NON-BINARY ALIENS OR BLUE SEX DOLLS? QUEER IDENTITIES IN MAINSTREAM VIDEO GAMES

By

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This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree

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Abstract

This study aims to understand how queer content is represented in mainstream video games. In the post-Gamergate gaming landscape, there have been several attempts to broaden inclusivity through the inclusion of queer characters. Gamergate revealed deep-rooted sexism within the industry (Chess & Shaw, 2015:212) and evidenced a reluctance to diversify representations in the medium (Dewey, 2014). There are still concerns regarding how these identities are presented, with homophobia, sexism and racist attitudes remaining evident today in gamer culture and arguments that mainstream games still prioritise their male, heterosexual demographic (Zhang, 2024). This thesis examines some of those attempts critically, assessing the extent to which 'queer' characters, game content and representation is integrated into gameplay (often through mechanisms like the 'gay button') and recurring tropes that are utilised to depict queer identities. The research consisted of three case studies across three regions—Europe, North America, and Japan—comparing games from before and after Gamergate. The scope of these case studies was determined to assess whether genuine progressive change has been made in representing LGBTQ+ characters. Japanese depictions of queer content vary, with some explicit, homophobic and transphobic examples and others nuanced and down to player interpretation. While the inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters in North American games has increased, games from the region show a lack of exploratory depth and ludic agency for queer characters. Queer content is often optional, reflecting the notion of the 'gay button'. The European selected games demonstrated more inclusivity despite some employment of stereotypical tropes. These tropes included visual signifiers to communicate queerness. While there are more queer characters post-Gamergate, there remains considerable ludic and representational issues which indicate that the industry is still in an exploratory, early stage in LGBTQ+ integration.

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Introduction

Enough is enough, Gamergate and inclusivity in video games

This research explores representations of LGBTQ+ identities and queer content in mainstream video games. The value of this work lies in understanding the cultural shifts in video game culture, as highlighted in Gamergate, a highly publicised movement on Twitter that exposed deep-rooted issues of sexism, homophobia, and racism within the gaming industry and within its communities. This research will therefore be conducted through a post-gamergate lens, acknowledging the phenomena as a detrimental consequence of the lack of inclusivity and diverse representations in mainstream video game content.

Following the launch of a game by independent developer Zoe Quinn, came an onslaught of false allegations that she had slept with a male journalist to provide good reviews. Consequently, activists argued game journalism was corrupted and that 'feminists are actively working to undermine the video game industry' (Chess & Shaw, 2015: 210). Notably, at this time women comprised half the gaming market, however, the number of women in the industry had increased 'marginally' (Shaw & Chess, 2015:209), with in-game content reflecting its male dominated industry. More recent studies show only 21% of the industry made up of women in 2023, demonstrating concerns of representation are still valid (Edgar, 2023).

Gamergate exposed the hostility towards female developers and emphasised the cultural weight which gaming carries among its players, highlighting a past disregard of games as a 'cultural artifact of value' (Mortensen, 2016). The campaign spread to social media platforms such as 4Chan, Twitter and Reddit, platforms that Massanari uses the phrase 'toxic technocultures' to describe the 'toxic cultures that are enabled by and propagated' via these sociotechnical networks (Massanari, 2015, Toxic technocultures—two cases: Para 1). The extent to which Gamergate campaigners went, revealed more than a reluctance of diversifying gamer culture. Sarkeesian's (one of the feminists targeted by the campaign) Twitter feed ranged 'from name calling to descriptive messages threatening death and rape' with some activists going as far as shooting and bomb threats resulting in FBI investigations' (Hall, 2015). While not everyone using the hashtag contributed to these extremes, Gamergate

and the consequences should always be considered in future game development and for looking critically at the medium. Evans and Janish (2015) even look at the phenomenon in an optimistic light, suggesting that Gamergate allowed previously 'marginalised and dispersed' voices visibility and acknowledgement. Gamergate can also be described as an on-going culture war between a 'young, nerdy white guy who likes guns and boobs — and the much broader, more diverse range of people who play now' (Dewey, 2014). This is evidenced by GLAAD's (2024) findings that today 17% of gamers identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Although Gamergate occurred almost a decade ago, with sexism, homophobia and racism still major issues in gamer culture, it is difficult to restrict it to simply a campaign; perhaps this was a wake-up call to everyone involved in the industry. These attitudes remain, with a 'woke games list' demonstrating a remaining resistance to video games providing more diverse content. The term 'woke' is defined in the Mirriam Mebster dictionary as 'aware of and actively attentive to important societal facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)' (2025). It is also defined as 'politically liberal or progressive (as in matters of racial and social justice) especially in a way that is considered unreasonable or extreme' (Merriam-Webster, 2025). Some contest that due to the 'grifting feminists', 'the video game industry was forever changed to reflect the sensibilities of the mentally ill, feminists, homosexuals, queers, wokesters, and other perverts' (Wolfshead, 2023). Gamergate was not simply about video game content but reflected a much larger cultural battle among gamer culture and a strong defiance of a diversified medium (Dewey, 2014). It is this 'queering of game spaces, not just feminist criticism' (Evans & Janish, 2015) that this research seeks to explain, looking at what different developers across the world consider inclusive and authentic representations of queer identities.

However, feminism and sexism are not new topics within games studies, and inclusion of LGBTQ+ content and authentic representations have been gradually growing in importance to the audience and the industry (Chess & Shaw, 2015:209). Although, many argue that the industry still prioritises content that caters predominantly to white, cisgender, straight men (Zhang, 2024) and that progress has been 'inconsistent' across the industry (O'Donnell, 2022). However, Chess and Shaw (2017:ix) question whether this new appeal instead resembles a capitalistic notion that LGBTQ+ gamers are an 'untapped market' reflecting earlier industry assumptions regarding female players, despite the existence of queer and female audiences since the birth of the medium.

Game designer Anna Anthropy's concept of the ‘gay button’, as described by Østby (2017), is a mechanic repeatedly used by developers to integrate queer content and requires ‘the player to actively seek it out rather than the content being part of main gameplay’ (Østby, 2017:13). So, while queer content can exist, when it is hidden or tucked away, it's easy for a significant portion of players to miss out on it. This not only reduces the visibility of LGBTQ+ representation within the game but can diminish the impact it could have on players who might benefit from seeing themselves represented in the game world. As expressed by Shaw (2014:34), if this content needs to be found, then unassuming players will ‘continue to consume the heteronormative-dominated texts’. This research aims to answer the following questions:

- Post-gamergate, is there a wider range of representations of queer characters in video games?

- To what extent is queer content explicitly presented in games, and how does it align with or diverge from the concept of the ‘gay button’?

- What recurring tropes and narrative devices are employed to depict queer identities in video games?

- How does the portrayal of queer content vary across different regions?

This thesis will critically examine the representation of queer characters in video games across three regions—Europe, North America, and Japan—by comparing pre- and post-Gamergate titles. Using a dual method approach of ludic and discourse analysis, the research will explore how LGBTQ+ content is integrated into games or dismissed by them. Ultimately, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions around diversity and inclusion in gaming by investigating whether post-Gamergate era mainstream games, across multiple regions, have developed in their queer representations and content.

Literature review

This section of the thesis will explore the existing literature in the field of game studies, with an emphasis on contributions from feminist and queer game studies, exploring queer representation as well as gender theories such as gender performativity. Chess and Shaw's (2015) research have greatly contributed to building the scholarship of queer representation in video games. Although much of their scholarship analysing LGBTQ+ representation tends to be quantitative data, often focusing on earlier titles. Thus, these studies frequently overlook the comparative aspects that this research seeks to address, such as the social contexts and the regional variations in LGBTQ+ portrayals. By integrating a comparative framework that examines both temporal shifts and regional differences, this study aims to fill an existing gap in the literature and provide a more nuanced understanding of LGBTQ+ representation across diverse game cultures.

