

## CHAPTER 2

# QUEER INDIE GAME-MAKING: AN INTERVIEW WITH MO COHEN

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A decade ago, when independent video game development first gained prominence in the games industry and games culture, the discussions that surrounded indie games often focused on a select few “auteurs,” primarily cisgender, heterosexual, white men. However, as game development tools and distribution platforms have shifted, and as the cultural landscape of video games itself has begun to change, indie game-making has become the terrain of many more creative voices. As Anna Anthropy rightly predicted in her 2012 book *Rise of the Video Game Zinesters*, a new generation of indies is bringing diverse perspectives to the medium of video games by creating games inspired by experiences of identity, marginalization, and difference. At the same time, these “zinesters” are challenging and fundamentally changing how video games are conceptualized, produced, and experienced.

Leading this sea change are queer indie game-makers. Starting in roughly 2012, video games have been shifting in part because of the rise of the “queer games avant-garde,” a movement (loosely termed) of independent developers whose games are shaped by queer experiences or who themselves identify as queer—or, most often, both (Ruberg, 2019). Some of these indies, such as Anthropy, Mattie Brice, Christine Love, merritt kopas, Porpentine, and Robert Yang, are well known among players interested in “diverse” video games. However, there are dozens of indie game-makers who have contributed to the queer games avant-garde, and new artists are embarking on this work regularly. The independent game distribution platform itch.io alone lists nearly a thousand games under its LGBT tag. With its experimental ethos and its investment in intersectionality, queer game-making is leading the new generation of independent games (Ruberg, 2018).

Those who are committed to social justice in video games should recognize and indeed celebrate the contributions of the queer game avant-garde, which is pushing indie game-making and video games as a broader medium in important new directions. At the same time, it is crucial to remain wary of the narratives that surround indie game-making, which

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are often framed as empowering without consideration for complications. Indie game-making is financially precarious work, made more so for queer folks and others who are often already in positions of social and economic disadvantage (Boluk and Lemieux, 2017, p. 33). Even for the most successful queer indies, making games often means scraping together an unreliable living through crowdfunding or donation-based game sales. The exciting artistic, cultural, and political power of these games must be considered alongside the lived realities of the people—and especially the queer and otherwise marginalized people—who create them. Each of these realities, and the individual relationship between a game-maker and their art, is complex, unique, and telling in its own ways.

This chapter presents an interview with one such queer game-maker, Mo Cohen, the creator behind the independent studio QueerMo Games. Cohen lives in Portland, Oregon. Originally from New Jersey, they spent parts of their life in California and New York City before settling in the Pacific Northwest. Cohen is the designer of *Queer Quest* (QueerMo Games, in development), a point-and-click adventure game about queer women of color—or, as Cohen refers to the game in promotional material, a “point-and-clit adventure game”—which is due out in 2020 (<http://queermogames.com/>). *Queer Quest* is about two queer women of color, Lupe and Alexis, and what it means for their queer community when Alexis goes mysteriously missing. Like Dietrich Squinkifer’s 2013 game *Dominique Pamplémousse in “It’s All Over Once the Fat Lady Sings!”*, *Queer Quest* is inspired by the genre of classic point-and-click adventure games from the 1990s and subverts that genre, reimagining the kinds of stories such games can tell and the ways that meaning might be made through their mechanics.

Queer community is a recurring theme in Cohen’s work. Strikingly, in this interview, Cohen points to the 2016 Pulse shootings in Orlando as a major influence on *Queer Quest*. Though the game has an upbeat tone and a colorful look, grief and loss are key themes in the work. Cohen even has plans to make grief an “object” in the game—reconsidering the notion of the collectible object, a standard mechanical element of the point-and-click genre, as a metaphor for the feelings that a person carries with them. In addition to *Queer Quest*, Cohen is also the designer of *Bottoms Up: A Historic Gay Bar Tycoon*, the first chapter of which was published in 2018.

