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LGBTQ+ Representation in Video Games through the Eyes of the Queer Community

Abstract

This article discusses the questions of LGBTQ+ representation in video games through the eyes of queer gamers and creators. The methodology of this work is based on Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, which is applied to a corpus of texts primarily from the social website Reddit. Critical discourse analysis is used to contextualize the statements of the speakers in the wider sociocultural framework. The findings are supported by previous research done in queer game studies by authors such as Bonnie Ruberg and Gaspard Pelurson. The first part of the work focuses on the approach game creators choose when creating a queer representation, which can be summarized as balancing between inclusivity and avoiding conflict with conservative markets. The second part delves into the stances LGBTQ+ gamers express towards queer representation in games. They point out various issues, such as marginalization and stereotypization, which can be however used to improve the credibility of characters.

Keywords

game studies, discourse, representation, queer studies, video games, LGBTQ+ representation in media

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Introduction

“Mass effect had you fighting against eldrich machines that looked like giant ass Squids and Cuttlefish, but Bisexuals in space? That’s a tad too far.”¹⁾

This is how one of the users of the internet forum Reddit describes the irony of the struggles of queer representation in video games. He points out how in settings where magic, faster-than-light spaceships, or sentient weapons are the norm, we can still find sparse imagery of queerness. And even if we do, it is very often marginalized, stereotyped, and the cause of uproar in the wider gaming community. Some voices reject any sort of LGBTQ+ representation as being forced, political pandering, and “shoving the gays down our throats.” The other side of this conflict calls for wider representation, a representation that is fulfilling and can serve as a role model for queer people. A representation that matters. The creators of video games themselves are caught in a web of business interests and desire for artistic expression that can either support or reject any notion of queerness in gaming. As is discussed over the course of this study, even the groups supportive of queer representation are internally heterogeneous.

This diverse landscape is the basis for the topic of this article. We find ourselves in an era that relies heavily on the new media and virtual worlds for anything from news dissemination to artistic self-expression. In this growing field of human interaction and activity, the video game industry plays a major role on levels both obvious and subtle. The importance of focusing on gaming from an academic viewpoint can be demonstrated by several metrics. The estimated profits of the gaming industry as a whole exceed 180 billion dollars for 2021,²⁾ with 11,916 new titles released³⁾ and a peak of over twenty-seven million concurrent active users on Steam⁴⁾ alone.⁵⁾ Several major esports events took place in 2021, such as the *League of Legends World Championship*, *The International: DOTA2 Championships*, and *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive Major Championships* streamed across several platforms and attracted millions of viewers. All of these bring together people from across the globe, allowing them to engage in a discussion and share ideas and experiences.

The gaming industry, however, is not only a place of positive interaction and blooming creativity, which is best demonstrated by the ongoing sexual harassment and gender discrimination investigation in Activision Blizzard company.⁶⁾ As the gaming community

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- 1) Worm_Scavenger, “Mass effect had you fighting against eldrich machines that looked like giant ass Squids and Cuttlefish, but Bisexuals in space?” *Reddit*, accessed January 16, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaymers/comments/s5axo7/comment/hswbmjy/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.
 - 2) Teodora Dobrilova, “How Much Is the Gaming Industry Worth in 2021? [+25 Powerful Stats],” *TechJury*, 2022, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://techjury.net/blog/gaming-industry-worth/#gref>.
 - 3) “Steam Game Release Summary,” *SteamDB*, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://steamdb.info/stats/releases/>.
 - 4) One of the most widely used PC game distribution platforms with major community elements, such as discussion forums or modding support.
 - 5) “Lifetime concurrent users on steam,” *SteamDB*, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://steamdb.info/app/753/graphs/>.
 - 6) Zack Zwiezen, “Everything That Has Happened Since The Activision Blizzard Lawsuit Was Filed,” *Kotaku*, 2021, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://kotaku.com/everything-that-has-happened-since-the-activision-blizz-1847401161>.

does not exist in a vacuum, it is influenced by the politics of major world powers, such as Chinese censorship of gaming platforms⁷⁾ or the efforts of the European Union to regulate gambling features in games.⁸⁾

All of these topics and many more are valid options for academic research, which is currently mostly situated in the field of recently⁹⁾ established game studies. This interdisciplinary approach draws from media studies, cultural studies, cultural anthropology, game design, and numerous other fields to properly describe, analyze, and understand how people play.¹⁰⁾ While the most common connotation with game studies involves video games, it is worth noting that game studies examine tabletop gaming or playing games in the broadest sense.¹¹⁾ The subfield of this discipline we find ourselves in this text, queer game studies, focuses on LGBTQ+ representation in the games themselves, the issues of queer people working in the industry, and many other ways of bringing queerness into gaming.¹²⁾

This article seeks to examine the discourse of queer people regarding LGBTQ+ representation in the medium of video games. The main research question asks: How do members of the LGBTQ+ community see this topic and what issues do they identify? This is supported by an examination of handling queer representation by the game studios and individual developers. The interplay of these two layers leads us to secondary questions: is the representation in particular games viewed as tokenization or are there examples of more nuanced and non-stereotypical representation? What are the main practices and challenges of construing this representation?

The basis of this text is the master's thesis *LGBTQ+ Representation in Video Games: The Power and the Other*.¹³⁾ In it, the various discourses surrounding queer representation in the gaming industry are discussed alongside an examination of the power relationships of various social actor groups present. The following article will primarily present the viewpoint of LGBTQ+ gamers regarding this topic based on the fourth chapter of the thesis. The remainder of the original text discusses primarily intergroup relations and viewpoints outside the queer community. The purpose of this study is to connect the particular manifestations of queer representation in video games to distinct viewpoints present in the community and wider social themes influencing both the queer actors and the gaming world. Furthermore, it offers insight into the tensions present in the industry.

7) Daniel Camilo, "How China's gaming regulations affect its market and the rest of the industry," *Gamesindustry.biz*, 2021, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2021-10-20-how-chinas-gaming-regulations-affect-its-market-and-the-rest-of-the-global-industry>.

8) Anette Cerulli-Harms, "Loot boxes in online games and their effect on consumers, in particular young consumers," *Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies*, European Parliament, 2020, accessed January 12, 2022, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU\(2020\)652727](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/IPOL_STU(2020)652727).

9) The birth of this academic field can be traced to the 1990s.

10) Matthew Thomas Payne and Nine B. Huntemann, *How to Play Video Games* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

11) Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding, *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015).

12) Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, eds., *Queer Game Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

13) Martin Látal, "LGBTQ+ Representation in Video Games: The Power and the Other" (Master's thesis, Palackého Univerzita v Olomouci, 2022).

