



Figure 1. QGCon organizers Bonnie Ruberg, Diana Pozo, Zoya Street, Dietrich Squinkifer, and Chris Goetz at QGCon 2015 in Berkeley, CA. Photograph by Dominic Dagradi

## In Practice: Queerness and Games

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Diana Pozo, Bonnie Ruberg, and Chris Goetz

Queer gamers have always been a part of video game culture. However, the growing importance of fans to media consumption, as well as the rise to prominence of the independent game industry over the past ten years, has helped bring public recognition and awareness to queer gamers, game designers, and games critics and scholars. This special In Practice section builds outward from the community formed around the Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon), founded in 2013 at the University of California, Berkeley, to identify a set of practices associated with queerness and games across independent and industry game design, queer video game theory and criticism, and queer games pedagogy. This movement to blend queerness and games joins theory and practice; queer game designers are also queer video game theorists and critics. Likewise, queer game scholars innovate in and through game design and pedagogy.

The past ten or so years have seen a renaissance of independent art games variously described in terms of “countergaming,” “serious games,” and the “rise of the video game zinesters.”<sup>1</sup> Independent games were initially promoted as an art form, with

*Camera Obscura* 95, Volume 32, Number 2  
DOI 10.1215/02705346-3925167 © 2017 by *Camera Obscura*  
Published by Duke University Press

scholars and journalists alike highlighting the expressive range of “small” short-duration games like *Passage* (Jason Rohrer, 2007), which *Destructoid* called the “greatest five-minute-long game ever made.”<sup>2</sup> By 2014, a roster of queer-designed games made primarily by transgender women—*Dysqia* (Anna Anthropy, 2012), *Mainichi* (Mattie Brice, 2012), and *Lim* (Merritt Kopas, 2012), for example—had been canonized by academics and the press as part of a “queer games scene” that expanded the kinds of stories that could be told in games, as well as games’ affective range, visual style, and procedural rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> Some games inspired by the mechanics and aesthetics of these queer-designed games, including *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2013) and *Depression Quest* (Zoë Quinn, 2013), also gained recognition for bringing artistic diversity to games.

Yet in August 2014, game artists already working on the margins suddenly found themselves targeted by what quickly became known as the Gamergate controversy, one of the most threatening and antifeminist harassment campaigns on the Internet to date. Media critic Anita Sarkeesian of Feminist Frequency had been targeted by misogynist defenders of “game culture” back in 2012; observers of Gamergate witnessed harassment and threats aimed at many other women who had achieved public visibility in game design or game journalism.<sup>4</sup> The recognition many independent artists had earned in the early 2010s thus transformed into notoriety as their personal lives, dating histories, and gaming credentials were pulled apart both in professional contexts and on social media. Though aimed at excluding women, people of color, and queer and transgender folks from video game fandom, this harassment brought even greater attention to the importance of queer perspectives within and around game culture. In this context, the emergent field of queer video game studies has fought to publicize and critique queer content in high-budget and high-promotion studio tentpole titles (or AAA games), to document queer game players’ experiences, to highlight the contributions of queer game designers, and to pose questions of what can be called queer game mechanics.

The Queerness and Games Conference adds to ongoing

discussions of medium specificity in video game studies including the “narratology-ludology debates,” which focus on meaning as expressed in play mechanics, or programmed and structured repetitions in player interactions with software. Adding to the scholarly conversation about mechanics and meaning-making—from Ian Bogost’s “procedural rhetoric” to Noah Wardrip-Fruin’s “operational logic”—QGCon highlights queer scholars’ readings of formally innovative game design and queer game designers’ challenges to the conservative formalism of AAA games.<sup>5</sup> As Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum argue, “All games express and embody human values.”<sup>6</sup> The study of queer game mechanics thus asks how game design and game scholarship can mount a medium-specific challenge to the heteronormative values of the video game industry and its fandom.

