

# Queer

# Game

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# Studies



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## Introduction

# **Imagining Queer Game Studies**

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After decades spent relegated to the margins, sexuality and gender are finally taking their place as key subjects in the study of video games. In recent years, a veritable wave of queer games and queer game scholarship has crashed on the North American games scene. Collaborations between game studies and queer studies, as well as between queer game makers and queer game scholars, are creating myriad new opportunities for exploring difference in games and exploring games as different. Leading the charge at this moment of shift, queerness has emerged as a focal point in the push to diversify both games culture and games critique. Providing a valuable framework for interrogating the very systems that structure the medium, queer thinking has the potential to simultaneously destabilize and reimagine video games themselves. In this way, exploring queerness in games means much more than studying LGBTQ content, players, or game creators. Rather, drawing from queer theory and the perspectives of queer subjects, the authors of the essays in this volume turn to queerness to challenge a variety of dichotomies that have long structured how scholars and designers alike understand games (e.g., narratology/

ludology, production/reception, control/agency, success/failure). They see queerness as an ethos that pushes us, as Naomi Clark writes in the pages that follow, to locate “unspoken norms by which a field of activity or knowledge is operating” and to find “points of rupture that destabilize those assumptions, opening up those fields to a wider and potentially more liberatory set of possibilities.”<sup>1</sup> Drawing on the insights of queer theorists from Judith Butler to José Esteban Muñoz, queer game studies is about imagining game studies otherwise, by studying games queerly in addition to studying queer game subjects.

By destabilizing assumptions, queerness offers a new way of seeing video games, a way that operates via the paradigm we are naming “queer game studies.” Through queerness this paradigm lays claim to video games of all kinds. It refigures games as systems of pleasure, power, and possibility, excavating the queer potential that can be found in all games. Moreover, as a paradigm, queer game studies stands as a call to action, an argument for the scholarly, creative, and political value of queerness as a strategy for disrupting dominant assumptions about how video games should be studied, critiqued, made, and played. As demonstrated in this volume, we can use it to consider the way queer failure, queer growth, and queer bodies are implicated in game structures; rather than understanding games as rule-based structures (ludology) or just in terms of representation (narratology), we can view games as spaces where we play within and against rules and explore representation beyond explicitly named queer content. Queer game studies opens up possibilities for queer game play that is not about finding the “real” meaning of a game text, but playing between the lines with queer reading tactics. It considers gaming counterpublics as a space for reimagining whom games are for and who is for games. Indie queer designers, utilizing non-traditional game-making tools like Twine, are pushing against the boundaries of what counts as a game and outside of concerns over commercial success. Games in all of their manifestations are a powerful place to imagine a queer utopia, not by simply imagining a better world but by giving players/makers/scholars the tools for enacting new and better worlds. Queerness, as its heart, can be defined as the desire to live life otherwise, by questioning and living outside of normative boundaries.

The present volume is inspired by the recent surge in feminist and queer game studies scholarship, as well as the numerous appeals from journalists, bloggers, designers, and player constituencies for an expanded engagement with the politics of subjectivity and embodiment in video games. On one front, a significant number of popular, academic, and industry writers have addressed the importance of LGBTQ representation in games, gaming audiences, and the games industry.<sup>2</sup> Driven by popular attention to what has been called a “queer games scene,” the successful organization of queer gamer events like GaymerX, academic conferences like the Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon), talks by queer game makers and scholars at the Game Developers Conference (GDC), documentaries like *Gaming in Color*, and new games journalism that looks at games beyond mainstream gaming audiences, the mainstream game industry has demonstrated an unprecedented awareness of issues concerning LGBTQ players. In many cases, this attention to increased LGBTQ inclusivity reflects capitalistic concerns; while LGBTQ players have in fact been playing video games for as long as games have existed, many game companies now see them as a “new” untapped market. Simultaneously, sparked in part by the online harassment of LGBTQ game critics and makers (which we will discuss in more depth below), a number of online LGBTQ gamer communities have also begun pushing back against the marginalization they have experienced in the games industry and game fandom. Tanya DePass’s #INeedDiverseGames, for instance, an organization and online community committed to addressing the under- and misrepresentation of marginalized groups in games, stands as just one example of how players from diverse backgrounds are coming together to demand long-overdue changes in the production and culture of video games.