A selection of discourses and opinions on queer representation in video games based on the analyses of posts on the Reddit social network is being presented in this study. After a brief introduction of the theoretical considerations and preceding research based in game studies and queer game studies, the study discusses the methodology, which is based on Fairclough's critical discourse analysis and the research sample. The first analytical section examines the issue of queer creators in the industry. They have to struggle with various internal factors and often have to elect to support queer reading of their characters through unofficial channels. The second part of the analysis introduces the positive, negative, and debatable themes of queer representation in gaming. The main positive is seen as the existence of any queer imagery at all. The negatives include disparity between the depiction of lesbians and other parts of the LGBTQ+ community and one of the divisive topics is the usage of stereotypes in the gaming industry regarding queer characters. The discussion touches on further questions raised by the research and its limits.

Existing Research and Theoretical Considerations

The primary framework of this research consists of impulses from game studies and queer games studies supplemented by various concepts connected to the study of queer representation in media in general. Game studies offer us crucial research concerning the relationship between consumers and game makers in the industry. The main point demonstrated is the ambiguity of agency, or rather agencies present in the gaming world due to the complex network of various actors: players, game creators, independent modders,¹⁴⁾ software pirates, shareholders of the production studios, and many more. This leads game studies scholars to the conclusion these relationships require reframing in the context of the gaming world and the broader social situation, rather than viewing them as purely transactional consumer-producer relationships.¹⁵⁾ Further arguments about power relations in gaming can be seen in the discussion about cheating in the spacefaring simulator *EVE Online* (2003),¹⁶⁾ where the distinction between fair play and cheating is highly contextual.¹⁷⁾ This points to the recurring theme in the discussion about relations in gaming: everything is highly contextual and should be judged on a case-by-case basis, rather than making broad statements about the nature of this topic — sometimes the relationship can be described as the typical producer-consumer one, while other examples can demonstrate more open and interactive features.

For this research, however, the most important role is played by the study of direct representation within the medium. Existing research suggests significant ambivalence of representation and its reception by queer gamers.¹⁸⁾ This is reinforced further by the themes

14) Users, who alter the game files using various tools to add, remove or improve features of the title.

15) Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford, *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society* (London: Routledge, 2018).

16) Spacefaring massively multiplayer online role-playing game.

17) Kelly Bergstrom, "Eve Online: Cheating," in *How to Play Video Games*, eds. Matthew T. Payne and Nina B. Huntemann (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 301–308.

18) Gaspard Pelurson, "Queer Quests: Journeying Through Manifestations of Queerness in Video Games" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sussex, 2017).

of exclusion present in the process of game-making itself.¹⁹⁾ However, due to part of the focus lying on the game studios and creators themselves, we also base our research on the perspective of queer game makers and the recent advances in this field.²⁰⁾ Furthermore, queer game studies are based on the theories present in the general field of queer studies. This means much of the findings draw from concepts such as Judith Butler's gender performativity²¹⁾ or Kimberle Crenshaw's intersectionality,²²⁾ which cover theoretical and epistemological aspects of minority representation.

For the research of discourses, the social context is as important as the academic groundwork as it offers insight into the explanation levels of discourse as per Norman Fairclough.²³⁾ In the case of queer representation in video games, we need to first consider the wider themes and issues of this representation in more traditional media such as television or literature. Most of this framework is based on the themes present in the US media environment. This is warranted by the fact that over the decades, American media presence has heavily influenced the global mediascape.²⁴⁾ Moreover, the majority of the significant game studios are based in the United States, with the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB)²⁵⁾ keeping a watchful eye over the game content, in a similar fashion to Motion Picture Association's film rating system. While many countries in the world have their own rating systems, e.g., Pan European Game Information (PEGI) for European Union and Israel, the ratings rarely differ and are based on similar principles as the American ones, such as assigning warnings about profanity, graphic violence, or sexual content in the title.

The attitudes of the American popular media towards queerness and general otherness have long been subject to the Motion Picture Production Code (also known as the Hays Code) which was enforced from 1934 to 1968. This code prohibited the depiction of various themes considered morally questionable at the time including but not limited to homosexuality, interracial relationships, and overindulgence setting strict rules for the display of moral values and family life.²⁶⁾ While the societal change during the sixties and seventies led to the abandonment of the Code, it can be argued its legacy is still alive and

19) Adrienne Shaw, "Putting Gay in Games: Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Video Games," *Games and Culture* 4, no. 3 (2009), 228–253.

20) Bonnie Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

21) Kilian Biscop, Steven Malliet, and Alexander Dhoest, "Subversive Ludic Performance: An Analysis of Gender and Sexuality Performance in Digital Games," *DiGeSt: Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 6, no. 2 (2019), 23–42.

22) Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 1 (1989), 139–167.

23) Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (London: Routledge, 2015).

24) Omar Katerji, "Why US Media Conglomerates Will Continue To Dominate the Global Media Landscape in the 21st Century, Though At a Diminishing Rate," *ResearchGate*, 2014, accessed January 18, 2022, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261991965_Why_US_Media_Conglomerates_Will_Continue_To_Dominate_the_Global_Media_Landscape_in_the_21_st_Century_But_Only_So_At_a_Diminishing_Rate.

25) US-based self-regulatory organization responsible for assigning age ratings to video games.

26) John Billheimer, *Hitchcock and the Censors* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019).

some of its themes carry over to these days, traceable in the reluctance to display queer characters.²⁷⁾

While the media presence of queer characters has steadily increased in the recent past,²⁸⁾ this trend has not remained without issues. One of the widely debated topics in the current media environment is the question of queerbaiting. This phenomenon is described as “implying either in the text or in commentary same-gender desire between characters, but never following through on it by depicting a real relationship.”²⁹⁾ As discussed later, not only does this happen explicitly in the gaming environment, but the inclusion of optional queer plotlines can be seen as a facet of this phenomenon. Before the allusions of queerbaiting, however, a widespread theme of queer coding was prevalent in the media. This principle is based on representing the underlying queerness of characters through indirect traits and stereotypes or modeling them based on real-world queer people.³⁰⁾ This is most commonly mentioned in connection with Disney fairytale villains; however, the theme is more prevalent and has been present since the days of the Hays Code.³¹⁾

Beyond these two general concepts, we can find numerous tropes connected to the display of queer characters. The “bury your gays” trope is based on the premise of unfortunate endings and the general suffering of explicitly LGBTQ+ characters.³²⁾ The existence of this trope in video games has been noticed by the gaming community.³³⁾ As we will see further, the mentioned trends and concepts have their impact or equivalent in the gaming world proper.

