Breaking it Down: The Construction of Femininity in *Just Dance*[1]

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Introduction

Popular media has the potential to impact the development of children as these cultural texts carry messages to audiences attempting to make sense of the world and their place within it. While video games and other forms of popular media are often critiqued as mindless entertainment, they can function as sites of discourse production, placing value on certain identities while constructing others as valueless through repetitive representations or absences.[1] Academic research on video games is now fairly common across disciplines. While most research has focused on video games targeted toward teen males that include violence or explicit sexual themes, less attention has been given to games marketed toward young female audiences. As a result, many seemingly innocuous games that have mild ratings (such as "E" for "Everyone" or "E 10+" for "Everyone 10+") by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) are overlooked. One of these overlooked video games is *Just Dance*.

This article argues that the popular *Just Dance* video game series reinforces dominant media narratives regarding the requirement of the ideal female body to perform normative femininity and sexiness. The series perpetuates rigid gender performance of femininity and sexiness by assigning value to the ideal body. The prevalence of fit, glowing white female avatars in the main *Just Dance* video games suggest to the audience that bodies outside of these requirements perform sexiness incorrectly or are not capable of performing sexiness at all. Bodies that vary from the ideal, such as racialized or ethnicized bodies, are constructed as hypersexual and/or exotic female Others. The franchise also silences fat bodies as only one fat-bodied female avatar is included in the main game series. In the series, hegemonic sexiness and value are intertwined. Rather than offering alternative narratives regarding the female body, femininity, and sexiness, the main games align with normative conceptions of ideal beauty and gender performance. After describing the *Just Dance* series, this article discusses the theoretical underpinnings used in the analysis before presenting the methodology. It concludes with a textual analysis of several routines that highlight some of the major themes present in the series.

The *Just Dance* Series

In 2009, Ubisoft released the first *Just Dance* game in the United States for the Nintendo Wii gaming system and has since produced over a dozen different *Just Dance*-related games (such as the *Just Dance Kids* series, the *Experience* series, and a series exclusive to Japan) for all of the major gaming platforms (Nintendo Wii, Xbox, and PlayStation). *Just Dance* is a dance video game that utilizes motion sensor technology to analyze players' movements and performance. Depending on the system, players either hold a remote that tracks their movement (Nintendo, iOS and Android via smartphone) or they calibrate themselves to be recognized by motion detecting software (Xbox and PlayStation).[2] Players receive points for their ability to mimic the movements of onscreen avatars dancing to popular songs by artists such as Katy Perry, Rihanna, Nicki Minaj, and One Direction.

Just Dance is an example of a highly interactive video game. Players are expected to move their bodies to mirror the movements of the dance avatars. In contrast to most video games, *Just Dance* encourages the player to have an awareness of the body rather than a separation from it. This full body movement intensifies immersion within the games and perhaps even aids in the normalization of discourse regarding identity narratives via kinesthetic learning.

Each individual game usually includes around forty songs spanning several decades of music. Each dance routine has its own unique setting and avatars. The avatars are predetermined by the game itself, and the player does not have the option to choose their preferred avatar but are instead assigned avatars depending on the particular song. For routines designed for partners or groups, a player has the ability to choose from a predetermined set of avatars; however, these avatars usually do not differ from one another substantially. In addition, all avatars assigned to the routine remain present in the routine regardless of avatar selection. The dance avatars have a number of signifiers that suggest their sex, gender, race, and ethnicity within a compulsory able-bodied and heterosexual framework. The majority of the avatars are a glowing white color, which often obstructs the facial features of the avatars.

All of the games that are a part of the main *Just Dance* series are rated "Everyone 10+"[3] by the ESRB and are popular both internationally and in the United States. As of 2014, the franchise sold nearly 50 million copies of the game series (Macdonald, 2014). *Just Dance* has been called one of the "biggest franchises in gaming" (Makuch, 2014: para. 4). *Just Dance*'s popularity justifies close analysis of what kind of messages the game series perpetuates among a sector of its target audience: girls.

Ubisoft has consciously marketed *Just Dance* to a girl audience. In the past, they collaborated with Miss Sporty cosmetics in the U.K. to create joint product displays for stores, and *Just Dance* has also partnered with pop stars, such as Katy Perry, to promote the games (Langsworthy, 2011; Sacco, 2011). Given the franchise's young and "global" audience, it is important to consider how the video game is constructing the ideal body,

femininity, and sexiness and how the series can be situated within the "sexualization" of girl culture discourse.