*Bottoms Up* likewise tells stories that have rarely been seen in video games. Inspired by archival materials at the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles, *Bottoms Up* is a game about owning a queer bar in the 1920s and avoiding police surveillance while forming a queer community.

Conducted in the spring of 2017, this interview with Mo Cohen is part of a larger oral history project that includes more than twenty original interviews with contributors to the queer games avant-garde. The goal of these interviews has been to foreground the stories that queer indies tell about their own work: their art practices, their politics, their accomplishments, and the challenges they have faced. In this way, the project offers an important alternative to the stories that are often told about queer indie video games in news reporting or mainstream games industry discourse, where such games are often referenced to serve a simplistic narrative about how video games are “getting better.” By telling the story of queer indie game-making through the words of queer indies themselves, this project also productively complicates the analysis of queer games by game studies scholars, such as myself. It values queer game-makers as artists who explain their own work in nuanced and powerful ways.

In this interview, Cohen talks about the revolutionary potential of making games about and for marginalized people, Cohen’s own transition from poet to programmer, and the financial pitfalls of developing a queer indie game. Of the many game-makers interviewed for this project, Cohen speaks with notable frankness and poignancy about labor, self-care, and how even a well-intentioned designer can make mistakes when representing difference. As they discuss here, Cohen’s journey to indie game-making itself challenges many normative ideas about who makes video games and how games are made. Before working on their own games, Cohen did not have formal training in coding. In 2016, they attempted to raise the money to fund the development of *Queer Guest* through crowdfunding. Despite Cohen’s considerable efforts, the crowdfunding campaign did not reach its goal, and they received none of the pledged funding. This has proven to be a crucial moment in Cohen’s path as an indie game-maker. It both forced them to confront the challenges of queer game-making and inspired them to help others succeed. Despite this setback, Cohen continues their game-making practice, driven by a belief that video games can speak meaningfully to queer experiences, queer histories, and queer communities.

**Ruberg: You use the word “queer” in the title of your game, *Queer Quest*, and the name of your company, QueerMo Games. Do you identify as queer? What does queerness mean to you?**

Cohen: I definitely identify as queer. Other words I identify with are Jewish, dyke, non-binary, and boi. Pick an identity and, at some point, it has probably resonated with me. That’s why I like the word “queer.” It’s a good catch-all.

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Queerness for me is like family. If I'm in a new city by myself, I will look for queer bars so that I don't feel alone. I remember one night, I had to travel to Texas for work. A friend of mine had just passed away, and I couldn't be there for their funeral. So, I went to a queer bar and befriended some drag queens. It helped. There's just this comfort in queerness.

I called the LLC that I registered in order to start making queer games QueerMo Games just to be as straightforward as I could about what I was doing.

### **Ruberg: *Queer Quest* is your first, longer term game design project. How did you get involved in making queer indie video games?**

Cohen: Before I knew I wanted to make video games, I was really into nonfiction writing. My family is all writers. I was an English major in college, and I went to New York for my MFA in creative writing, but I dropped out almost right away. I was in a writing workshop, and this woman turned in an awful story. I thought, "She got into the same program as me. Screw it, I'm going to drop out." The story had to do with the song "Don't Stop Believing." Whenever I hear that song now, I know I'm on the right path.

After I dropped out of grad school, I was living in New York working as a barista. I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. I had a Tumblr where I posted video game latte art I made. One day, I thought, "Why am I making video game latte art when I could be making video games?" I read Anna Anthropy's book about video games as zines and that was a huge influence. I knew I wanted to start with a point-and-click adventure game because that was what shaped me the most as a kid. I grew up playing games like *Leisure Suit Larry* and *Monkey Island* with my sister, and we bonded over playing them together. I got into video games as a more complete form of storytelling that people are more likely to interact with than a book. Video games have this sort of different accessibility to the story that books have.

The first little game I made was called *Queertastrophe*. You're at a dance party, trying to avoid your exes while bringing drinks to cuties. When I made *Queertastrophe*, I released the first version on [the indie game distribution platform] Game Jolt in 2013.