Methodology

The primary research tool used to answer the questions posed in the introduction is critical discourse analysis as described by Norman Fairclough in *Language and Power*. This approach is based on examining usually textual products of human activity and dissecting three main scopes of their social life — description, interpretation, and explanation.³⁴⁾ Naturally, all of these elements are intrinsically linked and changes on any of the levels in-

27) Vicki L. Eaklor, “The Kids Are All Right But the Lesbians Aren’t: The Illusion of Progress in Popular Film,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 38, no. 3 (2012), 153–170.

28) Megan Townsend and Raina Deerwater, “Where We Are on TV 2021–2022,” *GLAAD*, 2021, accessed January 27, 2022, <https://www.glaad.org/whereweareontv21>.

29) Milena Popova, “Fictional Bisexuality: Reviews and Reflections,” in *Claiming the B in LGBT: Illuminating the Bisexual Narrative*, ed. Kate Harrad (Portland: Thorntree Press, 2018), 223.

30) Adiba Jaigirdar, “What is Queerbaiting Vs Queer Coding,” *BookRiot*, 2021, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://bookriot.com/what-is-queerbaiting-vs-queer-coding/>.

31) Mikayla Mislak, “From Sissies to Secrecy: The Evolution of the Hays Code Queer,” *Filmic*, 2015, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://filmicmag.com/2015/08/01/from-sissies-to-secrecy-the-evolution-of-the-hays-code-queer/>.

32) “Bury Your Gays,” *tvtropes*, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays>.

33) Alexandra Heather, “Let Queer Characters Be Happy,” *Kotaku*, 2018, accessed January 16, 2022, <https://kotaku.com/let-queer-characters-be-happy-1827147707>.

34) Fairclough, *Language and Power*.

fluence the outcomes of the analysis on the remaining two. Through this, we aim to uncover not only the underlying themes in LGBTQ+ representation in video games but also the relationships between participating actors. In *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*,³⁵⁾ Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips offer a valid critique of several approaches³⁶⁾ to discourse analysis and offer their improvements upon the method. Most notably, when discussing the issues of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse theory, the authors offer their take on the concept of *order of discourse*, described by them as:

“a social space in which different discourses partly cover the same terrain which they compete to fill with meaning each in their own particular way.”³⁷⁾

This is crucial for understanding the nature of LGBTQ+ representation in video games, as this is our *order of discourse*, which is contested by various social actor groups. We come to view discourses in this work as fields of human cognition used to construe various meanings in the *order of discourse* which seek to exert control either over their own lives or the lives of others and which are based on the cultural, social, and historical context of each specific actor group. This viewpoint is based on the works of Michel Foucault,³⁸⁾ Norman Fairclough,³⁹⁾ and John Fiske⁴⁰⁾ with emphasis on the ideas presented by Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips, further supplemented by the approach of Theo van Leeuwen to discourses as social cognitions used for representing social practices in a text.⁴¹⁾

The analyzed material consists primarily of threads and individual comments within Reddit communities r/gaymers and r/queensofleague. Reddit is a social network organized into various communities where users discuss news and impulses from other users within self-contained threads. Each of these communities has its moderators and specific rules for posting both new threads and commenting on them. All users appear under fictitious usernames, although many people do not shy away from posting their pictures or personal stories in dedicated communities, creating an environment that can be both anonymous and intimate depending on one's preferences.

The most active community regarding LGBTQ+ topics in gaming is r/gaymers. It aims to offer a safe space for LGBTQ+ gamers and allies⁴²⁾ to discuss anything related to queer themes in video games, however, it is very lenient with allowed topics, the primary rules consisting of the prohibition of selfie posts. This community, founded on January 11, 2011, has over two hundred thousand members as of January 2022. Another important source of discussion is r/queensofleague, which focuses primarily on Riot's *League of Legends*

35) Marianne Jørgensen and Louise J. Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002).

36) Critical discourse analysis, discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe and discursive psychology.

37) Jørgensen – Phillips, *Discourse Analysis*, 56.

38) Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002).

39) Fairclough, *Language and Power*.

40) John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (London: Routledge, 1989).

41) Theo van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

42) People who are not queer themselves, but sympathetic to the fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

(2009)⁴³⁾ and supporting media. This community is heavily leaning into satirical takes on the elements of the game and its characters from the viewpoint of minority players. The discussions often point out rather interesting aspects of all kinds of representation within *League of Legends*, regardless of being based on gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or even age of the in-game characters. This community exists since August 2019 and has currently over twenty-three thousand members.

The primary sample includes thirty-four threads.⁴⁴⁾ Depending on the context, the scope of these threads varies from short discussions with single-digit comment count to ones with comment numbers in the lower hundreds. Similarly, the comments themselves range from short single-sentence witty responses to the given topic to multi-paragraph opinion pieces. Most of the analysis has focused on these longer posts, as they reveal deeper motives and reasoning. However, the shorter ones offered valuable insight into emotions connected with the discussed topics. The timeframe includes discussions from December 2020 to February 2022. Furthermore, this study discusses the viewpoints of several actors active in the game-making process. These were purposefully sampled based on the references made to their statements in the analyzed Reddit threads to better understand the positions of the commenters and to include a wider context of the game industry environment.

The coding of the analyzed material was based on principles of descriptive coding presented by Johnny Saldaña in *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*⁴⁵⁾ to distill the main themes common in each of the discussed threads. The main recurring themes in the case of official statements were “inclusion” and “commitment,” which were, however, in some cases disputed by individual creators, who thematize themes such as “fight for inclusion.” In the case of LGBTQ+ gamers, the common themes included “stereotypization,” “fetishization,” “uncertainty,” “tokenization,” and “focus on profit rather than a true representation.” The recurrence of various themes across groups was used to form a network of relationships based on the notions of comparison and multivocality.⁴⁶⁾ These show the ways the groups relate to each other, and the deeper practices and discourses present across the gaming community, which will be presented in the main body of this study.

An important fact that needs clarification is the demography of the sample. Due to the sheer volume of material and its nature, it was decided not to delve into the composition of the individuals responsible for the analyzed text. In my opinion and the intentions of chosen methods, the main focus are the opinions presented by various social actors⁴⁷⁾ rather than their specific affiliations and personal information. Due to this, while the main groups are referred to as studios, creators, and LGBTQ+ gamers in the text, it is not implied that every one of the speakers is firmly part of his given group. For example, while Worm_Scavenger referenced in the introduction posted his comment in the thread of r/gaymers, we do not infer the users’ gender and sexual orientation from such acts, despite

43) Multiplayer online battle arena, a competitive strategy genre where teams of five players clash.

