

"Too gay": masculinities and homoeroticism in slash fiction about video game content creators

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Abstract

This article analyses discourses on masculinity in slash fiction featuring two fictional pairings of content creators linked to the world of video games: Rubelangel (Rubius and Mangel) and Septiplier (Jacksepticeye and Markiplier). Slash fiction is a fan-produced genre that imagines romantic and sexual relationships between male characters or celebrities who are heterosexual. The aim of this research is to examine how masculinity is represented and the way in which it is transformed due to the protagonists' falling in love with one another. Through a critical discourse analysis applied to 22 texts about Septiplier and Rubelangel, the article analyses models of masculinity, the constraints and discomforts they impose on the characters, and the ways masculinity is reconfigured to make their romantic relationship possible. The findings show how slash fiction can function as a space for negotiating and reinterpreting masculinity within the highly masculinised and heteronormative realm of video games.

Keywords

Masculinity, fan fiction, video games, critical discourse analysis, homoeroticism, content creators.

Resum

Aquest article analitza els discursos sobre la masculinitat a l'slash fiction protagonitzat per dues parelles fictícies de creadors de contingut vinculats al món dels videojocs: Rubelangel (Rubius i Mangel) i Septiplier (Jacksepticeye i Markiplier). L'slash fiction és un gènere produït per fans que imagina relacions romàntiques i sexuals entre personatges o celebritats masculines heterosexuales. L'objectiu d'aquesta recerca és examinar com es representa la masculinitat i de quina manera es transforma a partir de l'enamorament dels protagonistes. Mitjançant una anàlisi crítica del discurs aplicada a 22 textos sobre Septiplier i Rubelangel, l'article analitza els models de masculinitat, les limitacions i els malestars que imposen als personatges i com la masculinitat es reconfigura per possibilitar la relació de parella. Els resultats mostren com l'slash fiction pot constituir un espai de negociació i relectura de la masculinitat en l'àmbit dels videojocs, altament masculinitzat i heteronormatiu.

Paraules clau

Masculinitat, fan fiction, videojocs, anàlisi crítica del discurs, homoerotisme, creadors de contingut.

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1. Introduction

Masculinity is not a fixed, universal or natural essence: the way it is expressed, the forms it takes and the values associated with it are always social constructions (Enguix Grau 2025). It is therefore a social process of production and reproduction in which communicative and media processes play a highly significant role (Blanco Ruiz 2024). Much research on media representations of identities and communities has focused on minoritised or non-normative groups, but examining how masculinities are represented and negotiated also allows us to understand how hegemonic identities function, as well as identify fissures or alternative discourses (Pichel-Vázquez, Gómez Puertas & Medina-Bravo 2019).

In this sense, slash fiction constitutes a space where masculinities are put into play, narrated and problematised. Slash fiction is a genre of fan fiction –fiction written by fans– that explores romantic and sexual relationships between two male characters who are heterosexual in the original text (a series, film, book, or celebrity) (Mackey & McClay 2008). Slash fiction emerged in the late 1970s within fan communities of the TV series *Star Trek*, when many fans –mainly women– began writing about romantic and sexual relationships between Kirk and Spock (Bacon-Smith 1992). Over time, the practice expanded to other popular culture texts, as well as celebrities and public figures.

Another particularity of slash fiction is that it is generally written by women and queer people, which allows us to understand slash as a “female queer space” (Lothian, Busse & Reid 2007). One of the earliest academic texts analysing slash fiction, by Joanna Russ, described it as “pornography [made] by women, for women” (Russ 1985). Thus, slash fiction has often been conceptualised as a site of resistance to patriarchy (Massey 2019), where women can transgress expectations surrounding their sexual desire and fantasies by writing and reading sexually explicit stories starring two men (Neville 2018b), while constructing narratives free of inequalities or power abuse (Kustritz 2003). These optimistic portrayals of slash fiction as an inherently transgressive space have been nuanced over time, shifting the focus toward its complexity and the normative or conservative messages it may contain regarding gender and sexuality (Åström 2010; Hunting 2012; Spacey 2018).