Shaw et al (2009) critically examined a large range of games, producing data regarding identity and representation of marginalised groups in video game content highlighting that for a medium developed in the 1970s, there was little LGBTQ+ content compared to other popular mediums (2009:229). Their data indicated lack of representation is not necessarily a 'matter of homophobic exclusion' but a result of industry concerns about the reception of this content (2009:248). Some argued that at the time, developers would rely on stereotypes as authentic representation was not a central concern as they would seemingly prioritise the game's mechanics as a young technological medium, over the narrative and thus, the representations (Shaw et al, 2009:244). This research is interesting as by contemporary western standards, there is arguably little reason why such inclusion would be absent, especially considering the phenomenal growth of the industry, technological advancements, scholarship, and cultural events such as Gamergate. This does not mean the industry previously produced patriarchal and heteronormative discourse restricting inclusion and diverse audiences, but reflects the dominant ideologies of a predominantly straight, white male industry and their perceived audience (Kondrat, 2015:178). Shaw (2014:19) questioned why we are considering queer issues so late in the medium's history, addressing that prior game studies were generally concerned with representations of binary gender rather than issues of gender identity and sexuality, and race.

Shaw's (2019) later collaborative quantitative research uncovered a range of interesting trends regarding LGBTQ+ content in games from 1985 to 2005. While it is critical to stress the industry's phenomenal developments since these games, Shaw (2019:1564)

expresses the importance of examining ‘what the existing norms of representation have been’. Among their sample of 162 games, they explored ‘characters, narrative content, ludic elements, locations like gay bars, or other references to LGBTQ people/themes’ (2019:1545). Finding that while queer representation was slowly increasing, most of it consisted of gay male identities, and many of these characters were presented alone, rather than among a wider queer community (Shaw et al, 2019:1554). They found that while representation exists, it ignores critical aspects of gay identities often depicting a stereotypical and inconsequential character. This research builds upon Shaw's quantitative data by expanding the focus to include regional variations of LGBTQ+ representations in more recent games, offering a comparative analysis of representation before and after Gamergate.

Shaw (2015) discusses how much of the critical analysis of LGBTQ+ content in video games previously considered only ‘good’ and ‘bad’ examples of representation (2015:19). This research therefore will not limit the analysis with such binaries but concisely analyse the nuances of representations. Furthermore, what may count as good representation to one person may differ to another, a strength of qualitative analyses is not limiting findings, but exploring every aspect of them. Shaw and Friesem’s (2016) assessment of LGBTQ+ content in video games from 2016 is worth considering within this research. They argue:

> ‘LGBTQ content exists in video games in many different forms. It is not only characters who are implicitly or explicitly LGBTQ but also locations players can visit, actions they can engage in, and artifacts encountered in games. Non-normative gender and sexuality can be also referenced through mentions, often in passing, and traits that PCs (player characters) can acquire. Some games have LGBTQ narratives at their cores, exploring lives and experiences of LGBTQ individuals. Others feature homophobia and transphobia’ (2016:3886).

While this offers valuable insights into how LGBTQ+ individuals relate to and see themselves reflected in games, there are some areas that remain underexplored such as genre, regional comparisons and comparative temporal analysis.

Shaw et al (2019) claim their quantitative work provides a ‘first step in making a more nuanced critique of LGBTQ+ representation in games’ and recognised the limitations of quantifying concepts such as sexuality and gender, in which such content is not always explicit (2019:1545). Afterall, one’s sexual actions or gendered codes do not equate to one’s identity, their example being that a man sleeping with another man does not necessarily mean he is gay (2019:1550). Furthermore, implicit visual signifiers may not be globally recognised. This research should thus consider the subjectivity of identifiers like gender and sexuality in a

‘medium produced and consumed around the globe’ open to extremely diverse communities, and interpretations (2019:1545). Shaw and Friesem (2016) also suggested that future qualitative data on this topic should be compared with their findings to examine the developments over time (2016:3886). Providing the space for comprehensive qualitative research that accounts for varying cultural interpretations among audiences and researchers' perspectives, while also exploring nuances and potential queer readings content. This research intends to fill this gap.

Mainstream game developers are gradually involving more inclusive and queer content in their games, with a simultaneous surge in feminist and queer independent games. While some claim games are described as ‘woke’ or too queer, some even argue the ludic possibilities of games deny straight narratives by the experimentation and freedom they can offer. Ruberg (2020) claims video games share a similar ethos with queerness in imagining ‘alternative ways of being’ within structures of power and control. While acknowledging the predominance of heteronormative, white narratives, Ruberg claims the video games can always be examined through a queer lens and be ‘played queerly’, suggesting games have always been queer in this aspect. Playing queerly might involve engaging with the game in a way that intentionally deviates from the expected norms/outcomes, such as playing to lose rather than win. Despite Ruberg’s approach, it is critical to explore game content and analyse these representations of queerness, regardless of the medium’s queer potential she describes.

Utsch et al’s (2017) quantitative analysis of queer identities in video games drew several important conclusions regarding the visibility of gender and sexually diverse characters. They highlight that while LGBTQ+ representation is gradually increasing, there is significant potential for future research, particularly on the representation of LGBTQ+ identities in Japanese games. Utsch argues that in Japan, video games are marketed to all age groups rather than primarily seen as children’s entertainment, which allows for the inclusion of more explicit and nuanced queer content compared to other regions (2017:852). This provides an interesting scope to investigate the extent to which queer content is explicitly represented in Japanese video games and how it compares to explicit content that aligns with Japanese heteronormative standards.

These works and particularly Shaw’s contributions to the scholarship are of great importance. Shaw discusses not only the repetitive and inauthentic nature of representations, expressing how imperative it is to include diversity in game content and expose players to new experiences. Some titles included as case studies have been previously mentioned by Shaw, while others, due to their recent release, have yet to receive much, if any academic

scrutiny. This combination allows for a comparative approach, where Shaw's established analyses can be applied and critically assessed in relation to newer titles, creating space for a fresh perspective in the study of LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream video games. This aims to complement Shaw's foundational work but also expand the conversation on LGBTQ+ representation in video games to include cross-cultural, genre, and temporal comparisons, thereby providing a richer, more comprehensive analysis.

Evans and Janish (2015) argue Gamergate exposed a dominant binary understanding among many of those supporting the movement. As the 'gamer' identity is no longer representative of the stereotype, but rather it is evolving as 'more non masculine, non-white, non hetero players claim expertise and status in gaming' (2016:126). They argue '#GamerGate is an acknowledgement of and reaction to this queering of game spaces' and not just a response to not just feminist criticism of gaming spaces. The article concludes by noting that Gamergate inadvertently brought 'widespread attention to the problematic nature of game culture. In so doing, opportunities for applying pressure on game designers and developers opened' (2016:144) posing the question as to whether these opportunities led to tangible changes, and if so, how?

There is also substantial research on gamer identities. Massanari (2017) examines Reddit as a catalyst for distributing misogynistic messages among 'toxic technocultures' and accelerating events such as Gamergate. She contends that online spaces such as Reddit often 'implicitly reflect a particular kind of geek masculinity—one that is laden with problematic assumptions about who can enter these spaces and how they can participate' (2017:342). Maloney's research analysed Reddit's gamer culture by exploring r/gaming, concluding that gamer identities are incredibly nuanced and within this space is an 'emerging prominence of overtly inclusive voices' (2019:91) supporting Shaw's (2023) notion that the majority of gamers want 'more kinds of content' (*Beyond Solitaire*).

Video games are recognised in scholarship as a genderless activity, with increasingly diversified representations in-game and among player bases. However, there is evidence suggesting negative perceptions of female gamers remain among male gaming communities. Kelly et al's (2023) study demonstrated there is still a 'worrying perception of 'gaming like a girl'-where female players are judged more harshly simply based on their gender' often resulting in hostile online gaming spaces for female gamers. This shows the importance of in-game representations in hopes of creating a space where gamers are viewed equally, without this cultural perception that one's gender or sexuality is a signifier of inferiority.

