



Figure 1. Shablee, a trans woman of color who appears in *Leisure Suit Larry 6* (Sierra Online, 1987)

Creating an Archive of LGBTQ Video Game Content: An Interview with Adrienne Shaw

Bonnie Ruberg

As the emerging academic paradigm of queer game studies continues to grow, the dynamic interplay between queerness and video games provides scholars with an increasing number of opportunities to explore and expand the methodologies of studying queer games. Bringing together close reading, reception studies, and the quantitative tools of social science, Temple University assistant professor of media studies and production Adrienne Shaw has created the LGBTQ Video Game Archive, the first scholarly database of queer content in video games. With the help of research assistants, Shaw has compiled a list (already more than 700 titles long) of games that include LGBTQ characters and references. The archive was published online (lgbtqgamearchive.com) and made available to the public in spring 2016. For each game in the archive, Shaw and her collaborators include a description of the game's LGBTQ content and often its queer interpretation by fans. The archive represents a massive undertaking, and Shaw encourages those who use it to help by contributing

Camera Obscura 95, Volume 32, Number 2
DOI 10.1215/02705346-3925176 © 2017 by *Camera Obscura*
Published by Duke University Press

content. As Shaw discusses below, the expansiveness of the archive format reflects an ethos of inclusivity and breadth in the queer games community. By combining scholarly analysis and fan perspectives, the LGBTQ Video Game Archive offers new possibilities for thinking about how the work of queer game studies is done.

Bonnie Ruberg: *Since queerness and video games is still a relatively new area of study, there are many ways you could approach this work. Why build an archive of games with LGBTQ content?*

Adrienne Shaw: One of the main goals of the project is to create a historical, conceptual map of what LGBTQ content in games has looked like. The archive shows that there has been queer content in games as long as there have been games. One of the origin stories for the project is that reviewers commented on my work with LGBTQ gamer communities: “Yeah, but how much queer content is there in games?” or, “If you say that there’s not a lot, how do you prove it?” For those people, now I have something I can send them and say, “Yes, see?”

Inevitably, the follow-up question about queer representation in games is, “Well, it’s always bad, right?” People’s understanding of game culture, if they are not inside it, is that it is homophobic, transphobic, and awful. Some aspects definitely are, but the games themselves are more nuanced. There’s much more depth to the forms of representation than I think people who aren’t familiar with games normally understand. By pointing to the ways that games have already imagined queerness, this archive provides a better starting point for scholars to move forward than just saying, “There isn’t enough LGBTQ content in games.” When you say there isn’t enough, the tendency within most media industries is to push back and say, “What is enough? Is one more enough? Are two more enough? You got three games last year. That should be enough, right?” It’s not a question of how much is enough. It’s a question of who gets to be imagined in these fantasy environments in the first place. Pointing back to the fact that the industry itself has already found ways to imagine LGBTQ experiences shows it’s not a question of starting from scratch each time. Queerness in

games already exists. There are many different ways it has existed. You can start with those, and if you think there are problems with them, you can make them better.

At the same time, the project is less about my collaborators and I defining whether the content of any given game is truly queer, and more about documenting why people have interpreted it as queer. The site categorizes characters according to whether they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or asexual, but the actual entries focus more on why people define these characters that way. I'm particularly interested in what specific evidence people use to define in-game characters' genders and sexualities. Is it the way they dress? Is it with whom they're in a relationship? That emphasis on player experience and interpretation is really important, because game studies has talked for a long time about the dual meaning-making process in games. The game isn't a stand-alone text; as players play it, different types of meaning can emerge. One of the goals of the archive is to adapt the existing methods that game studies has of looking at the text to include audience interpretation and conditions of production, and to put this all together in mapping the history of LGBTQ representation in games.

I think the question, "Is there really any LGBTQ content in games?" is one that all queer game studies scholars face. Being able to point to your archive is invaluable for establishing the legitimacy of the field. What about the methodologies of the archive? How do they fit with your goals?

In terms of what we include in the archive, we aim to be as all-encompassing about LGBTQ game content as possible. We started by creating a list of any game that anybody had ever mentioned having LGBTQ content, drawing from tons of different articles listing LGBTQ characters in games. Then we systematically go through each of those examples to see what the content is, what it looks like, where it occurs in the game, how much confirmation we can get that the content is there, etc. To do that, we find all the reviews we can of a certain game, and all the walk-throughs. We also watch a lot of longplays [videos in which players record complete playthroughs of video games]. We go back to the original

text as much as possible. It is important to us to value audience interpretation while also presenting as clearly as we can what is actually represented in the game text. I try to be careful to say that this is a record of what other people have recorded so far, since it would be impossible for us to go through every game that's ever been created and count the number of LGBTQ characters.

I don't want the site to be a buyer's guide. In my writing on the project, I am willing to make claims about what is good and what is bad in terms of representation: what's problematic, what's not. But I want it to be up to the people who play the games, who then go off and take the site as a starting point, to analyze these representations. I don't want people to know, "This game is good; this game is bad." I just want people to know that it *is*. Exploring the site gives you a sense of what these texts are like without necessarily needing to dive in and play them. As much as possible, I've designed the descriptions to be accessible to people who aren't in game studies. It's a list of activities that can happen in the game—things like posters for a gay bar hung in the background of a game or embedded in media within games. These things aren't necessarily part of the main text, but they're part of the universe that the text creates. My hope is that the archive offers an introduction to how to analyze representations in games more generally. I've focused on sexuality and gender, but the larger goal is to look at this in the context of intersectionality and think through questions of how race, class, and ability are also represented through these characters.

