



The Queer Art of LGBTQ+ Representation in Video Games

by
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Approval

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Degree: Bachelor of Communication

Title: The Queer Art of LGBTQ+ Representation in Video Games

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Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, Human Research Ethics approval from Capilano University Office of Research Ethics.

A copy of the approval letter is attached



Hello Lindsay Cooper,

The Capilano University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed your revised application for Ethical Review for the project entitled "*The Queer Art of LGBTQ+ Representation in Video Games*."

I am pleased to relay that your application is approved.

For your records:

REB Protocol ID: 2022-001-CAPS-COOPER
Date of Approval: February 17, 2022
Expiry Date: February 16, 2023

Throughout the duration of this REB approval, all requests for modifications to the approved ethical protocol must be submitted to reb@capilanu.ca.

We wish you the very best with your project.

Sincerely,
Capilano University Research Ethics Board

Chris Turner, PhD
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Abstract

In 2014, feminist scholars fight for better female representation in video gaming, resulting in the vitriolic Gamergate harassment campaign led by right-wing gamers who felt as though their identities and hobbies were being attacked. In more recent years, we have seen the discussion surrounding representation in gaming focus on a new subject of interest – queer identities. Although there is still work to be done, games have begun to introduce more and more queer themes, characters, and content over the last decade and have done so in more respectful and nuanced ways than in the past. Some research has examined queer content in video games, however, there is little research on how gamers perceive queer content in video games. This paper seeks to analyze the history of queer representation in gaming, how the gaming industry itself deals with it, and how indie game developers have begun to pave the way for better representation in AAA game titles. By conducting a survey of 572 gamers via Reddit and through a netnographic analysis of gaming subreddits and news article discussions, this research seeks to examine how gamers react to – and their opinions on – queer representation in video games.

Keywords: lgbtq+; queer; video games; gaming; representation; gamergate

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my parents and older brothers who encouraged and fostered my interest in video games from a young age. Also, to my partner, Eric, for his unending support during the research and writing process.

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Glossary

AAA Game	A high budget, high profile video game typically produced by well-known publishers. (AAA [video game industry], 2022).
Asexual	An individual who has little to no sexual feelings or desires, or who is not sexually attracted to anyone.
Cisgender	When someone identifies with the gender assigned at birth; an individual whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.
DLC	Short for 'downloadable content'. A DLC is additional content created for an already released game and is distributed through the internet by the game's developer. (Downloadable content, 2022).
Dox	When private or identifying information about a particular individual is leaked online, typically with malicious intent. (Doxing, 2022).
Gamergate	An online hate campaign started in 2014 that promoted sexism and anti-progressivism in video game culture and largely targeted women and feminists. (Gamergate [harassment campaign], 2022).
Gender Dysphoria	Clinically significant distress, impairment, or discomfort that might occur in individuals whose gender identity differs from their assigned sex at birth. (Mayo Clinic, n.d.)
Heterocentrism	The assumption that everyone is heterosexual.
Indie Game	Short for independent game. A game typically created by smaller development teams without the financial and technical support of a large game publisher. (Indie Game, 2022).
Intersectionality	An analytical framework to help understand how different aspects of a person's social identities (gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.) combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. (Intersectionality, 2022).

Non-Binary	An umbrella term for gender identities that are neither male nor female (identities outside of the gender binary); also known as genderqueer. (Non-binary gender, 2022).
NPC	Acronym for Non-Player-Character. A character not controlled by the player.
OP	'Original Poster'. The person who started/created a thread or post that users comment on.
Pansexuality	The romantic, emotional, and or sexual attraction to people regardless of their gender. (Pansexuality, 2022).
Steam	A video game digital distribution service founded by game developer Valve.
SJW	Short for 'Social Justice Warrior'. A pejorative term used for an individual who promotes socially progressive, left-wing, and liberal views (Social justice warrior, 2022).
Transgender	Someone whose gender identity or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth (Transgender, 2022).

Chapter 1.

Introduction

In 2014, feminist scholars began to discuss how women are portrayed in video games which resulted in massive backlash from a vocal sector of the gaming community. This controversy, known as Gamergate, was a harassment campaign that targeted these feminist scholars who sought out progressive and quality representation within video games. Gamergate became a movement that specifically targeted women in the video game industry, initially focusing on developers Zoë Quinn, Brianna Wu, and feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian before becoming an all-out culture war. These women and others who supported them were doxed (the publishing of private and identifying information with damaging intent), threatened with rape and murder, and relentlessly harassed for speaking out against the often offensive portrayals of women in video games. At its core, the Gamergate controversy was generated by right-wing gamers in their opposition against progressivism in video games led by feminists (“Gamergate [harassment campaign]”, 2022). “Gamergaters” were vehemently opposed to progressivism in their games, labelling anyone or anything vying for better representation as a “SJW” (social justice warrior) or as touting “SJW” politics. Feminists were fighting for better female representation and treatment in video games, upsetting many right-wing gamers who saw this as an attack and invasion on not only their hobby but their identity.

Those on the side of Gamergate (as in, those who opposed and harassed the feminist critics) felt that women attempting to assert their power in gaming culture meant that they (the ‘real’ gamers) were going to lose their hegemonic power and be silenced

(Evans & Janish, 2015, p. 130). For years, mass market developers themselves reinforced and fed into the idea of gamer privilege by producing and marketing games that represented and catered to a hypermasculine audience, providing a sort of invisible privilege to Gamergaters who claimed that their demographic (i.e. white, cisgendered, heterosexual men) deserve to have their preferences catered to (Evans & Janish, 2015, p. 135). Because games had long been traditionally marketed to men, by men, the men who played video games saw the feminist discussion of female representation in gaming as an attack on their ‘masculine hobby’ and, essentially, on them. Many viewed women as outsiders of the gaming community despite women making up a rather decent chunk of the gaming community themselves. In fact, according to a survey conducted by the Entertainment Software Association in 2014, women in the United States made up 48% of the gaming audience (Women and Video Games, 2022). At the time of the controversy, the majority of female characters in games were often nothing more than a pair of breasts to be ogled at or a sexy body to be saved by the strong male protagonist (as discussed by Dickerman et al., 2009). Although there were some strong female protagonists, they were often sexualized by both marketers and gamers. Take for instance Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* series, a physically capable and intelligent treasure hunter who was turned into a sex object through advertising and who had gamers create cheat codes in order to have her character model present nude in the game to be gawked at.

Alongside fighting for women’s struggles, feminist scholars (such as Judith Butler, Audre Lorde, and Sara Ahmed among many more) also often fight for queer rights as well. As such, discussions regarding queer representation in video games were also tacked onto the conversation surrounding Gamergate. Many in the movement

suggested that there was a need for better queer representation in video games beyond the typical optional same-sex romance of a side character, the prevalent portrayal of a queer character as predatory or villainous, or the all-too-common use of offensive stereotypes. However, since Gamergate, a shift has occurred that has allowed for more inclusion and sensitivity as society itself has grown more accepting and understanding through the years. With this steady increase in diversity comes a change in game play — meaning that the white, hypermasculine, heterosexual, cisgendered men of the gaming community are now being asked to play as something other than what they see as a reflection of themselves — a reality all too familiar for gamers who don't fit that mold.

Video games have begun to open their arms to more forms of queer representation with more nuanced and respectful portrayals and, as such, it is worth looking at how the opinions of gamers have changed since Gamergate brought forth the discussion of representation. As such, in order to better understand how a traditionally 'masculine' activity such as video games has grown in its reception of nonheteronormative content, this paper will examine the characterizations and shifts in queer characters and themes within popular and AAA video games. As this research will be examining queer representation in video games, it is fitting to approach such an analysis with a queer games framework. This framework pulls from queer theory and provides a concrete foundation to examine the nuances of queer representation in video games as its name suggests. By looking at the history of LGBTQ+ content in video games, how indie games have impacted representation, and the gaming industry itself, this research seeks to better understand how video games and their players have

progressed in their openness and acceptance of queerness since the inception of games and, specifically, since Gamergate.

Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1. The Queer History of Representation

So, what exactly is the history of queer representation in video games? Have video games characters just always been straight? As we know, queer people and queerness are nothing new; queer individuals have existed just as long as heterosexual individuals. In video games, queer individuals did exist, albeit, in incredibly small increments and as offensive stereotypes. The earliest notable representation of a queer character in a video game dates back to 1985 as a villain, however, quality queer representation up until the last decade or so has been sparse with most characterizations falling into stereotypical categories.

As much as video games are a medium for entertainment and art, one of the main reasons video games are created and constantly churned out is to create sales (Srauy, 2019, p. 487). The way in which certain games are made depends on the publisher(s) that fund the development cost, thus filtering and constraining the types of games made and the content they contain (Srauy, 2019, p 488). Of further concern to the developers bottom line is the audience. The gamer audience has long been constructed as “both heterosexual and potentially homophobic” which in turn can lead to fears of backlash for including LGBTQ+ content in games (Shaw, 2009, p. 240). This backlash was very much prevalent during the Gamergate controversy; although the main focus of Gamergate was the representation of women in games, the heterosexual and homophobic audience would similarly lash out at developers for even trying to include queer characters of any kind. Considering that masculinity is the presumed norm in both the gaming audience and the

industry itself, it's not surprising that video game content follows similar standards (Shaw, 2009, p. 239). With a product like a video game, and its primarily conservative market, developers cannot afford to offend their audience by courting queer people (Shaw, 2009, p. 243). It is also worth noting that the culture surrounding the gaming community is very heterocentric; words like "gay" and "fag" are not uncommon to be thrown about in online gaming spaces and forums (Shaw, 2009, p. 237). In her interviews with industry insiders, Adrienne Shaw found that developers were also on a tight leash with their investors and advertisers who were concerned about their merchandise being branded as a "gay product" and potentially alienating their heterosexual consumers (Shaw, 2009, p. 240) which in turn would mean less sales and thus less profit.

The Queer Cliché

More often than not, many LGBTQ+ characters are minor NPCs (non-player characters) or supporting side characters. Through their 2016 analysis, Shaw and Friesem found that from 1985 to 2005, explicitly queer characters were rare in general and 51% of those characters were indeed relegated to NPCs (p. 1561). When characters are more implicitly queer coded, their sexualities are often only revealed through dialogue or if certain in-game conditions are met, making them largely inconsequential to the game's progress (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 3880). Most notably in the early history of video games, however, characters are often identified as homosexual through blatant and stereotypical signifiers using visual cues such as mannerisms, their dress, and voice

(Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 3880). One such example worth acknowledging is the presence of Ash in Sega's 1994 game *Streets of Rage 3*. Ash, a mini boss in the first stage of the Japanese version of the game, was a clear and offensive stereotype of a gay man. Dressed in leather-daddy attire with buckled knees, heels, and limp wrists, Ash "prances around the screen, giggles, and cries when he's defeated" ("Ash", n.d.).