The Obesity Epidemic and "Exergaming"

Since the early 2000s, academic, medical, and popular literature discussing the obesity epidemic in the U.S. has increased. This literature has emphasized that the obesity crisis not only affects adults but children. Herndon (2014) explains that "[t]he war on obesity is as much about tensions surrounding gender, race, and class as it is about obesity...the panic over obesity has been mapped onto the bodies of women and children as the first sites of intervention in what is arguably positioned as the epidemic of our time" (pp. 2-3). Fat-bodied people are often blamed for their fat bodies, and fat bodies are constructed as bodies in need of correction. Herndon (2014) goes on to note that fat bodies are also in need of "saving," especially in relationship to children and on the individual level. This is evident in myriad sites of society in the U.S., such as Michelle Obama's "Let's Move!" initiative, that attempt to address childhood obesity.

As a result of the obesity epidemic in the U.S., "exergaming" (active gaming) has been introduced to encourage children to participate in physical activity while playing video games (Zeng & Gao, 2016). The Nintendo Wii platform, which is the preferred platform for *Just Dance*, is the gaming system most associated with "fitness" and changing the narrative of the sedentary adolescent playing video games, capitalizing on the fitness turn in U.S. society. Additionally, the majority of the *Just Dance* games offer a sweat mode where a player can track the number of calories burned during the routine. Some games are even modified for increased cardiovascular activity. In the *Just Dance* games, narratives surrounding fit and fat bodies in society are present where fit bodies are valued and fat bodies are devalued, and this discourse is directly tied to femininity and sexiness.

Sexiness: What Is It, and Who Can Achieve It?

The media offers narrow definitions of femininity and sexiness, in which women (and even girls) are often expected to conform to these constructions. The classical body is a general requirement in order to achieve femininity and therefore sexiness in society. The classical body is more easily elucidated in relation to the grotesque body, its oppositional binary. While the grotesque body, as explained by Bakhtin (1968/1984), is incomplete, "ugly, monstrous, [and] hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics," the classical body is its dichotomy (p. 25). The grotesque body suggests abundance and chaos while the classical body suggests containment and control. Therefore, the classical body is constructed as valuable while the grotesque body is often constructed as an ambivalent or valueless body; these erroneous narratives are normalized in the media and present in the *Just Dance* series.

Related to the notion of beauty and femininity is Mulvey's (1975) notion of the male gaze. If a woman's body meets the requirements of "*to-be-looked-at-ness*," then her body is worthy of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11). This worthiness is defined by the society's construction of beauty. Bordo (1993/2003) explains that women in particular feel pressure to conform to ideal slenderness in addition to constructions of femininity to the point in which bodily plasticity is an expectation of all women no matter their identities (such as race, sexual orientation, class, and age). Collins (2005) notes that "[h]istorically, in the American context, young women with milky White skin, long blond hair, and slim figures were deemed to be the most beautiful and therefore the most feminine women" (p. 194). The ideal slender body, which is thin but curvaceous in the appropriate places, ignores difference and requires that all female bodies conform to hegemonic femininity—even if the ideal necessitates certain attributes such as whiteness or heterosexuality. Bartky (1990) explains that this pressure to conform to normative femininity results in an endless self-surveillance in which the female is destined to fail at achieving the (purposely) unattainable ideal. Bartky (1990) uses Foucault's (1977/1995) notion of the pervasive panoptic gaze as a disciplinary mechanism in her explanation. The gaze results in a power differential among many identities, especially for women. In order to perform femininity "correctly" and convey sexiness, a woman must use her body in a traditional way that maintains the power differential. If a woman disrupts this system (whether in appearance or action), she is depicted in a negative manner because she is violating social norms. In *Just Dance*, female bodies are usually glowing white, fit, able-bodied, young, and have middle to upper-class signifiers. In addition, female avatars are paired with male avatars for "romantic" dance routines, suggesting that the game is framed by a gaze that upholds heterosexuality. *Just Dance* not only contributes to society's discourse surrounding bodies and sexiness based on its content, but the games actively police behavior by rewarding players for correctly mimicking on screen movements.

