Coming Out on Top: Been There, Done That

By Todd Harper | February 16, 2015

As a college freshman at the University of Wisconsin in 1996, I was fortunate enough to have access to a video rental place called Four Star Video Heaven. Back in the day, when I was too broke to have a DVD player of my own and [Netflix](#) was years away, the renting of VHS tapes on the regular was a key thing for me. While I had been out of the closet for two years at that point, college meant hassle-free time and space to watch and enjoy whatever I liked.

And I had a hunger, believe me. At that point in my life, the only "gay media" that I had consumed regularly were *Absolutely Fabulous* on Comedy Central and watching DiC's *Sailor Moon* dub every morning before school. This was before *Will and Grace*, before *In & Out* (the movie, not the burger). Seeing gays and lesbians in the mainstream media was still a rarity, and other parts of the queer spectrum were basically invisible.

Four Star had a nickname on campus: "Porn Star Video." The reason for this, other than having a literal porn section (which... who cares?) was that they also had a more innocuously-named "International" section where an enterprising young queer could find softcare Euro porn. Lord, did I watch a lot of it: an endless parade of smooth, European (white) twinks having deeply emotional silences while they stared at each other for a while and then fucked.

God, it was hot... in 1996, anyway.

But it's not 1996 anymore. Queer media are way more prolific now than they were then, though we've a ways to go with including more than just the "L" and the "G" in "LGBTQ." Yet while I played Coming Out on Top, a gay dating sim from Obscurasoft released in December 2014, I was transported right back to 1996, and not in a good way. While it's nice to see someone making and aggressively marketing a gay dating sim unafraid to tackle sexuality, particularly sexualizing gay men's bodies, *Coming Out* remains mired in an ancient and damaging vision of what those bodies are.

The game is the story of a college senior, a white gay guy with the default name "Mark Matthews." Mark is in his final semester of college and, after being closeted for many years, decides to come out, starting with his roommates. It goes smoothly, and the game involves Mark's life until graduation, juggling his studies, his relationship with his friends and his— let's be clear—unabashed and all-consuming journey to get laid.

Coming Out is a pretty traditional text-and-still-art dating sim, with five main "routes," one for each potential love interest: Alex the hot professor, Brad the partying jock, Jed the rock musician, Phil the Marine, and Ian the goofy roommate. While the story has a number of branches, twists and turns
(including one bizarre gag reel ending about becoming a delusional slave to your pet goldfish), in general the various paths play out in expected ways.

Sometimes… a little too expected. Romancing Phil the USMC cadet involves two violently homophobic fellow soldiers, including one who embodies perhaps my least favorite gay story trope, the "closet gay whose vicious homophobia hides his secret desires" which is played for laughs. Romancing Brad involves dealing with the religious closeted jock situation. Romancing Alex, your anatomy professor (oy) involves not just a Very Typical Sex Dream but also a pretty bog standard "we musn't… we must!… we musn't" situation.

I would be more okay with these played out tropes and body politics if they were not a perfect representation of the content I was consuming as a baby gay back in 1996. When I was 18 and renting those Euro softcore movies from Four Star, they were giving me something similar to what I get out of *Coming Out on Top*: a slice of our mainstream vision of what gay male bodies are and should be like. They "should" be 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. And because I was newly minted,

confused about what being gay even meant, these were everything I wanted. They gave me a very clear message: this is what being gay means. This is what you should be aiming for.

The problem is that who I am—my fat cis gay male body—was never a part of this buffet of images. The result was body image and self esteem problems that persisted well, well into my adulthood… problems I am still dealing with even now in my mid-30s. This focus on a very particular body type has very real effects in a culture where gay men are highly susceptible to body dysmorphia, and by extension to disordered eating and exercise behaviors, among other potential problems. One need only to scour "Douchebags of Grindr" to realize how this perfect imagined body continues to be tied into issues of race and gender identity. No fats, no femmes, no [insert racial term here]s.

It didn't surprise me to find out that *Coming Out* was not written by someone who identifies as a gay man. Before my excoriation begins: as the game's author/developer says on this topic in the FAQ on the game's site, "You have plenty of gay men creating things for and about women from a woman's perspective." That's absolutely true. I would never say that someone who is not [x] shouldn't try to create things about [x]; without people stepping outside their experience, media content stagnates. I think my problem is that I look at *Coming Out on Top* and see something that was not made with the experiences of someone like me in mind. It's a pre-existing, pre-packaged vision of gay men—and particularly cis gay men's bodies—served up for general consumption.

The game features unabashed and unashamed visions of gay men's bodies as objects and foci of sexual desire, but those visions are entirely unchallenging, uncritical and, frankly, boring. What does an unending tide of sex-hungry, perfectly sculpted, taunt muscle men with huge, porn star cocks add to the discourse of gay men and sex? Nothing that we haven't already seen a thousand times. It's exactly the same thing I saw in those Euro softcore films in the '90s. It's exactly the same thing I saw in the gay riff on American Pie, Another Gay Movie. In fact, if you go look for "gay and lesbian comedy" on Netflix right now, you will probably see these tropes play out before your very eyes in movie form as recently as last year.