Figure 1. Ash, *Streets of Rage 3*. (Sega, 1994). Retrieved from <https://www.giantbomb.com/ash/3005-14272/>

When it comes to homosexuality, it appears as though women's queerness is often marked by their relationships to other women whereas men's queerness appears to be marked by stereotypical signifiers (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 3881). Many female characters are often not acknowledged as queer unless they say so themselves or if they enter a relationship with another woman: Ellie and Dina in *The Last of Us II* (2020), Leona and Diana in *League of Legends* (2009), Carol and Greta in *Fallout 3* (2008), Tracer and Emily in *Overwatch* (2016), and Mileena and Tanya in *Mortal Kombat 11* (2019) are some such examples. When gay male characters are present, their homosexuality is represented in a more explicit manner, often rather mockingly so through stereotypes (as seen in Ash) unlike lesbian characters whose queerness is represented in a more implicit manner (Shaw et. al, 2019, p. 1557).

It is important to acknowledge that most scholarly discussions surrounding queer representation in video games focus largely on sexuality, rarely acknowledging transgender, non-binary, or genderqueer characters up until more recent years. In their 2018 data analysis of Adrienne Shaw's online LGBTQ Video Game Archive, Utsch et al.

found that gay men (specifically white gay men) are the most represented queer identities in video games, making up about 38% of the representation whereas gender non-conforming, binary trans identities, and non-binary identities were the least represented with those three totaling up to 21% all together (p. 850). Even though trans representation in gaming is rather scarce, it is worth noting that there are more trans women in video games than there are trans men (Thach, 2021, p. 22). Often, trans characters' gender identity is treated as a problem to be dealt with or as the butt of a joke (Shaw & Friesem, 2016, p. 3882). Furthermore, trans characters are also dealt with in a problematic way when it comes to production as well; trans men and women are often voiced by actors whose gender is opposite to the character. One of the most lauded representations of a trans character in terms of writing thus far in gaming, Krem in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), was in fact voiced by a cisgender woman. This trend in voice acting seems to be changing, however; in 2021, the main character of Dotnod Entertainment's *Tell Me Why*, Tyler Ronan, is a trans man, and was voiced by a trans man as well.

In 2021, Thach conducted research using Shaw's LGBTQ Video Game Archive to identify and analyze how transgender characters are represented in video games. He found that trans characters typically fit into one of four "types" or stereotypes that he identified: dysphoria or physical transition, mentally ill killers, trans shock/reveal, and ambiguity (Thach, 2021, p. 20). These four categories are visible in many iterations of transgender characters in video games. Gender dysphoria is described as clinically significant distress related to a strong desire or identification with another gender whereas physical transition refers to the changes one may take for their body to reflect their gender identity. Dysphoria and physical transition are notable in characters such as Angof

in *Runescape* (2001), an elven trans woman who used magic to aid her transition, and Sya in *Guild Wars 2* (2012) who, like Angof, utilized magic to aid in her transition.

An example of a mentally ill killer that Thach explores in their research is Alfred Ashford from *Resident Evil: Code Veronica* (2000) who forms an alter ego named Alexia and wears women's clothing (Tach, 2021, p. 30). Although not technically a trans woman, for outside viewers with not much understanding on transgender identities, the fact that Alfred dresses in women's clothing and develops the secondary identity of his sister Alexia (while the real Alexia is in cryosleep) as his mental health begins to deteriorate appears to link cross-dressing and psychoticism which in turn can paint a negative image of transness.

In regard to trans shock/reveal, there are two different approaches within this category: one that is used to literally shock and surprise the audience, and another that is just simply a reveal. As Thach (2021) notes, Shablee from *Leisure Suit Larry 6* (1993) is a prime example of trans shock. Shablee, a character that the eponymous Larry seeks to bed, is revealed to be trans when the game "shows an erect penis under her clothes", causing Larry to throw up (Thach, 2021, p. 32). The scene that follows implies that Shablee raped Larry as he seems revolted, regretful, and as though he was non-consenting after learning of Shablee's trans identity.



Figure 1. Shablee revealed to be transgender as Larry throws up over the discovery in *Leisure Suit Larry 6*. (Sierra On-Line 1993). Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c_U73BagT4

In the case of trans characters, ambiguity refers to instances in which “a character’s gender is changed in localization or over time, are not explicitly stated, or left open to interpretation” (Thach, 2021, p. 34). One such example is not necessarily a particular character but rather a race of characters within the *Mass Effect* series (2007 – present). The Asari are a mono-gender humanoid race of aliens who populate the many worlds within the game. In the first *Mass Effect* (2007), Asari companion Liara T’Soni mentions to the player character that “male and female have no real meaning for us” noting that she herself “is not precisely a woman” (Loveridge, 2017). Despite looking stereotypically female with breasts and feminine voices, the Asari can mate with any race

of any gender. Although present in North American games, ambiguity is a gender trope most notable in Japanese games. One such example of this is the character of Poison, a trans woman with differing gender interpretations in the original Japanese version and the English version, from Capcom's 1989 game *Final Fight*.

2.2. The Gaming Industry and Perceived Risks of Representation

Video games are often targeted toward men with images of stereotypically “masculine” interests: guns, breasts, war, etc., however, video games are also very popular with children. Games like *Crash Bandicoot* (1996), *Spyro the Dragon* (1998), *Roblox* (2006), *Minecraft* (2011), *Super Mario Bros* (1985), and *Rayman* (1995) are all incredibly popular games and game series among children. These games are targeted at a large, general audience that welcomes children to participate in their worlds. As such, when it comes to children and video games, many parents are wary of the activity, not wanting their children to be exposed to any kind of material that could potentially cause their children to bring up the subject of sex in any regard (Shaw, 2009, p. 241). Backlash is a very real fear for many developers and publishers as it can not only impact their reputation, but their financial situation as well. As Shaw notes, even though cartoon violence is considered more acceptable for children, any mention of sex can make a game considered to be mature (Shaw, 2009, p. 241).

Many popular game series loved by children, such as *Mario* and *Pokémon*, were created in Japan and had to be translated and adapted when brought overseas for North American audiences. As such, games have to go through the process of localization, which is the process in which video games are adjusted “technically, linguistically, and culturally to a given market” so that they can be distributed to territories other than the country they originated from (O’Hagan, 2015, p. 747). In regard to localization, this issue of any mention of sexuality or gender identity being scrubbed to “spare the children” can be seen in the localization of some games. For instance, *Pokemon X and Y* (2013) contains a character named Nova, a woman who mentions her medical transition in the



Figure 2. Vivian from *Paper Mario*. (Nintendo, 2000). Retrieved from <https://papermario.fandom.com/wiki/Vivian>

Japanese version of the game, which was excluded in the North America port — censoring her mention of transition to a subtle nod to her having been in a different Karate level that was exclusive to men in the past. Similarly, Vivian, a trans character in *Paper Mario* (2004), was described as a trans woman in the Japanese game but when ported to English, she was made to be a cis woman. Beyond children, developers have the very real concern of the overall general gaming audience.

The Constructed Audience

A common form of resistance by those who identified on the side of Gamergate in the past was the argument that having more representation in games is nothing more than pandering. In his research and survey conducted in 2016, Talbert found that some respondents claimed that queer groups are “intentionally ruining games to force a

political agenda upon the gaming community” (p. 94) just as Gamergaters once felt about the feminists fighting for better female representation in games in 2014. Interestingly, Talbert found that participants who want queer representation and those who were against it both expressed that they did not want queer characters forced into games simply for filling some sort of representational quota (p. 96). People who are for queer representation in games want the characters to be fleshed out and dynamic where their gender identity or sexual orientation is just part of who they are, not their whole identity; on the other side, those opposed to such representation feel that such diverse characterizations will threaten creative freedom (Talbert, 2016, p. 96).

Due to the adult gamer audience having been culturally constructed as both heterosexual and potentially homophobic, this can lead to fears for developers of receiving backlash for including queer content (Shaw, 2009, p. 240). Furthermore, advertisers are concerned that by approaching gay consumers, it may provoke “retribution from Moral Majority boycotts” (Shaw, 2009, p. 240). In his interview with Shaw, game designer Kevin Mack notes that one of the main reasons that queer content engenders outright hostility is the Christian ‘family’ groups that can go after them for including such content (Shaw, 2009, p. 24). As such, developers have to take their audience into account and the possible financial impact it may have if a game were to fail or undersell due to controversy or, in relation to queer representation, cause moral panic.

2.3. Indie Games and the Queer Experience

Independent games, or, “indie” games, have long existed within the gaming world, however, they have become more prominent than ever within the last decade. Indie games are often made by individuals or small teams without the typical financial backing of large AAA gaming developers and are typically free (or cheap) to download. Games like *Minecraft* (2011), *Stardew Valley* (2016), *Fall Guys* (2020), *Rocket League* (2015), and *Gary’s Mod* (2006) all started off as small independently created games that have now sold over 10 million copies each with *Minecraft*, in particular, becoming a major part of the gaming community’s cultural zeitgeist, having sold over 200 million. There is no denying that indie games have carved out their own respected space within the gaming community for their innovations in storytelling and gameplay, however, indie games have also paved the way for increased queer representation.

Within the last few years, queer indie games in particular have risen in popularity amongst the larger gaming community. We can see the rise in queer indie games like *Celeste* (2018), *Hades* (2020), *Dream Daddy* (2017), and *Night in the Woods* (2017), all of which feature LGBTQ+ main characters and all of which have received critical acclaim. Scholar and professor Bonnie Ruberg considers queer indie games part of the “queer games avant-garde”, which they define as a movement where game makers are creating both digital and analog games inspired by their own queer experiences (Ruberg, 2020, p. 1). According to Ruberg, more than any other area of video game development, this queer games avant-garde movement “has an



Figure 3. Madeline, the transgender main protagonist of *Celeste* (Extremely OK Games, 2018). Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madeline_\(Celeste\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madeline_(Celeste))

overwhelming representation of women, non-binary people, and transgender people – with notable presence of trans women” who create and contribute to these games (Ruberg, 2020, p. 12). These games go against the grain of typical hegemonic play of games, challenging the standard heterocentrism of AAA games. As Ruberg notes, video games are more than an entertainment medium — they react to the society around them just like all other forms of cultural production (Ruberg, 2020, p. 6). Video games are “fundamentally political, as is the place of marginalized subjects within them” and offer opportunities for resistance through storytelling and play (Ruberg & Philips, 2018). As such, it is no coincidence that “the rise of the queer games avant-garde is taking place alongside the rise of the alt-right” that was legitimized by a “president who [was] unapologetic in his racist, sexist, anti-gay, anti-trans agenda.” (Ruberg, 2020, p. 6).