It sounds like expanding notions of what LGBTQ representation means in video games is at the core of the project. Do you see that as an important contribution of your work that could be applied more broadly to fields like queer studies and media studies?

I come from a cultural studies and queer studies training where I try not to close things down. I don't think asking "Is this really a queer character?" is necessarily the best approach. I also think it doesn't offer a full map of what this content looks like. In some games, the representation is pretty implicit; you have to know the

codes to interpret a character as gay. But that doesn't make it a lesser form of representation. Just because not every person playing a game would recognize those codes doesn't mean that the representation is not there. For me, a much more complete history will connect play cultures to what the original texts offered to the average player, taking queer readings seriously as a part of the history of representation. One of the things I want to bring to the study of video games is a historical "big picture" view of queerness and games, a queer game studies that is not solely focused on specific kinds of representation in contemporary games.

I teach LGBTQ representation courses, and one of the things I've discovered, especially in the past couple of years, is that students are resisting queer readings. They introduced me this past semester to the term "queer baiting." It's when writers for a TV show, for example, put two characters together in a way that implies that they could have a relationship but they never actually go through with it. I see queer readings as a great space to play with the text outside of explicit representation. The students, on the other hand, interpret it negatively as a trying-to-have-their-cake-and-eat-it-too mode of contemporary media making. It's hard to get them to remember a time when this was actually a very resistant strategy. It wasn't just about media makers tricking you. It was about finding space in the text where you could be legible, too.

One of the games I've been writing about is *Grand Theft Auto*. It's such a big series and has so much queer content in it. For a series based on being offensive, it presents a much wider view of who gets to be gay than any of the other game series I've analyzed. *Leisure Suit Larry* is another game that's designed to be edgy but, at the same time, represents multiple queer women of color. So far, the earliest trans woman we've found in a game is in the *Leisure Suit Larry* series. How she's used in the game is very transphobic, but she's there. These are games that aren't trying to be good, yet they offer much more diversity than games that are actively trying to offer good forms of LGBTQ representation. That speaks to larger industry and structural issues about how people approach questions of representation and who they think about when they think

they're supposed to be representing particular groups. A game that isn't really caring about it, that's just going for the easy joke, somehow manages to be much more inclusive—or at least, to represent a wider swath of queer people.

Given that Grand Theft Auto has such a reputation for being culturally insensitive, pointing to it as a complex site of LGBTQ representation is provocative. That strikes me as an example of how the archive can draw attention to queer content in surprising places. What about the opposite? Is there any content that is notably absent from the archive?

In my writing and in my presentations about the archive, I talk about the historical context of when games came out and what that means in relation to how we should understand their content. Especially when it comes to the games from the eighties and early nineties, I spent a lot of time going back to the initial reviews of those games. One of the things I found remarkable, now that the eighties and nineties section of the archive is complete, is that there is only one game that directly references AIDS/HIV. It's a pornographic game, and it's super homophobic. There is also one indie game from 1988 called *Caper in the Castro* that was only distributed on LGBTQ bulletin board systems online. It was charityware, and the designer asked that if you downloaded the game that you donate whatever money you would have spent on the game to an AIDS charity. That's it though, at least so far. I'm still in the process of figuring out why. You can't locate any medium in that era and not see AIDS narratives, so why don't they appear in games? Games seem to sit oddly outside of time. Part of it is that they're either set in the distant past or in the far future. Maybe it's that people designing games don't want to have to deal with issues like AIDS. Maybe this could be the one space where you don't have to deal with that.

Another way to approach these questions is by taking a broad perspective on the archive and looking at trends in the data. For example, Evan Lauteria [Shaw's collaborator from the University of California, Davis] and I have been doing content analysis of the archive, counting up instances of different kinds of represen-

tation. One of the things we've found is that, over the eighties and nineties, the vast majority of gay-coded characters were male. Looking at the archive makes it seem like there were almost no lesbians in Japanese games. None of us thinks that that was actually the case, but the archive shows us that the types of games that people have noted as having LGBTQ content tend to be examples of men as opposed to examples of women. This might be because people making the lists tend to be men looking for representations of men. It could be because codes of female homo- or bisexuality, at least in the examples we found so far, tend to be much more implicit than those of male homosexuality.

Instead of keeping the archive private, you published it online and made it available to the public. That seems like a strong political statement. What inspired this approach?

A lot of the research I am doing builds on fan labor. I am dependent on the fact that people have recorded hours of gameplay and put it on YouTube. I'm dependent on the fact that people have spent hundreds of hours playing a game over and over again to create really detailed walk-throughs or entire transcriptions. So I don't think it is fair for me to keep all the data to myself. Sharing it feels more ethical than simply doing my work and hiding it in my office. This isn't just an academic project. The goal is to make it a community resource.

Note

This article is based on an interview with Adrienne Shaw conducted on 29 June 2016 via Skype.

Bonnie Ruberg is a Provost's Postdoctoral Scholar in the Interactive Media and Games Division at the University of Southern California and an assistant professor of digital media and games in the Department of Informatics at the University of California, Irvine. She is the coeditor of the volume *Queer Game Studies* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), the author of the book project "Playing Queer: Sexuality, Gender, and Identity in Video Games beyond Representation," and the lead organizer of the annual Queerness and Games Conference.

The LGBTQ Video Game Archive was funded in part by Temple University's Digital Scholarship Center Faculty Fellowship and a Refiguring Innovation in Games grant.



Figure 2. Anthony Prince, the main character in “The Ballad of Gay Tony,” an expansion pack for *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar, 2008)