The processes of socialization, which are rooted in discourse production, perpetuate the illusion that certain behaviors in a society are natural and normal while others are unnatural and abnormal. Through the processes of socialization, children are expected to learn the expectations of normative femininity, normative masculinity, and heterosexiness. In order to maintain the dualistic understanding of power and value in society in relationship to gender, individuals are expected to adhere to certain actions that are interpreted as gender specific as a result of discourse. These gendered acts are performative; masculinity and femininity are not inherent to a person's sex but are constructed as categories of normalcy (Butler, 1990/2006). Therefore, different cultures across time and space have had different definitions of what constitutes normative masculine and feminine behaviors.

While the fit body is regularly present in the main *Just Dance* game series, the fat body is rarely included in the routines. If the ideal body is a "body that is absolutely tight, contained, 'bolted down,' firm" and whose flesh does not "'wiggl[e]'" (Bordo, 1993/2003, p. 190), the fat body opposes the ideal body. In order to define "normal" body weight, many people turn to science for answers. The current medical construction of fatness is, according to Lupton (2013), based on an "arbitrary decision" made by medical experts as to what is considered "normal weight" and what is considered "overweight," particularly in reference to the Body Mass Index (BMI) scale (p.8). Bodies are often subject to the medical gaze—a way for elite medical experts to define what constitutes a normal body while treating others as abnormal where the body is thought of as object to be analyzed, categorized, and corrected (Foucault, 1973/1994). Many individuals who maintain a healthy diet and exercise regularly and still appear to have excess adipose tissue are often considered unhealthy and at high risk for diseases by medical experts, and quantitative tools rarely take into consideration individual bodies or other factors (Scott-Dixon, 2008). This lack of nuance regarding the medical construction of fit/fat bodies results in "normal" and "abnormal" rhetoric that can be harmful to conceptions of the self and others.

Fat bodies are often viewed in this manner as people negatively comment on rolls of fat exposed underneath the hem of a shirt and flesh hanging over the sides of jeans creating the undesirable "muffin top" effect. In this way, fat bodies are constructed as "grotesque, uncontained, physical evidence of their inability to control their desires and greed" in which "[t]heir flesh bulges, burgeons forth, takes up more space than other bodies, provoking negative attention in its excessiveness" (Lupton, 2013, p. 3). The excessiveness of the fat body is assumed to completely consume the person within, at which point the fatness takes over the person's entire identity. Degher and Hughes (1999) agree adding, "[o]bese people are 'fat' first, and only secondarily seen as possessing ancillary characteristics" (p. 13). Unless the fat body is being critiqued, as exemplified in reality television makeover and weight loss shows, constructions of the fat body in Western culture seek to minimize its representation in popular culture altogether. Some media narratives and medical discourses shame the fat body, as they present fatness as something undesirable. Narratives surrounding the fat body in popular media, such as those ones on makeover television shows and those associated with celebrity culture, present to audiences the repercussions of fatness. Therefore, it is important to consider the relationship between the ideal body and fat body and how these bodies are used to construct femininity and sexiness in the main *Just Dance* games.

The "Sexualization" of Girl Culture

The "effect" of media on society is a debated topic today as the media is often blamed for violent and sexually explicit behaviors. Many scholars posit that girl culture has become saturated with sexual themes as girls are pressured and expected to attain hegemonic femininity at younger and younger ages. It is important to note that girl culture does not have an established timeframe but rather a more general range of liminality in which prepubescent girls begin to transition into "womanhood." Cultural critics and scholars, such as Durham (2008), Levin and Kilbourne (2008), and Shewmaker (2015) posit that while children should not be shielded from sex and sexuality forever, exposure to sexualized media culture, in combination with a narrow understanding of sexiness, too early during a child's formational years can be harmful to children. The commodification of girl culture in particular is a lucrative endeavor as unattainable feminine ideals intertwined with narrow conceptions of sexuality present in popular culture marketed to tweens generate revenue (Cook & Kaiser, 2004).

In order to explain how sexualization is present in society, the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) compiled definitions and data on the sexualization of girl culture in the U.S., and describes a facet of sexualization as valuing a person, who is constructed as one-dimensional, strictly for their sexiness or their ability to conform to ideals. The APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) argues that viewing material that suggests sexual objectification can have damaging consequences associated with self-image and conceptions of others.