As Cole et al. (2017) speculated in their presentation at the Digital Games Research Association, it is possible that the rising influence of independent game developers and the increased access to game development tools may be significant factors in the increase of games with more queer content (p. 3). The recent wave of “queer indie game-makers” has pushed the medium “in important new directions, inspiring marginalized creators of many identities” to create their own games and “encouraging large-scale development companies” to make their games more inclusive in response (Ruberg, 2019, p. 779). Rather than saying that queer indie games are paving the way for a “better” future of LGBTQ+ individuals within the gaming medium “runs the risk of instrumentalizing queer art in the name of mainstream change” (Ruberg, 2020, p. 28). Instead, it may be more fitting to suggest that the power these queer indie games have is

not to necessarily make mainstream games more inclusive but instead that they can act to destabilize the notion of a mainstream (Ruberg, 2020, p. 28).

What makes these queer indie games so popular is the authenticity of the queer characters themselves. Unlike AAA games that often tend to tokenize queer characters, indie games present these characters as more than their queer identity. These more genuine forms of representation likely come from “having queer people write their own stories, and incorporating their queerness in a multidimensional way”, unabashedly including queer characters in their stories, and exploring “various other themes outside of coming out and finding romance” (Spencer, 2021). When AAA gaming studies include queer characters, many times those stories “are plagued by themes of queer pain” which can be a double-edged sword (Spencer, 2021). Queer pain is a very real experience; however, it is important to look at who is telling that story and for what purpose (Spencer, 2021). Indie games that tend to explore queer pain do so in ways that don’t come across as “cartoonish or heavy-handed”, allowing for the realities of queer people to be explored with more nuance (Spencer, 2021).

Chapter 3. Methods

Borrowing from Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw's queer games studies theory, posited in their 2017 book *Queer Game Studies*, this paper will utilize both quantitative and qualitative approaches in order to better understand both the current gaming sphere and players' opinions on queer representation. Queer game studies focuses on the study of LGBTQ+ issues in relation to video games, often weaving queer theory into the analysis of games, and providing a variety of approaches to take in analysis such as "opportunities for non-normative play", "queer readings of seemingly 'straight' video games", the "nuances of player-avatar identification", and exploring game mechanics, interfaces, and narratives (Ruberg & Philips, 2018). This framework is often used to analyze the queerness of video games themselves through the application of queer theory, however, it can also be used to analyze the actual representation of queer content and representation within games.

Queer representation has grown within the last decade or so, and more queer individuals are being included in games. With more queer representation in gaming, I sought to explore how much the opinions of gamers have changed since Gamergate and if it is related to the increase in inclusion. Paired with queer game studies, this research will be conducted using an online survey that will be submitted on various gaming subreddits (individual forums) on reddit.com. A qualitative netnographic framework will be used to analyze online forums, news, blogs, and discussion boards.

Survey

Firstly, an online survey was conducted consisting of both multiple choice and short answer questions pertaining to queer representation in video games to gauge the players' opinions on queer representation in video games. This survey was distributed to two subreddits on reddit.com: r/truegaming (which is dedicated to meaningful discussion on all topics gaming) and r/samplesize (which is a dedicated place for individuals to post their surveys and polls).

I first posted to r/samplesize and received over 475 responses over night; after posting to r/truegaming, the survey reached 572 responses (although it is hard to say how much of the over 100 responses after it went live on r/truegaming came from there and not r/samplesize). The survey was up and open for responses for a total of two weeks. After 12 days, there were very few responses coming in with only one response within the last two days of it being up. Due to interest and engagement dying down, the survey was closed at the two-week mark.

This survey was created using Google Forms as the platform provided useful pie charts for questions and automatically aggregated all data into an excel sheet for easy analysis. To provide flexibility and openness, all questions on the survey were optional (except for participant information), meaning that certain questions could be skipped if one so wished. Participants were anonymous with no identifying information necessary. However, participants were asked their age (given in age brackets), gender identity, sexual orientation, and country of origin — all of which are optional for participants to answer. By asking for participant age, it may aid in understanding on how different age

demographics view queer representation; considering the high number of gamers opposed to representation Gamergate in 2014, understanding participant age may help in assessing what opinions and knowledge has stayed with them since. Obtaining information on participant gender identity and sexual orientation will provide an understanding of possible homophobia and/or transphobia, and potentially an understanding of how toxic masculinity ideals may be subsiding or still continuing within the gaming community. Lastly, obtaining information on participants' country of origin will be useful in understanding the potential differences in cultural beliefs. The choice of providing a "do not wish to answer" option for each of these questions is to respect the comfort of some respondents; some may not have come to terms with their gender or sexuality and thus may not feel comfortable answering. As this research is being conducted surrounding representation and inclusivity, a goal in this survey is to not exclude anyone under the LGBTQ+ umbrella — including those who are questioning or unsure.

Netnography

Going hand-in-hand with the survey, a netnographic analysis of online forums will be conducted to further examine other areas of the gaming sphere and their reception of queer characters in AAA game titles. This method values a cultural approach to "understanding what happens on the internet, and, particularly, what happens through interactive media such as social media" (Kozinets, 2015). Moreover, a netnography allows for the use of various search engines and websites to collect data to answer the research question without the need to be focused on one particular website (Kozinets,

2015). Articles and discussions from 2013 to 2015 during the height of Gamergate will be looked at to see what the general consensus was surrounding representation at the time and compared to more recent forums and websites such as Kotaku (a gaming news site), GameSpot, and various gaming subreddits (r/thelastofus, r/thelastofus2, r/subredditdrama, and r/truegaming). Kotaku and Gamespot were particularly chosen to examine as both gaming websites have popular news sections and allow their users to comment on articles. Similarly, Reddit was chosen as a main source of information for this netnography as the website is one of the largest social platforms in the world. Two of the particular subreddits chosen (r/thelastofus and r/thelastofus2) were done so as they focus on a particular game series of interest to this research. The other gaming-focused subreddit, r/truegaming, was chosen as the subreddit focuses on discussions surrounding gaming and topics within gaming. Lastly, a particular thread on r/subredditdrama was selected as it provided opinions of gamers outside of typical gaming subreddits (which, any topic-focused forum can sometimes become an echo chamber) and communities.

During my analysis of online discussions surrounding queer content in video games, I focused on two particular time periods: 2013-2015 and 2019-2022. I chose to examine these two time periods for a few reasons. In 2014, queer inclusivity in gaming was not as discussed in the gaming community as other forms of inclusion – however, with the anti-SJW rhetoric that was so prevalent during this period, I wanted to examine how gamers were discussing seemingly “SJW” topics. I wanted to compare and contrast the opinions of gamers during this time with the current ones expressed online within similar communities. The 2019-2022 time period was selected for analysis as this is the most recent era of gaming; the initial plan was to examine 2019-2021, however, research

and writing moved into 2022 and I wanted to keep the timeline open in case any interesting new discussions were to arise.

I largely focused on reddit posts and the comment sections under gaming news stories on websites such as Kotaku and GameSpot. Gaming forums have continued to fall off in terms of popularity within the last decade, and as such, it was easiest to find discussions on these topics through reddit and news sites. Although searches were done for general queer content through these websites, I aimed my focus on particular instances of queer content in games from AAA developers that were more widely discussed online. For information from 2013-2015, I largely looked at gamers' reactions to the inclusion of Dorian Pavus (a romanceable gay male companion) and Krem (a trans man) in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* which came out at the height of Gamergate in 2014. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* was chosen in particular as the game was created by a well-known AAA developer, BioWare, and because the game included a cast of queer side characters. Comments for analysis were selected as they either echoed many other commenters in a more direct way or because they were outliers amongst the rest.

Dragon Age: Inquisition was the third installment of the *Dragon Age* series by AAA developer BioWare, who, as a company, are often targeted by conservative gamers for their more progressive approach in queer inclusion and representation. Although *Inquisition* included another queer character, the lesbian elf Sera, and pansexual as well as bisexual characters, it appears as though Dorian (a gay mage and person of colour) and Krem (a white trans man) received the brunt of criticism from gamers online.

For information from 2019-2022, I focused on Naughty Dog's 2020 game *The Last of Us 2* and gamer's reactions to Lev, a young trans boy, and Abby, a cis woman who received intense vitriol from gamers for her masculine frame and muscles. The first game in *The Last of Us* series was released in 2013, however, one of the main characters, Ellie, and her identity as a lesbian was not known until the release of the 2014 DLC *The Last of Us: Left Behind* which also caused upset from some conservative gamers. Most of the netnographic research for this time period focuses on reddit as the website is one of the biggest social media sites today and has become a sort of replacement for gaming forums of the past with multiple subreddits dedicated to different games, genres, gaming companies, and groups. As such, most research for this section analyzes r/thelastofus2 — a subreddit focused on the eponymous game — and r/subredditudrama and r/truегaming to see how other gamers outside of *The Last of Us 2* fandom react to queer content and characters in games.

Chapter 4. Data / results

Netnography

2013 - 2015

In the 2014 Kotaku article “BioWare’s First Gay Male Party Member Debuts in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*” by Mike Fahey, commenters were rather split in their opinions on the game’s gay companion, Dorian. Many expressed their discomfort with having a queer male companion in their squad. User rtkamb commented: “And another game I’m going to have to pass on because I can’t agree with this. Stop trying to force your gay propaganda on us. *sigh*”. In another article on Dorian, this time written by Eddie Makuch for GameSpot in 2014, entitled “*Dragon Age: Inquisition*’s Dorian Character is ‘Legitimately Gay,’ BioWare Says”

commenter tgwolf replies, “I knew there was a reason I didn’t like this game... C’mon people, homosexuality is both unnatural and DISTURBING! What in the world...”

Another commenter under the same article, MihaiHornet, comments, “I don’t really give a rat’s... ahem ass. A hot ‘Legitimately Lesbian’ on the other hand...” Comments under Makuch’s (2014) article were mixed like previous articles with many commenters expressing their displeasure with having a gay character in the game, stating that they saw Dorian’s inclusion in the game as “pandering to SJWs”. On the flip side, however, multiple other commenters on Makuch’s (2014) article expressed their support in



Figure 4. Dorian Pavus from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014). Retrieved from https://dragonage.fandom.com/wiki/Dorian_Pavus

Dorian's creation and inclusion in the game as well as their interest in who he is as a character. For example, user KainsDaughter commented,

...Though I have to say that I am amazed how many people are so amazingly offended by Bioware including a romances for everyone, not just hetero males. I am pointing this one out, since I have seen so many 'romances' or indicators in games, that were clearly designed for hetero male gamers - as if nobody else would play these games and I, as a female gamer, really didn't want to see or couldn't care less about them - yet I had no alternative. Bioware is approaching to serve everyone - and for crying out loud - if this romance option doesn't interest you, just don't follow up on it. I am sure there's something that will float your boat. So instead of complaining and bashing it, people should look forward to what will interest them and for once accept, that this game is a bit less discriminating than the majority of games and people.