Queer theorists—drawing from long-standing critiques of popular culture, art, communities, and capitalism—have also started turning their attention to games. In part this stems from a turn toward the digital in humanities scholarship broadly defined. As the digital humanities have gained prominence, and as queer theorists like Jack Halberstam have pushed for queer studies to increase its engagement with popular digital media forms, queer and feminist scholars from fields like media studies and literary studies have

demonstrated an increasing interest in the influential role of video games in the contemporary cultural landscape. Designers, too, are driving the push to change the way queerness is understood in relation to games. Compelling work from queer game makers like Mattie Brice and Anna Anthropy has received national attention. This work models the power of video games to address queer identity at both personal and societal levels. These creative voices are shifting the discourse around games in crucial, though sometimes contentious, ways.

This is the diverse range of work that we bring together here under the banner of “queer game studies.” Like queerness, queer game studies is difficult to define; this difficulty is itself highly productive for questioning the limitations of dominant conceptual frameworks. Existing academic categories prove insufficient for capturing queer game studies’ uniquely hybrid emphasis on both the content of games and how games are analyzed. Queer game studies is neither sufficiently rigid nor ensconced in the academy enough to be called a discipline. At the same time, it represents more than a mere subdomain of game studies or queer studies. To call queer game studies a subdomain would imply that this work exists as an offshoot of either queer studies or game studies—whereas, in truth, it stands at the intersection of the two. The terms “field” and “area of study” are likewise misfit as descriptors of queer game studies, since they signify an engagement with a specific topic. By contrast, queer game studies refers not so much to the specific topic of queerness in games as to the application of a set of critical tools derived from queer theory and queer thinking. Far from a subfield, then, queer game studies is best understood as a paradigm. The politics of queer game studies are the politics of the paradigm shift. This tool set provides a methodological framework for disrupting the logics that underlie much existing game scholarship—including the impulse to define video games themselves. This framework uncovers the related lines of inquiry that underlie both queerness and games: how power structures shape agency, how lived experiences challenge structure, and how systems afford for opportunities of resistance. Game scholars and makers have wrestled over questions of diversity in games for decades. At times, it appears that both sides have come

to an impasse: though it is obvious that video games need to be more inclusive in their representation, the pressures of industry and the reactionary response of gamer communities make game developers reluctant to enact significant change. Queer game studies stages an intervention at both a conceptual and a practical level. The frameworks of queer theory offer lenses through which to reclaim the medium, giving voices to the experiences of queer player subjects and bringing to light the fact that games are queer (or at least queerable) at their core.<sup>3</sup> Such frameworks have the potential to show those who make games that queerness represents far more than a niche issue or an untapped demographic.

In the spirit of queer theory, the goal of this volume is not to dictate what counts as queer game studies. Such work is rich, varied, and nascent; the full array of insights that will emerge from the intersection of queerness and video games has yet to be seen. Instead, we have deliberately chosen to represent a diverse array of perspectives and approaches to queerness in games. This volume's chapters range from the scholarly to the personal. They are written by academics, journalists, game makers, educators, organizers, and activists. By forming the volume in this way, we demonstrate the complexity of the dialogues that have emerged among these stakeholders. We also strive to welcome readers from many fields and backgrounds. Some of these pieces speak to theory, some to design, and others to the invaluable first-person experiences of carving out queer spaces inside heteronormative, mainstream gaming culture. Unlike much of the writing about LGBTQ issues and video games that has come before, many of these pieces are driven by a desire to explore queerness beyond representation. Through the paradigm of queer game studies, these authors locate queerness not only in queer characters or queer romance, but also in queer modes of play, design, research, and community building. It is our hope that this collection will lay the groundwork for future intersectional and interdisciplinary dialogues about queer games—and that this, in turn, will help make game cultures more felicitous spaces for all players. Together, the essays included here invite us to continue broadening conversations around gender, sexuality, and games. They inspire us to see video games as spaces of queer possibility.

## Historicizing Queer Game Studies

By mapping the paradigm of queer game studies, and indeed by arguing for the importance of queer game studies itself, this volume calls in part for a break with existing trends in LGBTQ game scholarship. The key distinction we are making here is between scholarship that takes as its primary focus LGBTQ topics—from LGBTQ players or designers to games with LGBTQ representation—and work that seeks to understand video games through the conceptual frameworks of queerness. As a brief review of existing LGBTQ game scholarship demonstrates, a sizeable amount of research has been conducted on LGBTQ subjects in games. Although this work is immensely valuable in its own right, we believe that the time has come to push further, to embrace queerness as an approach that opens new possibilities in all games and challenges the very foundations of game studies.