44) Topics on Reddit are organized into these units where users post their comments.

45) Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2013), 88.

46) Jørgensen – Phillips, *Discourse Analysis*, 149–152.

47) Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 10.

referring to them as representatives of queer gamers. The division is based purely on the attitudes expressed to the researched topic and the institutional settings.

The Games and Their Creators

When considering the questions of queer representation in the gaming industry, it is only natural we start with the creators of the games on both individual and institutional levels. These are the social actors who determine the final form of the games, and the themes present, which are reflected in the statements of queer gamers themselves. These are the people who hold the power over what is represented within the medium and how. But how do they achieve this? What are their approaches? How deeply do they care about the issue at hand? What does the end in-game result even look like?

When approaching the role of the (possibly queer or at least queer sympathetic) individual in the game-making process, we need to consider the dynamics of each company somewhat separately, as the philosophies often differ as we will see throughout this section. Starting with Riot Games, while their public statements emphasize that: “our commitment is to better equip our developers with education and best practices so every player can see themselves in our characters and games,”⁴⁸⁾ the individual experience is somewhat contradictory. As the now-former employee of the company points out when discussing their efforts to push through a canon⁴⁹⁾ male/male relationship: “[...] One of my managers aggressively told me to shut up every time I pitched stuff about their dynamic, [...]”⁵⁰⁾

This shows us the internal power struggles that dictate the possibility of representation in the gaming space. Furthermore, we can see that the conservative pressures inside the company itself can be very impactful, as the result is that the relationship in question remains uncanonized.⁵¹⁾ The effect on the product itself here is that the in-game representation limits itself to queerbaiting, hints, and allusions. This creates a paradoxical situation when the primary author has to circumvent the official viewpoint by individually supporting the queer reading of their characters, which was originally supposed to be a part of the full story, as the speaker does in the earlier part of the tweet. This contradiction leads us to the question of who is truly empowered to determine the intended reading of queerness in games. As seen in the next chapter, this responsibility falls mainly to the individual players, creating a loop back to the creators and studios who may, or may not, turn these interpretations explicitly canon.

48) “Celebrating Pride With You,” *Riot Games*, 2021, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://www.riotgames.com/en/news/celebrating-pride-with-you>.

49) Canon is a collection of true and official information regarding a given setting.

50) Devon Giehl (@devongiehl), “[clears throat, preparing to make the only League of Legends tweet I’ve made in quite some time],” *Twitter*, accessed April 29, 2022, <https://twitter.com/devongiehl/status/1255567284204040192>.

51) During the 2022 Pride month, a new short story starring the characters in question was published. It alludes to romantic tension between them and outs one of the characters as having an earlier relationship with another man. Jared Rosen, “The Boys and Bambolini,” *Riot Games*, accessed January 7, 2023, https://universe.leagueoflegends.com/en_GB/story/the-boys-and-bombolini/.

The topic of conservative viewpoints in the game-making process is reflected upon by queer gamers, visibly in the example of Quantic Dream studio. During a trial regarding sexual harassment and toxic working conditions, it came to light that the director allegedly remarked: “at Quantic Dream, we don’t make games for fags,” and various other sexist comments.⁵²⁾ The LGBTQ+ gaming community was not entirely surprised by this as one user points out when discussing their title *Detroit: Become Human*⁵³⁾ that they felt straight relationships are being forced in the narrative and queer characters are painted as disturbed individuals.⁵⁴⁾ This points in the direction that the imprint of creators is often deeply reflected upon by certain gamers and that the general tropes of LGBTQ+ representation are present in video games, as the mentioned pairing plays into the “bury your gays” trope.

Returning to Riot Games’ *League of Legends* and the supporting media during the analysis timeframe, we meet a grand total of three⁵⁵⁾ (out of 159 and counting) properly represented and confirmed LGBTQ+ characters: Neeko, Leona, and Diana. Queer males are represented by Varus, who is a demonic entity possessing the conjoined corpses of a gay couple, which as we can imagine is seen as *somewhat* problematic. When discussing the broader universe Riot created, the number slightly expands, as there exists a trans character (The Traveler) and further background queer characters present in *Legends of Runaterra* (2020).⁵⁶⁾ The Netflix show *Arcane*⁵⁷⁾ (Pascal Charrue and Arnaud Delord, 2021) all but confirms an attraction and budding romance between two lead characters, Vi and Caitlyn.

The important part here is the fact that all confirmations of character queerness are done primarily out of the game (*League of Legends*) itself. The player has to look for short stories⁵⁸⁾ explaining the lives and backgrounds of most characters, as the summaries in the game client are very generic short characterizations. And even then, these confirmations are often limited to one-time blurbs never to be referred to again. Or as is the case of the relationship between Ezreal and Ekko, two male *champions*, it is enclosed in its own parallel universe where the relationship is somewhat ambiguous, as the explicit in-text confirmation is open to interpretation.⁵⁹⁾ The author himself points out in one of his tweets which concludes with a link to this story that:

52) Steve Wright, “Quantic Dream doesn’t ‘make games for fags,’ Cage allegedly says,” *stevivor*, 2021, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://stevivor.com/news/quantic-dream-doesnt-make-games-fags-cage-allegedly-says/>.

53) An adventure set in the near future where humans live alongside androids.

54) KulaanDoDinok, “It felt really off as Marcus with that romance to the female Android,” *Reddit*, accessed June 4, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaymers/comments/nrql92/comment/h0iye9j/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

55) During the summer of 2022 a new queer male *champion* named K’sante was added to the game. However, as with the others, his queerness is still referenced primarily in supporting material and social media statements.

56) A deckbuilding card battler.

57) The relevance to the video game story is still unclear, as there are numerous contradictions on levels of timeline and previous background of many characters.

58) The most recent and impactful stories tend to be accessible from the game client. However, the archive is available separately from the official lore site.

59) Michael Yichao, “Out of Time,” *Riot Games*, accessed March 1, 2022, https://universe.leagueoflegends.com/en_SG/story/out-of-time/.

[...] As a creator, it's immensely frustrating to have your hands tied in terms of how you can execute a story, and what you can confirm publicly without any doubts about a character's perceived attractions. Love and attraction are core to many stories and characters' journeys! [...] ⁶⁰⁾

The context leads many to believe that the portrayal in the short story is intended to be that of a romantic relationship. This points us in the direction of the existence of internal censorship and the goal of creating easily excisable queerness, which can be expunged for conservative markets to the discontent of creators themselves.