Still, by imagining two men in an intimate relationship, slash fiction destabilises many assumptions surrounding masculinity since –implicitly or explicitly– it calls into question hegemonic discourses about what it means to “be a man”. Slash fiction challenges the assumption of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 2003; Wittig 2016) and hegemonic masculinity models (Connell 2005), which are linked to the rejection of any indication of desire between men (Hoad 2017). More broadly, slash

fiction explores what happens when a man falls in love with another man, and how this forces (or not) a reconfiguration of his masculinity.

This article analyses two fictional slash pairings: Rubelangel (the pairing of YouTubers Rubius and Mangel) and Septiplier (the pairing of YouTubers Jacksepticeye and Markiplier). Rubius, Mangel, Jacksepticeye and Markiplier are creators known for their work in the video game domain. The first pair produces content in Spanish and the second in English. In both cases, the creators are close friends with an affectionate and intimate bond. It is precisely within this homosocial bond that many fans read a homoerotic potential, which they later develop in their texts (Roach 2018).

These pairings are especially rich case studies because their videos and social media posts often showcase visible affection and closeness. They are also relevant due to the type of masculinity they embody and their placement in the world of video games –an environment highly masculinised and exclusionary toward non-normative identities (Salter 2018). Their masculinity approximates “geek masculinity”, constructed around an interest in video games, technology and popular media such as science fiction or animation (Salter 2018:250), and distanced from some aspects of hegemonic masculinity such as athletic or physical prowess (Taylor 2012:111) as we will see below in greater detail.

For these reasons, this article examines how slash texts about Rubelangel and Septiplier read and (re)construct the masculinities of these content creators in order to identify potential cracks in hegemonic constructions of masculinity, the mechanisms involved and the alternative models or discourses they suggest.

2. Masculinities, Homoeroticism and Popular Culture

Masculinity is a social construction and therefore cannot be understood as a stable and universal concept; hence the use of “masculinities” in the plural (Mercer 2017:41). Masculinities shift over time and depend on cultural, social, geographic and historical contexts, even though they may become naturalised –that is, understood as natural or inherent attributes (Reeser 2011).

When studying masculinities, it is crucial to consider the traits associated with being a man in a given context (Lee 2020) and understand their social construction, relational dimension and performativity –how masculinity is constantly enacted and formed in contrast to other models of masculinity or to femininity (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Sexuality is also a central axis: traditional hegemonic masculinity, besides being constructed in opposition to femininity, is based on heterosexuality and the expression of homophobia or “homohysteria”, defined as the fear of being perceived as homosexual (Anderson 2016:180).

Homophobia works as a mechanism for regulating gender expression, limiting displays of affection between men –physical, verbal or otherwise.

Although men have historically been the default subjects of study, the field of masculinity studies –conceiving men as gendered subjects– emerged in the late 1970s under feminist influence (Lee 2020), aiming to understand the relationship between masculinity, power, domination and the patriarchal order (Reeser 2011:7). Raewyn Connell (2005) is one of the most influential researchers in the field, proposing a relational model of four types of masculinity: hegemonic, subordinate, complicit and marginalised, a framework which allows Connell to identify how different masculinities relate to each other.

Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant and most desirable form at a given historical moment, and therefore its characteristics change depending on the social and cultural context. It generally includes traits such as strength, control, dominance and aggressiveness. Brannon and David (1976) identify four core traits of dominant masculinity: avoidance of femininity; social importance and relevance of power, competition and success; emotional and physical toughness; and the capacity for aggression or violence when necessary.

Although hegemonic masculinity is constructed as the desirable and dominant form, only a small number of individuals can embody it; therefore, most men either aspire to reach it or uphold it through complicity. Consequently, subordinated, complicit and marginalised masculinities also help us understand the hierarchies and interactions among different types of masculinity.

