

QUEERNESS AND VIDEO GAMES:

Queer Game Studies and New Perspectives through Play

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*A*t the intersection of queerness and video games stands the experience of play. Though queer studies has yet to explore video games in depth, this digital interactive media form has much to say about queerness and the relationship between technology and contemporary LGBTQ lives. Video games represent an immensely popular and widely influential form of cultural production that both reflects and enacts social expectations around gender and sexuality. This makes games an important site of investigation for queer studies scholars. Yet the resonances between video games and queerness go far deeper than the representation of characters on screen or the identities of players. Queerness and video games share an ethos that can be fundamentally characterized through play. The language of play is not only the language of games; it is also the language of BDSM and other queer communities, where kink and sex parties are “play parties” and individual erotic practices are known by names like “anal play,” “bondage play,” and “puppy play.” In an implicit sense, the importance of play already underlies much of queer experience and existing queer theory scholarship. Playfulness ties sexual expression to the queer desires of childhood in the work of Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009). It luxuriates in the *jouissance* of pleasure and rejects the use-value of sexual reproductivity in Lee Edelman’s *No Future* (2004). The vibrant tomorrows, always “not yet there,” of José Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* (2009) are built through make-believe. Each of these examples demonstrates how play is already central to queer studies, and how play has the power to both disrupt and reimagine worlds.

Placing queerness in dialogue with video games brings play to the fore. The politics of play are complex and often contradictory—and no subject of study illus-

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trates this better than games themselves. The nature of play has long been a point of debate among scholars of game studies, the academic field dedicated to digital and analog games. Even the titles of the early works that have been foundational for the field, like Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (2016) and Roger Caillois's *Man, Play, and Games* (2001), make it clear that understanding play has been a central concern of game studies. Common lines of inquiry from game studies scholars include questions about how and why game players play (De Koven 2013; Sutton-Smith 1997), how they feel when they play (Isbister 2016; Juul 2013), how game play is structured and subverted (Bogost 2007; Consalvo 2007), and what cultural values play enacts (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014). Scholarship that explicitly ties video games to queerness is a relatively new—and fast-growing—addition to game studies. However, seen through a queer lens, video games become windows into both the powers and the pitfalls of play. On the one side is play as playfulness: a kind of free-form expression that allows game players to explore new ways of being in the world and by extension themselves. In this mode, players roam in-game terrains and try on the lives, bodies, and desires of others. On the other side is play as conformity to a system of rules. Video games appear to offer players infinite possibilities for interaction, but they are in fact highly structured. To play a video game the “right” way, the way that the game intends, is also to play along. In this way, video games complicate the notions of play that already underlie queer studies and queer pleasures.

This is only one of many new perspectives that video games bring to the study of queerness. As will become apparent below, the academic field of game studies is already being notably enriched by an increasing interest in queer studies. What about the other side of this interdisciplinary equation? What does queer studies stand to gain by turning its attention to video games? To date, conversations around LGBTQ issues and video games have taken place almost exclusively in game-related contexts, such as at game conferences and in publications on digital media. Now this work must cross over into the terrain of queer studies. Among the valuable critical tools that video games—and specifically the emerging scholarly paradigm of “queer game studies”—bring to queerness is this emphasis on play as an analytic framework (Ruberg and Shaw 2017). There are many reasons why queer studies scholars should attend to video games. Video games have overwhelming cultural influence across North America, Western Europe, Asia, and beyond, meriting them the same level of consideration as film, literature, and the performing arts. They also speak to a larger set of pressing questions about technology, identity, and belonging. The thread that links all these issues is play itself. Play can be a force of resistance or the tool of oppression. Thinking about queer-

ness through play offers valuable opportunities for critiquing and reimagining the systems of power that shape LGBTQ lives, as well as for foregrounding play as key to the complexities of queerness.

Creating Dialogues between Queerness and Video Games

For those who are new to the study of video games, and even for many who know the medium well, talking about games in relation to queerness may seem counter-intuitive. For decades, video games have wrestled with their reputation as mere entertainment for children, or as platforms for the enactment of mindless violence. The misinformed belief that games are devoid of cultural or artistic value has unfortunately overshadowed the richness of games themselves; however, this is not to say that video games, taken as a whole, are unproblematic. It is true that across their history, mainstream commercial games and the games industry have catered to an imagined white, straight, cisgender male audience (Fron et al. 2007). Heteronormative content remains standard in most game genres, homophobic language is commonplace in online gaming, and LGBTQ players often report feeling uncomfortable in game-related spaces, both online and off (Jones 2014). Recently, longstanding problems of discrimination in games culture have reached a boiling point, drawing national attention to the heated debates (and reactionary vitriol) that surround a rising push from game developers and game critics to bring more diverse representation to video games (Wingfield 2014). Yet, despite these problems, video games are and have long been important sites of queer expression. This is true for LGBTQ game makers and scholars, but also for LGBTQ game players—such as transgender players for whom video games may represent a safe space for identity exploration (Janiuk 2014).