Like most game studies scholarship, LGBTQ game studies can be grouped into three main areas: community/cultural research, textual analysis, and design studies. To date, the bulk of this research has focused on fan cultures and online gaming. Given that online game play has dominated much game studies work, it is not surprising that studies of queerness and games have emphasized virtual worlds.<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have looked at how players navigate homophobia in gaming spaces.<sup>5</sup> Others use online forums to understand how players react to queer game content.<sup>6</sup> Shaw has researched online gay gamer communities' reactions to homophobia and LGBTQ representation in games, which she talks more about in her chapter in this volume.<sup>7</sup> The second major area of LGBTQ games research focuses on LGBTQ characters and same-sex relationships in games. An early example of this is Mia Consalvo's work on *The Sims'* queer relationship options.<sup>8</sup> As several essays in this volume point out, however, same-sex relationships are indicative of homosexuality, and sometimes provide the possibility of bisexuality, but are not inherent examples of queerness. Until recently, scholarship on queer game content was sparse and focused on only a handful of games, mostly of the massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) variety.<sup>9</sup> Even Brenda Braithwaite's canonical *Sex in Video Games* makes only passing references to gay sex (though this is probably due to a lack of examples

to study).<sup>10</sup> Given how long queerness has been a part of games, the pool of existing research has been small. Unlike the essays in this volume, much of the existing literature is focused on LGBTQ content rather than queerness as a mode of critique.

By contrast, much of the work that constitutes queer game studies locates queerness in games beyond representation.<sup>11</sup> Ruberg, for example, has addressed queer failure as a game play mode and elsewhere reframes play experiences that reject “fun” as queer world-making opportunities.<sup>12</sup> Many of the works in this volume (such as those by Jack Halberstam, Amanda Phillips, and Jordan Youngblood) are similarly interested in locating queerness in games that do not, at first glance, appear to include explicitly LGBTQ content. Other essays included here move beyond representation by interpreting the medium of video games through queer theory; the contributions by Kathryn Bond Stockton, Derek Burrill, and Christopher Goetz all fall into this category. Still others pieces, like those by game designers Colleen Macklin and Naomi Clark, explore the ways that queerness can inform game mechanics. The essays in this volume suggest the myriad ways that queer game studies reconfigures the relationships between queerness and video games. Building on this work, we hope this volume can push game scholars and designers to think in new ways about queerness and games, queerness in games, and queer approaches to games themselves.

In addition to suggesting new ways forward for queer game studies, many of this volume’s essays draw from, challenge, and/or reinvigorate long-standing debates about what games are and how we should understand them. This interest in definitions and redefinitions is unsurprising; most introductory games books start with a discussion of what makes games unique as media objects.<sup>13</sup> Defining games is, for example, the core issue behind the so-called ludology and narratology debate that began in the early 2000s. Ian Bogost reviews this debate via different interpretations of the game *Tetris* in his book *Unit Operations*.<sup>14</sup> Janet Murray, he relates, argues that you can read a “story” in *Tetris*: specifically, an allegory of contemporary American life.<sup>15</sup> Murray’s interpretation is then dismissed by Markku Eskelinen, who emphasizes the participation properties made available in the game as a rule-based object.<sup>16</sup> For his part,

Bogost concludes that “in both interpretations, something is lacking.”<sup>17</sup> Instead, Bogost argues for assessing games through their “procedural rhetoric,” a method he develops further in *Persuasive Games*.<sup>18</sup> Though the ludology and narratology debate continues today, it has become a bit of an anathema in certain circles.<sup>19</sup> Some scholars have suggested alternative approaches to game analysis that account for both ludic and narrative properties.<sup>20</sup> T. L. Taylor, for example, argues for considering the assemblage of factors that come together to create games:

Games, and their play, are constituted by the interrelations between (to name just a few) technological systems and software (including the imagined player embedded in them), the material world (including our bodies at the keyboard), the online space of the game (if any), game genre, and its histories, the social worlds that infuse the game and situate us outside of it, the emergent practices of communities, our interior lives, personal histories, and aesthetic experience, institutional structures that shape the game and our activity as players, legal structures, and indeed the broader culture around us with its conceptual frames and tropes.<sup>21</sup>

Like Taylor, many of this volume’s authors unpack games’ richness and complexity. These contributors examine assemblages and intersections. They are inspired by the contradictory and multivalent ethos of queerness, as well as queer studies’ focus on vectors of power and resistance, to analyze games themselves as systems, both ludic and social. Rather than restricting themselves to the study of a game’s narrative or even rules, they seek out the queer implications of its hardware, of its code, of the individual experiences of nonnormative subjects as they play. The scholarship in this volume approaches the topic of queerness and games from so many varied perspectives because sexuality, gender, and identity in games by nature defy definition. Desire and selfhood in games can never be fully explained, contained, or constrained by a standardized set of ontological limitations.