Dragon Age: Inquisition also had another monumental queer inclusion in their game — the transgender, tertiary character, Krem. Krem, a trans man, became a topic of discussion on online news websites and Reddit upon the game's release in 2014. With Krem being a side character, however, little attention was given to him in the literature of the game. One article which did look at this character was the 2014 Kotaku article "BioWare Put A Lot Of Hard Work Into *Dragon Age's* Trans Character" by Kirk Hamilton. This article discussed how BioWare went about creating Krem by speaking with individuals in the genderqueer community for feedback and critique in order to write



Figure 5. Krem from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014). Retrieved from <https://whatculture.com/gaming/10-most-influential-lgbt-characters-in-video-games?page=5>

a genuine and non-exploitative trans character.

Commenters were generally positive toward Krem's

inclusion, praising BioWare for his characterization.

User DoraDoraBoBora comments, "Awesome. Way to

go Bioware. I'm sure seeing a character like this in

such a high profile game has got to feel pretty like a

pretty great step in the direction for trans players."

Another commenter, Kyote37, expressed their pride

and appreciation in BioWare for Krem's creation:

Awesome that they did this. Imagine growing up trans and having no heroes [to]

look up to and barely anyone to even explain to you why you feel as you do.

Before the internet, it must've been among the loneliest ways to live. And really,

how is having a trans person in a game 'shoving it in your face', guys? Really?

BEING trans is not the same as shoving your sexuality in someone's faces.

Writing a trans character into the game as a well written character who happens

to be trans is how it should be done, so big kudos to Bioware.

One of the difficult tasks that comes with queer representation is the misunderstandings, misreading, and misinterpretations of the characters by the audience.

On the subreddit for *The Last of Us*, r/thelastofus, user derridadaist posted a thread in 2014 entitled "The reaction to Ellie's sexuality" in which they express their surprise at many fans of the game who they felt were "trying to find ways to argue that Ellie might actually not be gay." Although not a huge post on the subreddit that gained a lot of attention, derridadaist's post received 146 comments and 75 upvotes (likes). Other users

in the comments reinforce OP's (the original poster of the thread) beliefs, finding ways to skirt around admitting that Ellie is a lesbian, instead positing that Ellie and her friend from the DLC that she shared a kiss with, Riley, were just: gay only for each other, experimenting, or that they "couldn't know/understand" their sexualities at their ages (which was about 14 years old). However, some commenters do chime in to challenge these opinions, noting that if Riley were a male character that Ellie had kissed, they would not be questioning her sexuality as anything other than straight.

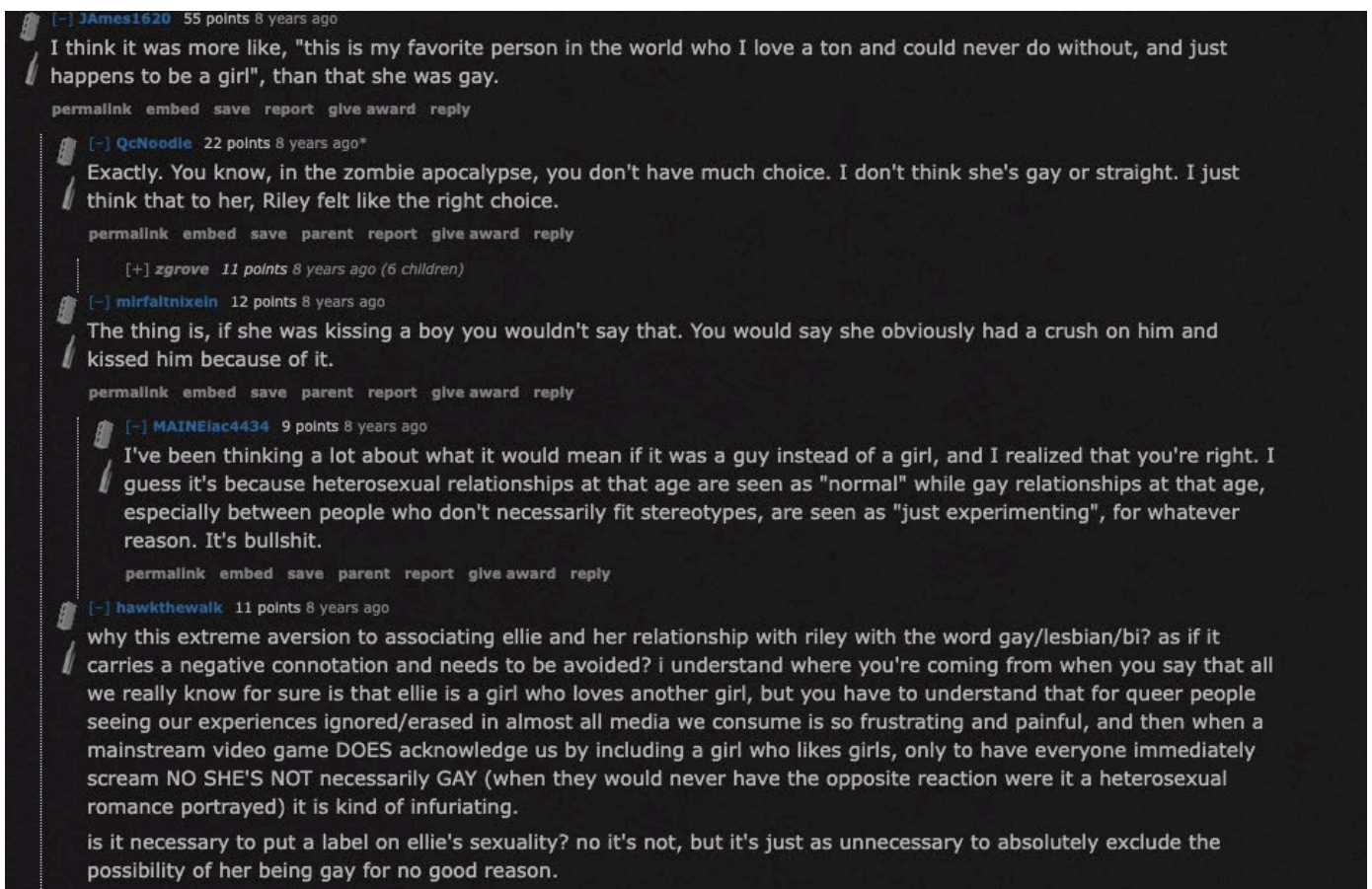


Figure 6. Civil conversation within the "Reaction to Ellie's sexuality" thread on r/thelastofus.

Looking back at this discussion on reddit from 2014, the conversation seemed quite civil when compared to the flurry of vitriol that erupted in 2020 with the release of the game's sequel, *The Last Of Us 2*. When we do shift to look at content from 2019-2022 — particularly when looking at *The Last of Us 2* — the toxicity within the gaming community began to run rampant with the sequel, making headlines.

2019 - 2022

It is important to note that *The Last of Us* is considered one of the greatest games ever made (“List of video games considered the best”, 2020). As such, its fanbase is very large (with the first game being the third best-selling PS3 games of all time) and many were excitedly anticipating its sequel. When *The Last of Us 2* was released in 2020, it was met with praise and acclaim from professional critics and reviewers, receiving a 10/10 on IGN, a 93/100 on Metacritic, and an 8/10 on GameSpot, respectively. The audience response, however, was abysmal. Gamers review-bombed the game (leaving scathing reviews and low ratings en masse) on various websites, resulting in a very low audience rating across the board. Many who went on to negatively review the game in this collective review attack criticized the characters and the plot, whereas others complained that the game was pandering to SJWs and their politics due to the inclusion of queer characters like a young transgender boy, Lev. There are genuine criticisms of the game to be made — and many do discuss them online — however, those were overshadowed by the vocal subset of gamers who felt the game had gone “too left”.

Adding to online fanbase reviews were forums like reddit and the subreddit r/TheLastOfUs2 which became a hotspot of criticism and vitriol upon the game's release. Instead of becoming a subreddit for those to engage in genuine criticism, discussions on the game and plot, tips and tricks, funny memes, etc. like many other game-focused subreddits, it became a place for people to gather, spread hate, and blame SJW's for how the whole game was constructed. Certain users in the community even went on to harass a youtuber, Girlfriend Reviews, for her positive review of the game. One user of the subreddit claimed to have received death threats from Girlfriend Reviews for leaving a negative comment on her video only to be exposed as posing as her in attempt to destroy her reputation.

One of the side characters in *The Last of Us 2*, Lev, is a young transgender boy. Although many would be quick to assume Lev as the main target of attack by toxic gamers due to his transgender identity, most users on the r/TheLastOfUs2 subreddit seem to be neutral towards his inclusion whilst also having legitimate criticisms of his character. However, this was not the case upon Lev's initial announcement. A day before the game's release, user lcne321 created a post on r/TheLastOfUs2 subreddit entitled "Turns out lev is a chick with gender identity issues and the reason she ran away from her community is because she shaved her head to look like a boy, and they wanted her to be a wife to one of the elders." The thread, its title, and the commenters, are full of people misgendering Lev.

The subreddit, and many gamers who played the game, particularly targeted one character in particular: Abby. When Abby (the antagonist turned protagonist) was first revealed to the public before the game’s release, many accused her of being trans due to her muscular body. Even after it was later clarified that she was not trans, some people still touted her as trans simply to mock her. This is interesting as the actual trans character in the game, Lev, was not on the receiving end of transphobic hate as much as Abby, a cisgender woman.



Figure 7. Abby (left) and Lev (right) from *The Last of Us 2* (Naughty Dog, 2020). Retrieved from <https://gamerant.com/the-last-of-us-3-abby-lev-story-continue/>

In a post on r/TheLastOfUs2 made in 2020, user AsheFromTheMoon created a thread entitled “Can we please stop calling Abby Trans?” in which they state that since everyone knows she’s not trans, they should stop referring to her as such. Commenters disagreed. User ay3j responds, “little too buff to be a woman altogether tho.” The OP replies stating that women can get that buff, however, ay3j opposes that idea, saying, “woman can be that buffed, only with steroids.... Not to mention when you inject that

much testosterone to get THAT buffed, you're basically a man." Commenters seemed to side with ay3j with their first response earning 9 upvotes and their second receiving 8. The OP's had been downvoted to 0. Another commenter, RyanTiu209 responds to the same post: "At this point we are only calling her trans for satire and humor. Really shows how little we care and respect her character even tho we haven't given her a chance." They received 18 upvotes — the same amount as the actual thread itself. It appears that despite the strides that have been made to progress trans character acceptance in AAA video games within the last decade, there are still those who feel emboldened enough to use the term "transgender" as an insult or as synonymous with not deserving respect.