Placing queerness and video games in dialogue is surprisingly controversial work. The current landscape of identity and diversity issues in video games positions queer games research against a backdrop of turmoil and change. This backdrop is made up of intersectional concerns that connect queer experiences of discrimination to the marginalization of people of color, women, people with disabilities, and others in games culture. It is well documented that mainstream video games underrepresent female characters and characters of color (Williams et al. 2009). Feminist game commentators like Anita Sarkeesian have also demonstrated the pervasiveness of misogynist tropes in video games. While companies like Electronic Arts have been vocal about their efforts to include more diverse content in “AAA” games (the industry term for games produced at the scale of Hollywood blockbusters), and distribution platforms like Steam have made nontradi-

tional games an increasingly important part of the North American games scene, it would be misleading to say that games are simply improving in the realm of diversity and inclusion (Makuch 2015). Starting in 2014, large-scale online harassment campaigns unleashed a torrent of personal attacks, death threats, and hate speech against those who spoke publicly about bringing social justice to games. Yet many individuals and collectives are standing up in the face of this harassment—including organizations like I Need Diverse Games and a number of groups dedicated to teaching women and girls to build video games—foregrounding the importance of social justice in games, the games industry, and games culture.

Part of what makes the interplays between queerness and video games so rich yet so difficult to pin down is that the definitions of both *queerness* and *video games* are slippery. Like *queerness*, which operates both as an umbrella term for LGBT+ identities and a conceptual nexus, *video game* has multiple meanings. Speaking about video games in the most material sense, I define games as any designed, interactive experience that operates through a digital media interface and *understands itself* as a video game. By this definition, the category of video games encompasses a wide range of genres and platforms. Arcade games are video games, as are home console games, computer games, portable games for systems like the Nintendo GameBoy, social games played on Facebook and other networking sites, and mobile games played on smart phones. In the mainstream news media, video games are often equated with shooters, but in truth shooters represent only a small segment of the medium. Role-playing games, strategy games, puzzle games, adventure games, sports games, and racing games are all examples of popular video game genres. Different games emerge from different production paradigms. Video games can also vary greatly in their player bases and the communities that form around them. While my focus here is on digital games (commonly abbreviated to simply “games”), analog games are also an important component of the discussion around queerness and play.

This definition of “video game” is far from self-evident, however. In fact, the very history of game studies could be told as the ongoing struggle to establish a definition for video games. The longest-standing and best-known feud in game studies is between narratology and ludology; the former is founded on the belief that games should be understood as storytelling machines, the latter on the belief that games should be understood as play (Bogost 2009). Today, this feud is largely passé, but important new work continues to focus on redefining video games. Even (or perhaps especially) outside the academic context, debates about what does or does not count as a “real” video game continue to rage. A regular complaint expressed by reactionary gamers bemoaning the diversification of the medium is

that video games that do not closely resemble established genres should not be considered games at all.¹ This question of how to define a game may sound rhetorical, but in fact it serves as a microcosm in which can be seen the often-unspoken biases that underlie the study of games and games culture more broadly. In both scholarly and popular contexts, policing the line between game and nongame is a tactic that has been used to delegitimize the work of women, people of color, and queer designers. Therefore defining video games as digital media objects that “understand themselves” as games is in fact a pointed political statement. Game studies, originally rooted in formalism, has traditionally cast itself as apolitical. Creating dialogues between queerness and video games is a way to insist on the politics of studying games. The multifaceted nature of queerness, along with the critiques from LGBTQ communities of notions of “realness,” challenges the belief that a “real” video game can or should be defined. Just as video games expand definitions of queerness to account for play, queerness destabilizes the very ontologies of video games.

