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The Queerness and Games Conference

Community

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Abstract: Studying video games most often means analyzing games themselves, but understanding the cultures and communities that surround games is equally important for those who are interested in how games relate to identity, diversity, and activism. Through a discussion of the Queerness and Games Conference, an annual event that brings together scholars and designers to explore the intersection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer issues and video games, Bonnie Ruberg demonstrates how community is constructed at the margins of game culture, with an emphasis on the power as well as the pitfalls of creating space for self-expression and difference.

Understanding video games is about more than analyzing games themselves. When talking about game studies, it is common to talk about critiquing games as media objects—that is, deconstructing and reimagining games through various theoretical lenses. However, to make sense of the relationship between video games and society, considering the cultures that surround games is equally crucial. Games do not exist in a vacuum. As Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum have argued, games reflect the values and beliefs of the people who make and play them.[1] Even "fun" games, which do not seem to have a political or social message, communicate values with real-world implications. The same can be said for the importance of thinking about the people behind video games. All games are the products of the developers who build them, whether or not they are part of the professional "games industry," and all games are played by a wide range of individuals, all of whom bring their own identity and unique set of experiences to the game. If we only talk about games and not about people, we miss a huge piece of the equation.

Video games have long been intertwined with what is broadly called "games culture." Games culture refers to the activities and conversations that take place around games. Historically, before playing video games became mostly something that people do at home, game arcades were important places for the formation of games culture. Today, games culture largely takes shape in online spaces like websites, forums, and segments of social media that focus on video games. Feminists, people of color, queer people, and others have condemned games culture as toxic and reactionary.[2] Indeed, starting in 2014, a wave of large-scale, internet-based harassment campaigns targeted at "social justice warriors" made it clear that games culture can be a truly dangerous place for those who do not fit the traditional picture of the straight, white, male, cisgender "gamer."[3] Yet, the truth is that there are many games cultures, not just one. When the members of these subcultures are connected in some way—perhaps through events they attend off-line or through playing and discussing games online—they can be called a community. Some communities are vast; others are small. Examples of game communities include the "speedrunning" community, a network of players who compete to see who can complete games the fastest, and the "modding" community, who crack open and modify the code of existing games.

Community is an especially important topic for thinking about video games and identity. Identity relates to video games in a number of different ways. Analyzing the representation of characters onscreen is one approach that game studies scholars take to understanding identity. Investigating how players do or not identify with game characters is another. However, equally meaningful for identity are the subcultures and communities in which players take part. Often these communities are founded around shared life experiences and interests. For example, the organization I Need Diverse Games, which began as the Twitter hashtag #ineeddiversegames, has formed a community of game makers and players who share a commitment to increasing visibility around issues such as those faced by people of color in video games. This example also illustrates how community is a key component of the connection between diversity and activism. Because nonwhite, nonmale, and queer folks, to name only a few groups, have been pushed to the sidelines for much of video games' history, community organizing represents a valuable opportunity for marginalized people to come together and make their voices heard.

In the fall of 2012, three collaborators and I set out to build a kind of community we had never seen in games culture: one specifically dedicated to the intersection of queerness and video games. *Queerness* is a slippery word, but it is also a powerful one, and rich with meaning. Originally a pejorative, today *queer* has been largely reclaimed as an umbrella term that encompasses all gender identities and sexual orientations that fall outside the bounds of "heteronormativity"—the

dominant cultural expectations for what it means to "normal." Used in this sense, each of the identities in the LGBT+ acronym (which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) could be called "queer," although not every LGBT+ person identifies with that word. Especially in the academic context, *queerness* also has a number of conceptual meanings. The field of "queer theory," which was established in the late 1980s and early 1990s by now-famous scholars such as Judith Butler, approaches queerness as a way of desiring, acting, or simply being differently.[4] In this second sense, queerness is still linked to the real-life experiences of LGBTQ people, but it is also a name for disrupting expectations around identity and power.

Any new community faces obstacles, but the creation of a queer games community posed a number of particular challenges. LGBTQ people have rarely had an easy time in games culture. Video games with LGBTQ protagonists are still few and far between and homophobia is an ongoing problem in competitive online games, to cite just a few of the many reasons why LGBTQ players often feel discriminated against (see Shaw's chapter in this collection for more on LGBTQ game representations). Although private LGBTQ guilds in games like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) have existed since the early 2000s, few spaces explicitly designed for LGBTQ gaming were yet available when my collaborators, and I began thinking about the type of community we wanted to build. Because of all this, we knew that video games culture desperately needed a place where queer people who cared about games could share their ideas—but we also knew that the very people we hoped to bring together might worry about feeling unsafe. Forming a queer games community was also difficult because many non-LGBTQ people still operate under the misconception that video games have little to do with queer issues. The fact that few "AAA" video games, the industry term for large-budget games, include LGBTQ characters incorrectly suggests that LGBTQ experiences are not relevant to video games.