Lauteria and Wysocki's (2015) work addresses intersections of sex and sexuality in video games, discussing the slow 'maturing' of the industry claiming 'Sex and sexuality are increasingly more visible, more complex, and more nuanced in video games' (2015:1). They establish video games as reminiscent of pornography, quoting Zimmerman's view that 'Mainstream AAA video games operate on principles akin to porn: highly repetitive activities premised on visceral pleasure and spectacle' (2012). This provides a space to question whether, as Wysocki and Lauteria claim, LGBTQ+ visibility in mainstream games has developed since their writing. Specifically, it invites an investigation into how nuanced these representations are and, if visual pleasure remains a core element (as Zimmerman suggests), who this content is ultimately gratifying. It is crucial to assess whether queer representations in games have achieved the same depth and complexity as those centred around heterosexual content.

Queer theory and Gender

The term ‘queer’ is understood in many ways; a particular understanding of queer, as noted by Shaw and Ruberg, was in a pamphlet anonymously handed out at New York’s pride parade in 1990 (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017: xviii). The pamphlet read ‘being queer … means everyday fighting oppression; homophobia, racism, bigotry … and our own self-hatred’. This understanding widens the lens, with queerness alluding to the notion of defying perceived social barriers of normativity. Warner (1994) writes that the aim of queer activism and queer theory is to ‘confront the default heteronormativity of modern culture’ by dismantling these socially constructed systems of oppression. Queer theory can be utilised in many ways, to ‘queer’ something, therefore, means exploring and imagining possibilities in a seemingly heteronormative domain.

Butler’s works examine identity politics, understanding the concept of gender as a result of historical and institutional production (1999:4). They question the relationship between gender and sex, expressing that gender is a complicated product of social construction, and thus should not mirror the presumed binaries of what it means to be a man or a woman. Butler argues gender is a ‘doing’, a performance of improvisation within a scene of constraint composed of hegemonic modes of normativity (2004:1). They provide a critique of the predetermined categories of identity that ‘contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalise, and immobilise’ (1999:8), describing gender as a construct determined by history and culture, rather than biology and culturally manifested binaries (1999:12). Some criticise Butler's assessment as overly deterministic, as they do not assign much, if any, agency to individuals in their analysis (Nussbaum, 1999) (Biscop et al., 2019). However, Butler’s concept of gender as performance does imply a level of autonomy, as individuals continually enact and potentially subvert gender norms. Butler’s idea that one ‘performs’ their gender identity is of particular importance to this research; it will be interesting to analyse the application of said ‘gendered’ performances of characters, and those with an ambiguous gender identity, exploring what these ‘performances’ look like in the context of videogame texts.

Post-structuralist Foucault’s (1976:17-18) works were influential to future feminist, queer and identity politics in which his ideas are developed and challenged. He argued that systems of power aim to shape discourses and regulate subjects. Foucault describes sexuality as a social construct shaped and maintained through power. His concept of biopower highlights how institutions such as medicine, education, and the family define what is

considered normal, often framing non-reproductive sexualities and non-normative gender identities as deviations. Foucault suggests that this 'did not exclude sexuality but included it in the body as a mode of specification of individuals' (1976:47) showing how biopolitics governs people by defining acceptable expressions of gender and sexuality. Subjects then internalise these categories and subjectivities as part of their identity, since, as Foucault explains, power 'consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome' (1982:789). Ultimately, biopolitics, and by extension, biopower, involves the regulation of bodies and populations through subtle and often normalized mechanisms of control, using surveillance, labels and social norms to direct us toward certain roles. While Foucault's ideas are more general in regard to knowledge and power, Butler claims gender as a social construction is more complicated, dismissing the notion that gender simply a product of a larger power structure. Butler claims identity is performative, fluid and subjectivity of gender is naturalised through said performance (Shaw, 2015:66), viewing gendered behaviours as the norm, not a rule (Butler, 2004:41). Unlike Foucault who focuses on how power structures historically regulate and define bodies, Butler (2004:41) emphasizes that gender is not something we inherently are, but something we continually do via repeated social behaviours and cultural reinforcement, gender is actively performed rather than fixed, making Butler's framework more relevant to this analysis (Shaw, 2015:66). Although, Foucault's arguments around historical power reproducing these norms are foundational to understanding gender and sexuality as a result of social construction.

Gender has long been considered as more than a mirror of one's biology, but something we perform, we can become. This idea is present in feminist works of Simone de Beauvoir's, (1949). She famously states, 'One is not born a woman, but becomes one' (1949:330), suggesting gender is socially constructed as opposed to biological. Following the influential works such as de Beauvoir's contributions accelerating second wave feminism, came further influential works to critical feminist theory such as Frieden's 1960 book, *The Feminine Mystique* and Millit's 1970 book *Sexual Politics*. In 1981 bell hooks criticised the white-centric nature of past feminist literature with her book *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. Hooks highlights how white feminist discourse lacks recognition of intersecting experiences of women across racial and class lines possibly reinforcing white supremacy and limiting the potential for 'political solidarity among women of different races and ethnicities'. The term intersectionality was coined in 1989 by Crenshaw in her discussion on black women's employment in the US. She argued past activism and scholarship often failed to address how these identities intersected and shaped complex, multi-dimensional,

individual experiences (Mojab and Carpenter, 2019:276-277). While this research focuses on sexuality, Crenshaw's framework helps assess whether queer characters are defined solely by their queerness or by more complex, intersecting identities.

Furthermore, on the topic of identity representation, one theory particularly relevant to the representation and framing of female characters is Mulvey's theory of the 'male gaze' (1975) is utilised by both film and game theorists in analysing gender representation. In fact, Burill (2017) argued that the videogame industry requires a 'Mulvey moment' insinuating a need to continue analysing representations of women (2017:26). This research aims to go beyond analysing representations of binary gender roles by examining the performativity of gender and exploring gender ambiguous characters. The core principles of queer theory imply heteronormativity, and a binary understanding of gender is a result of social construction, thus, we perform as our gender over sex or biology.

Queer theory and gender theory have a deep-rooted history derived from identical concepts of 'difference, subjectivity, discourse and power' (Burill, 2017:26). Similarly, as Chess states, queer theory allows us to consider video games outside of 'heteronormative, masculine culture' (2016). Queer theory therefore avoids 'essentialist and binaristic' ways of being, favouring notions of hybridity (Burill, 2017:25).

Despite the heteronormative, binary depictions of gender criticised by scholars for years, genres such as science fiction and fantasy have increasingly introduced ideas void of this narrative, offering new perspectives and possibilities beyond our realm of normality. Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* series (1987-1989) is a pioneering example, featuring a sexless alien race that seeks to reproduce with humans, thus challenging human conceptions of gender and reproduction. While non-normative sexualities may be present in other science fiction media, according to Shaw et al's (2015) LGBTQ+ Video Game Archive, there is little exploration into non-gender normative content or ideas in video games.

Interspecies sexual relations and intimacy is a theme explored in science fiction, and this concept has become more evident in video games as well. For instance, the *Fallout* series by Bethesda allows players to explore the identities of synths—artificial humans —and even engage in romance with them. *Mass Effect* (Bioware 2007-2021) and *Baldur's Gate* (1998-2023) offer players the opportunity to engage in relationships that challenge conventional human norms, further pushing the boundaries of how gender, sexuality, and identity can be explored and represented in gaming.

