, and in some cases outright lies, in order to play the system and maximise the likelihood of encounters that they are seeking out - this is in keeping with Erving Goffman's theories of self-presentation, in which individuals present themselves in order to influence how they are perceived by others (Goffman, 1956). By carefully curating these avatars players often experience positive self-image due to their selective self-presentation (Gonzalez, 2011) which leads to the conclusion that a healthy amount of roleplay seems to be integral to the players enjoyment and engagement with MSM apps. However, in the context of dating apps, players would have to be careful of how far they stray from reality due to the possibility of meeting in the physical world (Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott, 2014).

Traditionally, cruising and cottaging are linked to assault and high arrest rates, and police forces around the world have even stationed undercover policeman in known cruising and cottaging hot spots in order

⁵ For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to the "users" of MSM Hook-up apps as "players" to better reflect exploration of the metaplay which has developed around the usage of these apps.

to convict MSM who undertake these activities (Colter, 1997). This means that frequenting physical erotic oases carries the stigma of risk, something which may have played a role in MSM switching to safer activities facilitated by modern technology (Apostolopoulos et al., 2011).

The mass migration of players from historical forms of sexual encounters to web-based forms of play has been indicated by a number of factors, first and foremost being a reflection of society moving to digital mediums as a whole. This is particularly true of a new, digitally literate generation, who have been raised around smartphones and instant connectivity (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2016). Hobbs and his colleagues theorised that modern courtship had become a commodified game, in which web based interaction plays an important role. This supports the core concept of apps becoming a facilitator of playful activity between members of the MSM community.

Through migrating online, players not only have a greater range of choice in whom they interact with, but a degree of control over the subsequent encounters as cruising and cottaging tend to be random by their very nature and take control away from participants. Players also have control over where the game is played - initially from the safety and comfort of their own home or on the go if they so choose. This allows new players to acclimatise to the idea of organising and arranging a sexual encounter at a pace that suits them, whilst they may not have otherwise been bold enough to try unpredictable and immediate methods of "hooking-up" such as cruising and cottaging. By gamifying socio-sexual interaction and utilising the game logic of augmented reality, players are encouraged by developers to consider sexual activity in a more playful and casual light.

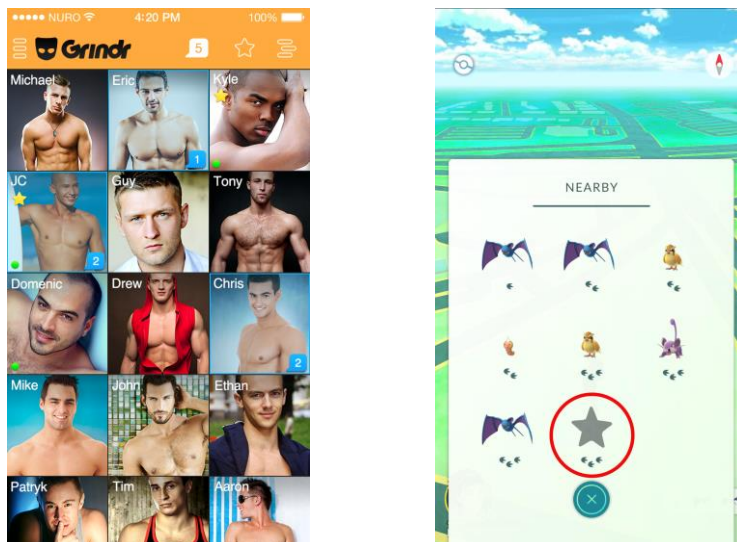


Figure 1 and 2: Screenshots of the in-game interfaces of Grindr and Pokemon Go

Above are images of the in-game GUI of both Grindr and *Pokemon Go*. These screens are designed to show players what, or who, they can interact with in their immediate proximity. Using GPS, the game arranges the tiles in a grid from nearest to farthest that present players with a system designed to reassure them that they have a large selection to pick from, and they can simply keep scrolling until they find something they like (Aunspach, 2015). This is balanced by the player's appetite for travel distance and their need for immediate gratification - an abstraction of real world geography that breaks down barriers and brings a whole realm of possibilities to the palm of the player's hand. This is one of the many ways in which developers have applied game logic to the design of hook-up apps for MSM. Other ways in which we can see the influence of game logic is the inclusion of mechanics such as "power ups" and "boosts" in the design of apps - these mechanics in games would often augment or increase the abilities of your character in the context of the game world, but in this context, it allows the player to see more players profiles, contact more players, see more photos and so forth. These inclusions are all in service of the designers' perceived win condition of the app - a hook-up.

What are the rules of the game?

On these apps there are several sets of rules that govern how players interact; the terms and conditions/code of conduct put in place by the developers, the expectations of the meta-game developed by the community and social conventions such as politeness and reciprocity. These rules are largely self-moderated by the players through features such as reporting other users and blocking. However, players tend to stick to these rules and conventions in order to maximise the likelihood of successful outcomes rather than fear of punitive measures.

Whilst the definition of a win-condition is left to the discretion of the player, as discussed below, there are generally accepted lose-conditions for the game. These include: being blocked by the majority of players in your area for poor conduct or inappropriate behaviour, being unable to secure desired outcomes through playing the game too cautiously or being perma-banned⁶ by the app developers. Whilst these may deter players for acting poorly, in cases where individuals choose to harass and antagonise others it is not uncommon for players to take moderating the behaviour of these "griefers" into their own hands. Individual profiles may contain warnings to other players concerning players to avoid, or disavow infractions such as "pic collecting", catfishing⁷, stalking and being a "time waster" (Tziallas, 2015). These methods used by a self-moderating community encourages players to

⁶ A "perma-ban" is a permanent ban placed on a user by the moderators of a service.

