Queer

Game

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Studies

Chapter **26**

Forty-Eight-Hour Utopia

On Hope and the Future of Queerness in Games

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Two weeks before the inaugural Queerness and Games Conference (QGCon), I found myself on the phone with a reporter from the *San Francisco Bay Guardian.* He had chosen our event (conference mission: "to explore the intersection of LGBT issues and video games") as the subject of an upcoming cover story. It seemed like an honor. The reporter and I talked about the exciting mix of academics and game developers who were coming to present. We talked about the indie designers who were exhibiting queer work in our arcade. But then the big questions started, questions I couldn't always answer. What about, for example, discrimination in games, one of the many topics the conference claimed to address? What exactly, the reporter wanted to know, did we intend to do about it? How were we going to make things better?

It's not an unreasonable question, and I realize in retrospect that all the reporter wanted was an upbeat, uplifting sound bite. From his perspective, I should have responded with confidence, command, and a surefire plan. "Homophobia runs rampant in games," the perfectly quotable me would have said. "My conference is here to make sure

that changes, and fast." Or maybe I would have promised a utopian light at the end of the tunnel. "Crusaders like me are on the path to fixing systemic problems in the video game industry," I could have self-righteously assured him. "The present is bleak, but the future is coming. It is equality. It is happiness." There were even rainbows on the Queerness and Games Conference logo.

I couldn't bring myself to say any of those boldly idealistic things though. For years before I became an academic, I worked as a video games journalist. I knew well that anything I said to a reporter might appear on the pages of Wednesday's alt weekly irrevocably decontextualized, sure to insult or misrepresent . . . someone. Co-organizing the conference, which was set to take place at UC Berkeley in October 2013, had already proven an extremely delicate operation. Though we organizers came from diverse backgrounds, many potential speakers expressed concern that the conference would feel like an unsafe space. Scholars feared they would find themselves lost among the jargon of game developers. Developers feared that scholars would look down their noses and dissect their games with three-dollar words. After many carefully crafted e-mails and (thankfully only one) public Twitter spat, I knew to think before making bold statements on behalf of our community.

Understandably, this didn't please the reporter from the *Bay Guardian*. "You sound like a PR rep," he told me. "You're always on message. Come on, you obviously think there's something wrong with how queer characters are being represented in games. If you could wave a magic wand, what would you *want* games to be like?"

Imagine a perfect world. As Ursula Le Guin reminds us in "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas," her meditation on utopia, that's easier said than done.

I made excuses. "It's really not that simple . . ." The truth was that I had no idea how to answer. I had spent months planning the conference, creating a platform for others to speak, and I knew that I wanted to open new dialogues, to inspire new ways of seeing games queerly. But what did I personally want for the future of video games? Not me as a representative of the Queerness and Games Conference, but me as a player, as someone passionate about the medium? Even lingering over the question felt selfish. By day, I study expressions of

sexuality and gender in digital media. In theory, the scholar elucidates culture; she doesn't prescribe. Yet it goes without saying that I think that video games would be a better place if more mainstream games represented LGBT characters as whole people instead of sideline stereotypes, if we put an end to homophobia in video games and the games industry, and if we made space for queer gamers like myself to call video games our own.

Optimism, however, does not come easy to me. It makes me feel unrealistic. Staying cynical means that my hopes don't have too far to fall each time someone on the Internet calls me a "stupid dyke" for talking about homoerotics in *Portal,* or threatens to hunt me down with a handgun for questioning racial representations in *Resident Evil 5* (to name only a few of the incidents from my years writing about games). As long as the Queerness and Games Conference went smoothly and sparked fresh ideas, I would consider it a success. After all, what's the point of dreaming impossibly big, of dreaming utopia, the "no place" that science fiction long ago taught us only exists as the dystopia in disguise?

I left the reporter with the least committal of parting remarks: "The future will bring something different."

What I didn't know until the Queerness and Games Conference began, or perhaps until after it ended, was that my co-organizers and I had created our own forty-eight-hour paradise—not perfect, because nothing is perfect—but impossibly beautiful and also impossibly brief.

In many ways, the conference resembled any number of other university conferences and/or small-scale "alternative" game events. Held in UC Berkeley's impressively collegiate South Hall, home of the School of Information, it began with a speaker dinner on a Friday night, continued for a full day of talks on Saturday, included a Saturday night pizza party and "play session," and ran on through Sunday evening with more panels and workshops. We had keynotes. We had badges. Business cards exchanged hands. References to Foucault were made. Volunteers on break in the hallways played games on the Nintendo DS. As organizers, we ran around shaking hands, plugging in AV equipment, directing attendees to our gender-neutral bathroom, putting out fires: the usual.