Queer Game Studies

What comes perhaps most readily to mind when one thinks of queerness in relation to video games is the representation of LGBTQ characters. The LGBTQ Video Game Archive, a project led by Adrienne Shaw, has demonstrated compellingly that LGBTQ characters have made appearances in games for more than three decades.² Yet the fact remains that few mainstream games have prominently featured queer characters—with a handful of notable, oft-cited exceptions. Some games in the *Sims* series (Electronic Arts, 2000–2016) allow for same-sex pairings, for example. *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007–2012), an epic sci-fi trilogy, offers players the opportunity to play as either a male or a female protagonist and to romance nonplayer characters (NPCs) of their choice regardless of their gender. The open-world game *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Bioware, 2014) is beloved by queer gamers for its inclusion of bisexual and kinky characters. At the place where queerness meets video games, however, there is much more to unearth than the direct (and often highly limited) representation of LGBTQ romances. The complexities of queerness itself challenges game scholars to also look for nonheteronormative desires in how games are structured and how they are played.

That there are myriad ways to approach the relationship between video games and queerness is evidenced by the diversity of work taking place in the emerging paradigm of queer game studies. Though scholarship on gender (and, less commonly, sexuality) in games has appeared since the late 1990s, with early

publications like *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, this work largely focused on the place of cisgender women in games, either as players or as characters (Cassell and Jenkins 1998). By contrast, queer game studies is interested in reimagining video games and games culture through a broad range of LGBTQ perspectives and queer theory. This area of research began taking form in 2012–13, alongside a handful of important coinciding factors that brought visibility, momentum, and a sense of community to the work. First, new software tools, like the online application Twine, were breaking new ground by allowing people without computer science training or large development teams to design and release their own video games (Anthropy 2012). Partly as a result, video games saw the rise of what might be termed the “queer games avant-garde”—a wave of explicitly queer, small-scale, highly personal games made by LGBTQ designers, including many transgender women. Some of these games, like Anna Anthropy’s *Dys4ia* (2012), were widely reported on in the mainstream press, where news about LGBTQ issues in video games had rarely appeared before (Hudson 2014). Simultaneously, new events were being organized that focused on diversity issues in games, such as the “Different Games Conference” and the queer gamer convention “GaymerX,” creating opportunities for those invested in queer games to meet and build connections.

In 2013 the event that has become the central hub for queer game studies, “The Queerness and Games Conference” (QGCon), was inaugurated. Now entering its fifth year in 2018, QGCon was originally founded by Chelsea Howe, Christopher Goetz, Mattie Brice, and me. What makes QGCon, and queer game studies in general, unique in its methodologies is its commitment to interdisciplinarity and interindustry collaboration. QGCon is run by a mixed group of academics, activists, and professional game developers. In this spirit, it is not uncommon for queer game studies scholars to work directly with the very same people who make the games they study. Just as the dangers of advocating for social justice in games are real and present, the creation of queer games is happening now—and at rates unprecedented in games history. For this reason, many queer game studies scholars believe it is important to go beyond the walls of academe and speak directly with game-makers: contemporary queer subjects whose experiences of identity, community, and marginalization deeply influence their work. These direct engagements have been formative for queer game studies. They keep this area of research, even in its most theoretical moments, rooted in the day-to-day realities of LGBTQ lives.

Because queer game studies scholars come from across a range of disciplines, they bring different frameworks through which to understand queerness in relation to video games. While some take ethnographic or data-driven approaches,

the majority of scholars currently in this area are humanists: scholars of media studies, cultural studies, and sexuality studies trained to think about queerness conceptually. Many of these scholars, including me, are turning toward the idea of queerness “beyond representation”—that is, queerness as a function of video game systems themselves. This element of queer games research resonates with work by scholars like Kara Keeling (2014), Jacob Gaboury (2013), and micha cárdenas (2015), who have argued for conceptualizing technology more broadly in relation to queer experience. It is also linked to the queer digital humanities, with its alternative modes of meaning making, as well as to feminist data studies. Among the many goals of queer game studies is a rewriting of games history. Queer game studies changes the dominant narrative about the place of LGBTQ subjects in video games and aims to reclaim the medium by imagining video games themselves as queer.

Current Trends in Queer Game Studies

In only a few short years, an impressive array of queer game studies work has emerged, and much more is on its way. An overview of the current trends in this research area demonstrates some of the myriad ways that scholars and their collaborators are unpacking the relationship between queerness and video games. These key trends, surveyed here, give a sense of the diverse methodologies of queer game studies, yet they also speak to the common threads that unite this work. Chief among them is an interest in the transformative experience of play and play itself as an expression of queerness. Some of these trends include:

1. Identifying LGBTQ video game characters, either by pointing to lesser-known instances of explicit LGBTQ representation in games or by performing critiques that argue for characters’ implicit queerness. Notable examples of this work include Amanda Phillips’s writing on the hyperfemme queerness of Bayonetta, a character often mischaracterized as a mere object of desire for the straight male gaze who in fact uses her hyperbolic sex appeal as a weapon against the patriarchy (Ruberg and Shaw 2017). Conversely, queer game studies work has also pointed to the absence of meaningful LGBTQ representation in games, as in Edmond Chang’s critique of same-sex marriage in the social media game *FrontierVille* (2015).
2. Arguing for a fundamental connection between queerness and games, such as by positing games themselves as queer or as spaces of queer experience. Notable examples of this include Naomi Clark and merritt kopas’s 2015 QGCon keynote and subsequent article “Queering Human-Game

Relations,” which proposes that play should be understood as the sort of queer excess described by Georges Bataille. Most recently, this interest in the inherent connection between queerness and games has begun to enter the thinking of established play theorists, such as Miguel Sicart. In his article “Queering the Controller” (2017), Sicart explores how game controllers can create opportunities for queer, erotic, and intimate experiences.

3. Reflecting on the connection between queerness and the game design process. Writing of this sort has most often been done by those who occupy a hybrid space between game design and academe. Colleen Macklin’s “Where Is the Queerness in Games” (Ruberg and Shaw 2017), for example, explores the notion of queer game mechanics, while Avery Alder’s tabletop role-playing game *Monsterhearts* (2012), about which she has given a number of interviews and talks, uses dice rolls to determine the vectors of player desire. Work like Alder’s, while primarily creative, can itself be understood as a form of queer critical analysis through design. In a related vein, work like that by Robert Yang (Ruberg and Shaw 2017) and Evan Lauteria (2012) has posited “modding,” the alteration of games themselves, as a mode of queer resistance.

4. Analyzing video games through queer theory, often with an emphasis on concepts of queer failure or queer affect. Jordan Youngblood’s work on failures of masculinity in *Metal Gear Solid* falls into this category, as does my own writing on video games that flip the script on success by instructing players to lose (Ruberg 2017; Ruberg and Shaw 2017). Lisa Nakamura also makes this connection in her afterword to the collection *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, where she points to the work of queer theorists like Lauren Berlant as frameworks for reconsidering issues of identity and power in games. In addition to queer theory, feminist film theory is also coming directly into dialogue with video games, as evidenced by Diana Mari Pozo et al.’s (2017) writing in *Camera Obscura* on the mixed methodologies of queer game studies.

5. Studying the issues of community, culture, and history that surround queerness and video games. Shaw’s monograph *Gaming at the Edge* (2014), in which she explores the ways that players discuss their own experiences with identification and video games, falls into this category, as does her work on the LGBTQ Video Game Archive, which seeks to catalog and thereby make increasingly visible the long but often-overlooked lineage of queer characters in video games. Less academic but nonetheless adjacent work has also contributed to these discussions of queer games communi-

ties, such as the documentary *Gaming in Color* (2014), developed by the creators of the annual event “GaymerX.”

This overview is far from complete, but it offers a helpful starting point and a ready-made bibliography for scholars, instructors, and graduate students interested in incorporating queer games research into their writing or course design. Of course, as the work of queer game studies continues to progress, new threads are sure to emerge. Some of the topics on the horizons of queer game studies include the queer fandoms that surround video games, the ways that games engender or restrict queer forms of movement, and the nonheteronormative experiences that still remain largely absent from games, such as non-binary identities, polyamory, and queer of color perspectives. What unites these subjects is more than a thematic connection to queerness and video games. Play has a central part in all this work—whether it is addressing who players play as, how they play, how play is designed, or what play means. Though queer studies scholars conceptualize their work differently, the aim of this work is rarely the neoliberal “improvement” of video games. That is, while many scholars in this area hope to see video games do a better job of representing LGBTQ subjects, queer game studies is not itself in service of the games industry. This is another lesson that queer game scholars take from queer studies: that heteronormativity, oppression, and capitalism are all closely tied, and that the role of the scholar is to question rather than simply to promote the teleological narrative: “it gets better.”