Subordinated masculinity is the one that contains elements traditionally attributed to femininity and is therefore deemed inappropriate. Gay men are generally placed within this model, since homosexuality has traditionally been associated with feminine gender expression. Complicit masculinity refers to men who, although unable to fully embody hegemonic masculinity, still benefit from it or gain some advantage from its existence. In other words, these are men who do not hold the highest level of power or privilege, yet neither question nor challenge that privilege. Finally, marginalised masculinity relates to the intersection with other axis of identity, such as class or race –men in situations of social exclusion or with limited access to power, such as working-class men or racialised men. These four categories have been highly influential in the study of masculinity, although they have also been critiqued and questioned. For example, it has been pointed out that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is too ambiguous, making it difficult to determine which men embody it and which do not (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005:838).

Another paradigm used to understand masculinities is "inclusive masculinity", proposed by Eric Anderson (2008) as a response to Connell's model. According to Anderson,

levels of homophobia and homophobia have decreased in recent years, meaning that many characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity are no longer relevant. As a result, inclusive masculinity has softened gender codes and allows for greater space and visibility for emotions, physical contact between men and intimate male friendship (Anderson & McCormack 2018).

For this research, we are also interested in gay masculinities and geek masculinities. Regarding gay masculinities, we have already seen that masculinity is constructed on the basis of heterosexuality and homophobia. Therefore, gay masculinity tends to fall at the bottom of the "masculinity hierarchy" (Barret 2019:244). However, this does not mean that gay men cannot exercise power or domination over others by using resources associated with hegemonic masculinity.

On the other hand, geek masculinity is constructed around technological skills and specialised knowledge in areas such as video games or popular culture, and it rejects certain traits of hegemonic masculinity such as virility or physical prowess (Morgan 2014; Salter 2018; Taylor 2012). If we narrow this down to the figure of video-game content creators, gamer masculinity is closely linked to geek masculinity, although with its own specificities and differences. According to some authors, this form of masculinity aligns more closely with inclusive masculinity, as it shows a rejection of hypermasculinity, allows displays of affection between friends, exhibits little homophobia and permits jokes or ambiguities about one's sexuality (Maloney, Roberts & Caruso 2018; Welch 2022).

These displays of affection between friends, physical intimacy or ambiguities about sexuality can be understood within homoeroticism or bromance narratives. As we have seen, slash fiction mainly consists of taking relationships between two heterosexual men and transforming them into homosexual ones. The relationships between the two men –usually friends or colleagues– tend to be intimate, and therefore we can situate them within the "continuum of homosocial desire", a term proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985). Drawing on her analysis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English literature, Sedgwick identifies how thin the boundary is between what falls under friendship and what falls under desire.

Sedgwick therefore speaks of "homosocial desire" because she sees a continuity between friendship, desire and eroticism. She uses contemporary examples to illustrate how bonds between men can be interpreted through this lens: football matches, locker rooms or U.S. college fraternities are full of moments that can be read through the dynamics of masculine homosocial desire (Sedgwick 1985:89). However, whereas this continuum is far more visible and recognisable in the case of women, its visibility among men is fractured and far less apparent.

Although it is not always highly visible, popular culture has paid considerable attention to these intimate, close

relationships between men. "Bromance" is a clear example. The term refers to intense emotional bonds between two heterosexual men who display an openness to a kind of "intimacy that neither of them sees, acknowledges, affirms, or expresses sexually" (DeAngelis 2014:1). While the word is often used colloquially to describe close male friendships, it also refers to a film genre –generally comedies– that explores these intense, intimate relationships between men, often highlighting homoerotic desire (Alberti 2013; Benson 2017; Brook 2015; Robinson, White & Anderson 2019), such as *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), *The Hangover* (2009), *Wedding Crashers* (2005) and *Superbad* (2007).