Explicitly queer game scholarship is currently reaching critical mass with several monographs and edited collections challenging how scholars view queerness, games, diversity, and representation. Adrienne Shaw’s *Gaming at the Edge* uses an ethnographic study of queer and otherwise marginalized game fans to show that queer players do not necessarily need to see queer characters to enjoy games. Shaw contends that the argument for more inclusive representations based on the market logic that consumers will buy texts about people like themselves puts too much responsibility on already disadvantaged segments of the games community.<sup>7</sup> A 2015 special issue of *QED* brought work by queer game scholars including Edmond Chang, Bonnie Ruberg, and Shaw in conversation with work by queer game organizers and designers Jeffrey Sens and Matt Conn.<sup>8</sup> Two recently released anthologies, *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, edited by Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm, and *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Ruberg and Shaw, promise to invigorate the field still more.<sup>9</sup>

How does the field define what is queer about queer games? Queerness manifests in video game practice in at least three ways: (1) queer existence, (2) queer design mechanics and aesthetics, and (3) queer criticisms and histories. First, the heteronormativity of

video game culture makes the very existence of queer artists and scholars in the field (particularly femmes and women) an example of queerness and games in practice. In the context of continuing resistance to queer and feminine perspectives in video game culture, persisting and surviving in the fields of video game design, journalism, and scholarship is in itself a form of queer and feminist activism. Second, a queering of video game aesthetics and sensibilities is occurring through design, criticism, and pedagogy. Queer game design may expand the affective range of video games, their narrative possibilities, or their structural qualities. For instance, it may include queer aesthetics and experiences or use innovative game mechanics to queer the structure of games. Third, the practice of queer game studies requires the identification of a queer corpus of representations, mechanics, and styles, as well as a history of queer gamers and their interpretations of dominant video game culture. Queer readings of games and studies of queer game fandom can be considered queer game scholarship in practice. Excavating queer characters and histories from video games to document or discover queer potentialities is another practice that expands the field.

### **Video Games, Feminism, and Film Theory**

The methodologies suggested by this list of projects illustrating queer game studies in practice should sound familiar to scholars and historians of feminist film theory. Just as cinema both encoded patriarchal structures of looking and narrative and opened space for feminist criticism and fantasy, so too have video games historically excluded queer sexualities and genders while at the same time opening space for them. The queer study of video games, like the field of feminist film theory, aims to critique and refigure patriarchal and heteronormative power structures encoded in media.

The contemporary game industry operates on a studio system similar to Hollywood in the twentieth century with its formulaic genres, monopolistic control of certain markets, and tent-

pole AAA titles. Tools from early feminist film theory and criticism, such as the analysis of looking relations and the search for strong female characters, have therefore proven useful to protest the shortsightedness of some games and franchises. Feminists have also used simple and complex game design tools to produce their own games, employing game design as a form of feminist theory and practice. Feminist and queer theory and practice help scholars to view games in a new light, arguing for queer modes of playing and reading games. However, the feminist and queer study of video games as art and culture is in its early stages, and video game studies could still benefit from a serious consideration of feminist film theory and practice.

Perhaps the most powerful obstacle to a more serious relationship between feminist film theory and video game studies has been that early video game theory organized itself against film theory and criticism. In order to distinguish games as a separate medium from film and television, some scholars in the 1990s and 2000s sought to de-emphasize looking relations, visual representation, and narrative in the study of video games. These scholars positioned video games as a uniquely interactive and embodied medium, in the process marginalizing feminist film theory's contributions to the study of film as an embodied and interactive medium in its own right. With some important exceptions, early feminist critiques of video games employed feminist theory only sparsely, emphasizing discussions of visual style, strong female characters, and fan communities. These pop culture feminists have employed tools from feminist theory taught in introductory film studies classrooms removed from their original context. In particular, the concept of objectification and the idea of the male gaze have been used to argue that AAA game culture enacts violence against women through the sexualization of female nonplayer characters (NPCs), the representation of female NPCs as sex workers, and the existence of opportunities for player-characters to sexually harass these NPCs.<sup>10</sup> In this context, feminism has sometimes come to stand for a certain set of assumptions about video games—particularly the assumption that gamers are heterosexual cisgen-

der men who identify unproblematically with player-characters. Meanwhile, readings focusing on the mechanical and ludological aspects of games may marginalize gender and sexual critique, assuming that game mechanics exist in a space outside of feminism and queerness, or that issues of gender and sexuality only pertain to the narrative of games.

Feminist game designers, particularly queer feminist game designers, often use highly accessible game design tools, like the interactive fiction tool Twine and the 2-D tool Game Maker, to engage with video game theory and criticism in practice, creating an oppositional gaming culture to both answer and sidestep the debates surrounding AAA games. New queer video game theorists have drawn upon concepts from queer theory to problematize the literal readings of games circulating in popular culture (for instance, by exploring how the concept of queer failure can help us understand the importance of negative affect in gameplay).<sup>11</sup>

As the first conference explicitly dedicated to the intersection of video games and LGBTQ issues and cultures, the Queerness and Games Conference brings together communities of game academics, activists, and artists to produce new video game theory, combining feminist and queer video game theory and practice. The conference also puts queer and feminist theorists in dialogue with both an emergent community of feminist and queer game scholars as well as the queer games avant-garde. Feminist game studies must move beyond simplistic appropriations of Laura Mulvey's early work without eschewing radical feminist critique, while queer video game theory and practice must overcome its discomfort with feminist readings of game representation and narrative. Additionally, video game theory must acknowledge the usefulness of film theory to the ongoing scholarly conversation about video games.