## The Queerness in Queer Game Studies

Of course, we are not the first to bring together queer theory and games. Queer theory has influenced many feminist game scholars before us, even those who do not directly address queer subjects. Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne de Castell, for example, use queer theory to analyze gender construction in games.<sup>22</sup> Laine Nooney uses queer theory to analyze gender and video game history.<sup>23</sup> T. L. Taylor and Helen Kennedy cite queer theorists in their research on game cultures and texts.<sup>24</sup> When we say “queer game studies” we are looking to work that does not simply cite queer theory, but that uses queerness as a method or paradigm to dramatically rethink game scholarship. We have to be aware, moreover, of the fact that some readers might only think of queer theory in relation to literary studies. Certainly, in academia, queer theory emerged from literary studies with the work of scholars like Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler.<sup>25</sup> However, in the intervening decades, queerness has been adopted as a lens by a wide array of disciplines. Foundational figures like Alexander Doty and Richard Dyer put queer studies into dialogue with film.<sup>26</sup> Larry Gross, Lisa Henderson, and Katherine Sender are among the key figures in queer communication and media studies.<sup>27</sup> We might equally point toward the work of queer ethnographers like Mary L. Gray and David Valentine, queer critical theorists like Gayle Salamon, Sara Ahmed, and Lisa Duggan, queer legal scholars like Dean Spade, and queer historians like Susan Stryker.<sup>28</sup> Queer studies’ rich multiplicity offers multiple methods for scholars, designers, and players to study games. To reach its fullest and richest potential, queer game studies must build not only on queer literary studies, but also on queer film studies, media studies, sociology, anthropology, political science, and all of the interdisciplines. It must emerge as an area of research that does not limit itself to the status of a sub-discipline of either queer or game studies, but provides space for seeing how these existing fields of research intersect.

At the same time that it blazes trails for new lines of inquiry, queer game studies needs to recognize its potential blind spots and the directions in which it must continue to evolve. Queer studies’ focus on sexuality, particularly notable in early queer theory, has

at times obscured the importance of race, gender, and class. In response, queer of color scholars—including Juana María Rodríguez, Mel Chen, Chandan Reddy, and Jasbir Puar—have dismantled the limited version of queer theory, queer politics, and queer activism dominant during the 1990s.<sup>29</sup> More recently, scholars examining asexuality through queer theory have constructively challenged the centrality of sex itself in sexuality studies.<sup>30</sup> Disability and socio-economics are similarly pressing areas of inquiry, previously overlooked by dominant trends in queer theory, with which queer studies scholars are now finally engaging. Queer game studies must work to keep this intersectional thinking at its heart. We look forward to future work in this area that increasingly and even more explicitly puts issues of queerness and games into dialogue with these fundamentally interrelated concerns of access, visibility, subjecthood, agency, and voice. In a pamphlet titled “Queers Read This,” published anonymously by Queers and handed out at the 1990 New York Pride parade, the authors wrote, “Being queer . . . means everyday fighting oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and our own self-hatred.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Michael Warner argues in 1993’s *Fear of a Queer Planet* that the goal of queer theory and queer activism is not simply acknowledgment of LGBTQ lives, but dismantling systems of oppression and normalization.<sup>32</sup> A queer game studies paradigm must inevitably be tied to this type of activist project: not just expanding representations of gender and sexuality in games, but in refusing the normalizing tendencies of game studies projects that seek only to build taxonomies of players, create narrow definitions of games and play, and reduce importance of a medium to commercial success. It is only by using the queer methods of embracing difference and resisting reductive categorization that games as an industry, culture, and realm of meaning making can be made to be more open.

We are standing now at a critical and exciting moment in video game history. At the same time, the concept of “now” is slippery. “Now” implies immediacy, a connection to the present. Yet the traditional academic publishing process moves slowly, and work such as this runs the risk of feeling dated by the time it reaches the public. Many of these essays were written in 2013, though we solicited some

later works to address events like the #GamerGate. As we finalize this book, we find that the ground beneath our feet is still shifting. Queer game studies and the network of those invested in exploring queerness in games is ever broadening. That so many collaborators came together to realize this project demonstrates just how vibrant, present, and “now” the combination of queerness and games has felt to us all. But how can we reconcile this “now” with that “now,” let alone all the future “nows” in relation to which this book will be someday read?

Perhaps “now” is something of a misnomer. Maybe we would do better to imagine this collection as a snapshot. Instead of an anthology that offers the definitive word on queer game studies—for now and for the future—we view this book as capturing a transitional historical moment. Much like David Eng, Jack Halberstam, and José Muñoz do in their “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” introduction to their special *Social Text* double issue, we see this volume as mapping the most urgent political concerns of queer game studies.<sup>33</sup> Like the 2006 inaugural issue of the journal *Games and Culture*, in which scholars were asked to address a similar question (“Why game studies now?”), these essays point to where this field might go.<sup>34</sup> They are as much about a future as they are a “now.”