In slash fiction, there is also a strong interest in these masculine homoerotic narratives, but unlike bromances –which never cross the boundary into love or sex– these texts do explore romantic and sexual terrain while still attending to the protagonists' intimacy and friendship. In fact, according to Lucy Neville, slash fiction primarily involves observing this homosociality and "framing it as homosexual" (2018a:91). As Henry Jenkins notes, it "uncovers the erotics of male friendship, confronting the fears that prevent intimacy between men" (1992:210).

One genre within slash fiction that focuses on exploring these boundaries and relationships is "intimatopia" (Woledge 2006), defined as texts with romantic narratives that, rather than centring on identity or sexuality, emphasise homosociality, emotional and romantic intimacy and sexual acts. These are texts that inevitably play with models of masculinity (Riseman 2020).

Thus, masculinity –though often constructed as a series of natural attributes– is a contested terrain where multiple models and forms coexist, constantly strained and renegotiated within popular media culture, including slash fiction.

3. Methodology

As previously mentioned, the main objective of this research was to understand how Rubelangel and Septiplier slash fiction interprets and negotiates the masculinities of its protagonists. The specific research questions that guided this analysis are the following:

1. How is the protagonists' masculinity constructed in the slash fiction texts?
2. In what ways does falling in love with another man impact or modify their masculinity?

To answer these questions, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used, a qualitative methodology for discourse analysis. Specifically, Norman Fairclough's approach (1992, 1995, 2003) was applied. CDA allows us to delve into textual and discursive mechanisms and identify the values present in the text. We understand discursive practices as having strong ideological effects since discourse can be used to

sustain the social status quo yet can also serve to transform it. According to Gee (2014), discourse is a way of seeing the world –systems of thought and belief, patterns and assumptions within a given context. CDA makes it possible to bring these beliefs and values to the surface, in this case those related to discourses on masculinity.

CDA has rarely been used in narrative or fictional texts. Therefore, in this research it is complemented with other methodological approaches– specifically, Van Leeuwen's social semiotics (1996) and Lubomír Doležel's possible-worlds theory (1999)– which allow us to address two fundamental aspects: the representation of social actors and narrative constraints, respectively.

Drawing on these three methodological approaches, an analytical grid was developed through an inductive and deductive process. The final grid, created as part of a broader research project on discourses of desire, love and masculinity in these texts, consists of five main categories (narrative genre; interdiscursivity; social actors and groups; metaphors; narrative modalities and presuppositions) with their corresponding subcategories and operators. For the purposes of this study, we are mainly interested in the operators related to masculinity, desire and love.

This analysis was applied to a total of 22 slash fiction texts –11 Rubelangel and 11 Septiplier. The sample was closed according to a saturation criterion (Saunders et al. 2018). The texts were collected from Wattpad and Archive of Our Own, two of the main online fan fiction platforms. The inclusion and exclusion criteria defined were the following: works had to be completed; they had to contain a minimum of 3,000 words to ensure continuity, narrative length and character development; they had to have at least 1,000 views or reads; the Septiplier or Rubelangel romantic pairing had to be central and protagonistic in the text; and narrative genres such as science fiction, fantasy or one-shots (short narrative pieces) were excluded to ensure sample homogeneity and include only texts focused on the protagonists' romantic and/or sexual relationships. The texts were in both Spanish and English and no time limits were set regarding their publication date.

Finally, regarding the ethical considerations of collecting and handling these data, it is important to take into account that although these texts are public and anyone can read them –and although they are written under a pseudonym– the individuals who authored these fan fictions may have different expectations or perceptions of privacy (Franzke et al. 2020:22). However, it is very difficult to contact the authors of these texts (as they are no longer active on the platforms), which makes obtaining informed consent challenging.

To protect the authors' identities, any information that could lead back to the original text was removed, anonymised or paraphrased, a common practice in digital research and fan studies (Deller 2019; Dym & Fiesler 2020).