⁷ Catfishing is the practice of creating a fake online persona to deceive other users of the service.

look out for each other, and furthermore to ostracise and shame those who operate outside the unofficial rule set that has emerged in the meta play of the game.

Another example of this would be players only presenting a faceless "torso-pic" of themselves as their avatar - an act which is viewed with suspicion by most players. By refusing to give up a part of their identity, i.e. their likeness, any interaction will not start on an even playing field, leading players who play the game "correctly" to be less likely to initiate a dialogue with that individual (Lemke and Weber, 2016).

Playstyles

Research into MSM encounter-based apps has presented various ways of interpreting them, and indeed classifying them. The two most prominent are "Gay Dating and Hookup" apps, "Location-based Real-time Dating" apps and "Gay Social Networking" apps. I would argue that all of these are valid, as well as many of the other terms used by researchers. What I believe they fail to take into account, however, is the fact that the user base does not tend to be a homogenous group, and that they are often looking for very different outcomes (Aunspach, 2015) through strategic performances (Hobbs, Owen and Gerber, 2016), or what will be referred to in this essay, in the context of play, as playstyles. In short, the nature and classification of the app is dependent on the nature and behaviour of the player.

In MSM apps, there is no dominant strategy because there is no agreed upon win condition. Whilst the app developers have marketed and designed the apps in certain ways, often with real-world sexual interaction being pitched as the ultimate goal, there are in fact a great number of emergent playstyles that have become popular in the community base of these apps. For many players, it is the peer-to-peer Skinner-box style feedback loops (MacLeod, 2007) that takes the form of compliments and positive affirmation from fellow players, who themselves often expect the same in return, which is then rewarded with more photos and messages. It is this cycle of instant gratification and sense of achievement that brings the player back for more and more, regardless of desired outcome. Many players of dating apps simply engage with them for the entertainment value (Carpenter and McEwan, 2016) provided by play. MSM who are not "out" or consider themselves to be straight often play in a way that prioritises online sexual activities, content to perform masturbatory acts whilst chatting and sharing pictures with other players (Lemke and Weber, 2016).

Gamified achievements can take many forms in the meta-play that has developed around MSM apps. For some players, collecting erotic pictures of the community around them is the reward, for others the promise of having an open-ended history of chats full of positive reinforcement about themselves and their sexual prowess is enough (Tziallas, 2015). Some players like to "rack up" as many real-world meets as they can,

and measure their success at playing the metagame this way - as "interactional" achievements (Licoppe, Rivière and Morel, 2016). What's important is that players all have their own unique play style, and often this playfully subverts the scope and intention of the software's original design and purpose. Each of these styles has an associated strategy which will maximise the likelihood of the desired outcome for the player, but flexible and changeable players who may want different outcomes at different times have shown a degree of adaptability in their playstyle (Blackwell, Birnholtz and Abbott, 2014).

Evangelos Tziallas postulates that Grindr has become a platform for self-pornification, that players are indulging in a form of eroticised participatory surveillance. Whilst this exhibitionism and voyeurism is an important part of the game to many players, it is frequently not the sole desired end result. However, it is an integral part of the formative induction to the game for new players, learning when and how to share what images within the framework of the generally accepted rules in a pseudo-DIY tutorial. This gamified surveillance is offset by the expectation of screening - the act of selecting potential interactions from the choice available based on preferences and playful questioning to gauge compatibility (Tziallas, 2015).

Conclusion

In this borderless new world, the art of cruising and cottaging are all but extinct due to a step-change in technology, changing societal attitudes towards the MSM community and a generation of young people who have had less incentive to hide their sexual activity and embrace the possibilities made possible by the technology in their pocket. These simple apps empowered a generation of gay and bisexual men to move out from the shadows of secretive places and play in the real world, as equal members of society. This augmented reality, and the emergent metaplay that developed surrounding it, utilised spaces which were new to the MSM community to change old behaviours. In short - the commodified game of modern courtship can now be played in a gamified digital erotic oasis utilising a play style that suits the goals of the player. If we accept that the nature of the app is dependent on the nature of use, players of Grindr and similar apps are playing a game, and we should accept that the apps that gave rise to those metagames are, in themselves, games.

Whilst it is clear that cruising and cottaging have been replaced by a generation of MSM who prefer a more digitised form of play due to the greater range of playstyles and control it affords (and lessened risk that comes with moving away from illicit underground activities) further research into the changing behaviours and experiences of MSM in the context of a mobile-first world is required (Weiss and Samenow, 2010). What limited prior research there is has focused mostly on medical, psychological or sociological dimensions of MSM apps, but do not

address the phenomenology of the adoption and proliferation of them. Furthermore, there are also no longitudinal studies into the usage of MSM apps (Goedel and Duncan, 2015).

By developing a qualitative research project utilising ethnographic research methods to study this phenomenon, that takes into account dimensions such as geography, race, age and "out" status, we can gain a deeper appreciation of the underlying anthropological factors that enabled this shift, the experiences and numbers of individuals who have transitioned from physically cruising to digitally cruising, and in doing so better understand the game that is being played itself.

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