Along with many others, we felt that 2013 represented a turning point for rethinking what it meant to do queer work in video games. Two community-oriented, diversity-focused conferences began in 2013: Different Games (April) and QGCon (October). At these events, queer analyses of games took center stage. Meanwhile, at the 2013 Game Developers Conference (GDC), a group of designers organized #LostLevels, “a radically-casual ‘unconference’ about games and play” that aimed “to be hyper-inclusive.”<sup>35</sup> And in August 2013, GaymerX, an LGBTQ gaming fan convention, was first held, attracting 2,300 attendees.<sup>36</sup> All of these gatherings have since happened annually. Steadily increasing attendance demonstrates that conversations around queerness and games are growing. In the same period, popular coverage of queer game content, players, and design also increased dramatically. Much of this coverage focused on mainstream games’ inclusion of non-heterosexual relationships and characters, or on queer gamer communities. Additionally, media

outlets have highlighted independent queer game designers who are pushing the boundaries of game design and questioning AAA game-industry norms.<sup>37</sup> Anna Anthropy's *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters* is perhaps the most widely known and earliest attempt to chronicle how free game design tools and new game distribution hubs have allowed a wider array of people to make and share games.<sup>38</sup> Building on this work, we hope this volume can push game scholars and designers to think in critical new ways about queerness and games, queerness in games, and queer approaches to games themselves. By spring 2014, Nintendo, the most mainstream of mainstream gaming companies, came under fire for not including same-sex relationships in their game *Tomodachi Life*.<sup>39</sup> If that is not a sign that the times are changing, what is? Many pressing conversations that intersect with queer game studies, such as those around representations of race and disability in games, have yet to gain the visibility currently driving the queer games discourse. We see queer game studies as a vanguard: thenowness of queer thinking in video games paves the way for the emergence of a diversity of approaches to understanding video games that stand just on the horizon: a range of lenses informed by the concerns of social justice and founded on experiences of difference.

Unfortunately, the last few years have also been notable for their challenges. By August 2014, many designers and writers invested in socially conscious gaming faced new levels of rage and vitriol. Attacked by those who rallied under the #GamerGate banner, the so-called social justice warriors who had been imagining more inclusive futures for games found themselves the targets of harassment. It is impossible to summarize #GamerGate, as it is a phenomenon that has cut across online platforms and types of fandom; it remains diverse in both its stakeholders and targets. In the simplest of terms, #GamerGate began as a Twitter hashtag that brought together various actors who felt attacked by calls to make games more inclusive (the very same calls we are foregrounding here). Some made the argument that "outsiders" were trying to change established games culture. Others insisted that games were already sufficiently inclusive, and that critics who said otherwise were unfairly mischaracterizing the objects of their fandom. Katherine Cross's essay in this volume

unpacks this line of thinking in relation to Susan Faludi's metaphor of the "terror dream." After years of feeling like games were under attack from reactionary social commentators and politicians, a subset of mainstream gamers came to see game criticism as censorship—or, worse, an attempt to "take away" video games themselves. Once more, however, queer theory proves itself a valuable tool in re-framing the terms of this debate. It encourages us to push past the simplistic dichotomies between the "enemies" and "defenders" of the medium reflected in the rhetoric of #GamerGate. Video games are contradictory: spaces of freedom and possibility, they are simultaneously normative and oppressive. Adrienne Shaw's essay in this volume speaks to this multiplicity concerning community formation. On the one hand, games have indeed offered a refuge for players who have experienced ostracization in other areas of their lives. Yet this refuge is itself defined by norms that limit who is granted the privilege of accessing this space. Games are both a subculture and an increasingly omnipresent feature of the mass media mainstream. Those who rail against critiques of games often insist that games should be understood as fantasies—just "for fun"—and therefore impervious to scrutiny. To the contrary, as queer studies knows well, fantasy is always already political. As for claims that critique equates to censorship, queerness reveals this presumption to be erroneous. Given a lengthy history of oppression from legal, medical, and other social apparatuses, queerness eschews dogmatic assumptions about what "good" representation is. It rejects the idea that certain subjects, stories, and desires should not be seen.