Queer theory acknowledges the social norms and dominance of heteronormative culture, understanding it as a hegemonic power structure. Thus, this approach explores

boundaries beyond normative, challenging the rules and laws constructed by societies. In analysing queer representations within these case studies, queer theory will be utilised in defining these instances of inclusion and queer content within the confines of the game. Queer theory also encourages a critical examination of representations and how games can influence and contribute to discussions of gender and sexuality in contemporary gaming culture. While research such as this does not aim to erase the straight masculine gaming space, it simply aims to facilitate it to everyone who loves gaming. Incorporating these theories allows for a deeper understanding of how games represent LGBTQ+ content, if any, contributing to ongoing discussions about inclusivity and representation in the gaming industry.

Reoccurring tropes and gender representation

A particular trope evident in video games used to communicate gender is the Ms. Male trope. Often, female characters are a duplicate of a male character with stereotypically feminine attributes to communicate this. Sarkeesian (2013) explains how game designers pay attention to colour coding to insinuate images of girl or boy-hood, often symbolised by pink and blue. Reoccurring signifiers identified by Sarkeesian are the iconic hair bow (as seen on Ms. Pac-man), heart motifs, pink and pig tails. An example of Ms. Male is Ms. Pac-man (1982). These repercussions could entail the use of these elements in character design reinforcing a 'strict binary form of gender expression' (Sarkeesian, 2013). Where female characters have these signifiers, male characters often have further identified characteristics void of simple gender signifiers, such as a fully realised personality and back story.

There are a range of other problematic female stereotypes used in video games such as 'Damsel in Distress, Natural-Born Happy Homemaker and Sexy Action Heroine' as argued by Trépanier-Jobin and Bonenfant (2017). Women in games are often depicted as an extension of their male counterparts, Mulvey's ([1975]2013) arguments could be applied to this, as the active male is often the narrative driver in comparison to the submissive, identity lacking characters without fully realised personalities. Sarkeesian explains how these tropes are often produced unconsciously, due to the overrepresentation and forced normality through the recurrences of them throughout videogame history. Sarkeesian often refers to Princess Peach in the *Super Mario* series, as well as princess Zelda in *The Legend of Zelda* series with this criticism (2013), their character's roles often serving as varying reflections of this trope throughout the series' history. Even in Nintendo's latest instalment of the *Legend of Zelda* series (2023), Zelda's role remains supportive and in need of the male protagonists' rescue. Sarkeesian (2013) also notes the story of Adam and Eve has clearly been mirrored in future media, with male identification manifesting as the default, with women as an addition. Females are associated with deviation of the norm, while alternatively, the male is default and is not in need of signifiers of differentiation.

This echoes Mulvey's arguments that a woman is 'tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning' as men are ([1975]2013). While Mulvey focuses on film narrative, her work has made great contributions to the critical feminist literature sphere. Her arguments regarding the 'male gaze' are of particular interest, especially considering the hypermasculine dominance evident among the videogame industry and among gamer culture. Mulvey deconstructs representations of women in cinema, deducing female characters are

often simply a product of the ‘male gaze’; a scopophilic process in which female characters become a passive product of desire (Mulvey, 1975:808). Thus, they are often aesthetic objects of sexual desire; their existence is there to please the desires of heterosexual men and male audiences, denying any significant contribution to the narrative (Mwedzi, 2021). Visual depictions have been long criticised, female characters often representative of strict beauty standards while donning smaller outfits then their male counterparts with an emphasis on their chests, examples include characters such as Lara Croft (in *Tomb Raider*, Eidos Interactive, 1996-2018), Bayonetta (in *Bayonetta*, Atlus, 2009-2022), Emma Frost (in *Marvel Rivals*, NetEase Games, 2024) among countless other protagonists and supporting characters, their designs inviting what Mulvey would describe as the male gaze. While this theory will be applied throughout this research, it is critical to also consider who the ‘male’ is. The theory assumes the male audience objectifies women on screen, overlooking the generalisation that all male viewers are straight and seeking sexual gratification. Despite this, Mulvey’s theory is still invaluable to understanding sexual/gendered power dynamics in media texts.

Ultimately, the video game medium has long been criticized for its reliance on harmful stereotypes, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. Throughout its history, there have been numerous overtly offensive portrayals of women, often reducing them to objects of sexual gratification or victims of violence are also more overt offensive representations of women produced throughout the history of the medium. Earlier examples include games such as *Leasure suite Larry* (Sierra On-Line, 1987–2020) and *Grand Theft Auto* (1997–present). There are even extreme examples such as *Rapelay* (Illusion, 2006) or more recently, *No Mercy* (Zerat Games, 2025) where sexual violence is a key gameplay mechanic. *NoMercy* was available to any player with a Steam account until it was finally taken off the platform after widespread condemnation.

Furthermore, some suggest that video games also reflect problematic representations of men and masculinity, echoing feminist critiques that have traditionally focused on the portrayal of women. Male protagonists are often shown in a very specific way: tall, muscular, and physically powerful. This reinforces a narrow and often unrealistic ideal of what it means to be masculine. These portrayals also connect to Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze. It’s not just about who players find attractive, but also about who they identify with. Even if players don’t desire male characters romantically, they might still want to embody them. The player’s avatar becomes a way to step into that identity, using their agency in the game to live out those ideals of strength and control. For example, Rockstar’s *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-2015), in which Gabbiadini et al argue ‘main male characters are always depicted as

hypermasculine, dominant, and aggressive men. In contrast, the female characters are portrayed as sexual objects—usually prostitutes or pole-dancers—who are peripheral to the game narrative and whose sole purpose is to entertain the main male characters' and arguably also straight male players (2016:2). The industry has also faced its share of criticism for racist portrayals and colonialist themes. Games like *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009) have been widely criticized for depicting African characters in ways reminiscent of troubling colonial stereotypes (Brock, 2011). The *Grand Theft Auto* series, too, has been criticised for its portrayal of racial stereotypes, particularly in the way it handles Black and Latino characters (Bakal, 2024). These issues point to a larger problem in gaming, where race is often used as a shortcut for villainy or negative traits, without much depth or nuance.

Ultimately, these examples show how video games have too often relied on simplistic, stereotyped portrayals of gender, sexuality, and race—perpetuating harmful norms rather than challenging them.

The industry today, modern controversies and inclusivity

Krobová et al. (2015, LGBT Player and the Heteronormative Game Culture, para.5) note that much of the identified seemingly inclusive content is present due to industry pressures of engaging queer audiences resulting in 'mere caricatures of homosexuality' as opposed to authentic representation. While acknowledging the depth of contemporary queer game studies, it is important to look at modern video games critically, examining both explicit and implicit occurrences of queer content. Despite the history of the industry and the sexist, homophobic and racist messages seen within many triple-A video games, recent games such as Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* (2013), as well as Blizzard's *Overwatch 2,* and Dontnod's *Life is Strange* (2015-2024*)* series games contain non-white, female, queer protagonists (Nakamura, 2019, p.128). However, Kohlburn et al (2013) among other game scholars agree there remains a 'historical absence' or 'erasure of Queer identity in games as a medium' (2013:1), Shaw refers to this as 'symbolic annihilation' (2015:19). In contrast, Greer (2018) identified that 'the most meaningful representation can be found in smaller indie titles' . This research will focus on double-A and triple-A games to explore how representations are communicated to broader, mainstream audiences. Triple-A games are big-budget, high-profile titles aimed at the mainstream market, while double-A games are between indie games and triple-A titles maintaining a professional level of production.

The avatar or point of agency in which the player vicariously experiences game worlds will also be considered. Studies show that identifying in some way with one's avatar can positively influence the player's experience (Trepte & Reinecke, 2010). Generally, character creation in RPGS (role playing games) such as Bethesda's games prior to *Starfield* (2023*),* exhibited binary options often under a category named 'sex', limiting players who prefer their avatar to reflect non-binary or nonnormative gender identities. However, in recent years mainstream video games such as EA's *The Sims 4* (2014, gender options menu introduced in 2023), Bethesda's *Starfield* (2023), CD Projekt Red's *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), Larian Studio's and *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023), to name many more, have recently introduced new, inclusive features into their character creation. The ability to choose pronouns and genitals has received conservative backlash and threats of boycotting as a result (Arasu, 2023). As concluded in Whitehouse et al's (2023) paper, 'in game-gender performances reflected their (respondent's) gender identity' (results section, para.1) showing the importance of allowing players to express or represent themselves through their avatar. This highlights

the importance of an avatar, and what it can mean to the player should the game provide the tools to create whatever identity they wish.