One of the comments on it was, "This was the first and only game that popped up when I searched up queer on Game Jolt." It was really cute. I am glad that I am not the only person that goes to video game websites and searches for the word "queer."

Now I'm working on *Queer Quest*. I basically learned programming for the sake of making the game. I'm about a third of the way through now. My plan is to release it in 2020. For a long time, I was really worried that someone would make *Queer Quest* before me. Other queer point-and-click adventure games have come out, like *Read Only Memories* (Midboss, 2015), but none of them are like *Queer Quest*.

**Ruberg: In addition to making queer indie games, you also work full-time in the tech industry. Do you find that work fulfilling?**

Cohen: I have a day job as a programmer at a tech company. It's one of those places where they ask questions like, "What is your experience as a woman in tech?" For all the feminism in the tech industry these days, there's a lot of red tape when it comes to talking about gender. At my previous job, I surveyed women about their experiences in tech, and I got in trouble with HR. It's frustrating, but it's nice to work at a place that has benefits so I can make my dream game on the side. Working on *Queer Quest* balances me out.

**Ruberg: So many initiatives these days encourage women to learn to code because it is supposedly empowering. Has that been your experience?**

Cohen: I like programming as a tool to solve problems but it's not actually that interesting. Sometimes I do feel like it gives me power—like when I'm at a male-centric game conference and all the men say, "What are you, an artist?" and I'm like, "No, I'm a programmer."

There's a really steep emotional learning curve to programming though because it makes you feel like you know nothing. My friend just started a coding bootcamp. She's maybe four weeks in and she's having panic attacks. I get that. I never thought I would be a programmer. I'm not disappointed about it, but I'm also not excited. I'm just happy that I get to make this really fucking gay game.

**Ruberg: You're involved with the Portland Indie Games Squad (PIGSquad). Would you say that you're also part of a broader queer games community?**

Cohen: PIGSquad has had a huge impact on me. When I was first learning how to make games, I was living in New York. I tried to get involved with [the art games organization] Babycastles, but it was really intimidating.

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I volunteered but I never felt like I was a part of the community. When I moved back to Portland, I found PIGSquad. I was so scared the first time I went to one of their meetings that I took my girlfriend with me.

Afterward, she was like, “I can’t believe you were so nervous to meet all those nerds.” I was so impressed though, because they were doing exactly what I wanted to do.

PIGSquad is still mostly white men. That’s why going to the Queerness and Games Conference [QGCon] for the first time this year was amazing. I got to meet all these other queer developers. Before QGCon, I’d had very little interaction with other people who make queer games. I still do feel like I’m part of a queer games movement, though.

**Ruberg: How did you decide to make *Queer Quest* as your first game? Where did the idea for Lupe and Alexis’ story come from?**

Cohen: A few years ago, there was a homophobic hate crime in Portland. The queer community’s response was to hold hands across a bridge. I didn’t go. I was so cynical; I thought it was pointless. I had some idea about the right way to respond to grief, but the truth is that there isn’t a right way to respond. Now, years later, I’ve been to many hand-holding events and I see why they are powerful. As a result of that, a lot of *Queer Quest* is about how community responds to tragedy.

One of my biggest influences in making *Queer Quest* has been the Pulse shooting. The night that it happened, my friends and I went to a big queer party. It was a bizarre way to mourn, but we needed to be in a physical queer space together. There was this heaviness that I felt the need to dive into with the lens of a game developer.

Maybe that’s my coping mechanism.

**Ruberg: It’s surprising to hear that tragedy was an inspiration for *Queer Quest*, since the game’s tone is so lighthearted and funny.**

Cohen: Point-and-click adventures are known for their campiness. I use humor to tackle serious issues. I don’t think I could get through real life without humor.