And surprise, the popularity of these tropes in many ways stems from their acceptability to the notions of gay male sexuality that persist in the straight world. On the Kickstarter page for Coming Out, the author discusses thematic influences, including Japanese comics such as boy's love (though she uses the term "yaoi") and gay manga. In point of fact, she effectively says that men in boy's love are too "lithe and pretty" while those in gay manga are "hairy, burly guys," so she "simply drew the guys I wanted to see but couldn't find." To put it bluntly, she created men whose bodies she was interested in.

There is nothing inherently wrong with that. I think it's expected of a creator, to some extent. But it is part of the problem. The game was created by someone who has commensurately small stakes in our discourse about gay male bodies, in the same way that men who create media from a woman's POV—as the game's developer rightly asserts—frequently get it wrong because they also have low stakes.

I want to point out that the two cultural touchstones she's talking about—boy's love and gay manga—are two very different contexts. Boy's Love (BL), broadly speaking, comes from a different starting place than gay manga (sometimes called "bara," though please see this link for why the term "gay manga" is preferred), which is typically considered to be by and for an audience of gay men. The differences in body types reflect not just the different desires of those perceived target audiences, but also cultural expectations about gendered bodies by those audiences. Japanese gay manga are frequently the only place I can find media images of bigger or fat gay men that are unreservedly sexual… and the reason for that is because images of bodies like those found in Coming Out on Top are massively prolific and dominant in the US already, and have been for some time.

Sadly, the game's florid descriptions of what are relatively basic sexual acts struck me as painfully dull rather than erotic or interesting. They were decidedly mechanical, lacking in any of the warmth, humor or awkwardness I associate with sex between cis gay men; instead, the relentless focus was on dicks dicks dicks, bodies bodies bodies, with an explicit still image to match. The sexual experiences of newly out gay men in particular—young ones who are confused, and too eager, and scared—are never this porn-perfect. In truth, whenever things got sexy in the game, I tended to immediately flip into fast forwarding through the description. The still images were occasionally nice—as much as I was irritated by the "closeted jock" storyline, I thought Brad was kinda hot and the scene of Mark giving him a blow job after a tutoring session was sexy—but they were easily appreciated and then moved past.

In the end, this strongly gives me an impression of the game as by a straight woman, for people other than gay men. This doesn't preclude it being enjoyed by gay men, who are not a monolith, and who certainly don't share all of my preferences or feelings. But it does emphasize the idea that a supposedly gay experience is being packaged and sold for the benefit of others. This view of consumable gay male bodies is at its silliest with the optional "Beard" and "Body Hair" toggles for each major male character, which allow you to add a beard or what I would call a "light dusting" of chest hair to each character at your whim.

Lest it seem like I am singling out Coming Out on Top, my frustration with the hegemonic perfection of gay male bodies in other games is equally high, even those with gay men at the helm. While I am a big fan of Luke Miller's My Ex-Boyfriend the Space Tyrant, for example, that game has practically no body type diversity at all. Designer Robert Yang consistently makes games with male bodies as objects of desire, though they are not always specifically coded as objects of gay male desire. However, Yang's work also tends to relentlessly portray the same muscle-toned, hegemonic male body that Coming Out presents. At the 2014 Different Games conference, for example, Yang demoed Get Better Soon, an Oculus Rift "gay clubbing simulator" where players wandered a space full of infinite identical beefcake, literally moving through it by focusing their gaze on men's asses. At the time, I remember thinking the core idea was fascinating... but that the execution made me distinctly uncomfortable, since for someone who doesn't fit that perfect molded gay male body (like me, admittedly), such clubs are often openly, literally hostile spaces.

But while Miller's game defuses this with humor and campy charm, and Yang's work is at least attempting to engage creating games with queer content in novel ways, *Coming Out on Top* feels old and tired, a throwback to an era that as an adult I've moved past. 18-year-old me, who had no frame of reference, would have been agog at the heavy description of oral sex over an explicit still of a hot cock, thinking "I want that, I want to be that." But 36-year-old me, looking back almost two decades later, wants more… and perhaps, more importantly, wants better for the gay guy who's 18 now, looking for definition on what he can be. I want him to see actual gay experiences reflected, not a packaged and unrealistic version set up for the consumption of people with little stake in his future.

I think the biggest disappointment, though, is that there is lots of media space for representation of gays and lesbians now, but we are basically wasting it on reaffirming the same stories and tropes we've been telling for a very long time… and it's possible that these stories are hurting us, not helping. The reality of gay male desire is bigger than Ken doll hot bodies frosted with optional chest hair. So while I don't necessarily have a problem with a wacky gay sex romp, I find it difficult indeed to be excited over it.