Other gaming-focused subreddits, such as r/truegaming, have become the modern-day equivalent to the gaming forums of the 90s in which the community can get together to discuss more nuanced topics within gaming. In one thread posted by u/gamefreac in 2019 entitled "how do you feel about LGBT representation in video games?", u/Manofchalk responds noting that although they are not an LGBT person themselves and therefore cannot attest as to whether the representation is good, they reply to the post saying,

...I will say a problematic aspect is that games put uneven prominence on lesbian relationships when compared to gay male relationships, it's the 'safe' way to represent homosexuality as straight guys, the dominant audience, aren't exactly going to complain if girls kiss compared to if two dudes kiss. Which is its own issue that's more about the straight people than the gay people, but games do this to a lesser degree than other mediums so they get some credit.

In a 2020 thread on r/SubredditDrama (in which redditors gathered to discuss drama taking place in various subreddits) discussing how r/PCGaming reacted to Steam, a digital game distribution service, hosting a platform-wide sale that promoted games made by queer creators and/or included queer characters. In this thread, users discuss the ethics of queer pandering. One redditor, whose account has since been deleted, comments

To the people in the thread pointing out how large corps use pride as a sort of marketing event: you're right, but I'd rather be seen as a marketable demographic than shunned from wider society. I'll take steam pride sales over the anti-gay culture of the 80s, 90s, and 00s any day.

Other comments in the r/SubredditDrama thread tear apart commenters in the original thread on r/PCGaming who were complaining about queer games getting a spotlight on Steam when “straight games” weren’t. User Dain42 quotes a commenter from the r/PCGaming thread who said, “There aren’t really a lot of games where being straight is prominently featured” and responds, saying:

That’s a real galaxy-brain take, there, what with all the hetero couples, relationships, romantic tension, and such that soooooooo many games are just filled with. Of course, I’m sure those don’t count as straightness being “prominently featured” for reasons. When will these dipshits get it through their heads that the reason that, while tokenized queer representation definitely happens, as the player, they often play a big role in tokenizing queer characters by becoming focus on and distracted by the character’s difference, thus ignoring other characterization efforts.

Survey

Of the 572 survey respondents, most were under 32 years of age. 38.5% reported being aged 21-26, 28% were aged 15-20, and 22% were aged 27-32. In regard to respondents' continent of residence, 57.9% reported living in North America, 30.8% in Europe, and 4.9% in Australia. The majority of respondents were male, followed by female, and then non-binary individuals. 79.7% identified as cisgender, whereas 13.6% identified as transgender; another 6.6% did not wish to answer (see Figure 9).

Please indicate your gender identity
572 responses

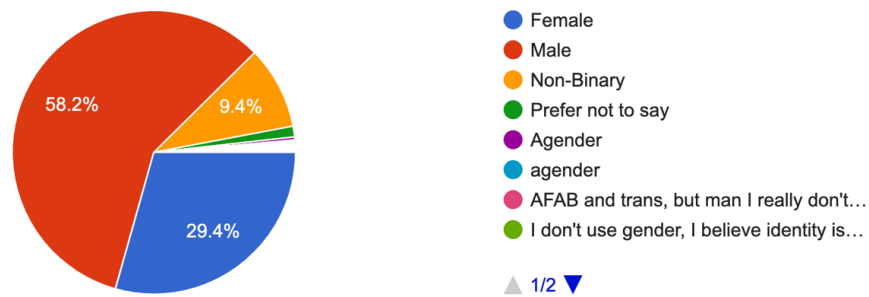


Figure 8. Survey Respondents Gender Identity Demographics

The three most prominent sexual orientations were reported as: straight (47.4%), bisexual (21.9%), and asexual (those who experience little to no sexual attraction) (8.4%) (see Figure 10). Interestingly, the next most reported sexual orientation was pansexual (the attraction to people regardless of sex or gender) (6.8%) which was then followed by gay (5.1%) and lesbian (4.7%). Although straight and bisexual were expected to make the top three reported sexual orientations, asexuality was not as it is rarely represented or discussed in media; similarly, pansexuality was not expected to be fourth place as the orientation is rather new in terms of its labelling and name. This could be because

bisexuality and pansexuality are relatively similar in that they both are attracted to men and women, however, pansexuality is considered a more open and inclusive orientation than bisexuality as it includes attraction to non-binary and other gender individuals. This is not to say that bisexuality excludes non-binary and other gender identities, however, the prefix of “bi” implies two — two binary genders. As such, we have seen more and more people over the last few years move toward the label of pansexuality in its place. For example, major celebrities such as Miley Cyrus, Cara Delevingne, Demi Lovato, and Bella Thorne, have all come out as pansexual, bringing more awareness to the sexuality itself.

Please indicate your sexual orientation
572 responses

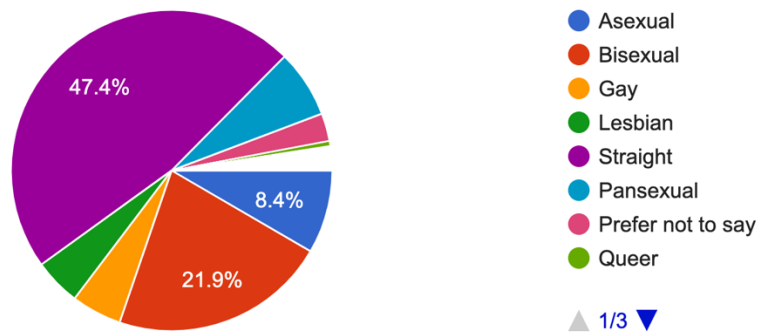


Figure 9. Survey Respondents Sexual Orientation Demographics

Despite a large majority of respondents identifying as straight, 67.2% of respondents answered yes to the question “Have you ever intentionally pursued an optional queer romance in a video game?” It is unknown whether these optional queer romances took place between two male or two female characters, however, the fact that

even straight audiences intentionally opt to select queer romances is of particular interest. This indicates that it is not only queer audiences who are interested in engaging in and with queer romances, suggesting that the marketability of queerness extends beyond its own community.

When asked if those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community feel their identity is accurately represented in video games, nearly all answers were a resounding no. This question received a total of 239 responses, many of which were long paragraphs in which respondents expressed their disappointment in either the lack of representation in general or just poor representation overall. Those who identified as part of the community interspliced their thoughts and opinions on representation throughout the survey in other short-answer questions. Most common gripes noted were the lack of asexual and non-binary representation, the fetishization of lesbian/queer female relationships, and the misrepresentation of bisexuality.

Participant 123, who identified themselves as asexual, notes that:

In the subject of the nuances of asexuality, there is much work that could be done (but I get that media doesn't want to be Intro to Queers 101), such as that asexual ≠ aromantic, asexuals can have/enjoy sex/libido, they often still fall in love, can have kids yadda yadda yadda. We're not all sex-averse, prudes or innocence wholesome sweeties (or heaven forbid incels???) Not to mention lots of messages in media are pretty allo/amatonomous (i.e. Sex is always good and the best show of love, everyone wants sex/sexual stuff, or for romanticism, that romantic relationships are inherently the most important or necessary for fulfilment, or that

(romantic) love is the answer to many problems (and that this romantic love is only valid if it's also sexual).

When considering how many respondents identified themselves as asexual, it is interesting to note the lack of asexual representation in video games. The only explicitly asexual character from a AAA game within the last 5 years is Parvati Holcomb, a biromantic asexual (romantically attracted to both men and women but experiences little to no sexual desire for them) companion, from Obsidian Entertainment's 2020 game *The Outer Worlds*. Although *The Outer Worlds* is a AAA game and Parvati's inclusion was a big deal in queer gaming spaces, she received few mentions in the survey. So little, in fact, that only five individuals mentioned the game and only one mentioned her by name. Overall, many asexual identifying respondents felt as though their sexual orientation's representation was lacking, with Participant 274 noting that they "can't name a single explicitly [asexual] character in games and I play a lot of them, so..."

In discussing how female relationships are often fetishized or sexualized in games to pander to male audiences, Participant 34, a bisexual female, noted:

Biased representation is worse than no representation imo [in my opinion], and that's all we have. Like, lesbians are okay because they're basically pandering to the kinds of disgusting straight guys that fetishize it, but gay men are not allowed to exist. Titles with lesbian romance like LiS [Life is Strange] are a hit, but name one AAA title with a even major supporting male character who's gay?

Participant 449 expands upon this, explaining that bisexual women and lesbian characters are not unusual, however, their representation is hyper-sexualized especially when compared to the small number of bisexual men in video games.

I feel like currently queer representation is, by and large, lesbians, bisexual women with raging nymphomania, or bisexual men who don't ever actually act that way towards men but it's there to make them look exotic. They can do better than this, by far.

There is a notable lack of bisexual male characters in video games — particularly in AAA games. One of the few notable explicitly bisexual men from a video game within the last 10 years is Trevor Philips from *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), who is notable for being considered one of the most controversial characters in video game history (“Trevor Philips”, 2022). Trevor, as a character, is known for his outlandish and over-the-top personality; although he does show care for those close to him, he is violent and aggressive — both physically and sexually (at one point claiming to have raped men in prison). The *Grand Theft Auto* series has always been heavy with satire, and this game is no different. However, despite this, it is still worth acknowledging the most prominent portrayal of an explicitly bisexual man from the last 10 years is one who is sexually aggressive and violent.

Other respondents, such as Participant 346, express discomfort with how bisexual characters are portrayed, saying, “Bisexuality still has this stigma of being either ‘easy’ or unfaithful. Not only in video games, mind, but media in general.” Another respondent,

Participant 152, brings up the point that bisexuality is decently represented in numbers, however, the approach to representation leaves much to be desired.

...games tend to follow the trend of "bisexuality doesn't exist" or "we will say this character is bisexual but they just happen to always be in a hetero relationship and they never indicate any same sex attraction or mention it... except when it's convenient for the company developing the game to show how inclusive and rad and progressive they are!"

Throughout the survey, many respondents note that indie games tend to have better, more fair, and respectful representation of queer identities than AAA games. Participants acknowledge the difference not only in the amount of diversity, but in variety as well, with Participant 564 explaining that, "Indie games have a plethora of diversity, modern mainstream games still struggle with representation beyond muscular white men and overly sexualized white women." Many who comment on indie games having better representation typically tended to mention that they play indie games more than AAA games as well.