**Ruberg : Has your interest in exploring grief shaped the design of the game?**

Cohen: Definitely. Lupe has moments of very intense feeling. At one point, you can lie on the ground and just stare at the sky. It doesn’t help you

progress; you just need to process. Some people have said that *Queer Quest* seems like a twist on a typical damsel-in-distress game, but you never see Mario cry for Peach.

Grief also appears as this object that breaks the standards of the point-and-click genre. Point-and-click adventure games are very inventory based. Normally, you have items that help you solve problems. At the moment Alexis get kidnapped, an item appears in Lupe's inventory that is "grief." It doesn't help you in any traditional way. If you use it, it triggers statements like, "I wish I could have done something differently" or "I'm so angry!" or "Why couldn't it be me instead?"

**Ruberg: What responses have you gotten to *Queer Quest* when you've showed the demo at game events?**

Cohen: In the demo, you play as Lupe. You have to make nachos for your cute girlfriend Alexis. Lupe goes into the kitchen and when they come out Alexis has been kidnapped. It's really painstaking to make a game, so I'm always surprised when people react to it.

Like, "What! The demo is over?" They're concerned. When I play my own game, I'm bug testing. When I see other people playing it, they're in a completely different mindset.

Sometimes little kids play it. The youngest to beat it so far was an eight-year-old. I always get nervous when parents are like, "Oh, can my kid play your game?" I'm thinking, "Probably, but it has the word 'pussy' in it." I was ten when I was playing *Leisure Suit Larry* (Sierra Entertainment, 1987) though. Why shouldn't an eight-year-old play a queer, sex-positive game?

Sometimes, when I show the game, people see the title and make this squinty, judge-y face. They're trying to tell whether the game is going to be offensive—like, "Is this going to make fun of queer people or support queer people?" I call the game a "feminist *Leisure Suit Larry*" but that doesn't always get the response I hope it will. You know, *Leisure Suit Larry* was super sexist, but you can also imagine a game that is very sex positive where there are boobs in it and that's ok.

**Ruberg: On your blog, you've written about interviewing a wide range of queer people so that you can bring a diversity of voices to *Queer Quest* (Cohen, 32016). Why has that been important to you?**

Cohen: I want *Queer Quest* to represent the full texture of queer people's experiences in the real world. For example, I have trans characters in the

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game, so I interviewed trans femmes about representation. That's how I learned about the Topside Test. It's like the Bechdel Test, but it's with trans characters. When two trans characters are talking but they aren't talking about being trans, then they pass the Topside Test. Next up on my list is to talk to folks who identify as bisexual, because they're queer but often they're invisible in queer communities.

There are a lot of people of color in the game, too. Alexis and Lupe are Latina and Latinx. I knew I couldn't make a video game with white people as the main characters. We have plenty of that already. I've also been interviewing people about race, but that been a slower process, unfortunately, because Portland is such a white city.

A lot of what I'm learning are things I know from my background in writing. I was talking to a friend of mine about physical disabilities. He asked me, "When did this character end up in a wheelchair? How did that happen?" With characters of color, I need to ask myself questions like, "What is this character's cultural identity? What is their family heritage?" Those are things that a lot of game-makers never think about.

Their characters aren't influenced by the past. They're only influenced by what the player does. They use white-dude characters like blank slates, because they have the privilege of not needing any background. To me, that is a real failing of character development. The details are vital.

Figuring out those details is way easier said than done though. It's like, "Ok, what city should Lupe's family be from? What will the impact be if I pick a city that is more northern or more southern?" How much research do I do before I say, "Enough, I just need to focus?" One thing that helps is that almost all my characters are based off friends. So I can pick their brains and I can learn about their families. It spares me having to make things up. I want to be as well informed as I can without getting so dragged down in the details that the game never gets finished.