Additionally, the texts (originally published in English or Spanish) were translated into Catalan, ensuring an additional layer of anonymisation for the slash fiction. In this way, when texts are referenced in the analysis of the results, an "S" will be used for Septiplier texts and an "R" for Rubelangel texts, followed by a number (1–11) to identify them, for example "S10" or "R3".

4. Results

Below, we present the main findings of this research, divided into two sections: first, how masculinity is understood and what it means to be a man; and second, the implications of falling in love with another man and how love or desire for another man allows the protagonists to modify or transform certain elements of their masculinity, in line with the research questions outlined in the previous section.

Before examining these two aspects in detail, we briefly describe the most common narrative pattern found in these slash fiction texts. The storyline is as follows: two heterosexual friends (Rubius and Mangel, or Jack and Mark), who share a close, affectionate and intimate relationship, realise that they feel attraction toward each other or that they have romantic feelings. Then, one of them confesses to the other, or they engage in sexual relations –an event that reveals their mutual love– and finally, they become a couple. This type of narrative fits within the genre of intimatopias (Wolledge 2006) and is very common in slash fiction (Salmon & Symons 2003), as such stories typically seek male characters in contexts and situations that foster intimacy and bonding between them.

4.1. Being a man

We have already seen how the main patterns of masculinity (hegemonic, gay, inclusive, etc.) have been defined and configured, as well as the specificities of geek and gamer masculinity. Through the analysis of epistemic constraints related to masculinity, we can identify how these paradigms –or their main characteristics– are known, unknown or assumed by the characters in Rubelangel's slash fiction.

First, it is important to highlight that the characters assume that the predominant models of masculinity (associated with virility, strength or emotional restraint) are natural and inherent traits of being a man, rather than social constructions. This pattern appears in most texts, except in those where one or both protagonists are portrayed as gay or bisexual, since positioning themselves outside the hegemonic mandates of masculinity provides them with a more open understanding of what being a man can mean and makes them less fearful of showing vulnerability or sensitivity. However, in the remaining texts, the protagonists do not question whether these traits are natural or constructed. For example, in a passage from

R11, Rubius tells Mangel that he has missed him, but is surprised to have said it aloud and wonders the following:

"What was wrong with me? Even though I missed him, I felt embarrassed to say these kinds of things to Mangel. I'm not usually honest. When we say things like that, it's always as a joke. We never say them seriously, even if we really feel that way."

Although Rubius is able to recognise the longing he feels, he finds sharing it strange and notes that if he expresses any emotion, he does so through joking or ironic distance –something that aligns with gamer masculinities, where displays of affection and fondness are allowed, but always within a playful and humorous frame (Maloney *et al.* 2018; Potts 2014; Welch 2022).

We also identified a fear of embodying traits associated with subordinated or gay masculinity, and this fear shapes how the characters define themselves as men –or at least how they wish to be perceived as such. In a Septiplier text (S7), Jack and Mark, who are already publicly a couple, are recording a video discussing what name to give a dog they have adopted. Jack suggests "Biscuit", and Mark replies, "What a cute name, just like you!" Mark calling him cute makes Jack nervous; he asks him to stop because it embarrasses him and quickly turns off the camera.

In another Septiplier text (S9), Mark jokes that he is "the man of the relationship" because he carried Jack in his arms, adding, "I have muscles" and that Jack is "my lovely wife". Even though Mark says this to tease him, we can see how both characters associate certain behaviours or traits with hegemonic masculinity (in this case, Mark being physically stronger and carrying Jack) and others with traditional femininity –a division neither of them questions.