While it is important to consider what kind of cultural texts are available during the meaning-making process in relationship to the development of sexuality, it is necessary to understand children as active agents in interpreting the cultural messages present in a society and offer a nuanced understanding of sexual(ized) girlhood. Some scholars argue that sexualization rhetoric constructs children as lacking agency and unable to negotiate sexualized media, ultimately creating panic for educators and guardians of children. Some studies have shown that despite the prevalence of sexualization present in media, audience reception studies regarding youth audiences find that girls actively negotiate or resist sexual themes associated with popular music (Baker, 2004; Jackson & Vares, 2015; Lowe, 2003). Therefore, this paper understands the use of sexualized popular culture among girl audiences as complicated and contradictory and not as a totalizing force. As Gill (2009) explains, the monolithic sexualization of culture thesis is essentially an insufficient tool for understating how power operates as understanding mechanisms of sexualization in society is a nuanced and intersectional endeavor that should focus on difference. Therefore, this paper attempts to explain how the rigid discourse regarding femininity and sexiness in the *Just Dance* games can be harmful to bodies and behaviors that vary from the normative construction at multiple intersections of identities.

Methodology

      In order to analyze the construction of discourse regarding normative femininity and deviations from normative femininity in relationship to sexiness within the game series, content analysis and textual analyses were employed. The playlist of each game varies based on a number of factors including location, where the game was purchased, the gaming platform, and the unlocking of routines. This study focuses on songs included on the main playlist for *Just Dance*, *Just Dance 2*, *Just Dance 3*, *Just Dance 4*, *Just Dance 2014*, *Just Dance 2015*, *Just Dance 2016,* and *Just Dance 2017* specifically for the Nintendo Wii gaming platform but does not include all downloadable content, exclusives, or different modes of play. Therefore, other illustrative examples may exist. In total, eight games and 329 routines, each with different avatars, songs, and setting backgrounds were reviewed. Out of this sample, some general trends were apparent. Avatars coded as female with traditionally feminine signifiers appear in 67% of the total routines sampled. At least one human avatar was featured in 94% of the dance routines. Of the routines that included human avatars (the game also includes avatars shaped like animals and other non-human entities), 89% of these routines featured a human avatar that was a glowing white color for the duration of the song.[4] Fit female avatars were disproportionately represented. Of the routines that featured at least one female avatar, 99% of them included female avatars with thin or fit bodies and traditionally feminine signifiers.[5]

      While this data highlights general trends found in the game, textual analyses of the dance routines were central in understanding the messages embedded within the text. These analyses included an examination of lyrics, dance moves, background settings, avatars, music, and a contextual comparison between the *Just Dance* version of each song and the artist's original music video. This process revealed numerous encoded messages regarding stereotypes present within the game that could contribute to inequality-reproducing discourse regarding femininity and sexiness.

Analysis: Sexiness and the ideal body.

      In the *Just Dance* series, the ideal body is a requirement of normative femininity and sexiness. However, this is unsurprising as "[t]he physical representation of gender in the vast majority of video games is also a close adherent to societal expectations of beauty" (Dickerman, Christensen, & Kerl-McClain, 2008, p. 23). White avatars (both male and female) are regularly presented in the game, but female avatars that are a glowing white color are by far the most represented.

      Glowing white female avatars are present in the majority of the *Just Dance* routines and even appear in dance tracks where artists of color originally sing the song. In *Just Dance 2*, the dance song "Crazy in Love" originally by Beyoncé ft. Jay-Z, is

covered by the game series. In the game, players are expected to mirror the dance moves of a glowing white female avatar. While the original artists of the song are of color, *Just Dance* uses a glowing white female avatar for the routine. While the original artists' race or other axes of identity may not carry over into the game, many other signifiers from the original music videos are present in the games. For example, the music video "Crazy in Love" by Beyoncé ft. Jay-Z includes a catwalk setting and Beyoncé in a number of outfits. The *Just Dance* version of the song also features an avatar on a catwalk wearing clothing and accessories that are reminiscent of the original music video (high heels, large gold earrings and necklace, and a purple and orange dress) in addition to similar dance moves. The game attempts to capture Beyoncé and her moves (body rolling and popping and strutting) through the use of a female avatar coded as white. This depiction upholds white femininity and also depicts the classical body as a requirement of traditional femininity and sexiness. Further, the contextual link to Beyoncé reinforces the narrow construction of sexiness present in the media.