**Ruberg: It sounds like you've tried to be very conscientious about how you represent marginalized folks in your games. Have there been times when you've found that challenging?**

Cohen: I'll tell you about a time when I fucked up. When I was promoting the Kickstarter for *Queer Quest*, the Huffington Post wrote an article about the game. In the article, I describe a puzzle where Lupe is at a bar and there's a drag show, but there are too many straight people in the bar and you need to get them to leave to make room for the queer people. In the quote, I



describe the straight people as “breeders.” When I used that word, I didn’t realize that I was hurting bi, trans, and pansexual folks. A lot of people left comments telling me the word was offensive. It was a funny experience of getting called out by the people I wanted to support. I’m glad I’ve been in enough intersectional and feminist spaces that I know to use it as a chance for self-reflection. I talked to a lot of friends who said, “Oh, you can’t make everyone happy.” But I was like, “This is a game about queer community. If it’s going to make anyone happy, it should be queer people.”

So now I’m editing the dialogue in that scene so that Lupe talks to a drag queen who calls the straight people “breeders,” and a dialogue option comes up where you can explore that word. Lupe can say, “Hey, I heard that’s not a great word for these reasons . . .” Another comment on that same Huffington Post article was someone saying, “I don’t care about the word ‘breeders,’ but what about the word ‘queer’? That’s offensive. I was like, “No, I have to draw a line somewhere and that’s where it is.”

**Ruberg: *Queer Quest* is a game about queer people, but it’s also a game you’re designing for queer people—that is, queer players. Do you have plans for how to reach that audience?**

When the game comes out, I intend on making it pay-what-you-can for queer folks but also putting it on Steam for a set price. The idea is to make it available for the people who it’s actually made for. I was reading recently about a game developer who makes gay games. They were saying that more straight people were more likely to play their game than gay people or queer people. That made me worried about who my audience is going to be. Really, it’s about figuring out where queer art clusters. Those are the places where you want to share a game like this. You don’t want to share it somewhere where people don’t care.

**Ruberg: You gave a talk at the Queerness and Games Conference this year [in 2017] about the importance of self-care for queer indie game-makers. What are some of your own self-care practices?**

Cohen: Indie game-makers usually have to do everything themselves, so it’s easy to burn out. It’s important to take care of yourself. For me, friendship has really helped—and so have cat gifs. I ride my bike, I hang out with a lot of my friends, my queer community, we lay at the beach when it’s good weather. For how anti-social I am, I’m really into being very social. It’s about having that balance of living in the moment versus staring at a computer all the time.

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While I was working on my Kickstarter campaign, I had a little altar with some candles where I could set my intention for the day. Another thing that worked well for me was making fun of Internet trolls. Someone online left a comment about the game that said, “I bet a white straight guy did the kidnapping, right?” I had the honor of replying, “I’m sorry, there’s no one in this game that fits that description.”

Other things didn’t work as well for me. I was bad at delegating. Also, I tried taking Ritalin and writing three blog posts in one night. I showed them to my friend the next morning and she was like, “Wow, these make it sound like you’re on drugs.” Not good.

**Ruberg: Are there lessons that you learned from your Kickstarter campaign that would be helpful for other indie game-makers who are figuring out how to fund their work?**

Cohen: It takes so much work to run a successful Kickstarter campaign. You need to build up a reputation. You also need friends who have money, which I didn’t have. I wasn’t going to be like, “Hey, broke-ass queer community, help me fund this game.” I tried appealing to tech people, but it was also weird to be like, “Hey rich, straight people, pay for me to make this game that isn’t about or for you.”

In retrospect, I wish I’d picked IndieGoGo instead of Kickstarter, since IndieGoGo lets you keep the money, even if the campaign doesn’t reach its goal. Since then, I’ve moved to Patreon, which is much better. It’s more creator-oriented and interactive.

I also struggled with people’s perceptions of how much money it should take to make a video game. The goal for the *Queer Quest* Kickstarter was around \$40,000.

People would always say, “Oh gosh, you’re asking for so much money.” Some trolls would even be like, “You’re a greedy Jew.” Who are these people? The ways I see trolls, it’s like if you went to a supermarket and you picked up a can of beans and you were like, “I hate you, beans!” Why are you telling me that? Who asked you? I don’t like you either, so we’re even.