In most cases, this reinforcement of gender roles and masculine attributes is done jokingly or teasingly. Typically, it happens when one character does not behave "like a man". In R1, Rubius helps Mangel put on his pyjamas because he is very tired and tidies the whole room before going to sleep. In response, Mangel laughs and says he looks "like a housewife". In R2, Rubius gets a small cut that bleeds a lot, and seeing the blood makes him dizzy and faint. When he wakes up, Mangel tells him he fainted "like a damsel from the last century". In neither case does Rubius get angry or offended; this kind of teasing is simply part of their habitual way of interacting. Thus, we see how the characters' jokes point to behaviours linked to care work –traditionally feminised (Araña, Tortajada & Willem 2018)– or to supposed weakness and lack of virility. These kinds of jokes are very common in environments shaped by hegemonic or even inclusive masculinity, where constant teasing is used to reaffirm one's own masculinity and highlight the other's perceived shortcomings.

However, it is important to note that although the characters assume certain traits of hegemonic masculinity to be natural and desirable, these same

traits also generate discomfort, even if they cannot identify its source or recognise that it relates to the limits imposed by masculinity. In many cases, the characters feel frustrated because they are unable to express their feelings or show affection toward their friend or partner. For example, in R6, Mangel thinks that "it was about time to stop being an idiot who ran away instead of expressing my feelings." Even so, Mangel frames it as him "being an idiot", an individual flaw, rather than a consequence of masculine norms.

In some cases, however, the protagonists do recognise that this discomfort may be connected to masculinity. In S10, Jack and Mark have to share a bed as friends, and this worries Mark. Jack quickly tells him: "Is your masculinity so fragile that you're afraid cuddling will destroy it?" Here we see an ambivalence between their desire (to sleep together) and the mandate of masculinity, which considers this level of intimacy dangerous because it could be read as homosexual. And indeed, the teasing and mockery are aimed precisely at highlighting how this model of masculinity is limiting him.

4.2. *Falling in love with another man and transforming masculinity through love*

Masculinity is also constructed through heterosexuality and the fear of being perceived as homosexual. In the Rubelangel and Septiplier slash fiction, homosexuality is one of the elements that creates the greatest tension in how the protagonists understand and embody masculinity. With the exception of two out of the twenty-two texts analysed, the protagonists consider themselves heterosexual and have never felt attracted to another man. Therefore, feeling drawn to another man is a shock for them and forces them to reconcile their masculinity with this discovery.

A large part of the texts revolves around narrating how the protagonists come to realise this attraction. Very often, it is through the characters' gazes that they detect the desire they feel –something that echoes what Woledge (2005) observed in *Star Trek* slash fiction featuring Kirk and Spock. According to Woledge, the exchanged glances between male characters often function as signs of desire, a subtle language that fan-fiction writers pick up on and amplify in their stories.

In the case of Rubelangel and Septiplier, analysing the mental and material processes of the social actors shows that these gazes play an important role because they allow us to see, in detail, how the protagonists observe their friend and become aware of the desire and attraction they feel. But above all, they allow us to see how quickly this transforms into confusion or doubt: the characters struggle to understand what they are feeling, because they cannot conceive of the possibility that they might be attracted to their friend. The following passage

perfectly illustrates this gaze of attraction and budding love, immediately followed by uncertainty:

"I never got tired of looking at him [...] Looking at him was the moment when I felt no fear, when I wasn't afraid as long as Mangel was with me [...] But the fear came afterward, when I returned to reality and realised the problem. How can you be with the person your heart tells you is the right one, when society tells you the opposite?" (R4)

In a passage from a Septiplier slash fiction text, we can also see Jack's difficulty in identifying what he feels for his friend. In this case, Jack –who has a girlfriend– realises that he feels something special for Mark:

"Here was the doubt: 'I love my girlfriend, I'm sure of it, but Mark...' What he felt for his friend was... a new category, something he had never experienced with anyone else before." (S7)

Therefore, although they are able to identify that they have strong feelings for their friend, they struggle greatly to accept that these feelings could be love or sexual desire, because this does not align with their self-conception – not only as heterosexuals, but as men, two ideas that are tightly intertwined.