The line between individual and institutional is somewhat blurred when it comes to smaller indie studios. For example, the author of *Coming Out on Top*⁶¹⁾ (2014) Obscurasoft is a single-person studio. This influences the way the author engages with the player base, as they were active on social media during production and agreed to an interview with a community member on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the game's release.⁶²⁾ The result of such close interactions in cooperation with the usage of Kickstarter campaigns is not uncommon in the indie development scene and alters the power distance between the players and game makers through direct investment and a chance for personalized interaction. The notions of personalized game-making are supported by the claims of many creators present in the *Queer Games Avant-Garde*,⁶³⁾ which in turn points us to the existence of certain discourse among queer (or perhaps independent) creators concerning the process of game-making. When expanded by the above-discussed opinions of actors in larger studios, I am led to believe that the *order of discourse* of LGBTQ+ representation from the viewpoint of individuals is leaning heavily into the desire for artistic expression and true inclusion within the games themselves. However, as with many themes discussed in this study, further research needs to be conducted to validate these claims.

As can be seen, there are varying approaches to the creation of queer representation and each of the studios has its discursive template for depicting queerness in games, whether striving for realism and inclusivity or rejecting it altogether. Some studios seem to empower individual creators, while other suppress their ideas, forcing them to seek external outlets to express their intentions. This in turn resonates in the video games themselves, leading many players to think and reflect upon the titles they consume, as discussed on the following pages.

60) Michael Yichao (@michaelyichao), "One of the biggest challenges of telling queer stories in large Ips is the difficulty of doing so w/ a global audience," *Twitter*, accessed May 25, 2022, https://twitter.com/michaelyichao/status/1264984285800329216?s=20&t=pc_rz3x7R0zot2s1hlC7Lw.

61) Gay dating simulator.

62) Terry'sBiggestFan, "Obscure Interview," *Coming Out On Top Wiki*, accessed December 10, 2022, https://coot.fandom.com/wiki/User_blog:Terry%27sBiggestFan/Obscure_Interview.

63) Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*.

The Ga(y)mers

When approaching the statements of the players themselves, we need to consider the following issues first. Mainly, there is no monolithic opinion present in either the LGBTQ+ or the mainstream group. Furthermore, even the opinions presented here are only a shard of the greater mosaic, as we base our research primarily on the opinions expressed on Reddit. Many (if not all) game studios have their discussion forums and numerous fan pages, and fan forums exist for many of the mentioned titles. Even more importantly, the number of players that actively engage with any of these outlets is very hard to pinpoint and it is safe to assume that a large portion of the player base is silent. This is supported by de Certeau's notions of marginality in modern society, pointing out: "a marginal group has now become a silent majority."⁶⁴ However, it is also hard to imagine, that even the silent players engage with the games in a vacuum, ignoring reviews or various discussions surrounding the chosen title, which is supported by the idea that social media have at least partially taken over as a source of information, rather than purely interaction platform.⁶⁵ With all this in mind, let us now focus our attention on the discourses of the queer community, their concerns and the way they relate to the wider game industry.

One of the main (and few) positively viewed themes in the eyes of the LGBTQ+ community is the existence of any kind of representation at all. As one of the users says:

Representation matters so much! It normalizes our existence, especially when we are seen as "other" and "outsiders" to our own country we were born into.

As a queer woman of color it is so rare to see any form of representation that I latched onto whatever queer icons and whatever people of color I see in media, comics, games, tv shows, or books. I have always felt alien no matter where I go, its finally now in my early forties that I see people like me getting represented in big name media productions. It makes me happy that kids don't have to grow up like me. I grew up in a time where "bury your gays" was the only type of rep we had, a sad tragic short life was the only viewpoint we had. Or the only POC rep was a token character/rather racist stereotype in the background, never ever truly in the forefront.

I'm glad the lens is shifting and its slowly getting more diverse. I wish I could live to see the day when everyone understands one another.⁶⁶

This is supported by the opinions that queer themes in games can serve as a source of inner strength and courage, presented by the respondents in *Dressing Commander Shepard in Pink*.⁶⁷ Regardless, the fact of queer representation is scrutinized by the actors and

64) Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1984), 17.

65) Beata Biały, "Social Media — From Social Exchange to Battlefield," *The Cyber Defense Review* 2, no. 2 (2017), 69–90.

66) Not-A-SoggyBagel, "Representation matters so much! It normalizes our existence, especially when we are seen as "other" and "outsiders" to our own country we were born into," *Reddit*, accessed January 21, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/lgbt/comments/l7pb21/comment/gl8xntc/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

67) Tereza Krobová, Ondřej Moravec and Jaroslav Švelch, "Dressing Commander Shepard in Pink: Queer Playing

while they acknowledge the strides toward inclusivity, they are often less than satisfied with the results.

The crux of positive discourses connected with the queer representation in gaming is connected with the statements of individual creators we mentioned in the previous chapter. For example, when one of the users discusses the aforementioned Michael Yichao tweet, he mentions their interactions connected to questions of queer representation in *League of Legends*.⁶⁸⁾ Another aspect of positive queer representation is seen in the more intimate approach to queer representation, exemplified by characters present in BioWare's titles, such as the *Dragon Age*⁶⁹⁾ series.⁷⁰⁾ However, the most perceptible positive discourse is present when relating to the smaller studios and creators: "*Hades*⁷¹⁾ for sure had the most meaningful rep I've seen in a long time. Probably my favorite I've seen in any game. [...]."⁷²⁾ When framing this attitude by the notions of Laclau and Mouffe's nonexistence of fixity and non-fixity in society,⁷³⁾ we conclude that while the group of individual creators and queer gamers are separate⁷⁴⁾ entities, their discourses not only overlap but support each other in the *order of discourse* of LGBTQ+ representation in video games.

Most of the positivity is directed at the niche titles that are explicitly aimed at the queer community, such as *Coming Out on Top*. When discussing these titles, the sentiments are usually similar to this: "[...] I love some of the characters and hate some of them, which I always take as good writing. [...]."⁷⁵⁾ This can be explained by connecting this discourse to the discourse of queer game makers. In *Queer Games Avant-Garde*, the creators often reflect that their personal experiences and struggles manifest in their games.⁷⁶⁾ This personal approach is probably what resonates with the queer gaming community, as they can see themselves in the authors or their works directly, rather than through the lenses of "some" multinational company and their more distant and anonymous employees.

in a Heteronormative Game Culture," *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace* 9, no. 3 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2015-3-3>.