Sexiness takes a limited number of forms in the *Just Dance* game series and relies on tropes for expression. In addition to the construction of the white classical body as the apex of femininity, "the Lolita"—which is a misconstrued trope from Vladimir Nabokov's (1955) novel *Lolita*—is utilized in the *Just Dance* series. In *Just Dance 3*, Britney Spears' "Baby One More Time" (covered by "The Girly Team") is used as a dance routine in which four glowing white female avatars dance to the popular song. Spears' iconic hit "...Baby One More Time," released in 1998, gave the then sixteen-year-old artist worldwide fame and sex symbol status. The music video is set in a Catholic high school, and opens with Spears wearing a school girl uniform and braided pigtails. She dances in the school's hallway, combining Mary Janes and pigtails with a bare midriff and knee-high socks. The "Baby One More Time" routine is reminiscent of the music video as four white glowing female avatars who appear to be teenaged (as a result of their seemingly smaller frames) with fit bodies and blonde hair dance in a high school hallway to the song. The female avatars all wear cheerleading uniforms with knee-high socks and varying hairstyles (one of the dancers is wearing pigtails). The dance moves are less vigorous than Spears' video; however, the "bouncy" nature and sharp "whipping" motions of the dance remain intact. Other signifiers in the game, such as the school bell in the background and the locker setting, are similar to Spears' video. Thus, the notion of the desirable "popular girl" in school, the white cheerleader, is reinforced in the game but also the image of Britney Spears, once described as a "Lolita" herself, is being used to show how even young females can try to perform this construction of sexiness.

The regular use of "global" female popstars and their songs in *Just Dance* is important, especially for a girl audience. Read (2011) explains that the "popular girl" at school has characteristics that support the constructed femininity at that time,

characteristics that are established or reinforced by popstars, who tend to align with ideal femininity and heterosexy discourse. In Read's (2011) study of children's (ages 7-8) role models, she found female teachers were the primary role models for girls; however, female popstars/groups were a close second in which the girls chose Britney Spears and Beyoncé as their personal role models as a result of appearance (attractive), personality (kind/sweet), and accomplishments (stars can sing and dance). In *Just Dance* these potential role models are featured prominently. For example, Katy Perry is featured six times in the main series. Several other stars also have numerous songs used for dance routines including Rihanna, Nicki Minaj, Britney Spears, Beyoncé, and Shakira.

Sexiness and the Other.

When *Just Dance* is not participating in the erasure of racial or ethnic signifiers, the games account for "difference" in a stereotypical manner, often marking female avatars who have fit bodies but several non-white and/or non-Western signifiers as either hypersexual, exotic, or both. In her discussion of black girlhood and womanhood in relationship to the body, Dagbovie-Mullins (2013) explains how black females are depicted in the media:

> [B]lack girls are oversexualized and considered sexually aberrant in the media, black women are infantilized, viewed as play things who are endlessly available and childlike, particularly in popular culture media where images of black women are most prominent: reality television and music videos. The prevalence and acceptance of these damaging images...suggests that black girls aren't really *girls*. The dangerous entangling of woman and girl prompts us to think about black girls in two interrelated and degrading ways: they are forgettable and invisible yet highly visible, hypersexual, and repelling. (p. 746)

Women of color, who are regularly absent from the media, are often depicted in a stereotypical manner as hypervisible, hypersexual Other when depicted in the media for a white, Western audience. One extreme example of the hypersexual other occurs in an alternative routine for *Just Dance 2014*'s "Rich Girl" (2004) by Gwen Stefani featuring Eve that falls outside of the methodological parameters of this study but is nonetheless important.

In the original video, set on a pirate ship, Gwen Stefani and Eve dance with pirates and "Harajuku Girls" (which used to be a regularity for Stefani). While the main dance version of this game focuses on a white female avatar in an ancient Egyptian setting, the "alternative mode" entitled "Rich Girl (With a Chair)," suggests that the avatar is of color and also that the avatar is on stage. The game opens with a black female avatar, who appears to have Afro-textured hair, lying on a red chair with a bright

light behind her (so as to create a silhouette effect). The avatar performs a typical "sexy chair dance" routine in high heeled shoes. The dance ends with the avatar's head at the bottom of the chair and her legs at the top of the chair. This coding of the avatar as of color, as opposed to the usual glowing white avatar, links the black avatar to overt sexiness, in which the black female body is often coded as hypersexual in the media (Collins, 2005; hooks, 1992). Dagbovie-Mullins (2013) explains that black women are met with different expectations regarding sex and sexuality in the media that depict black girls as "'whores' who want it" thus "repeating a familiar—from slavery times to the present—damaging narrative in the American consciousness" (p. 764). Similarly, Collins (2005) notes that the black female body is especially objectified and commodified in mass media in which black females are "reduced to their bodies" and that "displaying nameless, naked black female bodies had a long history in Western societies" from slavery to contemporary popular culture (p. 128). Therefore, given that black avatars rarely appear in the main *Just Dance* game series, and that the black female avatar is coded as being of color and is hypersexual as a result of the chair dance number, it is important to consider how this representation may be used to define and place value on normative femininity.