As a result of #GamerGate, several designers and journalists dedicated to addressing the importance of gender, sexuality, and difference in video games have stopped working in the field—including some authors originally included in this volume.<sup>40</sup> Others experiencing harassment continue to work in games but have become wary of engaging in Twitter conversations, sharing personal information, and speaking at public events. Of course, #GamerGate did not invent harassment; it has a long history in games culture.<sup>41</sup> As editors, though, we now find ourselves balancing this project's optimism with an awareness of its stakes. Summing up both the difficulties and the potential of this moment in her introduction to a series of

queer games special issues of the journal *First Person Scholar*, Ruberg wrote, “As GamerGate has made clear, speaking up for diversity in this hostile environment takes real courage. Now more than ever, it is crucial that we create safe spaces for discussing sexuality, gender, race, and difference in videogames.”<sup>42</sup> This is the “now” that is defining the paradigm shift of queer game studies, but our vision for queer game studies remains hopeful.

In the words of José Muñoz, “Queerness is primarily about futurity and hope.”<sup>43</sup> For him, queerness has unique world-making potential precisely because expressions of queerness are so often impeded: “From shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality.”<sup>44</sup> Given the relative absence of queer thinking in existing game scholarship, and the current culture of online harassment against those who speak up for diversity in games, we believe it is fair to say that the authors whose work contributes to the paradigm of queer game studies are dissatisfied with where things stand. Together, the writing we have collected here demonstrates how the “collective potentiality” of that dissatisfaction can re-create game studies. These pieces make manifest the drive to mobilize in response to our dissatisfaction with the state of games, game communities, and the games industry. At the same time, in the spirit of Muñoz’s queer utopia, these pieces also look ahead to possibilities for futurity and hope. What unites the works we have included here—indeed, what unites queer game studies and what queer game studies more than any other conceptual framework stands poised to offer video game criticism more broadly—is a commitment to seeing differently, to finding the marginalized in between the lines, and to unlocking the non-normative potential that has been waiting in video games all along.

## **Structure of the Book**

In the last few years, it has become increasingly clear that while parallel conversations are happening in game design, game criticism, and game studies, there is frequently insufficient overlap between these conversations. As much as possible, we have structured this volume to promote dialogues across perspectives, forms, and histories. Presented side by side, these authors model discussions be-

tween game design, journalism, and scholarship. What they have in common is their passion for new ways of imagining nonnormative gender and sexuality in ludic spaces. Each of the sections outlined below addresses one key area in queer game studies.

### ***Defining Queerness in Games***

We open with four pieces that explore definitions of queerness in games. First, in “What Is Queerness in Games, Anyway?” Naomi Clark maps key themes in recent discussions of LGBTQ issues and video games. Pushing back against the popular drive to make games “useful,” Clark asks us to consider what we lose when don’t allow games to remain deviant, offensive, and queer. In “Queergaming,” Edmond Chang argues for understanding queerness as a counter-hegemonic play style. As a rallying cry, queergaming demands that game makers and players resist oppressive norms by embracing queerness that goes beyond surface-level representations of identity. Inspired by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Derek Burrill’s “Queer Theory, the Body, and Video Games” argues for the importance of embodiment in game studies. Queer game studies, says Burrill, stands at the perfect intersection of theoretical traditions to bring the body to the fore. Finally, in “Queering Games History: Complexities, Chaos, and Community,” Zoya Street questions what it means to write a history of queer gaming experiences. Street points us toward a mode of history making that allows queer players to tell their own stories, and acknowledges the impossibility of rendering gaming’s complex systems into simple interpretations.

### ***Queering Game Play and Design***

Many of today’s games are still governed by normative assumptions, but games as a medium can create counter-normative, emancipatory experiences. In this section, authors explore how we might actively queer play and game design. In “*Ending the Cycle*: Developing a Board Game to Engage People in Social Justice Issues,” Peter Wonica presents a postmortem of his game *Ending the Cycle*, which began as a series of collaborative workshops. By iterating on an initial prototype, workshop participants learned about the systems of oppression that queer women face when they attempt to exit abusive relationships.

Queer gaming can be an educational tool, but it can also be a call to action. “Playing Outside” is Leigh Alexander’s passionate polemic about diversifying games. By welcoming a wider range of game makers and players to the medium, says Alexander, games can move beyond fun and address difficult social issues. Hanna Brady’s “Building a Queer Mythology” explores what games can learn from science fiction and fantasy. To bring queerness to games, Brady urges us to turn to fantasy and its worlds of possibility. “For Play? Literary Ludics and Sexual Politics” by Aubrey Gabel encourages us to think about “play” in discussions of queer games, and connects gaming to a literary tradition of playful language from Rabelais to Oulipo. Mattie Brice’s “Play and Be Real about It: What Games Could Learn from Kink” argues that, much as kink allows partners to play with complicated personal and cultural histories, game design should create a space for engaging with the real world, not just stepping away from it. Finally, in “Queering the Snapshot: Ambient Mobile Play,” Larissa Hjorth and Kim d’Amazing explore the relationship between mobile phone practices, performativity, and alternative concepts of play. Drawing on interviews with queer-identified phone users, Hjorth and d’Amazing unpack social media photo sharing as a mode of performing selfhood, affect, and sexuality. They link these practices to ambient mobile play, which transcends traditional game space boundaries and makes camera phone usage (and the selfie’s bodily presence) a diffuse and ongoing game.