68) Ash04123, "Oh hey, that's my tweet lol: I will say that Yichao and I are mutuals and he likes to tease me a lot because he knows I love Ezreal," *Reddit*, accessed September 2, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/ezrealmain/comments/iii498/comment/g3p94q1/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

69) Three roleplaying games set in a fantasy universe.

70) Schadenfreude_q, "Dorian Pavus from Dragon Age Inquisition. He's intelligent, capable, genuinely a good companion in the game who actually cares about the main character," *Reddit*, accessed January 8, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/gamers/comments/ryqnl1/comment/hrs0uvc/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

71) A roguelike RPG set in Greek mythology.

72) Em_Pedy, "Hades for sure had the most meaningful rep I've seen in a long time: Probably my favorite I've seen in any game," *Reddit*, accessed January 8, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/gamers/comments/ryqnl1/comment/hrt9fr0/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

73) Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso Books, 2001), 111.

74) At least for the purposes of our research as we can hardly determine the actual overlap of these groups, but it would be naïve to assume there is none.

75) Yakscamelandsmules, "This game is worth the \$20! I love some of the characters and hate some of them, which I always take as good writing," *Reddit*, accessed March 6, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/gamers/comments/4927b2/comment/d0p55t1/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

76) Ruberg, *The Queer Games Avant-Garde*.

Furthermore, the focus on making games for a specific narrow audience, such as gay men, allows for the representation of intersecting identities that are often otherwise omitted in the media image of queerness, such as LGBTQ+ people of color. While recent reports indicate that the situation is improving,⁷⁷⁾ the indie gaming scene is more inclusive and has been for quite some time, as can be demonstrated by the characters of Phil and Jed in *Coming Out on Top* or the Asian cast of *Butterfly Soup* (2017).⁷⁸⁾ This is further elaborated upon by Ruberg's interview with queer women of color game-makers, who intentionally work with the intersection of queerness and ethnicity to highlight societal flaws.⁷⁹⁾ Concerning the big studio games, BioWare is once more somewhat ahead in this respect, as Pelurson points out that the inclusion of interspecies relationships further pushes the players to challenge their views of heteronormative romance.⁸⁰⁾ As mentioned above by Not-A-SoggyBagel, the normalization of queer identities is connected to questions of ethnicity and body image just as to sexuality itself.

The positives are, however, opposed by several negative and questionable themes and practices. One of the most glaring issues is the perceived (and hardly disputable) disparity in the ratio of gay men to gay women in popular titles. Putting aside BioWare titles, where the situation is somewhat⁸¹⁾ more balanced, the primary examples of major queer characters in popular games are Leona and Diana in *League of Legends*, Kasmir and Marjory in *Guild Wars 2* (2012),⁸²⁾ Ellie and Dina in *The Last of Us Part II* (2020).⁸³⁾ This is often infuriating to many of the members of the queer community as we can see from statements such as:

I read a post on this subreddit earlier about how we're currently lacking proper MLM⁸⁴⁾ representation in *League of Legends*. It really hit me that I lack anyone in *League* that I see myself in and it does irk me quite a bit. There are, what, 160 champions now and none of them are gay, bisexual or pansexual men. That subtle homophobia really hurts. [...].⁸⁵⁾

The members of the LGBTQ+ gaming community go as far as to label this phenomenon as the fetishization of lesbian characters. This is an explanatory framework that is not unheard of throughout society, being described as reducing people to objects of sexual de-

77) Townsend – Deerwater, "Where We Are on TV."

78) Lesbian coming of age visual novel.

79) Ruberg, *Queer Games Avant-Garde*, 153–161.

80) Pelurson, "Queer Quests," 72.

81) Then again, their first queer character was a lesbian woman and the possibility of male/male romance in the *Mass Effect* series happened only in the last two installments, as opposed to the numerous female/female romances available in all four games.

82) Fantasy MMORPG.

83) Action-adventure set in postapocalyptic United States.

84) Men loving men.

85) PurpleSpaceSquid, "I read a post on this subreddit earlier about how we're currently lacking proper MLM representation in *League of Legends*," *Reddit*, accessed February 18, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/queensofleague/comments/svq0hs/lack_of_mlm_representation_lets_do_something/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

sire based on their identity.⁸⁶⁾ The reasons for the prominence of this type of representation may be rooted in the fact that lesbian relationships were generally perceived as a more tolerable quirk in the history of sexuality, as opposed to male homosexuality, which was often rabidly prosecuted in Western societies, and the prevalence of sexism. The queer gamers also reflect the notion that lesbians in gaming and media are okay because of the influence of lesbian pornography aimed at heterosexual men.⁸⁷⁾ The current wider social discourse supports this and points out that:

Lesbians aren't viewed in relation to their value for themselves, they are viewed in relation to their value for men. This can lead to lesbians and other sapphic identities being invalidated and primarily viewed for their sexual value.⁸⁸⁾

If we connect these statements with the facts of sexism and toxicity of many gaming studios we mentioned earlier, it is hard not to see the merit of this particular viewpoint present in the community and the critique it offers.

Speaking of disparity, the situation is even direr when discussing the representation of further portions of the LGBTQ+ community. The order of letters in the abbreviation corresponds to the prevalence of the given minority in games. We meet numerous lesbians, and some gays, but bisexuals “in space are tad too much” (which we will elaborate upon when discussing *playersexuality*). A single-digit number of transgender characters can be found and asexual, genderfluid, and various *plus* identities will be present far and few between. This phenomenon points us to the existence of a certain (hopefully unintended) hierarchy in sexual identities that are more and less acceptable to promote through media. The reluctance to represent, especially when connected to transgender people may be a part of a wider social theme of transphobia; however, more research on this issue is still being conducted.⁸⁹⁾

Regardless of the subgroup represented (or maybe not represented), queer gamers are fully aware of the practice of sidelining LGBTQ+ characters to minor or easily censorable roles.⁹⁰⁾ They reflect on the nature of business-minded decision-making, with the sentiments often being positioned between blaming studios and the conservative markets or even the specific states known for censorship of queer themes. This reinforces the notions of conflict between progressive and conservative discourses across the world at large, making much of the conflict regarding representation in the gaming community a symptom of global processes.

86) Rose Chapman, “The Fetishization of Lesbians and Modern Culture,” *Her Campus*, accessed September 22, 2021, <https://www.hercampus.com/school/nmsu/the-fetishization-of-lesbians-and-modern-culture/>.

87) Gokkyun, “Of course its more acceptable do have lesbian characters: Not only does it cater to a lot of straight male fantasies (yuck),” *Reddit*, accessed December 9, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/queensofleague/comments/rcfh0s/comment/hnunabd/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

88) Chapman, “The Fetishization of Lesbians.”