We knew differently, however. My collaborators and I were LGBTQ gamers ourselves: a mixed group of professional game developers and game academics. What we had in common was a passion for video games and the conviction that queerness in games was a pressingly important area that we, as a wider games community, needed to be discussing in the open. We wanted a space to call our own, a community to call our own, and so we built it.

In 2013, we founded the Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon) (see figure 14.1). Held annually, QGCon is a two-day conference dedicated to LGBTQ issues and video games. It is usually attended by about 300 people, many of whom travel from across the country or even the world. For its first three years, QGCon took place at the University of California, Berkeley; for its fourth year, the conference was held at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Unlike most

FIGURE 14.1 The organizers of the 2017 Queerness and Games Conference, hosted at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, take a moment mid-event to show their excitement. Organizers, from left to right, are Dietrich Squinkifer, Christopher Goetz, Teddy Diana Pozo, Terran Pierola, Bonnie Ruberg, Jasmine Aguilar, Chuck Roslof, and Chelsea Howe (below banner).

conferences at universities, however, QGCon is not purely an academic event. Sessions include not only talks and panels but also video game "postmortems" (a format in which game designers reflect on the process of developing a recent game) and an arcade of "indie" games from queer designers. Over the years, presenters have spoken on a wide range of topics—from transgender representation in games to the obstacles faced by queer of color folks in the games industry to how to design games with "queer" rules. The event is founded on an ethos of inclusion and financial accessibility. Among many other things, building a diverse community requires thinking about who can and cannot afford to attend. Although attendees are invited to donate to the event, tickets are always available for free.

Of all the forms that our new queer games community could take, we chose to create a conference because we believed that face-to-face interactions were a

crucial part of building meaningful, dynamic connections between LGBTQ game makers, players, scholars, and allies. While most contemporary gaming takes place in virtual spaces, such as massively multiplayer online games, there is a thriving tradition in games culture of players coming together off-line. "Cons" (short for "conventions") are among the most common types of these events. At cons, video game fans gather to celebrate the games they love and connect with others who share their interests. Other forms of in-person community game events are also becoming increasingly popular. One example is the "game jam," where participants work together over a brief but exciting period to develop their own games. Although QGCon is not a "con" in a traditional sense—nor is it a game jam—the conference takes inspiration from events like these, which demonstrate the power of building community off-line as well as on the internet.

While no event is perfect and no community above critique, QGCon has been immensely successful in building a community around queerness and video games that brings together individuals from across North America and beyond. This community is made up not only of the people who attend the conference—some only once, some year after year—but also those who join in the larger dialogue the conference has sparked. For many attendees, and for each year's cohort of conference co-organizers, it is truly moving to spend one weekend each year with fellow LGBTQ folks and allies. In the decade-plus that I have been attending video game events, I have never seen such diversity of gender identity as I do at QGCon. Yet it would be misleading to say that there is only one QGCon community. As is true with any community, ours is also made up of a number of overlapping subcommunities.[5] One of the most vibrant has been the network of academics now working on "queer game studies"—a new scholarly paradigm that has galvanized around the conference.[6] Queer game studies is bringing research on LGBTQ issues and video games into universities across North America, Western Europe, and beyond. In 2014 and 2015 QGCon also expanded to include a three-month workshop to teach queer students with limited prior technical experience how to build their own video games.[7] This created yet another subcommunity: a community of students who have since entered the workforce and have become the next generation of game professionals.

One of our biggest goals for QGCon, and also our biggest challenges, was creating a community that bridged academia and the games industry. Before returning to graduate school for my doctorate in new media, I worked as a games and technology journalist. I knew from my experience interviewing professional game developers that there was a surprising amount of bad blood between those who make games and those who study them. Not uncommonly, developers see game studies scholars as elites who criticize games from their ivory towers. While I have encountered academics from outside game studies who do look down their

noses at video games, in truth those of us who make game studies our life's work have the greatest respect for games. My collaborators and I believed strongly that industry and academia had an immense amount to learn from one another. Facilitating those barrier-breaking conversations was a top priority, so the conference was designed from the ground up to be welcoming to attendees from different backgrounds. Over the years, we have seen this approach foster connections, collaborations, and friendships that cross professional divides—or even begin to break them.