Krobová et al's (2015) research found their respondents shared their worry that pushing for LGBTQ+ content could result in backlash or homophobic reactions for 'pushing too hard' (2015:10). However, they agreed such inclusion in video games can help battle the homophobic attitudes repeatedly seen among player bases. There are many contemporary examples of homophobic reactions to queer content; a report published in Scientific American found that after Blizzard announced one of their popular characters in *Overwatch,* Soldier 76 was gay, the pick rate for the character dramatically dropped (Parshakov, 2023) (Nesseler, 2022). This showed players consciously ignored a hero on a basis completely unrelated to the gameplay and the mechanics of the character.

Shaw (Beyond Solitaire, 2023) however, explains there is only a small minority of gamers who actively argue against inclusion. She argues that in general, audiences want 'more kinds of content' such as diversity of experiences. She expresses how the 'dude in cargo pants' narrative is repetitive, as there are countless different experiences to represent and explore. It is not just the inclusion of marginalised groups, education, or empathy, but accessing experiences we will never understand 'first hand'.

The earliest games to allow players to engage in romantic relationships with NPCs of the same gender include *Fallout 2* (Black Isle Studios, 1998), where players could marry a same-sex partner. This was followed by *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000), which allowed same-sex relationships but not marriage. Other notable games include *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004), where players could engage in same-sex marriages, and *Bully* (Rockstar Vancouver, 2006), which featured same-sex romantic interactions.

The controversies surrounding *Bully* (Rockstar, 2006) were immediate after the games' release, with the developers defending their decision, simply stating they wished the player to have as much choice as possible (Vitali, 2010). Some critics argued the completely optional gay kiss was inappropriate for a game with a mature rating, an illogical argument considering heterosexual content did not receive criticism or 'outrage' (Shaw, 2009:241). Other, earlier examples of queer characters often fall to the trend of the characters being villainous, promiscuous and violent.

One striking example of problematic representation in video games is from *World Heroes Perfect* (Aesthetica Development Kogyo), an arcade game first released in 1995. The game features a character described by the SNK Wiki as 'the leader of a love cult' from Russia, loosely based on the historical figure Rasputin. This character is notably effeminate,

particularly when mimicking Marilyn Monroe's iconic pose of holding down her robe. His ‘super move’ involves summoning a bush, disrobing, and raping his opponent, an act that can be repeated if the player times it correctly (Game Theorist, 2014). *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar, 2010) featured a villain named captain Vincent De Santé, who is alluded to not only being queer, but a child rapist, further perpetuating harmful stereotypes and linking queerness with predatory behaviour.

An extremely offensive example of a non-cis representation is from *Leisure Suit Larry 6* (Sierra Entertainment, 1993). A blatantly homophobic storyline featured a questline in which Larry goes on a date with a black woman. After noticing her put a condom on, Larry starts ‘vomiting exaggeratedly’ followed by the game indicating the night ended with the women forcing herself on Larry. This ultimately provides a representation that frames Black, trans individuals as dangerous. Thach (2021:20) identifies four main trends in the characterisation of trans characters: dysphoria/physical transition, mentally ill killers, trans shock/reveal, and ambiguity. Examining earlier examples in film *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991) we can clearly see how a gender dysphoric character’s identity can be directly linked to their murderous and violent behaviours.

Recently, as noted by McLaren (2023), we have seen ‘more robust transgender representation with characters that are more prominent in the storyline’ in recent television shows. Their examples of recent television shows being *Orange is the New Black* (Kohan et al., 2013), *The Fosters* (Lopez et al., 2013), *Sense8* (Straczynski, 2015), among others. Notably, these transgender character’s experiences are integrated ‘deeply into the narrative, offering a more nuanced portrayal of transgender identities’ (2023). McLaren compared these representations with those in video games, noting that ‘LGBTQ characters that appear in video games are often nonplayer characters (NPCs) and are inconsequential to the game and/or the storyline’ as affirmed previously by Shaw & Friesem (2016, p. 3880).

Cyberpunk 2077 (CD ProjektRed, 2020) and *The Last of Us (Naughtydog, 2013)* series are notable examples of respectful queer representation in gaming. *The Last of Us* series (2013-2020) is particularly celebrated among queer communities for the character Ellie. Ellie's sexuality is explored within the narrative in a meaningful and authentic way, especially highlighted in *The Last of Us Left Behind* DLC (2014) (downloadable content) and in *The Last of Us Part II*, where her relationships and identity develops with depth and sensitivity. Furthermore, *Baldur’s Gate 3* is of particular interest to this research, a case study in which I hypothesise could be one of the most inclusive mainstream games in history. Bevan (2023) discusses some of the reactions on Steam, claiming ‘dudebros’ are outraged

other male characters are hitting on them, claiming it is immersion breaking and a result of the studio employing ‘woke activists’.

Recognising the persuasive power of games

Bogost (2007, 2010) has demonstrated how video games can convey certain political and ideological messages via the systems and processes of the game. Bogost understands pushing certain rhetoric as procedurally throughout the rules via their simulation rules, and how these rules are communicated to the player. Bogost (2007) states that modes of persuasion are 'related to the player's ability to see and understand the simulation author's implicit or explicit claims about the logic of the situation represented' (2007:333). His examples looked at the procedurality of political and capitalistic rhetoric, a specific example being Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* franchises where he identified the primary goal of the game is paying your mortgage to a money-hungry raccoon.

While previous research shows that violent games don't inherently cause players to replicate in-game actions, and games about crime may not directly influence players to commit offences (Griffiths, 1999), implicit messages conveyed through game logic, representations, and other elements can shape how players imagine and perceive different groups and communities. This is why it is important to recognise the persuasive and expressive power of procedurality as these processes 'influence' us and in time 'seed changes in our attitudes, which in turn, and over time, change our culture' (2007:340). In the context of LGBTQ+ representation, Bogost's ideas are particularly relevant when analysing how game mechanics and narratives either reinforce or subvert traditional gender and sexual norms, which will be explored in this ludic and discourse analysis. His concept of procedural rhetoric helps us understand what is permitted or restricted within the game's structure, offers insights into how games communicate societal values and norms through their rules and systems. For instance, the inclusion of queer characters or the possibility of same-sex relationships in a game's structure can serve as a form of procedural rhetoric that challenges heteronormative assumptions and encourages players to engage with diverse perspectives on gender and sexuality. Bogost's ideas of procedurality will be referred to throughout this research, underpinning the rhetoric which may interfere or influence negative or inauthentic representations of queer people. Bogost's ideas here are arguably reflected in Gamergate, demonstrating the influence sexist, misogynist and homophobic in-game content had on audiences and their perceptions of who should be playing games and the material they expect to see.

Although, game theorists such as Sicart claim theories of procedurality disregards the player's personal belief systems, along with the fact many players seek to simply play, not to unmask messages (2011). Sicart argues that like the school of ludology, proceduralists believe video games are a cultural exception and thus should be examined through the 'ontological particularities' which make the medium unique (Sicart, 2011). Ultimately, Sicart (2011: Against Proceduralist, para 13) asserts that a proceduralist understanding overlooks the personal and communal aspects of play, arguing:

> 'Play, however, is personal, individual, and communitarian, played with others, for others, in an intensely, deeply personal way. And politics and ethics are personal, too. Therefore, when a player engages with a game, we enter the realm of play, where the rules are a dialogue and the message, a conversation.'