However, somewhere along the way, something happened that made the Queerness and Games Conference different from any other event I've attended. Something—and the cynic in me can't quite believe I'm saying this—downright magical.

Maybe it was the collaboration. We opened the conference with a session called "What Is Queerness and Games?" Each of the organizers spoke about their hopes for the weekend (mine: to stop being seen as that "one weird grad student" who works on queer game studies). Each of the audience members wrote their own goals down on index cards, shared them with their neighbors, and then posted them by the entrance to the building. Later in the day, keynote speaker Colleen Macklin challenged listeners to imagine different ways of conceptualizing queer games. Co-organizer Chelsea Howe ran a paper prototyping workshop that ended in the creation of a new tabletop RPG based on dragons in drag. Sunday's micro-talk session, which opened the floor to any attendee to speak on any subject, buzzed with excitement. Our final panel, "The Future of Queerness and Games," roused enthusiastic feedback and created dialogue across disciplines and industries.

Maybe the magic came from a kind of intellectual alchemy. We didn't know what would happen when we put academics and game designers in a room (well, a building) together for the weekend. The resulting organic, emergent, and generative chemistry far exceeded my most secret and optimistic expectations. Keynote speaker Jack Halberstam, well-known for his writing on queer failure, joined in for a public conversation with Jesper Juul, well-known for his writing on game failure—a combination I may have described, when I introduced the two, as an "academic slash fiction." Keynote speaker Kathryn Bond Stockton used the term *jouissance* in her talk on gaming and queer children. "Oh no," I thought as I eyed the audience from the back of the room, "game folks can smell fancy French terminology a mile away. I hope no one is complaining about this on Twitter." Not only did no one complain, Stockton's talk had a huge impact. In one of the Sunday afternoon sessions, a designer who had previously vocalized his distrust of academics took the stage earnestly and ecstatically chanting, "Jouissance! Jouissance!"

Or maybe the magic came from visibility and acceptance. Showing up at gaming events and showing up queer is so often an emotionally (and potentially physically) dangerous combination. We organizers tried our best to address this explicitly, and while there is always room for improvement, it largely seems to have worked. Our program featured an "inclusivity statement," inspired by a similar statement written for New York University's Different Games, which stressed the importance of respecting every individual's chosen identity. Again and again, over the course of the weekend, the sight of so many gender nonnormative gamers and scholars meeting under one roof moved me. In my own life, I encounter many moments when I feel pressured to either tone down my queerness (Bonnie, don't mention that you're kinky in front of other academics) or to perform it (Bonnie, do mention your ex-girlfriend so that others won't mistake you for straight). For the first time in academia, the first time in games, and possibly the first time ever, I felt like I had found a community where I could be the version of myself that I am on the inside.

However you explain the magic of the Queerness and Games Conference, I wasn't the only one who felt it. Attendees and speakers came to us many times over the course of the weekend to thank us, to hug us, to share their stories. By Saturday night a large circle of folks had formed in the hallway to discuss their own complicated gender identities. By Sunday night the audience was collectively daydreaming about all the queer games events we could organize to keep our wonderful but temporary community together. In the days after the conference, I received an amazing and humbling landslide of e-mails from scholars and developers who shared my warm, glowing sentiments about the conference.

When my colleagues back in the Berkeley Department of Comparative Literature asked me how the weekend had gone (they'd seen me stress about it for weeks prior), I couldn't help but put aside my academic persona and beam. "It was short," I murmured wistfully, "but it was wonderful." Many of them looked back at me with polite but puzzled smiles. It was time to stop hugging, I realized. It was time to stop grinning. The utopia had come and gone.

The words of my co-organizer Mattie Brice, who'd addressed the

crowd caringly in conference's final moments, came to mind: "Take care of yourself. This has been a wonderful weekend. But it's a very different world out there."

In the months that passed after the first Queerness and Games Conference, once my bliss had mellowed into general good feeling, once we decided to take the plunge and organize the conference again in 2014, I found myself again wondering about the value of hope and the notion of a queer games utopia. Even as I reflected on the magic of the event, I couldn't help but hear the questioning voice of the *Bay Guardian* reporter. What did you accomplish? What about LGBT issues and video games did you actually change? Why struggle to replicate your forty-eight-hour haven if you're not certain it did any good? Even the notion of "striving to do good" was potentially problematic. Did "making video games a better place" mean instrumentalizing the members of our newly forming queer games community?