In *Just Dance 2014*'s "Where Have You Been" by Rihanna, hypersexual and exotic Othering is evident. The original video opens as Rihanna emerges from water as the camera pans down her body. Rihanna dances wearing zebra print and a headscarf adorned with a feather in a dry desert setting with flames in the foreground. At the end of the video, Rihanna appears to reference Shiva, a many-armed deity of Hinduism, as she moves her hips from side to side. *Just Dance*'s "Where Have You Been" opens with a white female avatar, who appears from thin air as a result of flames, crouching on the ground while distant lightning threatens volcanic rock in the background. The avatar wears a long red skirt and a matching red top that reveals a white classical body. In addition, the avatar has long uncontrolled hair adorned with feathers and a headband. As the beat pulses, "tribal" tattoos become visible on the avatar's body as they glow in red and then turn black. These tattoos are reminiscent of a tattooed man of color in the original video. When the bass drops, fire and lava illuminates the background and the female avatar turns almost completely black as lava cracks the foreground. The second time the bass drops, the female avatar again turns black but her tattoos are visible and glow orange as a ring of fire surrounds the avatar. The "tribal" dancing in the game is similar to the dancing in the video.

In *Just Dance 3*, the hypersexual, exotic female Other is present in the number "Beautiful Liar" (2006) by "Countdown Mix Masters" (originally by Beyoncé and Shakira). In the source text, Beyoncé and Shakira open the video with smoke, sultry stares, and moaning. Body locking, popping, and rolling are regularly used by both individuals throughout the video as the instrumentation gives the song an "exotic" feel

for the Western audience. In one scene of the video, Beyoncé and Shakira mirror one another's belly dancing. In *Just Dance 3*, two glowing white female avatars are used for the song. Both avatars are wearing high heels and are in skirts and belly shirts. Also, both avatars are wearing multiple bracelets that go up the length of their arms. Similar moves found in the original video are used in the dance routine such as body popping, locking, and rolling. Shakira's iconic "slithering" movement, where she fluidly contorts her stomach, is also present.

Shakira, who is both Lebanese and Colombian, is regularly constructed as exotic Other in the media. Molina-Guzmán (2010) elucidates this construction of "Latinidad as Other" in relationship to the media in which "[a] white Latina, for example, may be read as nonwhite because of her national origin, as is Colombian-born Shakira" as celebrities "who are multiethnic and appear to be phenotypically white, are gendered and racialized outside whiteness by the media because of ethnic markers that are commonly associated with U.S. Latinas or Latin America as foreign and exotic" (pp. 10-11). These stereotypes reinforce ethnocentric rhetoric in the construction of nation and identity, where white, Western femininity is constructed as superior to racialized and ethnicized femininities (Mendible, 2007; Molina-Guzmán, 2010). In addition, the source text and the *Just Dance* routine seems to reinforce an exotic non-Western othering inherent in Said's (1979) notion of orientalism. While *Just Dance* attempts to be "multicultural" in its portrayal of female avatars with various racial and ethnic signifiers, this seems like a failed attempt that reinforces Otherness. Drew (1997) explains the difficultly of introducing "multiculturalism" to children in a pedagogical framework (through multicultural literature, for example) for it can actually just reproduce colonial rhetoric despite its "good" intentions:

> Multicultural readers can and do encourage students to think of that which is foreign, remote, and exotic as Other, and thus issues of difference appear to have little or no bearing on students' lives. Students learn to "tour," for example, the "Chinese" experience, or the "Latina" experience, or the "lesbian" experience. (p. 301)

Just Dance promotes a variation of "cultural tourism" for a white, Western audience where players are introduced to commodified snippets of the Other, not unlike Disney's Epcot World Showcase that Drew (1997) mentions, where simulacra of cultures of the world are made convenient and consumable for the tourist. In *Just Dance*, players can dance like a "geisha" or move like a "Native American," participating in sites of difference for a few minutes each for the white, Western player.