### **Queer Games in Practice**

Since 2013, QGCon has become a hub for the queer game movement in the US. Its interdisciplinary team of organizers includes award-winning game designers, critics, and academics, and its format combines presentation styles common in the game industry

(such as the postmortem describing the design process of a game) with traditional academic work, workshops, public game demonstrations, and roundtables discussing aspects of race, gender, and sexual identity in game culture. The aim of this In Practice dossier is twofold: (1) to showcase some of the innovative work in design, criticism, and historiography that has been presented at QGCon—highlighting the interdisciplinary work being produced by junior and early-career scholars at and around the conference and the theory-practice work being done by queer game designers—and (2) to open a discussion between feminist film and media theory and the current queer game movement in the pages of *Camera Obscura*.

The first piece, “Creating an Archive of LGBTQ Video Game Content: An Interview with Adrienne Shaw,” explores a queer game studies project that brings together fans and scholars. The LGBTQ Video Game Archive, the first extensive online database of LGBTQ representations in video games, documents the long history of games’ queer content. In her interview with Bonnie Ruberg, Shaw explains the design process behind this archive, which contains analysis and criticism of a broad range of queer representations in game history and solicits contributions from fans.

Two further pieces introduce work presented at QGCon. In “Conferences, Conventions, Conversations, and *Coffee*,” Dietrich Squinkifer explores how playing the mobile device-assisted interactive game *Coffee: A Misunderstanding* at QGCon and elsewhere comments upon and shifts the dynamics of the event. Claudia Lo’s “Everything Is Wiped Away: Queer Temporality in *Queers in Love at the End of the World*” uses queer theory to analyze *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, a game by Anna Anthropy presented as part of the QGCon game arcade in 2014. This talk, which combined a live playthrough of the game in front of a room full of fans and the creator herself with a nuanced analysis of the game’s queer mechanics, demonstrates the particular confluence of energy, interdisciplinarity, and theoretical innovation taking place in queer game studies today. As QGCon expands its geographic scope, holding its 2017 conference in Los Angeles for the first time, this In Practice opens the conversation to an interdisciplinary feminist audience.



## Notes

1. See Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Ian Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); and Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012).
2. Anthony Burch, "Passage: The Greatest Five-Minute-Long Game Ever Made," *Destructoid*, 11 December 2007, [www.destructoid.com/passage-the-greatest-five-minute-long-game-ever-made-58961.phtml](http://www.destructoid.com/passage-the-greatest-five-minute-long-game-ever-made-58961.phtml).
3. Merritt Kopas has argued that this scene has been misunderstood as cohesive and lasting, while her experience of it was more loosely organized and short-lived. See Naomi Clark and Merritt Kopas, "Queering Human-Game Relations: Exploring Queer Mechanics and Play," *First Person Scholar*, 18 February 2015, [www.firstpersonscholar.com/queering-human-game-relations/](http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/queering-human-game-relations/); and Merritt Kopas, "Introduction," in *Videogames for Humans: Twine Authors in Conversation*, ed. Merritt Kopas (San Francisco: Instar Press, 2015), 5–19.
4. Oliver Moore, "Woman's Call to End Video Game Misogyny Sparks Vicious Online Attacks," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 11 July 2012, [www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/womans-call-to-end-video-game-misogyny-sparks-vicious-online-attacks/article4405585/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/womans-call-to-end-video-game-misogyny-sparks-vicious-online-attacks/article4405585/); Anita Sarkeesian, "TEDxWomen Talk about Online Harassment and Cyber Mobs," *Feminist Frequency*, 5 December 2012, [feministfrequency.com/video/tedxwomen-talk-on-sexist-harassment-cyber-mobs/](http://feministfrequency.com/video/tedxwomen-talk-on-sexist-harassment-cyber-mobs/); and Jay Hathaway, "What Is Gamergate, and Why?: An Explainer for Non-Geeks," *Gawker*, 10 October 2014, [gawker.com/what-is-gamergate-and-why-an-explainer-for-non-geeks-1642909080](http://gawker.com/what-is-gamergate-and-why-an-explainer-for-non-geeks-1642909080).
5. Bogost, *Persuasive Games*; Noah Wardrip-Fruin, *Expressive Processing: Digital Fictions, Computer Games, and Software Studies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
6. Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum, *Values at Play in Digital Games* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 3.

7. Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
8. Charles E. Morris III and Thomas K. Nakayama, eds., “Queerness and Video Games,” special issue, *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking* 2, no. 2 (2015).
9. Jennifer Malkowski and TreaAndrea Russworm, eds., *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017); and Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, eds., *Queer Game Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
10. Women’s place in video game production and fandom has been complex and intertwined with sexuality and sexual representation since at least the 1990s. On women and sexuality in video game history, see Laine Nooney, “A Pedestal, a Table, a Love Letter: Archaeologies of Gender in Videogame History,” *Game Studies* 13, no. 2 (December 2013), [gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney](http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney). Recent years have seen concepts from early feminist film theory, including objectification and the gaze, used to explain gender in games. See, for example, Anita Sarkeesian, “Tropes vs. Women: Women as Background Decoration (Part 1),” *Feminist Frequency*, 16 June 2014, [feministfrequency.com/video/women-as-background-decoration-tropes-vs-women/](http://feministfrequency.com/video/women-as-background-decoration-tropes-vs-women/).
11. See Bonnie Ruberg, “No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games That Annoy, Anger, Sadden, and Hurt,” *QED* 2, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 108–24.

**Diana Pozo** organizes the Queerness and Games Conference and taught the Queerness and Games Design Workshop at the University of California, Berkeley, in 2015. Pozo recently graduated from the University of California, Santa Barbara, with a PhD in film and media studies and an emphasis in feminist studies. Their work on technology, sexuality, feminism, and film theory has appeared in *Porn Studies*, *New Review of Film and Media Studies*, *Mediascape*, *Rated M for Mature: Sex and Sexuality in Video Games*, and the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Film Theory*. Pozo's current book project is titled "Haptic Media: Gender, Sexuality, and Affect in Technology Culture, 1959–2015."

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**Chris Goetz** is a film, digital media, and video game scholar whose research focuses on fantasy and play across a range of platforms from cinema to interactive digital media. His published works have appeared in *Games and Culture* and *New Media and Society* and are forthcoming in the edited volume *Queer Game Studies* and the journal *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*. He is one of the founding organizers of QGCon. Chris is assistant professor of film studies and new media at the University of Iowa.

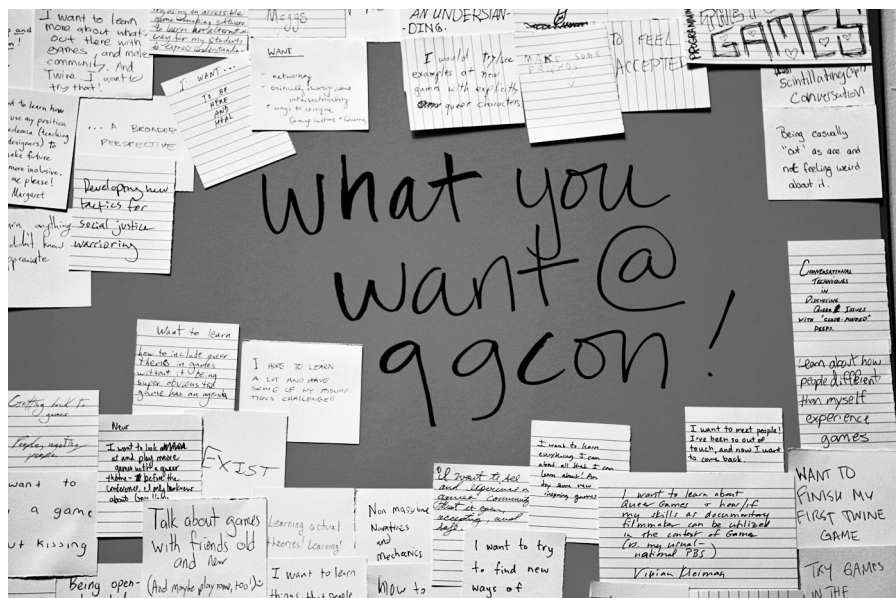


Figure 2. “What you want @ qgcon!”: Presenters, organizers, and attendees shared their hopes for the 2014 conference on this public poster.