**Ruberg: Over the last few years, there has been a lot of talk about how anyone can make an indie video game these days, even without expertise or money. Given how much effort you’ve put into learning to code and raising funds, it sounds like you would disagree.**

Cohen: To anyone who thinks that, I would say, “That’s ridiculous.” It’s true that a lot of development tools are free these days, but no one has all the skills to make a game.

Let’s say I want to hire an artist or a musician. I have to pay them. Their time is worth money.

Also, a big part of the cost of making an indie video game is emotional. If you are making queer games, then you’re putting yourself out there on the Internet, and the Internet can be really harsh. Sometimes it’s vital to just walk away—to be like, “Okay, I’m pouring my heart into this thing in my computer, but also, if I close my eyes and breathe, there is my heart. It’s right there in my chest.” When I knew my Kickstarter was going to fail, I went to a hippie retreat in the woods for a few days with no Internet or cell reception. I really needed it.

**Ruberg: Are there self-care techniques that you recommend specifically for queer people?**

Cohen: Consume a lot of queer art. For me, things like *Steven Universe* and *Sense8* are really helpful reminders of why I’m making this game. Also, spend time with other queer people. I was doing some work with a friend, and they were like, “Let’s take a break.” Five minutes later, I was ready to work some more. My friend said, “Are you kidding me? That was not a break.” We went out to a queer party. It was great because I got to interact with the community I’m making the game for.

**Ruberg: Once you’re finished with *Queer Quest*, are there other queer games or related projects you’d like to make?**

Cohen: After *Queer Quest*, I want to make a historic gay bar tycoon game inspired by the ONE Archives collection. They have all these magazines about queer bar culture. You would start the game in a gay bar in the 1920s. How do you get people there if you can’t be openly gay? How do you keep the cops away? Bars are such an important part of queer history, but all the lesbian bars are closing, and a lot of gay bars, too. The queer community has a generational issue. I really want to help keep the stories from older queer people alive.

I’m also getting into building arcade machines. I have one that is sitting in my basement that’s made out of a weird dollhouse. I would really love to open up a mini homemade arcade museum where anyone can play for free, with a gallery vibe, and just fill it up with strange things. Down the street

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from me there's this tiny shop that use to be an Anarco-Punk bookstore. Now it's a candle shop. I want so badly to fill it with little arcade machines and have really odd hours and let people off the street just to come in and play and go on with their lives. The arcades in Portland are loud, flashy, and intense. I like the idea of an arcade where you can sit calmly and not feel pressured to get the high score. That's my ten-year plan.

## Conclusion

One of the many notable elements of this interview is Cohen's perspective on their position within the tech industry. They explain that, while they never expected to become a coder, they learned to program in order to create queer video games. In a contemporary moment when many educational initiatives insist on the uplifting potential of teaching women to code, Cohen tells a more pragmatic and less idealizing story.

Their knowledge of programming has allowed them to build what they call their "dream game," but they also encounter sexism in their role as a programmer. Cohen's experience offers an important counterpoint to the often-repeated misconception that queer indie games are being built by artists without technical skills. By contrast, Cohen's path highlights the fact that most queer game-makers do indeed have—and often need—computational expertise. For Cohen, the "steep emotional learning curve" of programming is just one of the prices they have paid for getting to make their passion project, which they describe exuberantly as "this really fucking gay game."

As Cohen's interview highlights, developing indie video games as a queer person comes with its own unique challenges. As more and more artists enter the queer games avant-garde, many are finding that the vibrant work of making video games that engage with non-heteronormative experiences is both highly rewarding and surprisingly taxing.

Often, valorized tales of indie game-making overlook the fact that this work takes considerable financial, educational, and emotional resources. Even as we appreciate the increasing democratization of video game development, it is crucial to recognize that the "accessibility" of game-making is still only accessible for some. Stories like Cohen's are crucial because they address the complexities of lived queer experience while also sharing candid advice about how to make indie game development possible for marginalized people.

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