The *Just Dance* games suggests that, in order to be considered sexy, women who are coded as "Other" as a result of race and/or ethnicity must first conform to the fit

body and Western beauty standards and also must perform hypersexuality and/or exoticism as a result of this categorization.

Sexiness and the fat body.

  As much as the *Just Dance* game series reinforces hegemonic ideals of the body and sexiness, it simultaneously upholds notions of who is not allowed to be sexy. In the entire main *Just Dance* video game series, only one fat-bodied female avatar is included, and when she is included, she is portrayed as less desirable than avatars with fit bodies.[6] One song in particular, "Big Girl (You Are Beautiful)," exemplifies the constructions of fat bodies versus classical bodies and the negative connotations surrounding fatness. The fat-bodied female avatar dances to a song called "Big Girl (You are Beautiful)," making evident the fatness of the avatar from the beginning of the routine. The song opens with the lyrics "big girl you are beautiful" as the avatar stands with a hand on her hip, and she slowly begins to wave her arms in the air, allowing the player to gaze at the fat body in motion.

  "Big Girl (You are Beautiful)," originally by Mika, seems to promote body positivity, especially for fat-bodied women. The source music video features five fat-bodied women following Mika down a crowded street. The women are dressed in various colored corset-type outfits covered in beads and fringe. Additionally, each of the women's legs, arms, and cleavage are visible in the outfits, allowing for their bodies to be visible and uncontained. Throughout the video the women sensually move their bodies as they strut, shimmy, and shake.

  These women in the official video are "everyday" women who challenge the dominant narratives surrounding fat bodies and sexiness. As media portrays fat bodies as lazy, sexually unappealing, and grotesque, the women challenge these constructions by presenting themselves through their revealing clothing and movements, showing that they too can be active and sexy. At the end of the song, the crowd gathers in on Mika and the dancers as many other "big girls" and women (as well as thinner and "average"-bodied people) in the audience join in on the dancing. Balloons are released into the air to complete the celebration of body positivity. Overall, it appears that Mika intended to challenge body ideals and stereotypes surrounding fat bodies rather than present the fat body as a spectacle.

  In contrast, the *Just Dance* version of "Big Girl (You Are Beautiful)" infantilizes the fat-bodied female avatar. For example, the avatar wears a mid-length dress with bright pink, orange, and green ruffled tulle. Unlike most of the other female avatars in the *Just Dance* series that wear high heels, a signifier of sexiness in Western culture, the fat-bodied avatar wears bright green, round-toed ballet flats. Additionally, the bodice of the outfit has capped sleeves, unlike the strapless corsets in the music video. On top of her head, the avatar wears a small orange top hat with a bright green flower. Rather

than constructing the avatar's outfit the same as the music video dancers (showing skin, strapless, showing more leg, and having a tighter fit to the body), *Just Dance* made the avatar more conservative and childlike in appearance. The fat-bodied avatar is given the privilege of white glowing skin, but the depiction is not traditionally or alternatively sexy.

Scott-Dixon (2008) writes that fitness is defined as the "'power to do,' and the ability to meet the requirements of particular activities" (p. 37). To do implies an active movement, a "doing" of something, usually involving some sort of physical activity. On the other hand, fatness is viewed as lazy, which is associated with passivity and inactivity, and leads to the assumption of fat bodies as not capable of movement. Therefore, fatness can be seen as the inability to do. The "Big Girl" routine in *Just Dance* subscribes to fatness' "inability to do" by restricting the avatar's movements. For the majority of the routine, the avatar only moves her arms up and down and side to side, being sure not to move too fast to make any flesh wiggle. She does shake her hips, but the movements appear overly bouncy rather than subtle and sexy like the ones in Mika's music video. When her whole body moves from side to side, the avatar barely jumps off the ground and only moves a few inches to each side. *Just Dance* could have ventured into a more technically difficult or creative routine; however, the producers created a fairly inactive dance routine.

When the moves of "Big Girl" are compared to other routines with the same difficulty and effort ratings, such as "Cosmic Girl" by Jamiroquai in *Just Dance 2*, it becomes obvious that the fat-bodied avatar is expected to move less and with greater difficulty. These dance routines of "Big Girl" and "Cosmic Girl" perpetuate notions that the slender body has the power to do a more difficult dance routine whereas the fat body has an inability to do anything more than wave its arms around. Because the fat body is culturally represented as lazy, it is acceptable to give the fat-bodied avatar less movement than an avatar with a classical body, even when both are given the same difficulty and effort ratings.