I do think representation is much better now than it has been but I also think that as a queer person I consciously and subconsciously seek out games with queer characters. I play more indie than AAA games and I think if it was the other way around I would have a much more negative view of the current state of representation. (Participant 59)

Most respondents wished for more queer representation in video games (see Figure 11). Those who responded “yes” or “neutral” tended to express the desire to see more queer representation but they wanted to see it done well. Many respondents seemed to agree that they want to see more queer representation, however, they did not want that representation to be just to meet a “diversity quota” of sorts; they want to see real characters who happen to be queer – not a queer character who only exists to be queer.

Do you wish to see more queer representation in video games?
569 responses

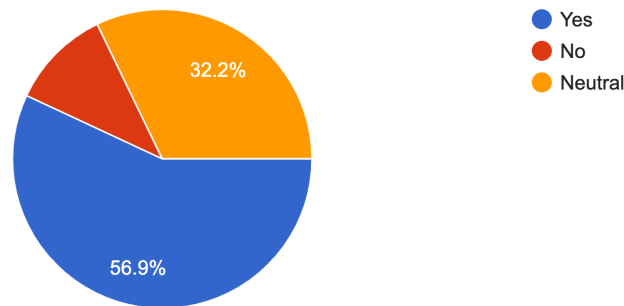


Figure 10. Survey Respondents and their desire for more queer representation in gaming.

Although the vast majority of responses were respectful and thoughtful, there were a small handful of respondents who were vocal in their distaste for queer representation. Take, for instance, Participant 227, a straight cisgendered male aged 45 – 50, who expressed negative opinions on every written question. When asked “Do you wish to see more queer representation in video games?”, they answered no and followed up in the next question that asked them to explain the answer, saying, “Faggots and trannies are disgusting degenerates. I want a break from that.” In another follow up to the question “How do you feel about the current state of queer character representation in video games?”, they replied, “I don’t know what you mean by negative/positive in this

case. Any representation is a negative. If they are represented, they should be enemies that suffer and die in agony.” It is clear that from answers such as these, no matter how “well-done” or subtle queer representation is, there will be individuals who oppose and disapprove of it.

The final question on the survey asked participants to name any characters or games that they are aware of that have transgender or non-binary characters. Out of the total 572 participants, 372 responded to this particular question. Although AAA games were the most referenced, interestingly, the game with the most mentions was the 2018 indie game *Celeste* (see Table A), and the most mentioned character was that game’s main protagonist, a young transgender girl named Madeline. Other more well-known indie games made the list such as *Undertale* (2015) and *Deltarune* (2018) (which were created by the same developer), as well as *Hades* (which won various game of the year awards from different media outlets in 2020).

Game Name	Game Mentions	Character Name	Character Mentions	Game Type
Celeste	70	Madeline	44	Indie
The Last of Us 2	37	Lev	20	AAA
Dragon Age: Inquisition	37	Krem	17	AAA
Cyberpunk 2077	34	Claire	8	AAA
Undertale	33	Frisk	19	Indie
Mario (series)	28	Birdo	21	AAA
Mario (series)	28	Vivian	10	AAA
Apex Legends	25	Bloodhound	24	AAA
Tell Me Why	22	Tyler	12	AAA
Deltarune	21	Kris	18	Indie
Hades	17	Chaos	11	Indie
Borderlands 3	10	FL4K	10	AAA
Rainbow Six Siege	10	Osa	9	AAA
Dream Daddy	8	Damien	5	Indie

Table A. The most mentioned games (and their respective non-binary and/or trans characters) by survey respondents.

Chapter 5. Discussion

5.1. Playersexuality and the Choice to See “the Gay”

I didn't know I felt this way about other girls... until I met you.

(Abigail, *Stardew Valley* [Concerned Ape, 2016])

One of the many ways that the gaming industry has approached queer inclusion is through the implementation of ‘playersexuality’. Playersexuality is used to “describe romances within games where all romanceable characters will be interested in the player-character, regardless of their gender” and has become a common form of inclusion in gaming within the last 10 years (Cole, 2018, p.10). For instance, a character will be romantically interested in the player character regardless of whether player character is male or female. Playersexuality simultaneously includes, yet also erases, bisexuality as it allows the player to pursue queer relationships, however, the romanceable characters themselves do not self-identify with any particular sexuality. The character isn’t bisexual, gay, or straight – they aren’t sexually attracted to any particular, or all, genders — they’re playersexual.

Some respondents in the survey explicitly mention playersexuality and their mixed feelings on it. A few expressed how it minimized bisexuality whereas others felt as though it was a double-edged sword in that it allows players to represent their sexuality by pursuing who they wish yet it also makes the representation feel relatively hollow. This representation comes across as hollow because it doesn’t fully commit to

bisexuality; it makes it so that the romantic interest is either gay or straight for your character depending on the player character's gender. This erases the character's bisexuality as the player won't see the potential of the character as bisexual because their backstory is 'blank'. Although for some, polysexuality might be progressive in that it lets players enter same-gender relationships, it also allows for homophobes to go the entirety of the game without ever encountering a queer individual (Tierney, 2020); as homophobes wouldn't intentionally attempt to seek out queer romances with characters, they would never know that the character could be queer — let alone queer for their character. Participant 317, who identifies themselves as a non-binary lesbian expressed, "I feel like most of the LGBT rep these days is in the form of playersexual NPCs (non-player character), which isn't a bad thing but I'd rather have explicitly lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender characters, you know?" Participant 75, who identifies as a bisexual female, felt that playersexuality can act as a form of erasure:

While there are increasing amounts of games, especially among indie developers, with queer representation, it is still often sidelined or sequestered to optional side quests or, often at best, "playersexual" romantic options that erase bisexual characters or minimize the significance of queer identity. Having more characters with explicit queer sexualities helps to expand what people think queerness can be, for both queer and non-queer people.

Playersexuality is reminiscent of "the gay button", a mechanic that gives players the option to either see or avoid queer content in video games (Adams, 2015, p. 43). Like playersexuality, "the gay button" requires the players to take the initiative to interact with the button in order to see the queer content; any player who is unaware of or does not

engage with the button will then continue to “consume heteronormative dominated texts” (Shaw, 2013, as cited in Adams, 2015). In essence, both playersexuality and “the gay button” place the burden of representation and diversity onto the player.

There has not been much research on the concept of playersexuality as both the term and the mechanic are rather new to gaming, having slowly gained popularity over the last 10 to 15 years or so. Most writing on the topic comes from gaming websites, gaming forums, and blogs; any mention of playersexuality in academic writing is typically a sentence or two in passing. The nuances of playersexuality should be examined further and expanded upon in future research and academic writing as the mechanic has becoming increasingly popular in video games.

5.2. The Fetishization of Queer Women

"You and Lonnie are just GOOD FRIENDS," "you just haven't met the right BOY..." "It's a PHASE." That's what I didn't see coming. That they wouldn't even respect me enough... to BELIEVE me. Well. Joke's on them. Because they are in for one VERY long phase.

(Samantha, *Gone Home* [The Fullbright Company, 2013])

Stereotypes of queer men have long existed in media and have often been the object of ridicule or mockery; the portrayal of queer women, however, is a bit different. Although stereotypes of queer women do exist, there isn't necessarily as much of a common thread in stereotypical signifiers for queer women in media as there is for queer men. In many video games, queer women tend to be more often represented through their

relationships with other women — possibly as a form of fetishization. As video games are typically considered an activity for straight, cisgendered men by not only marketers and developers but by general North American society, it is possible that the idea of seeing two women together is likely much more palatable and interesting than two men. As Dym (2019) notes,

Queer love becomes secondary to the experiences of the heterosexual male gamer, with the sexuality of women more malleable solely for the purpose of titillating the straight male player, and the queerness of men all but erased from the games. (p. 31)

Furthermore, it appears as though the idea of queer women being more marketable to the wider gaming audience is something that gamers have picked up on as well. As Participant 464 states,

I also suspect that lesbian characters are more common than gay male characters - I don't know if this is because companies think a lesbian would be more socially acceptable or marketable, or if it's due to development teams being predominantly male and lesbian characters seeming more acceptable to the developers.

In a heterosexual male dominated area such as gaming, it seems to be less controversial for a game to advertise two sexy queer women with each other than two sexy queer men. As such, queer female relationships are typically highlighted more in video games and in their advertising. In 2001, Kronos Digital Entertainment released *Fear Effect 2: Retro Helix*, a sequel its predecessor released a year earlier, *Fear Effect*. Both game's main protagonist, Hana Tsu-Vachel, is a bisexual woman. In the first game,

her love interest is a male mercenary; in the second game, her love interest is her friend, Rain Qin. Prior to *Fear Effect 2*'s release, Hana and Rain's relationship was heavily advertised with the two often in sexually suggestive situations or poses together (see Figure 12). Interestingly, however, although the game advertised the two characters in such sexually suggestive ways, the game contained only one scene that matched the sexualized advertising of



Figure 11. *Fear Effect 2: Retro Helix*'s protagonist, Hana (bottom), and her partner, Rain (top) in an advertisement for the game. (Kronos Digital Entertainment, 2001). Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hana_Tsu-Vachel

the two women. In the scene, the Hana and Rain undress and embrace specifically to distract male guards who were watching them on a security camera (“Hana Tsu-Vachel”, 2021). Furthering the idea that men tend to fetishize female relationships, this scene showcases presumed straight men (the guards) ogling the sexual relationship of two women.

As mentioned by Participant 300, “sapphic relationships feel fetishized or follow heteronormative ideas” with the two women in the relationship often fitting the stereotypical gendered ideals of beauty. Participant 364 echoes this idea, explaining, “most of the time lesbians in video games are only used to appeal to male fantasies and not to actual sapphic women.” In the case of *Fear Effect 2*, Hana is a traditionally beautiful half-Asian woman (which may potentially tie to another form of fetishization as Asian women typically tend to be sexualized in western media as well [see Matsumoto,

2020 and “Orientalism”, 2022]) with larger breasts and fit body, and her partner, Rain, is a similarly fit and beautiful white blonde woman.

More often than not, in media, when a beautiful woman is attracted to other women, her and her relationships are presented as highly sexualized in nature (as discussed by Annati & Ramsey, 2022). On the other side, however, when a queer woman is considered unattractive by societal norms, the character is sometimes portrayed as predatory, evil, or grotesque – potentially all three. Take for instance the character of Jo Slade, a minor boss, from Capcom’s 2006 game, *Dead Rising*. Jo’s character is overweight and somewhat butch in presentation with her deeper voice and sexually aggressive attitude. In the game, Jo captures four women with the intent to sexually assault them; it is further implied that she captures and kills others who attempt to save the women.