89) Robin Longobardi Zingarelli, “Transmasculine Representations in Video Games” (Paper presented at the Central and Eastern European Game Studies Conference, Tallinn University, Estonia, October 14, 2022).

90) Amageish, “It seems obvious higher-ups at Riot are either (i) actively homophobic or (ii) passively-homophobic,” *Reddit*, accessed February 18, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/queensofleague/comments/svkrrm/comment/hxgy8my/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

Another issue manifests through gay-themed visual novels:

[...] But when I (and I assume most people) complain about the lack of gay games, I mean lack of gay games that *aren't* dating sims/porn. I want an action adventure/RPG in the style of the Witcher, just... instead the protagonist is gay. And I don't mean playersexual — I mean canonically gay. Triple A games constantly ram into the player's head about how straight the protagonist is, whether it be his tragic back-story about his dead wife or including a random scene where a succubus seduces him. I want that, but instead of a dead wife, it's a dead husband, or instead of a succubus, it's an incubus.⁹¹⁾

Many players point out that reducing the presence of homosexual men in gaming to sex-focused games further hurts this group and, while serving as representation, reinforces many of the hurtful stereotypes about gay men.

One of the divisive topics concerns *playersexual* characters. Two versions of this phenomenon exist. The first one is characterized by turning the main playable character into a clean slate regarding their sexual preferences, leaving the choice up to the player. The second practice stems from the first one, as this approach turns various non-player characters open to a relationship with player characters of any gender. It is this second manifestation that is the target of critique from queer gamers:

[...] While I understand people wanting to have some prudence over their own story, I feel like characters should have their own sexuality rather than being attracted to the main character regardless.

This is for several reasons. The way to make a character feel less real is to deny them their own identity. Gender and Sexuality is definitely a huge part of that. To make them player sexual takes away from the experience. To meet someone, and realize that no matter how you feel about them, they may not feel the same way.

That said, it can work. *Stardew Valley*⁹²⁾ (2016) is a great example. Alex and Abigail both have some hang ups in regards to dating a character of the same gender... but both realize that their feelings override their fears. And they have very few issues getting with the player anyway.

The best way to play that would be to have the characters come to such realizations.

The character coming to terms with these new feelings.⁹³⁾

This comment manifests the primary problem seen in this practice: cheapening the complexity of characters by giving them no clear agency regarding their preferences. Fur-

91) Riley_the_Thief, "Oh, I know there's a lot of gay dating sims being made," *Reddit*, accessed January 22, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaymers/comments/s9mr02/comment/htojc2d/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

92) A pixelart farming simulator.

93) Kayden_Pauser, "I'll be honest and say that I was disappointed that River wasn't available to my male V," *Reddit*, accessed December 26, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaymers/comments/kknqgb/comment/gh3fron/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

ther statements point once more to the erasure of bisexuals on the grounds of indecisiveness or even loose morals. According to Klesse,⁹⁴⁾ this attitude to bisexuality is widespread and leads to further marginalization of the group even in the progressive context of the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. Furthermore, some players frame *playersexuality* through the lenses of marginalization and erasure, as one of the users summarizes: “I’ve always said that playersexual characters are inclusion but not representation.”⁹⁵⁾

On the other hand, we can see the defense of this concept based on the principles of empowering the player to make their own decisions in the game and giving them as much freedom as possible.⁹⁶⁾ This viewpoint can be framed through the concept of the interactive nature of the gaming medium. The importance of this fact is further elaborated upon in *Subversive Ludic Performance*, the primary point being that this wide variety of choices is crucial for individual exploration of themes of sexuality and gender.⁹⁷⁾ Rather than cheapening given identities, this approach empowers the player to project themselves, which in turn can lead to queering the gaming experience in the sense of negotiating personal identity in otherwise non-queer environments.⁹⁸⁾ This player agency-oriented focus can, however, conflict with the principles of the contact hypothesis, as it allows the gamers to excise queerness from the experience themselves. Still, being given the choice to be queer is arguably better than being non-existent or being seen and represented as a depraved and adverse entity.

Speaking of depravity, many queer characters are being criticized on the grounds of using various hurtful stereotypes connected to their sexuality. Naturally, the negatively coded characters, such as murderer Paco in *Le Crime du Parking* (1985),⁹⁹⁾ are judged harshly. However, even in the case of multidimensional characters, we can see opinions such as: “Honestly, I feel like Zevran¹⁰⁰⁾ being an assassin and also being portrayed like a fucked up deviant in general is decidedly NOT good representation.”¹⁰¹⁾ And while in the long run, Zevran is a character with depth, the negative first impression is hardly deniable, as the character was originally hired to assassinate the main protagonist. Despite the im-

94) Christian Klesse, “Shady Characters, Untrustworthy Partners, and Promiscuous Sluts: Creating Bisexual Intimacies in the Face of Heteronormativity and Biphobia,” *Journal of Bisexuality* 11, no. 2–3 (2011), 227–244.

95) Spedumon, “I’ve always said that playersexual characters are inclusion but not representation,” *Reddit*, accessed December 26, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaymers/comments/kknqgb/comment/gh3i8tg/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

96) Kaiosama, “It’s funny isn’t it? When it comes to selecting classes in games — warrior, mage, rogue, healer etc...,” *Reddit*, accessed December 27, 2020, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaymers/comments/kknqgb/comment/gh4pfhz/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

97) Kilian Biscop, Steven Malliet, and Alexander Dhoest, “Subversive Ludic Performance: An Analysis of Gender and Sexuality Performance in Digital Games,” *DiGeSt: Journal of Diversity and Gender Studies* 6, no. 2 (2019), 23–42, <https://doi.org/10.11116/digest.6.2.2>.

98) Tanja Sivhonen and Jaako Stenros, “Cues for Queer Play: Carving a Possibility Space for LGBTQ Role-Play,” in *Queerness in Play*, eds. Todd Harper, Meghan Blythe Adams and Nicholas Taylor (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 167–184.

99) French detective adventure which was one of the first games ever to feature a gay character.

100) A non-player character encountered in *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009).