### *Reading Games Queerly*

Moving from design and play audiences, in this section we consider how game texts themselves might be analyzed queerly. First, Robert Yang’s “On ‘FeministWhorePurna’ and the Ludo-material Politics of Gendered Damage Power-ups in Open-World RPG Video Games” delves into the controversy over a misogynistically labeled power-up in Deep Silver’s game *Dead Island*. Rather than see it as an obscure joke, Yang argues that the game’s inclusion of “FeministWhorePurna” reflects widespread problems of sexism and accountability in the games industry. In “Welcome to My Fantasy Zone: *Bayonetta* and Queer Femme Disturbance,” Amanda Phillips uses film studies to consider the queerness of *Bayonetta*, the titular character from the

2009 Platinum Games title whose design is often condemned as hyper-sexualized and fetishistic. Using Micha Cárdenas's concept of "femme disturbance," Phillips recasts Bayonetta as a queer force of disruption who manipulates the gaze, taunts players with castration, and is driven by controller techniques that recall female masturbation. Next, Todd Harper asks whether we, as players, can bring queerness to games by approaching them through alternate perspectives. This is the experiment he undertakes in "Role-Play as Queer Lens: How 'ClosetShep' Changed My Vision of *Mass Effect*." Only in the third game of the *Mass Effect* trilogy did developer BioWare offer male-male romance options for its protagonist, Commander Shepard. To make sense of this shift, Harper sets out to replay the series while imagining Shepard as a closeted gay man throughout the first two games. In "Queer(ing) Gaming Technologies: Thinking on Constructions of Normativity Inscribed in Digital Gaming Hardware," Gregory Bagnall turns to the material technologies of games. The controller-design standards for console gaming, argues Bagnall, reflect heteronormative thinking. Moving forward, Bagnall calls for a queering of gaming hardware that models itself on fluidity and possibility rather than hetero-masculinity. The section concludes with merritt kopas's "On *Gone Home*," a deeply personal response to what kopas describes as "a game about girls in love." Connecting her play-through of *Gone Home* with her own childhood, kopas describes her encounter with the game as an opportunity to live out a queer youth she missed and for which she still mourns.

### *Queer Failure in Games*

Failure has been of interest to both queer studies and game studies in recent years. In this penultimate section, we turn to the obstacles faced by queer players, designers, and scholars, as well as the generative possibilities of queer failure. Reflecting on #GamerGate and the need for safe queer gaming spaces, Adrienne Shaw's "The Trouble with Communities" encourages readers to think about community as a series of multiple and overlapping subcommunities rather than a monolith of sameness. Far from collapsing differences, says Shaw, community provides an opportunity for "finding camaraderie despite difference." Next, Gabriela T. Richard addresses the difficulty

of navigating who belongs in safe spaces. In her piece, “Play Like a Girl’: Gender Expression, Sexual Identity, and Complex Expectations in a Female-Oriented Gaming Community,” Richard reflects on the policing of gender and sexuality in the (initially) all-female PMS clan and its associated all-male clan, H2O. In “The Nightmare Is Over,” Katherine Cross compares reactionary gamers’ outrage to what Susan Faludi has called the “terror dream.” Gamers who grew up in the 1980s and ’90s have lived through the trauma of social stigmatization, says Cross. Today, when faced with critiques of toxicity within games, these fans relive their trauma and lash out because they fear that video games will be taken away from them. Considering the ability of queerness to reimagine failure, Jack Halberstam’s “Queer Gaming: Gaming, Hacking, and Going Turbo” builds on his previous work on animation in order to think about game play through the concept of the glitch. For Halberstam, the glitch usefully disrupts dominant value systems, an approach that he applies to three games: *Monument Valley*, *Thomas Was Alone*, and *Braid*. At the 2013 QGCon, Halberstam and Jesper Juul were invited to discuss the striking similarities between their recent books, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Halberstam) and *The Art of Failure* (Juul). The lively dialogue that ensued is transcribed here as “The Arts of Failure.” Drawing connections between queer failure and failure in games, Halberstam and Juul discuss losing and loss as opportunities for nonnormative pleasure, cultural reflection, experimental design, and resistance through play. Jordan Youngblood concludes this section with his own analysis inspired by Juul’s and Halberstam’s books, which he uses to perform a close reading of failure in the *Metal Gear Solid* series. His article, “I Wouldn’t Even Know the Real Me Myself’: Queering Failure in *Metal Gear Solid 2*,” reframes the Raiden character as an analogue for the player, one whose experience and selfhood are defined through failure. In contrast to the hyper-masculinity of Solid Snake, the standard protagonist of the series, Raiden fails at masculinity, at his straight relationship, and even at being “real.”