Both Sicart and Bogost approach the subject from different philosophical and practical perspectives. Sicart focuses on its personal, ethical, and political aspects, alternatively, Bogost emphasises the structured, system-based nature of play and its ability to communicate complex ideas (political, social, etc) through procedural rhetoric. This analysis will integrate both Sicart's and Bogost's perspectives. While it will examine the structural and procedural rhetoric of games, it will also highlight Sicart's emphasis on the player's autonomy and ability to think independently within the game space. This dual approach allows for a deeper understanding of how games could communicate messages and how players interpret and engage with these messages.

However, with past events such as Gamergate, it is arguable that while gamers are not empty vessels waiting for influence, unconscious biases can be encouraged via repetitive exposure to tropes and stereotypes. Therefore, a range of game journalists and online player posts and opinions will be considered with my data to demonstrate opinions of player bases to avoid generalising the result of particular content.

Ludology vs. Narratology

The act of playing a videogame is a completely different experience for an audience compared with other acts of medium consumption such as reading a book or watching a film. This idea has sparked great debate among game scholars regarding how video games should be analysed. On the one hand, narratologists argue games are closely linked to narratives and can be analysed via 'theoretical concepts from disciplines such as literature and film studies, while keeping an appreciation for the medium-specific formal elements of video games' (Murray, [1998] 2017) (Opheusden, 2020:7). Because many digital games have clear protagonists, antagonists and quest structures, Murray (2017) among other narratologists argue the case video games have a 'unique expressive potential' for digital storytelling and should be examined as such.

Alternatively, ludologists claim video games should be analysed in a separate academic field removed from disciplines and application of literary theory and analysis (Juul, 2011:16). As Aarseth explains, 'games are both object and process; they can't be read as texts or listened to as music' but rather they are played (2001). The audience actively engages with a virtual world as opposed to witnessing a narrative unfold, players are the ones actively unfolding it via the mechanics and rule-based systems of the game space. Ultimately, the ludologist approach prioritises the unique capabilities of game design and the 'distinctiveness of video games as an expressive medium' as the forefront of the research agenda (Pérez-Latorre et al., 2016:587).

Undertaking a hybrid method of analysing both narratological and ludological aspects allows for a deeper insight, rather than viewing them solely as ludic systems or narratives; this approach treats them as multifaceted sources of information. By integrating narrative and ludic elements, researchers can better understand the complexities inherent in video games and their cultural significance, thereby providing richer and more nuanced data for analysis. While it is critical to explore video games as an entirely separate entity, as advocated by many such as Juul, this approach risks overlooking valuable insights derived from narrative exploration, and vice versa. Burril's (2017) notion of a 'meta-hybrid' approach, offers a solution by encouraging investigation into both aspects. This approach recognises the importance of both gameplay mechanics and narrative elements, both of which are invaluable in addressing the posed research questions. This research will therefore consider this, aiming to examine beyond mere examination of game mechanics or narratives, but encompassing

everything in between providing a holistic understanding of queer representation in these games.

Methodology

Research methods

This research will conduct a combined ludic and discourse analysis of nine case studies, evaluating how they represent queer content and experiences or how in some cases, entirely dismiss or marginalise them. To create room for comparison, the case studies will be categorised by region of origin, focusing on North American, European, and Japanese triple-A and double-A video games. Each game will be played and analysed in depth throughout the duration of this research, aligning with Mäyrä's assertion that playing the games being studied is 'the most crucial element of any methodology of game studies' (2008:165). This also compliments Aarseth's argument that along with exterior sources related to a videogame text (such as developer interviews, reviews, industry knowledge, etc), a 'hands-on playing experience' provides videogame analysis with the best potential for successful research (2007:6). The representations of LGBTQ+ individuals in video games will be analysed through a multifaceted approach as recommended by scholars such as Burrill (2017), incorporating discourse and ludic analysis, enforcing a meta-hybrid analysis.

Ludic refers to 'play', therefore ludic analysis involves examining the mechanics, rules, and systems that shape a video game. As aforementioned, it is acknowledging video games as distinct complex systems that differ from other texts, thus needing an identifiable way to analyse them. Through a ludic analysis, researchers can underpin how certain discourse is framed by the systems and procedures of the game. The decision to integrate these methodologies stems from the recognition that video games function on two interrelated levels: gameplay mechanics (ludic) and narrative elements (discourse).

A ludic analysis of a character can yield conclusions that differ significantly from a narrative analysis. This distinction highlights why this research will adopt a meta-hybrid approach, integrating both methodologies. As Pérez-Latorre et al. (2017) observe, a 'character's ludic role may be far from their role and characterization in the narrative dimension,' which can potentially reveal 'opposing values' (2017:595). Ludic analysis therefore considers how the 'rules of play' in games reflect and reinforce cultural values, including those related to gender, sexuality, and identity as this research aims to underpin. By exploring how games function at their structural level, ludic analysis provides insights into how developers encode meaning (deliberately or unconsciously) within the interactive framework of ludic spaces, revealing both the explicit and implicit ways that video games

mediate identity. In practice, I identify and explore the core mechanics, player agency/game interactions, procedural rhetoric and the inclusivity provided by the mechanics. For instance, an important aspect of ludic analysis in queer game studies is the exploration of the aforementioned 'gay button', where queer content or relationships are optional and can be easily overlooked or ignored if the player is not intentionally seeking out this content. This phenomenon raises questions about the inclusivity and centrality of queer identities in games. Are LGBTQ+ narratives fully integrated into the core mechanics of the game, or are they restricted to easily missed 'surface level' inclusions?

This will be accompanied by discourse analysis, the method used to study language, communication, and their meanings within a social or cultural context (Gill, 2000, p.174-175). Mäyrä describes discourse analysis as the process of 'uncovering how conventions in language make certain ways of representing or thinking to appear as self-evident and natural, even if they carry certain power relations within them' (2007:157). Building on this, Fairclough's (2013) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a way to explore how language in games can reflect and reinforce social structures, power dynamics, and ideologies. Critical social analysis will be used as both a normative and explanatory critique, not only used to analyse how queer content is represented in games but also used in evaluating how these representations align with cultural values, particularly in terms of cultural and political standards. This research employs discourse analysis to critically examine in-game dialogues, character descriptions, and narrative elements, exploring how LGBTQ+ identities are portrayed within the game's storyline. It will also analyse character designs, animations, and narrative cues to understand how visual and textual elements contribute to the representation of queer characters and themes. Character design analysis includes examination of character's colour schemes, bodies, mannerisms as these aspects are a 'tool for the designer to exaggerate and play down traits in a character' (Solarski in Unéus, & Christenson, 2017:5) (Solarski, 2012). Mechanics like the 'gay button' are analysed ludically by examining how optional queer relationships are integrated into gameplay, while discourse analysis explores how these relationships are communicated in the narrative. This methodology adapts the concept of ludic analysis by integrating it into the wider framework of discourse analysis, widening the focus from how games communicate meaning through narratological and ludological aspects.

Qualitative data favours in-depth explanations, descriptions, and comparisons of data rather than statistical, quantified data. Mäyrä (2008) discusses how qualitative data can provide the researcher with a 'with a holistic understanding about the whole surrounding the particular phenomenon' (2008:160), which allows this research to underpin an in-depth view.

For the data collection phase, I undertook a comprehensive playthrough of each game, with a focus on meticulously documenting every instance of queerness or elements that could be interpreted as queer, drawing upon the frameworks of queer theory as well as previous academia. This involved a detailed examination of how LGBTQ+ identities and themes are portrayed, including narrative structures, character interactions, player agency, and the broader game world by undergoing a discourse and ludic analysis. By applying this dual methodology, I sought to uncover explicit and implicit representations of queerness, aiming to capture the nuanced ways these identities are embedded within the game's storytelling and mechanics.