New Critical Perspectives through Play

It is clear from this diversity of work that queerness is bringing many important new perspectives to the study of video games. What does this work suggest that video games might bring to queerness? A few queer theorists have already begun investigating the answer to this question by bringing video games into dialogue with their existing work. Past QGCon keynotes Jack Halberstam and Kathryn Bond Stockton have each published articles in the area of queer game studies. In “Queer Gaming: Gaming, Hacking, and Going Turbo,” Halberstam links video games to animation through the 2012 movie *Wreck-It Ralph* and suggests that both model “a queer orientation to reality” by “encouraging [players] to think in terms of parallel worlds” (quoted in Ruberg and Shaw 2017). For Halberstam, the video game “glitch” becomes a potent metaphor for the ways that “queer subjects have to hack straight narratives and insert their own algorithms for time, space, life and desire.” Stockton in turn thinks about games as “highlighting two queer fires,”

sideways growth and excessive pleasure, which stand in the face of homonormativity and resist social legitimacy through an insistence on pleasure (Ruberg and Shaw 2017). Halberstam and Stockton alike draw inspiration from video games not because of the specific worlds or figures they represent but because they are fundamentally structured around the experiences of play. Suggested in these two pieces, as well as in the wealth of emerging queer game studies work, are many connections between queerness and video games—connections through notions of world building, agency, and counterhegemonic resistance. Each, however, returns again to queerness as an experience of play.

Play is already central to queer theory, as in the examples of sexual and theoretical “play” given at the start of this essay, but bringing video games into direct dialogue with queerness highlights how play can itself be a framework for queer critique. As a designed experience, play can offer opportunities for critical reflections on how systems of power operate and how expectations for selfhood are formed; it also creates opportunities for deconstructing and resisting these systems. Ultimately, what video games bring to queerness is new ways to think about queerness itself. Considered through queer game studies, queerness emerges as a set of desires and a way of being that are fundamentally linked to playfulness. At the same time, queerness relates to games through its disruption of hegemony. Queerness refuses to “play the game” of dominant culture. This speaks to the complexities of play, as well as the complexities of queerness: the game of queerness is both queer experience itself and the forces that queerness rejects. Both queerness and play contain possibilities for resistance and for reinscribing norms. Much as video games seem to offer infinite possibilities but in fact greatly limit player agency, the lives of LGBTQ subjects can in fact be highly restricted by homonormativity and other culturally imposed expectations. Identifying the resonances between video games and queerness does, however, imply a powerful potential for imagining playing as a queer verb—not the verb “to queer,” that is, but play as a queer action.

In one sense, “playing queer” can mean playing video games in ways that run counter to the intentions of their designers, reappropriating game play for the pleasures of nonheteronormative players. Yet it also signifies the act of playing queerness—whether playing at queerness or somehow playing that elusive thing called queerness itself. The playing queer is also a subject, the queer who plays. Like Huizinga’s “*homo ludens*,” the playing man (or playing human, depending on how generous one is with the translation from the Latin), the playing queer is a subject characterized by the fact that it is, in some sense fundamentally, at play. Playing queer differentiates the study of queerness in video games from the study

of queerness in other media forms. Beyond the representation of LGBTQ subjects on the screen is the interactive experience of queerness, the experience called play. That play experience matters because it is individual as well as cultural, and because it is always felt in the body. Ultimately, it is in the body that queerness meets video games. Both approaching video games through queerness and approaching queerness through video games represent experiments in bringing the queer body—its desires, its loss, its expression of self—to press up against a game, to see where the two attract and where they repel, to form an intimate, erotic, and often subversive connection between the embodied experiences of queerness, the beauties and dangers of LGBTQ lives, and the medium of video games. The place where queer subjects and games meet is also a space of erotic play.

The work of queer game studies is only just beginning. In addition to the growing network of scholars taking part in research in this area, new voices must join this dynamic paradigm. Just as game studies is already expanding its horizons through its consideration of queerness, queer studies and queer theory can take on new forms through an engagement with video games. The bitter feud raging around diversity and video games makes it clear that there has never been a more important time for bringing LGBTQ perspectives to digital media. Conversely, when queer studies engages with video games, it does the important work of throwing itself into this fray—demonstrating a clear connection to the realities faced by queer subjects in cultural spaces related to technology. Queer game studies brings with it a spirit of activism that extends beyond academe. New complexities and new insights emerge at these boundary crossings between disciplines, as well as between scholarship and politics, creating opportunities to linger in liminal spaces and play.

Notes

1. Examples of this abound, but perhaps the most widely discussed is the independent game *Depression Quest* (2013), for which its designer, Zoe Quinn, has received ongoing harassment. Numerous forum threads and YouTube videos have been dedicated to angry diatribes about how this game should not have been made available through Steam, a game distribution platform—for example, the forum thread on Steam's own community section titled "This is not a game" (thread started from August 25, 2014, steamcommunity.com/app/270170/discussions/0/35221584654150330/).
2. See lgbtqgamesarchive.org.

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