When the protagonists finally realise they feel attracted to their friend, they continue to experience difficulties –especially when it comes to forming a couple and expressing the love or affection they feel for one another, as if doing so might call their masculinity into question and make them seem too effeminate. Thus, although they have accepted their romantic and/or sexual feelings towards their friend, and even after becoming a couple, they still fear being perceived as insufficiently masculine.

For this reason, the characters worry about using terms of endearment such as "love", "teddy bear", or "king", which they often consider "too gay". They constantly appeal to the idea of not wanting to be "too" gay when expressing affection, even though they are in love and, in many cases, already in a relationship with another man. In a Septiplier text (S4), Mark tells Jack over a video call that he can't sleep without him because he has got used to sharing a bed. Jack's response is to say: "that's the gayest thing you've ever said to me." However, unlike earlier examples, he doesn't say this teasingly or mockingly, but as recognition and appreciation of the declaration Mark has just made. Although the framework of homophobia is still present, as the protagonists become a couple, they increasingly allow space for affectionate expressions, even if these might be read as "too gay".

Unlike the previous section, where the characters teased each other by accusing the other of being too effeminate, here the word "gay" is not necessarily used with negative connotations. For them, describing something as very "gay" becomes a way of saying that it is affectionate or sweet—that it is something beautiful. Even so, this points to

a certain tension and difficulty in reconciling their models of masculinity (tough, inexpressive, invulnerable) with the affection and attraction they feel for one another, which lead them toward emotional warmth and tenderness.

The way the characters overcome this difficulty is through love. These slash fiction texts portray love and romantic partnership as positive, desirable and even necessary aspects of a happy life. Therefore, any effort or sacrifice made in order to become a couple is considered worthwhile –even modulating their masculinity. Thus, even if something feels “too gay” to them, enduring that discomfort is worthwhile if it means being with the person they love most. The protagonists mainly identify two aspects that make being in a relationship difficult or could jeopardise it: their limited emotional openness and vulnerability, and the practice of caring for the other.

Regarding emotional openness, in a Rubelangel text (R3), Rubius and Mangel have gone a long time without speaking due to a misunderstanding about their relationship. When they reconnect years later, Rubius acknowledges that this hurt him and distanced him from his friend –now partner– and he expresses this to Mangel: “Mangel, I need you [...] I know I’ve made many mistakes and I regret them... but you’re right, mistakes are meant to help us learn [...] I’m willing to correct my past actions” (R3). As we can see, the desire to be with Mangel has led him to reconsider how he behaves, and although he does not explicitly frame this in the codes of masculinity, we can see that it involves questioning how he manages emotions and allowing himself to be vulnerable before another person.

In relation to care, the protagonists also reflect on how they should take care of their friend. They are used to taking the relationship for granted or avoiding getting too involved when the other is going through a difficult time. However, upon becoming a couple, the characters are compelled to take a more active role and care for their friend –even if this risks being perceived as effeminate. In this passage from Septiplier (S5), Mark verbalises to his friend how he wants to care for him, something he had not been fully capable of doing until then: “Jack, I will take very good care of you, I’ll give you everything you need and everything you deserve. I want to show you that, okay? I’ll take care of you, I promise.”

5. Conclusions

This research has allowed us to see how Septiplier and Rubelangel slash fiction discursively constructs masculinity and interprets and reconstructs it in the texts, especially through the love or sexual relationships between the protagonists. The analysis shows that the characters are not situated within a single model of masculinity; rather, they constantly move between different paradigms – hegemonic masculinity, inclusive masculinity and geek

masculinity. However, they never fully inhabit one fixed model. Instead, they combine elements from different paradigms, shifting according to their personal situation. This hybridity reveals the fluid nature of masculinity which, far from being a set of natural or inherent attributes, is an ever-changing and tension-filled field, especially when sexuality comes into play.