To facilitate a structured and comprehensive analysis, I manually employed a systematic coding process to identify and categorise key elements key to answer my research questions (Williams & Moser, 2019). This allowed for the deconstruction of complex game elements and their interactions, and discourse revealing underlying patterns and themes that inform the representation of LGBTQ+ identities. The codes that guided my analysis are as follows:

- Player interactions: How are encouraged to engage with the game world, characters and agency, particularly in relation to queer representation and the opportunities for diverse player agency.
- Game mechanics: How mechanics, such as romance systems and decision-making processes either support or limit the inclusion of LGBTQ+ content and narratives.
- Narrative elements: Analysing the storylines, dialogue, and plot structures to identify how queerness is integrated into or omitted from the narrative.
- Character and avatar design: The depictions of characters, including their identities and visual design, and how these aspects reinforce or challenge normative representations of gender and sexuality.

These codes and methodological approach provide a broad yet focused framework for applying both ludic and discourse analysis. In this case, my dual methodology will be applied to each case study aiming to underpin the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of queer integration and content (Yin, 2004). By systematically applying this methodology across multiple case studies, I can ensure that the findings are replicable, providing a more precise and rigorous examination of the research questions.

Case Studies

Yin argues qualitative research attempting to answer the 'why' and 'how' behind social phenomena is well suited to case study data which allows for 'extensive' in-depth descriptions of the subject (Yin, 2009, p.4). Exploratory case studies can also identify new research questions which can be used in subsequent research studies (Priya, 2021). This research will prioritise the exploratory route; many of the case studies to be examined are new games, hence, there is no such analysis of them as of 2024.

Typically, case studies use a variety of evidence from different sources, such as documents, artefacts, interviews, and observations, and this goes beyond the range of sources of evidence that might be available in historical study (Rowley, 2002). This is because case studies allow space for interchangeability over time as the gaming industry further develops, and thus, this information is comparable with past games. This research will therefore utilise academic scholarship and news publications throughout to support my analysis and arguments or counter them. Moreover, while answering my own research questions, it is likely that the research will introduce new questions, exploratory routes, and ideas for future research. Furthermore, as each case may come with different explanations and understandings, it is almost impossible to generalise just one case, so exploring a variety of cases will make for a more comparable and extensive data.

Researchers using multiple case studies should consider carefully the selection of cases and challenge them with the same rationale. Yin notes that 'every case should serve a specific purpose within the overall scope of inquiry' and to try to follow "replication" logic' (Yin, 2014, p.45). Therefore, each case will be analysed and challenged via the same research questions, providing comparative data produced following replication logic as proposed by Yin. The logic underlying the use of multiple-case studies case, Yin explains, is that the cases must be 'carefully selected so that it either (a) predicts similar results (a literal replication) or (b) produces contrasting results but for predictable reasons (a theoretical replication)' (Yin, 2004:388).

The selection of the nine games for this research was guided by a systematic process to ensure a comprehensive and representative analysis of LGBTQ+ representation across different regions. This study aimed to encompass the varying cultural attitudes towards sexuality, gender and identity which could reflect the local market expectations as well as cultural norms or do the opposite and provide new views entirely. Initially, I conducted an in-depth exploration of each region's gaming industry and LGBTQ+ policy to establish the

cultural context that would inform my analysis. Following this, I considered community and player bases, focusing on selecting games that have garnered wide and sometimes conflicting responses from players and in wider media within the triple A or double A category. This approach was intended to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives on LGBTQ+ representation.

In addition to cultural and community considerations, I applied genre diversification as a key criterion. The selection aimed to represent a broad range of game genres — from first-person shooters and life simulation to puzzle-platformers, RPGs, and choice-driven narratives in order to capture the varied ways queer representation can manifest across different gameplay formats. Given that fantasy and science fiction genres often provide expansive narrative possibilities and complex character arcs (Battis, 2007:4) (Hollinger, 1999:24), I primarily prioritised games within these genres. By selecting games across a variety of genres, I aimed to provide a balanced and nuanced analysis of how different narrative structures impact the portrayal of LGBTQ+ identities.

Geographical origin	Pre-Gamergate	Post-Gamergate	Post-Gamergate
European	*Fable* series (Lionhead Studios, 2004)	*Life is Strange* (Dontnod, 2015)	*Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios, 2023)
North American	*Mass Effect 3* (Bioware, 2012)	*Overwatch 2* (Blizzard, 2022-present)	*The Sims* 4 (Maxis, 2014-present)
Japanese	*Bayonetta* (Platinum Games, 2009)	*Catherine: Full Body* (Atlus, 2019)	*The Legend of Zelda* (*BOTW* & *TOTK*) (Nintendo, 2017, 2023)

I was able to curate a selection of games that not only reflect regional diversity but also provide a balanced mix of narrative styles, gameplay mechanics and player experiences, ensuring a robust and comprehensive analysis of LGBTQ+ representation across the global gaming landscape.

Justification of methods

This dual-methodology is the most effective approach, as it recognises the unique functions of video game texts and enables critical analysis through both their ludic systems and discourse. Although case study data lacks a fixed point of evidentiary support, it provides comparable information. The case studies were purposely chosen to provide insight into attitudes, representation and inclusivity; concepts that cannot be quantified, but rather to be discussed and approached with objectivity and acknowledgment of varying cultural contexts.

Analysing an array of games for each category aims to avoid issues of generalisations, allowing further comparisons among developers and companies of the same region. As noted by Yin, multiple-case research equips the data with some distinct advantages over single-case designs (2014:45). The data is therefore, often considered stronger and more credible overall (Herriott & Firestone, 1983:14-15) (Yin, 2014:45). Given the evolving nature of the gaming industry and consequently the arguably limited academic literature on the topic, case study data provides a valuable and comprehensive insight.

As aforementioned, in the conclusion of Shaw and Friesem's article they suggest that future qualitative data on this topic should be compared with their findings to track developments over time (2016:3886). Hence, there is certainly room for in-depth qualitative data, acknowledging how cultural interpretations may differ for audiences and the beliefs of the researcher. Attempting to quantify instances of queerness can introduce complications concerning the researcher's definition of queerness and their categorization of different sexualities. While Shaw and Ruberg's data is invaluable in exemplifying instances of queer content, it is critical to acknowledge the cultural and social differences of gamers, researchers, and developers.

Each game varied in playtime: *Baldur's Gate 3* took 100 hours to complete, *Mass Effect 3* took 60 hours, and *The Sims*, with no defined narrative structure, was played for approximately 60 hours. The differentiating play times ultimately impacts this research's replicability. Given the complexity and open-ended nature of these games, it is also difficult to be certain of everything I may have missed during these playthroughs. To mitigate this, I also referred to game journalists and Reddit (among other sources) to explore player responses and gather additional insights and or content I may have missed. Furthermore, while the diversity of game formats allows for a more comprehensive analysis, certain genres, such as first-person shooters, inherently offer limited opportunities for in-depth character exploration or development. As a result, even when characters feature queer

identities, the constraints of the genre often limit the extent to which queerness can be meaningfully explored within the game space itself.

Case study data can be regarded as lacking rigour and objectivity (Rowley, 2002:16). Yin notes that case study research has been viewed as 'sloppy' or less controlled in comparison to quantitative data (2004). Qualitative data lacks the numerical and statistical possibilities enabled by quantitative research. Macnamara observed that many researchers criticise qualitative content analysis as being 'unscientific and unreliable' as well as intensive and time consuming (2005:5). Yin states that the greatest concern for case study data is a lack of systematic procedure and infiltration of personal bias influencing the study's conclusion (Yin, 2004:14). The resulting case study data may reflect the interpretations and personal biases of the researcher, affecting the accuracy of the data. These arguments, however, ignore the fact personal bias is also capable of impacting or interfering with controlled, quantitative experiments as well as other qualitative research methods. Rosenthal (2009) highlights how a researcher can unconsciously drive their supposedly controlled experiment to complement their hypothesis, despite following the strict codes and procedures ensuring unbiased data from the experiment. Evidently, a researcher's unconscious biases can impact their research outcomes despite following strict research procedure. Therefore, to argue qualitative research such as case studies lacks 'rigour', dismisses the fact all research is ultimately affected by bias and one's subconscious hypothesis.