Just as video games do not exist in a cultural vacuum, neither does the Queerness and Games Conference. A number of other important factors have contributed to the formation of a queer games community. The same year that QGCon was founded also saw the birth of events like GaymerX, an LGBTQ gamer fan convention that regularly attracts thousands of attendees each year. Other alternative games conferences, like Different Games and Lost Levels, were starting up as well, helping promote dialogues around diversity in video games. QGCon also came into being side by side with the rise of what could be termed the "queer games avant-garde." This is a movement, loosely defined and still ongoing, of LGBTQ game makers using accessible development tools like Twine to design small-scale video games about their own queer experiences. The work of some of these designers has made national news, spreading their mainstream visibility and the impact they have on games culture.[8] Other queer game communities continue to arise from outside the conference and related events. Fan cultures, for example, are increasingly bringing queerness to video games by reimagining game narratives and characters as queer.

A strong community is not necessarily made up of people who always agree, and QGCon, too, has had its share of internal conflict. Often these moments of friction arise around differing ideas about what makes a constructive dialogue and who should or should not be given the floor to speak. One such disagreement arose during the second conference, in 2014, about a speaker who had helped develop a game with arguably homophobic content. Some members of the QGCon community felt strongly that this speaker should be removed from the program. Others believed that his talk would start an important discussion among conference attendees about how LGBTQ characters are portrayed. Ultimately, we organizers decided against cancelling the speaker's talk—but we also asked him to take part in a live question-and-answer with another game developer who was critical of his game in the hope of creating an opportunity for productive self-reflection. This example demonstrates how conflict within a community can be highly productive. Our community spoke, and together we made the conference better.

Logistically, creating community is easier said than done—especially when doing so requires breaking new ground. Each year at QGCon, we learn new things

about the nitty-gritty details of making our event more inclusive. Even when these things seem small, they can have a big effect. In our first year, for example, we knew that we wanted to designate a bathroom as "gender neutral." However, we made the mistake of placing the gender-neutral bathroom in the basement, making it the hardest for attendees to reach and creating the impression that we valued binary gender identities (represented by "men's" and "women's" restrooms) over nonbinary ones. At the end of the event, we held a town hall where attendees provided feedback on the conference—a tradition we repeat each year. The attendees not only pointed out our mistake but also suggested ways to improve in the future. Moments like these are key for the creation of communities. Individuals become community members when they take an active role. By contributing their own knowledge and passion to the group, they make their place within it.

The Queerness and Games Conference will not go on forever, and the communities that have emerged around it are already changing. This is how it should be. QGCon has been a springboard for a wealth of new conversations and connections at the intersection of queerness and video games. Now our community members are going out in the world, forming their own communities and growing the commitment to LGBTQ issues in video games that we all share. Whatever the future of queerness and video games brings, community will have played a crucial part in getting us there. As new challenges surface, it will continue to be an invaluable tool for those at the margins of video games.

NOTES

1 Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum, *Values at Play in Digital Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 1.

2 Leigh Alexander, "'Gamers' Don't Have to Be Your Audience. 'Gamers' Are Over," *Gamasutra*, August 28, 2014, accessed October 11, 2016, www.gamasutra.com.

3 Nick Wingfield, "Feminist Critics of Video Games Facing Threats in 'GamerGate' Campaign," *NYTimes.com*, October 15, 2014, accessed October 11, 2016, www.nytimes.com.

4 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

5 Adrienne Shaw, "The Problem with Community," in *Queer Game Studies*, ed. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 153–162.

6 An introduction to the work of queer game studies, as well as a list of current work in this area, is available in my online piece "Queer Game Studies 101: An Introduction to the Field (2016)," published June 20, 2016, accessed October 11, 2016, http://ourglasslake.com/.

7 Christopher Goetz, "Building Queer Community: Report on the Queerness and Games Design Workshop," *First Person Scholar*, February 25, 2015, accessed October 11, 2016, www.firstpersonscholar.com.

8 Laura Hudson, "Twine, The Video-Game Technology for All," *New York Times*, November 19, 2014, accessed October 11, 2016, www.nytimes.com.

FURTHER READING

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