### ***Queer Futures for Games***

We end this collection on an optimistic note. What is possible when, against the odds, queer game communities come together? This section opens with a piece by queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton, to-

day's leading thinker on the relationship between growth and queer theory. Part critique and part performance, "If Queer Children Were a Video Game" reads gaming through "lateral growth." The gamer who refuses to "grow up"; the child with such technological proficiency he seems to have grown up too fast; the childish, candy pleasure of addictive mobile games: these are the set pieces in Stockton's trip through the queerness of games and childhood. Building on Stockton's work, Christopher Goetz's "Queer Growth in Video Games" addresses a tension between two threads in current debates around queer games and growth. On the one hand, says Goetz, proponents of diversity in games want the medium to outgrow its juvenile content and immature gamer culture. On the other hand, queer game scholars celebrate gaming's invitation to revel in childish pleasures and anti-reproductive "sideways growth." Goetz himself suggests that the game's terrain is the queer sideways fantasies of childhood. In "Finding the Queerness in Games," Colleen Macklin instructs us to look for queerness in the fabric of games themselves. Referencing Muñoz, she describes games as queer utopias where players can explore "other ways of being in the world and ultimately new worlds." In "Organizing New Approaches to Games," Bonnie Ruberg interviews Chelsea Howe, Toni Rocca, and Sarah Schoemann about the unique difficulties and rewards of organizing diversity-focused video game events. Speaking about QGCon, GaymerX, and Different Games, respectively, Howe, Rocca, and Schoemann share insights to help future activists and organizers bring together the queer games community. Finally, the collection closes with Ruberg's "Forty-Eight-Hour Utopia: On Hope and the Future of Queerness in Games." Reflecting on her experience co-organizing QGCon, she asks, What is the value of creating a welcoming but temporary space for diversity in games? Change comes slowly, Ruberg admits, but that change begins with moments of excitement and hope. Imagining a different future for queerness and games means opening ourselves to joy and community, however briefly.

## Conclusion

Queer game studies has emerged now precisely because now is when queer game studies is needed the most. We need queer game studies now because there has never been a more energizing, inspiring

time to look for the queerness in games. Queer game makers are receiving international recognition. Thousands of queer players are coming to conventions. As diversity-focused game conferences continue to grow and scholarly interest in queer theory and game studies spreads, this new area of interdisciplinary work will surely take its place as an important new paradigm that speaks to both games scholarship and queer scholarship. Queer studies, game studies, and even queer content in games all have long histories. Here and now, those histories intersect—but the results of that intersection are still in flux. Today, we have the opportunity to open up a multitude of avenues for new inquiry. These authors all speak to this moment of convergence. Whether implicitly or explicitly, they each offer answers to this volume’s key questions: Why queer game studies now? What is queer about video games? What is queer about queer game studies?

This is an exciting time, but also a turbulent and upsetting one. It is crucial that we address the current toxic games environment and condemn the ways that feminist and queer game makers, players, critics, and scholars have been attacked. Yet we also need to make room for hope, for optimism, and for the future. We must provide a sober assessment of the past and current climate, but we must also value the important work that our contributors are already doing to make the games industry and game culture better. This is not the first time that queer communities have faced backlash at moments of progress. When we are being made to feel like our voices should be silenced, we need a chance to be heard. Queer game studies offers such a chance. It points directly to the ways that systems of power produce opportunities for oppression but also resistance.

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publishing process so that we could share their wonderful writing with the world. We are honored to feature their work here and we look forward to the new scholarship, thinking, and design it will inspire.

## Notes

1. This volume, chapter 1.
2. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. Other authors in this volume use LGBT, where queerness is not central to the analysis, or LGBTQI to be inclusive of people who are intersex. Different acronyms are used in different communities for a variety of reasons. We have chosen to allow authors to use the acronym that best fits what they are talking about and where they are coming from, rather than standardize the acronym used.
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