Similar to other forms of media, *Just Dance* can inform players' views of sexiness by providing examples of who is and is not sexy. Whether it is through the *Just Dance* avatar's clothing, dance moves, environment, or song, each component, or cue, contains messages about the avatar's identity and status. Through these status cues, individuals are able to easily recognize fatness. Degher and Hughes (1999) explain status cues "provide information about whether or not the individual is 'fat,' and if so, how 'fat'" (p. 14). Further, these cues can be active (through interaction) or passive (through the environment) (Degher & Hughes, 1999).

The song "Big Girl (You are Beautiful)" performs the function of an active cue by signifying to the listener (or in this case, the player) that the song is about "big" girls. The dance moves, on the other hand, act as passive cues. While the song itself does not

suggest that fat bodies are unathletic, the fat-bodied female avatar in the dance does minimal movements, passively suggesting that fat bodies cannot and should not move. Players are rewarded for "performing fatness" as they earn stars (positive reinforcement) for doing minimal movement. Additionally, because the "Big Girl" routine has less movement and technicality to it, it is not a particularly enjoyable routine to perform. All of the active and passive cues serve to warn players from becoming fat or they too will suffer from an "inability to do" as well as an inability to correctly perform femininity and sexiness.

Conclusion

Given the prevalence of media in society, it is important to analyze cultural texts to consider how they may be contributing to the meaning making process of various individuals of differing identities. The main games of the *Just Dance* video game series contribute to the narratives regarding normative femininity and sexiness by reinforcing the desirability of the fit white female body, signifying the hypersexuality and/or exoticism of the non-white and/or non-Western female body, and warning the audience of the undesirability of the fat female body. By doing so, the non-white and/or non-Western female body and the fat body in the main *Just Dance* game series is used to uphold traditional notions of sexiness and stifle alternative conceptions of sexiness. Considering the influence of media on children is not to say that every person who plays *Grand Theft Auto* will steal a police car or that every child who plays *Just Dance* will view only fit white women as having value. This study is not asserting that media is a causal mechanism in influencing behavior, but rather that media can provide the cultural conditions for how we make sense of ourselves and others.

It is important to understand how media might subtly impact children to have preconceived notions about certain cultural identities and self-worth. The continued study of *Just Dance* is important for a number of related reasons that add more layers of complexity to discourse construction in the games, especially situating the series within a global context. The narratives present in the main *Just Dance* series require further study, which include both textual and content analyses and audience reception studies, due to its popularity and apparent emphasis on traditional narratives concerning gender, race, ethnicity, and the body in relationship to sexuality situated within this historical moment.

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Notes

[1] See Hall, S., Evans, J., & Nixon, S. (Eds.). (2013). *Representation* (2nd ed.). London: Sage/The Open University. (Original work published 1997) for an introductory text on representation and cultural studies.

[2] The Nintendo platforms use motion sensing controllers to track user movement (Wii, Wii U, Switch). The PlayStation and Microsoft platforms (PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One) use motion sensor technology to detect movement. Recently, Ubisoft developed an app, called *Just Dance Now*, where players have access to some of the routines without a console, using an internet connection and a smartphone as the motion sensing controller (iOS and Android).

[3] According to the ESRB Ratings Guide (2017), an "Everyone 10+" rating means that "[c]ontent is generally suitable for ages 10 and up. May contain more cartoon, fantasy or mild violence, mild language and/or minimal suggestive themes."

[4] This number does not include avatars that change from glowing white to solid black or solid black to glowing white throughout the routine, which occurs for 5% of routines sampled. An additional 3% of the routines featured an avatar with realistic human skin color (not glowing white or solid black). Another 2% had a non-human skin color (such as blue, gray, orange, or multi-colored).

[5] There were three routines in the sample that included a female avatar that did not have a thin body. Two routines featured female avatars that had traditionally feminine signifiers, but the bodies of the avatars could be considered curvaceous compared to other female avatars in the routines. Therefore, these two routines are coded as a separate category. The only other outlier is a routine that featured a fat-bodied female avatar, which is discussed at length later in this article.

[6] Four fat-bodied avatars with masculine signifiers appear as an alternate version of "Turn Up The Love" parenthetically titled "Sumo Version." The four dancers appear to be wearing fat suits for the routine. In this case, fatness is not presented in an authentic way. Rather, fatness is crudely performed by the avatars. Other routines which include fat-bodied male avatars are available as alternative versions or downloadable routines.