In part he's right, that straw man. Many things looked much the same in that next year as they had the year before. There was still homophobia in video games, still homophobia in the video games industry. There were still quarrels over queer representation, still queer players who felt abandoned by the art form they love. Still glowing from the inclusivity and warmth of the Queerness and Games Conference, I discovered that I had more trouble than ever stomaching events like the Game Developers Conference (GDC). In a short time, I had grown so accustomed to speaking with other people who are passionate about LGBT issues that I'd forgotten the snickering dismissiveness of mainstream games cultures. At a GDC cocktail party, a friend of a friend scrunched up his face and glared at me when I told him I co-organize the Queerness and Games Conference. "Queerness? And games?" he asked with a twinge of sarcasm and disgust. "Okay, I just wanted to make sure I heard you right." Long after he'd sauntered off to another part of the bar, my mind replayed his comment. Why did it make me so angry? I used to face the firing squad of online commenters every time I published an article. I used to have a thick skin. My temporary no-place had opened my mind and my heart, but it had also made me soft, vulnerable. It had made me happy, but it also made me lose track of what was, in some sense, real.

However, to that reporter, I could have also said, "Yes, some things have changed." I would have been exaggerating if I claimed they had changed specifically because of the Queerness and Games Conference. The diversity track at GDC in 2014 featured a number of talks about queerness and games, bringing the topic to a much wider industry audience. I was also working with coeditor Adrienne Shaw to put together this collection, which emerged in part from QGCon 2013.

Now, in 2016, the Queerness and Games Conference is entering its fourth year. Back at that first conference, I had felt like the "weird grad student" who studied queer issues in games. Today I am an incoming professor of digital games and queer game studies has become a burgeoning area of research. The intersection of queerness and video games is being recognized as a crucial topic for discussion and activism by more and more game designers, players, and academics every day. For me, it all began with that one weekend, one building, and the two hundred people inside its walls. It began with cautious optimism, with anxious hope, and it has become something bigger than me or any individual, bigger than QGCon, far more complicated than utopia but also far more rich and full of potential.

As always, the fearful cynic in me is still wary of hoping too much, but I now see the value of even the most fleeting of welcoming spaces. A temporary community is still a community, and the powerful feeling of belonging lasts long beyond any given place or time. I have also come to see the value of optimism, of idealism, and of happiness, even if these, too, are fleeting. When we share these feelings, if only for an instant, we believe that anything is possible. Real change is hard, but this initial inspiration is still crucial. It shapes us, drives us, and fuels us to work toward a feasibly different tomorrow. It allows us to push forward because we feel we are pushing together, challenging and supporting one another, making new worlds.

If I could wave a magic wand, what future would I wish for queerness and games? My perspective has changed considerably since I first stumbled through an answer to that question. My idea of utopia has also changed. I still wish for video games that represent queer folks fairly and fully, for a video games industry marked by acceptance and diversity, for an academy engaged in heated discussions

around queer games. In the meantime, though, I've come to find great meaning in the temporary moments that reconnect me to the people with whom I share my passion for the power of video games and those who play them.

The evening after that GDC cocktail party that had left me spinning, I sat outside an industry-oriented dance party watching the crowd and wondering if video games would ever be *okay,* and what that even meant. Suddenly a friendly face appeared in the crowd, a Queerness and Games attendee I hadn't seen since our closing panel in October. "Bonnie!" he shouted, running to pull me up into a hug. When I told him about our yet-unannounced decision to organize the conference again in 2014, he literally jumped with joy. "QGCon is back! QGCon is back!" In his voice I heard reflected my own excitement, my own happiness, and my own feeling that the "no place" of utopia had become some place after all.

Looking back from 2016, the questions of optimism and utopia that we Queerness and Games Conference organizers wrestled with in those first moments seem far away—not because we have found the answers, and not because equality has finally come to games, but because now we know beyond a doubt that the issue of difference and video games matters. It matters to the hundreds of people who have attended QGCon and its associated programs. It matters to the many thousands more who are rallying for social justice in so many corners of the games world. The Queerness and Games Conference no longer feels like magic. Now it feels real: a real community, a real set of labors, a real accomplishment. We may never find our utopia, and that is how it should be. There is no perfection, only change—in games, in our communities, and in ourselves. That is what I hope for.