Women, in general, have had a tumultuous relationship with representation in AAA video games – that was the main thing feminist scholars were fighting for during Gamergate in 2014, after all. Considering how sexualized women have been in games, it is, unfortunately, no surprise that queer women are further fetishized for presumably straight men to ogle at. Participant 52 noted that the only time they feel their identity is fairly or accurately represented in games are “only in games made by queer creators. Otherwise I am usually tokenized, fetishized, or erased.”

5.3. Breaking the Binaries: Non-Binary and Transgender Representation

Male... Female... What's the difference? Power is beautiful, and I've got power!

(Flea, *Chrono Trigger* [Square, 1995])

It is possible that the recent increase in more respectful approaches to transgender and non-binary characters is due to the popularity of indie games, many of which are created by queer individuals who have an understanding of queer perspective and nuance. Although trans representation is beginning to improve in its presentation — particularly in indie games — there is still work to be done. Homophobia and transphobia still exist within the gaming community and this can understandably be difficult for AAA developers to maneuver around. As we saw with Abby from *The Last of Us 2*, not even cisgendered characters who don't fit typical gendered beauty standards are safe from transphobic rhetoric. When examining games of the past, as exemplified earlier with Shablee from *Leisure Suit Larry* and Alfred Ashford from *Resident Evil: Code Veronica*, trans characters in video games have often been characterized using harmful stereotypes. As Participant 109 noted in the survey,

Either a trans woman in a game is a caricature that [perpetuates] harmful stereotypes or is a normal person living [their] lives. I feel like there is rarely an in-between and I never see a game handle the struggles of being trans except in very rare cases.

Krem from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* was a wonderful step in the right direction, however, there were still a few missteps with the character. For one, Krem was voiced by a cisgendered woman. According to BioWare writer Patrick Weekes, Krem's voice actor, Jennifer Hale, did attempt to masculinize her voice, developing the voice for the character "in a world without access to transitional procedures" (Brown, 2014). In a way, this is a thoughtful approach, however, it is still worth acknowledging that having a cisgender actor/voice actor portray a trans person does indeed muddle up the authenticity of the representation.

Another survey respondent, Participant 117, noted the lack of non-binary representation in video games, saying,

Well, I have very rarely if ever seen a canonically nonbinary character in a main stream video game. If they are, it is usually left vague or unclear or they are a robot or alien instead of a nonbinary human.

This quote is of particular note as this is the case for many games; non-binary characters in video games are often portrayed as non-human, typically being represented as robots (like FL4k from *Borderlands 3*) or as aliens (like Liara and the Asari race from the *Mass Effect* series). As non-binary identities fall out of the typical binary "normal" gender identities, it's not hard to understand why some would portray non-binary characters as non-human. For many, it is hard to understand how an individual does not "fit in" or identify with either of the "normal" binary gender identities (those being male and female), and thus, it is easier to make them something "foreign" – something alien. It is easier for someone to understand an alien from an alien world with a different, unusual

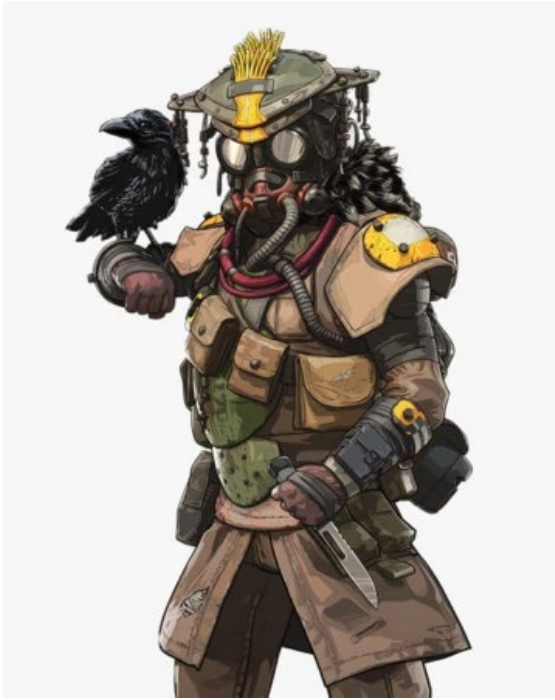


Figure 12. Bloodhound from *Apex Legends* (Respawn Entertainment, 2019). Retrieved from <https://apex-legends-universe.fandom.com/wiki/Bloodhound>

culture to be portrayed as neither male or female than it is to see a human who doesn't fit into the gendered binary our society has established. However, this representation of non-binary individuals as aliens or robots erases their humanity – they are not often being portrayed as humans, after all.

Although non-binary characters are particularly rare in video games, non-binary (human) representation seems to be

improving, increasing in numbers as seen in characters such as Frisk from *Undertale*

(2015), Kris from *Deltarune* (2018), and Bloodhound from *Apex Legends* (2019), all of whom were mentioned by numerous survey participants.

One of the many ways in which players tend to identify with their characters more personally is through character creation (which, although not in every game, is a common addition in games – particularly in role playing games [RPGs]). Furthermore, in giving players the ability to create their characters (especially with more flexible appearance modification systems), it allows for those who otherwise do not/have not felt represented to see themselves or someone like them in their game. As Participant 223, a trans woman, noted, “... the only way I [can] see myself represented [is] in *Sims 4*.”

The Sims series has had a significant impact not only in the general gaming industry but also in queer representation in video games. In 1999, game developer Maxis

released a trailer for their upcoming life simulation game, *The Sims*, which included a gay couple kissing. Initially, the inclusion of queer couples was an accident; same-sex couples were initially cut from the game, however, were accidentally re-added due to an old design document being worked off of. Despite same-sex couples being initially an accidental inclusion, Maxis ran with it and have continued to be at the forefront of queer inclusion in simulation games. In 2014, the fourth installment of the series, appropriately titled *The Sims 4*, received an update that allowed users to dictate their sim's (their character's) physical frame (masculine/feminine), clothing preference (masculine/feminine), pregnancy abilities (can get pregnant/can get others pregnant), and toilet usage (standing up/sitting down). This allowed players to create characters of varying identities – a female sim with a masculine frame who prefers feminine clothing, pees standing up, and can get others pregnant, for example. These distinct customizable options give players the chance to create whomever, however they want. Furthermore, in 2022, Maxis announced a new update that would allow for players to customize their sim's pronouns.

5.4. Toxic Gaming Culture, SJWs, and the Far-Right

I was mainly unaware [of Gamergate] at 15 years old, but now am well versed in how disgustingly sexist it was. I'm very political now, so it's interesting to see its connection to the more general alt right pipeline on the internet.

(Participant 438)

One of the questions in the survey asked participants whether they knew of Gamergate and if their opinions had changed since. 61.1% of respondents indicated that they were aware of Gamergate and 300 individuals responded to the short answer follow up question. Most responses were divided into one of two sides: those who knew about Gamergate and disagreed with it then just as they do now, and those who knew about it and were on the side of Gamergate at the time but whose opinions have now changed in favour of progressivism. As Participant 449 explains,

...until 2018ish I was pretty swept up by the online far-right / alt-right movements and considered anything left-wing to basically be worthy of mockery and derision. I was a lonely kid who found kinship online with these people and after branching out, meeting those I considered 'enemy', I've come to realise that... no they aren't the demon, they aren't evil, they're just other people trying to live their life and their existence is no threat to me at all. That was a long way of saying that my entire worldview has changed since then and my views on representation in gaming with it, yes; I'm now fully supportive so long as it's proper representation.

Participant 415 echoes their sentiment, saying,

In 2014 I was unfortunately sucked down the alt-right pipeline so I viewed feminism as bad. When Gamergate happened, I was led to believe that it was just women overreacting and being sensitive. Since then, I see how the women of Gamergate were harassed endlessly and were treated incredibly unfairly.

In 2014 when Gamergate took place, President Barack Obama was nearing the end of his second term in office and was soon to be replaced by the conservative and far-right thinking President Donald Trump in 2017. Although Gamergate was an intense period in gaming history and public conversations on representation were strained, a different, more vitriolic kind of hatred came to the forefront upon Donald Trump's election. This kind of hate existed before Trump's inauguration, however, his election seemed to legitimize it, giving a platform and the "okay" to take it to the next level. Many believed that Trump fanned the flames of far-right thinkers, encouraging and legitimizing their opinions and beliefs, emboldening them to fight back against progressivism yet again. Although the focus was not directly on video games, the impact of the far-right seemingly having their opinions validated by then President Trump set a precedent that could have given his voters confidence to attack any progressivism Obama had attempted to establish.

We can see this attack on progressivism in the response to *The Last of Us 2* discussion of the netnography and the immense amount of hate the game received from gamers. There were legitimate critiques to make against the game, just like with any other game, however, these individuals took it a step further, grabbing at any other straw they could to attack the game – including the queer female protagonist (Ellie), a young trans character (Lev), and a muscular cisgender woman whom they attacked with transphobic

slurs (Abby). Furthermore, Abby's voice actress, Laura Bailey – who had previously been a respected voice actor in gaming – became the target of intense death threats.

Common themes prevalent in both time periods examined in the netnography were ideas of “wokeness”, SJW's and the ever-so commonly complained about “gay agenda” — all three of which tend to be interchangeable in some way, shape, or form by many conservative gamers as they have become rather synonymous with more leftist and progressive social views. These topics tend to be common discourse amongst most conservative minded people in the gaming community who are against progressive and liberal ideas to varying degrees. These themes still exist in discussions today, however, at varying degrees depending on the online space. Most online spaces that discuss LGBTQ+ related issues as they connect to video games tend to be more open minded and supportive of queer representation than in the past. However, certain more focused online areas — such as r/thelastofus2, for example — can act as a breeding ground for toxicity as they can act as an echo-chamber for likeminded individuals. Anti-woke sentiments are, overall, relatively unpopular among younger generations and it appears as though those who tout anti-SJW rhetoric tend to find their own niche spots to speak their minds without pushback as those who don't share their views may not visit the same spaces. That is not to say that these echo-chambers do not exist in their own ways on other, more liberal and progressive spaces, however.

Although there is still a rather vocal subset of the gaming community that is in opposition to representation, the general consensus of gamers from the survey seems to be skewed more positively and thoughtfully regarding queer representation. It appears as though commenters on a variety of places online tend to be more aware of what

constitutes as “good” vs. “bad” representation — that is, shoehorned and/or stereotypical portrayals vs. nuanced characterizations — and how the industry handles it. Many respondents in the survey mentioned that they wish to see proper queer representation and not just representation for the sake of meeting a diversity quota for the game. Over all, it appears from both the netnographic research and the survey that most gamers tend to be more open minded and interested in seeing quality queer representation in games; although there is still those in the gaming community who oppose such representation in an aggressive manner, such opinions seem to be less popular and accepted by other gamers.