101) Miracleorange, “Honestly, I feel like Zevran being an assassin and also being portrayed like a fucked up deviant in general is decidedly NOT good representation,” *Reddit*, accessed January 8, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/gaymers/comments/ryqnl1/comment/hrtnd5g/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

proving situation, the usage of stereotypes is still prevalent in wider media, video games included. This practice is viewed by Gross as a mere step above invisibility and non-representation.¹⁰²⁾ Pelurson points out that in the context of queerness stereotypes “are inevitable because they are part of wider societal structure. Consequently, they should not be shunned but used as a tool of resistance to promote that which goes against the norms of the ruling group that create them.”¹⁰³⁾ This also leads us to consider the constraints and common practices of the medium in question. According to Amossy and Heidingsfeld, the role of stereotypes in fiction is not based on purely reductionist tendencies. Rather, it serves to elaborate and problematize the commonplace views of the world.¹⁰⁴⁾ When considering even older theories of archetypes in cultural narratives,¹⁰⁵⁾ we may conclude that the importance of stereotypization and framing characters through well-known concepts serve to bring the fictitious character closer to the real person and their perception of the world.

This leads us to the question of how (and whether or not) we can even reconcile the usage of stereotypes in fiction and the desire for representation through intricate multi-faceted characters. As one of the actors points out:

Pathfinder games have had some awesome representation in games. A lesbian couple plays a prominent role in *Wrath of the Righteous* and honestly they are just so cute (and I will do literally anything to protect them).

Their romance-able characters run the gamut of alignments, classes, sexuality, etc. They honestly do a wonderful job with it, more so in *Wrath* than *Kingmaker* since a male MC had only one option for a male lover.¹⁰⁶⁾

In the context of *Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous* (2021),¹⁰⁷⁾ it is more difficult to separate characters from certain stereotypes, such as the hedonistic arrogance of Daeran, who is a romance option for the character of either gender. Even miracleorange ends his critical assessment of Zevran with: “[...] That said, I romanced him my first time through and I have absolutely no regrets. The writing in that game is so GOOD.”¹⁰⁸⁾ Circling back to the stance of developers, their primary approach meets the desires of the queer community, as both sides aim for representation based on life-like narratives and characters. For example, the way Zevran relates to the overall theme of *Dragon Age: Origins* is based on the intersectionality of his queerness, elfness, being raised in a brothel, and being a stranger in a strange land. If we consider the above statements of gamers, we conclude that the usage of

102) Larry Gross, *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 253.

103) Palurson, “Queer Quests,” 79.

104) Ruth Amossy and Therese Heidingsfeld, “Stereotypes and Representation in Fiction,” *Poetics Today* 5, no. 4 (1984), 689–700, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772256>.

105) Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

106) FromSuchGreatHeight5, “Pathfinder games have had some awesome representation in games,” *Reddit*, accessed January 9, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/gamers/comments/ryqnl1/comment/hrvhlah/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

107) Turn-based RPG set in a popular tabletop gaming universe.

108) Miracleorange, “Honestly, I feel like [...]”

stereotype is not truly seen as hurtful if it goes in unison with further elaboration upon the character's personality, further proving the merit of Ruth Amossy and Therese Heidingfeld's views.

The first and foremost theme concerning games and the gaming industry from the side of players is the emphasis on interpretation liberty and production of meaning. The aim of this production in popular culture is "to produce meanings that are relevant to everyday life."¹⁰⁹ This concept allows all of the participating actors to find their meanings and reflections in various fields of human culture. The nature of the gaming industry supports this by default, as games are inherently interactive and open-ended, offering the player many playstyles, narrative developments, and much more. As we demonstrated earlier, even in moments when the creator's intent is more or less clear, the consequent player interpretation can alter the main takeaway.

Important for us are the cases when these individual interpretations begin to aggregate and start influencing the game creators to alter and reinterpret their prior creations. For example, in the case of *League of Legends*' Diana and Leona, their original relationship was based mostly on religious antagonism. The romantic themes had to wait for years of player discussion and support of the notion to manifest explicitly. It will be interesting to see if a similar pattern repeats in the case of recently released *champions* Aphelios and Sett, which became widely popular ship¹¹⁰ among a portion of the player base. My opinion is that the fact both characters are male will delay the process and all official allusions to their relationship will be heavily veiled or contained to alternate universes, which already happened during the 2022 run of *Spirit Blossom* in-game event.

Discussion

Throughout the various statements, we could see that the queer gamers on Reddit emphasized the quality of the writing of characters and the overall story rather than the identity or stereotype they embody. This view creates a contradiction with the widespread view that stereotypes are hurtful essentialization and leads us to wonder how deeply rooted this discourse is in the wider framework of identity politics. Furthermore, the perceived importance of storytelling in video games and its influence on character depth begs the question of how extensively this view is reflected by the creators themselves. What happens if one or more actors in the creative process do not cooperate and what are the solutions for such conflicts?

The main limits of this research are present in the sources used. We are operating primarily in the environment of Reddit, which seems to be a social network leaning more into the pro-inclusivity Western discourses. We have also focused more on the broader themes present in the gaming industry rather than keeping to the particularistic study of a single studio, which leads to a certain nebulosity of the entire research. While this

109) Fiske, *Reading the Popular*, 6.

110) Phenomenon where fan bases see the romantic or sexual relationship between characters regardless of their relationship in the source material.

could be prevented through the study of a particular studio (Riot Games would probably be the ideal choice), I believe this wide scope creates a framework we can use for further case studies. We have also heavily leaned into the LGBTQ+ portion of the viewpoints, which leaves us the majority of the players for further research. Are the negative views of queerness in gaming truly that prevalent, or is this just a vocal minority? Another limiting factor is the fact we have no deeper insight into the process of game-making and construction of queer representation by the developers themselves. While we have seen some hints from the individual creators, we do not know who the main actors in the policymaking in various studios are and how this manifests in the games themselves.

Conclusion

The perception of queer representation in the gaming industry can be summarized as somewhat accepting, with plenty of critical remarks. While all the examined groups reflect on the existence of queerness in gaming (and wider society), they point out that the representation is done often in very problematic ways depending on their explanation framework. Many examples of queer representation are seen as mere lip service and efforts to placate the Western push for inclusivity without angering the conservative markets. All of the involved groups cite the importance of life-like characters and their depth, which can override the stereotypes present with the given person.

While this study has talked about a series of particular examples and particular approaches in the industry, which is in line with the prevalent game studies discourse, I would like to advocate for the wider applicability of its results. There is no argument that we have dealt with a few smaller communities on a social network with limited reach and very specific cases of queer representation in gaming. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of game developers and tens of thousands of titles that do not deal with queerness at all. The problem with queerness in video games is that despite the growing acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in the world, which leads to more and more people embracing their identities, shifting the demographics of the world, it still is a small-scale phenomenon in the gaming world. But even in the limited sample of games and opinions discussed, the themes repeat far too often to ignore. Our goal as media scholars should be to validate them using further empirical evidence and carefully watch the rapid changes in both media artifacts and the societies that produce them.

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