It is important to highlight that even though the texts treat traits associated with hegemonic masculinity as natural (strength, emotional detachment), these are precisely the traits that generate discomfort for the protagonists. And although they often cannot attribute this discomfort to the rigidity of masculine norms, they do recognise that certain attributes are harmful to them, particularly in relation to love or their romantic partner. In this sense, hegemonic masculinity continues to function both as an aspirational reference point and as a normative model –but also as a constraint or limit the characters wish to transform. It is no coincidence, then, that this tension forms the central narrative conflict: the two protagonists like each other, are mutually attracted, but struggle to realise and accept it because it directly clashes with their conception of masculinity, which is heterosexual.

The influence of hegemonic masculinity –built upon homophobia– also affects how they express affection, as they fear appearing too effeminate. These dynamics are embedded in male–male relationships, often characterised by teasing and constant mockery, calling out traits seen as “not masculine enough” or potentially readable as homosexual. In the Rubelangel and Septiplier slash fiction, we detect these dynamics functioning as mechanisms that regulate gender expression and, once again, limit both their friendship and their romantic relationship.

However, the protagonists are able to modulate this homophobia and gradually open up more, eventually appreciating traits considered feminine (care, verbal affection) because these allow for closeness and intimacy within the relationship. What once functioned as teasing (“that’s so gay”) becomes a genuine expression of affection. Thus, we see how the texts reclaim some of the most typical features of relationships between heterosexual men and transform them into signs of affection within a homosexual couple. In this way, the texts play with elements constitutive of hegemonic and heterosexual masculinity and destabilise them by relocating them within a context of homosexual male intimacy and affection.

It is important to note, however, that the break with hegemonic masculinity and its limitations takes place through romantic love, along with all the myths and connotations associated with it (Ferrer-Pérez, Bosc & Navarro Guzmán 2010; Flegel & Roth 2010; Herrera Gómez 2010). Where hegemonic masculinity imposes its restrictions –such as emotional distance or silence– love operates as the force that pushes the protagonists to articulate

feelings or acknowledge mistakes. This is possible because the transformation happens under the umbrella of the idea that "love conquers all", and since love is always worthwhile, the protagonists are able to change some of the traits that caused them discomfort. In this sense, we can see –consistent with what other authors have argued– that romantic relationships are spaces where gendered and patriarchal dynamics become most visible (Capdevila, Tortajada & Araüna 2011), but also spaces in which men's roles can be questioned and transformed through the management of romantic feelings (Aran-Ramspott *et al.* 2014). The texts challenge the limitations of masculinity, but can only do so through romantic narratives which can also be painful or restrictive for the protagonists.

In sum, this research shows that Rubelangel and Septiplier slash fiction functions as a space for negotiating masculinity. The texts reproduce many dominant codes surrounding masculinity, but at the same time they question and even transform them. It is through the desire and attraction between two men –emerging from homosocial contexts and relationships– that certain discourses on masculinity can be shifted. This transformation is neither clean nor linear; rather, the protagonists oscillate between the desire or intention to embody traits of hegemonic masculinity while simultaneously breaking away from those same traits. This reveals that texts like slash fiction offer an ideal space for thinking about masculinities, about desire and about possible paths for expanding the range of what it means to be a man –or at least, a man in the world of video games.

It is important to keep in mind that, as a qualitative study, the results cannot –and do not aim to– be representative or generalisable, especially given the focus on two specific case studies. Likewise, this research analyses the texts published by fans, but does not investigate the practices, motivations or discourses of the fans themselves when writing or reading these stories. For future lines of research, it would be valuable to include these readers and/or writers in the study and learn firsthand about their discourses and practices through interviews or digital ethnography.

The fact that these narratives emerge within fan communities in the realm of video games –spaces that are highly masculinised and heteronormative– reinforces their significance and potential for transformation. Slash fiction not only reshapes the masculinities of its protagonists, but can also serve as a crack in communities and spaces that tend to reinforce masculinity norms and exclude many non-normative identities.

Endnote

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