Chapter 6. Limitations

Finding a place to post the survey was one of the first hurdles encountered in this research. Originally, the goal was to post the survey to two specific gaming subreddits: r/gaming and r/games, however, neither place allows for surveys to be posted due to “frequent misuse and other concerns”. In each of these subreddits community rules page, r/samplesize was recommended as the place to post surveys instead. Before posting to r/samplesize, I searched for any other gaming-focused subreddit that I could post the survey to, however, very few allowed it. The ones that did allow it required approval from the subreddit moderators in order to post. I stumbled upon r/truegaming in my search for subreddits and it immediately piqued my interest as a place to post due to it being a place for meaningful discussions surrounding video games. I messaged the moderators explaining the situation and my research and received a response two days later. Their response reiterated their rules and warned me to guard my expectations considering video game discussion areas are prone to trolling, noting that their subreddit is no exception and after some back and forth with each other, they allowed me to post. Interestingly, r/samplesize provided me with more responses than r/truegaming. I further sought out other dedicated online gaming forum websites (such as Giantbomb, Neogaf, and VGR) however, the audience populations were considerably smaller and less active than the ones on reddit and their rules regarding surveys were very restrictive as well.

As many gaming communities had strict rules regarding the posting of surveys, r/samplesize was the next best space I could find to post. Although the survey explicitly indicated that it was targeted toward gamers (in both the post title and post body), it is

possible that some respondents were not gamers and took the survey out of interest and/or curiosity. Furthermore, the sample size for the survey was considerably small compared to how many gamers there are in the world.

Another limitation to this study was time. Given more time, additional research and in-depth discussion pertaining to certain topics could have been completed; moreover, other topics (such as asexuality, for example) could have been given more attention in discussion.

The sexualization of queer women in video games is something that should be examined in further research. The fetishization of female relationships has been analyzed in regard to other media forms such as film, however, there is little academic research on the topic as it pertains to video games. Considering how large of an entertainment medium video games are, further analysis of the portrayals and fetishization of queer women in games should continue to be investigated. Furthermore, research regarding queer representation in video games should examine the intersectionality of queer characters of colour and how they are portrayed. Shaw et al.'s 2019 study, *Counting Queerness in Games*, did discuss the instances of queer characters of colour, however, the portrayal of those characters were not specifically analyzed.

Chapter 7. Conclusion

Since Gamergate, the opinions of gamers in the general gaming community seem to have become more obviously and clearly split — the grey area of opinion isn't as grey as it once was. People typically tend to be for or against queer representation with both sides tending to be more staunch than before. Opinions are a bit more divided than they once were as the topic of queer representation wasn't the main focus of Gamergate at the time it took place. Gamers appear to lean more toward pro-representation, however, there are still others who disapprove or disagree with it. It also appears that more gamers seem to be increasingly open and welcoming to the inclusion of queer characters regardless of the gamer's own sexual orientation. Furthermore, it seems as though developers and publishers in the gaming industry have put further effort into creating more complex and respectful portrayals of queer characters within the last decade in particular. This may be because of the rise in popularity of indie games and the queer individuals who work on making those games more representative of queer experiences.

During Gamergate, gamers tended to show little care or interest toward queer characters. Online discussions were generally mixed when the topic of queer characters and queer representation was examined. Some gamers were outspoken about their distaste or support, however, in general, there wasn't nearly as much discussion on the topic as there is today. As Gamergate largely focused on the representation of women in games, queer representation was not given much of the spotlight in discussions at the time. However, since Gamergate, the conversation surrounding queer representation has continued to gain an increasing amount of traction. This is in part because of how society

itself has come to acknowledge and examine queer issues and, possibly, partly because of the rise of indie games.

The gaming industry is, at the end of the day, a profit based business and AAA developers and publishers often go with what they know will sell. For a long time, when it came to queer characters, it was popular for them to be the subject of mockery and stereotypes, however, this trend seems to be slowly changing. Although there are still some issues within queer representation that the industry needs to work on, it has been improving. With indie games gaining so much steam and popularity, it is no surprise that AAA developers and publishers have taken note of their approach to representation in gaming and tried to tie it into their own games.

Gamers appear to be interested in seeing characters beyond the typical buff, straight, white man and his sexy arm-candy; they want diversity and they want to see new stories from different perspectives. Regardless of the gamer's own sexual orientation, they expressed interest in seeing and exploring identities other than straight. There's only so many new stories that can be told through the lens of a straight, cisgender, white male. There are a plethora of different kinds of people and gamers out there, so why are their stories not being shared? As Participant 280 puts it,

Does it make sense to color with only 3 crayons when there's a whole 50 color box on the table? Yes there are great pieces of work that can do with 3 crayons, but there's a much wider range of possibilities with the 50 crayon box. Video games are an incredible story telling medium and it benefits from flexibility and it's mirroring of and extension of real life. Video games can benefit from all

diversity and can have really interesting takes and moments to reach an audience about something if it expands on itself.

The gaming industry has made great strides in its effort to rectify its portrayals of queer characters, however, there is still a ways to go. Playersexuality is a very popular mechanic in many games (particularly in RPGs) and its relationship with bisexual representation needs to be examined further. Moreover, although lesbian romances have become less sexualized in modern games, there is still an inherent sexualization of female characters and their relationships with other female characters that is obvious to many gamers. Beyond that, transgender and non-binary representation needs further improvement. Although Lev from *The Last of Us 2* was an important stride in trans representation in gaming, the developer, Naughty Dog, did fumble with his representation by including his deadname (his birthname/name before his transition) in the game. Non-binary representation needs improvement as well; many non-binary characters are represented as non-human beings rather than as people. Again, however, this does appear to be shifting slowly. Lastly, the fervent distaste for queer representation still exists within the community which can make it difficult for AAA developers to push the boundary further than they already have.

Aside from the things that still need to be worked on, it is important to acknowledge that progress toward better queer representation in games is improving. Although queer representation may not yet be perfect (and it likely never will be considering how complex identity is in general), it appears as though the gaming industry has finally begun to get on the right track. More developers are employing queer writers and consulting with queer individuals to write their LGBTQ+ characters better and with

more respect. Again, considering many indie games are written and created by queer individuals — and how well received the portrayals in those games are — hiring queer talent when including a queer character in a AAA game is absolutely a step in the right direction to get representation right.

Ultimately, this paper and research is about representation and the nuances of it. Representation is incredibly important; to see oneself represented in a form of media, particularly one you have deep admiration for, can mean the world. To know that you are not alone and that you have someone or something to resonate with and relate to can deeply impact one's understanding of self and self-worth. Gaming, like other media mediums, explores the creativity and multifaceted nature of humans and the human imagination. The real world is so diverse with so many people of different shapes, sizes, genders, sexual orientations, colours, lifestyles, opinions, and interests. Sometimes video games can act as a way to remove oneself from the discriminations they face or the difficulties of life by engrossing themselves in a different world and story. The world — and the gaming audience — is more than just straight white men, and that deserves to be reflected in games as well.

Everybody deserves to have a piece of media that they can identify with.

*Videogames are art, and art is perhaps *the* essential tool used to not only intimately reveal the hearts and minds of society, but sway them as well. The pathway to true empathy between different groups of people is, and always has been, art. (Participant 293)*

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Appendix A. Selection of Video Game Character Gender Identities

Game	Character	Type
<i>Apex Legends</i> (2019)	Bloodhound (non-binary)	Optional Playable
<i>Assassins Creed: Syndicate</i> (2015)	Ned Wynert (trans man)	Side Character
<i>Borderlands 3</i> (2019)	FL4K (non-binary)	Optional Main Character
<i>Catherine</i> (2011)	Erica (trans woman)	Side Character
<i>Celeste</i> (2018)	Madeline (trans girl)	Main Character
<i>Chrono Trigger</i> (1995)	Flea (genderqueer)	Villain
<i>Dragon Age: Inquisition</i> (2014)	Krem (trans man)	Side Character
<i>Final Fight</i> (1989)	Poison (trans woman)	First as an enemy, Optional character in <i>Street Fighter</i> crossovers
<i>The House of Fata Morgana</i> (2012)	Michel (Intersex trans man)	Main Character

<i>The Last of Us 2</i> (2020)	Lev (trans boy)	Side Character
<i>Mario series</i> (1985 - present)	Birdo & Vivian (trans women)	Birdo: Optional Vivian: Side Character
<i>Mass Effect series</i> (2007 – present)	Asari race (mono-gender) Hainly Abrams (trans woman)	Side Characters, NPCs Side Character
<i>The Missing J.J. Macfield & The Island of Memories</i> (2018)	J.J. Macfield (trans woman)	Main Character
<i>Rainbow Six Siege</i> (2015)	Osa (trans woman)	Optional Playable
<i>Tell Me Why</i> (2020)	Tyler Ronan (trans man)	Main Character
<i>Watchdogs 2</i> (2016)	Miranda Comay (trans woman)	Side Character

Appendix B. Selection of Video Game Character Sexualities

Game	Character	Type
<i>Apex Legends</i> (2019)	Fuse (pansexual), Makoa Gibraltar (gay), Loba (bisexual), Valkyrie (Lesbian)	Optional playable
<i>Borderlands 2</i> (2012)	Maya (asexual), Tiny Tina (lesbian) Sir Hammerlock (gay)	Maya: Optional Main Tiny Tina: Side Sir Hammerlock: Side
<i>Borderlands 3</i> (2019)	Zane (pansexual)	Optional Main Character
<i>Bully</i> (2006)	Jimmy Hopkins (bisexual)	Main Character
Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014)	Iron Bull (pansexual), Dorian Pavus (gay), Sera (lesbian), Josephine (bisexual), Lilliana (bisexual)	Companions/Side Characters
<i>Fallout 3</i> (2007)	Greta & Carol (lesbian)	NPCs
<i>Grand Theft Auto 5</i> (2013)	Trevor Phillips (bisexual)	1 of 3 Main Characters
<i>Last of Us 2</i> (2020)	Ellie & Dina (lesbian)	Ellie: Main Character Dina: Side Character
<i>Life is Strange</i> (2015)	Max Caulfield (bisexual), Chloe Price (lesbian)	Max: Main Character Chloe: Side Character

<i>League of Legends</i> (2009)	Neeko, Diana, Leona (lesbian)	Optional Playable
<i>Outer Worlds</i> (2019)	Parvati Holcomb (asexual, biromantic)	Companion/Side Character
Overwatch (2016)	Tracer (lesbian), Soldier 76 (gay)	Optional Playable