It is critical to acknowledge the possibility of confirmation bias in this research. As a female gamer and proud member of the LGBTQ+ community, it is crucial to remain objective throughout my research and consider research which may counter my hypothesised ideas. Personal experience and bias may narrow the researcher's scope by looking strictly for instances reflecting their own experience and thus an internalised bias. Furthermore, the explanatory notion of case studies could also result in the researcher's personal bias reflected in their explanations of queerness and what queerness looks like. As Von Krafft-Ebing (1893) wrote in his paper named Psychopathia Sexualis, 'very few ever fully appreciate the powerful influence which sexuality exercises over feeling, thought, and conduct, both in the individual and society' (1983:iii). So, while researchers should deny applying their personal bias, one should acknowledge how media texts can unconsciously embody the sexual biases of their creators. Similarly, in addressing instances of queer inclusion, the researcher's personal beliefs could influence what they believe counts as 'good' or 'bad' representation, or what counts as a form of representation at all.

It is important the researcher is conscious of the possibility that their bias will be naturally filtered through their research processes, thus, resulting in bias-tainted data. To prevent this, Yin advises that researchers should aim to 'avoid biases by being sensitive to contradictory evidence' (2014:73). Similarly, Feynman, a Nobel prize winner in Physics, insisted that our responsibilities as researchers include 'bending over backwards to show how you're maybe wrong' (1974:12), (McSweeney, 2021:5).

Furthermore, when applying Western theoretical frameworks to the analysis of queer themes in games developed outside the West, it is essential to acknowledge cultural differences, particularly in societal attitudes toward queerness. To address this, I familiarised myself with Japanese social policy and LGBTQ+ history, both within the gaming industry and in the broader context of Japanese society. However, I'm aware that there may still be interpretive challenges, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and the risk of unintentionally applying Western perspectives to narratives that are deeply rooted in different social contexts.

One limitation to this methodological framework is the analysis of in games with branching narratives, and due to the time constraints of this project, it wasn't feasible to analyse every possible romance path—particularly in expansive titles like *Mass Effect 3* and *Baldur's Gate 3*, which offer a wide range of queer options. Additionally, as I engaged with some of these titles without prior experience of earlier entries in their respective series, there is a possibility that I may have missed earlier queer content or character developments that could shape the broader context of LGBTQ+ representation. To help mitigate these limitations, I invested time in researching previous game instalments, exploring fan communities, and understanding developer histories and intentions, in order to ground my analysis in a more informed and comprehensive context. Additionally, Aeserath (2007:7) notes how 'Games are performance-oriented, and our own performance might not be the best source, especially when we are analysing it ourselves'. This highlights the importance of acknowledging how I play games will differ from others. To amend this, this research will include a range of player feedback as well as dual-playthroughs in games with multiple romances outcomes. While time constraints prevented the completion of all second playthroughs, additional insights were gathered through community discussions and YouTube gameplay footage, allowing for the analysis of scenes and narrative developments not accessed firsthand in-game.

While this research focuses specifically on LGBTQ+ content, it acknowledges that other important aspects of inclusivity, such as disability and racial representation, are not the

primary focus. These areas are significant and deserve attention but fall outside the scope of this study although intersectional identities will be considered. Additionally, the decision to exclude independent games was intentional, as the focus is on mainstream titles with generally larger audiences and budgets (AA and AAA). This allows for a more concentrated examination of how queer representation is handled in games that have a wider cultural impact.

Game Analysis Part 1 – European Games

This section will cover three European games, all of which have queer themes and contributed to the developing representations of queer identities in video games.

Fable Franchise (Lionhead Studios, 2004 – 2010)

Lionhead Studio's *Fable* Franchise, originally produced for Xbox, followed a particular narrative formula in their games, featuring an unknowing hero (the player) on whose shoulders the fate of Albion rests. *Fable* (2004) is set in Albion, a fantasy world which greatly mirrors Medieval Britain. Chronologically, *Fable 2* (2008) reflects an age of enlightenment, with the third instalment *Fable 3* (2010) introducing Albion's version of the British industrial revolution. The player's choices impact how the player is perceived by other characters and certain decisions will have a direct impact on narrative outcomes. The player can be evil, good, ugly and, (most revolutionary for a game released in 2004) gay or bisexual. Focusing mainly on *Fable 2* and *Fable 3*, this analysis examines how these games explored queerness and contributed to the portrayal of sexual diversity garnering critical acclaim for these portrayals (Shaw, 2013). Problematic patterns of rhetoric will also be addressed regarding representations of sexual identities, including the emphasis on heterosexuality as the default option in game mechanics, the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, and the overall lack of authentic queer representation The series offers players the chance to 'play gay', granting them the freedom to explore same-sex romantic relationships in a way players had not been able to in other contemporary RPGs of the early 2000s. However, Shaw (2013) comments on the queer potential of the genre, expressing that 'games as fantasy spaces have the potential to disentangle queerness from experiences of violence and without relying on oversimplified notions of identity' (2013:.9), which leave me wondering why they didn't capitalise on the queer potential of this game and its genre. Being the only pre-Gamergate game for the European case studies in this research, *Fable* offers a perfect scope to look at comparatively with queer game studies today.

Inclusivity or a mechanical oversight?

Fable is often compared with *Fallout 2* (Bethesda, 1998), The *Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000) and *Bully* (Rockstar, 2006), regarded by academics as some of the earliest and pioneering examples of queer representation in the gaming industry. In fact, even in the first *The Sims* game romantic interactions with the same sex were provided, but no there was no option to marry them until *The Sims 3* in 2009. The first *Fable* is one of the earliest examples of nonheteronormative marriage as an option in games. At the time *Fable* (2004) was released, civil partnerships and same-sex marriage were not yet legally recognised in the UK. Interestingly, *Fable* always had same-sex marriage as an option for the player; *Fable*'s creative director Dene Carter noted that the ability to 'play gay' was not 'originally at least, an example of the developers' social consciousness' (Ochalla, 2006), but rather an appropriate accident. Carter (2006) explains that:

> 'It was not so much a question of overt inclusion as a reluctance to remove something that occurred naturally in the course of creating our villagers' artificial intelligence. […] Our villagers each had a simple concept of 'attraction to the hero.' We'd have had to write extra code to remove that in the case of same-sex interactions. This seemed like a ridiculous waste of time.' (Carter in Ochalla, 2006, para. 16).

While preparing for backlash from those 'violently opposed to such content', the developers eventually embraced their decision, recognising it as an 'important stance' and 'support of tolerance' (Ochalla, 2006, para. 18). Contrastingly, Shaw's (2013, para.4) analysis unveiled a 'persistent shutting down of queerness' throughout the progression of the franchise. Taking this into consideration, this analysis will explore *Fable*'s queer content, critically examining areas where their claims of inclusivity are not substantiated nor reflected in their content and representations.

It is arguable that this commitment continued, with randomly pre-determined sexualities for every NPC from *Fable 2* onwards and (while small and easily missed), an acknowledgement of queer identities. Despite the happy accident of gay marriages, for the game to systematically recognise you as bisexual, the player must marry a both a male and female NPC. This becomes especially difficult since getting a divorce in-game isn't easy. To end a marriage, you either must kill your spouse, mistreat them, or marry in different towns or regions to avoid conflict. This is not the only evidence of mechanical oversights leading to

implied monosexuality in digital gaming. This ludological aspect suggests a rather heteronormative or narrow view of bisexual representation, as if the gesture was implemented as an afterthought to solidify a façade of inclusivity.

In the second and third game, players can check an NPC's occupation, personality traits and sexuality which in turn dictate their responses to the player. Although, there is little besides this to reinforce their identities; there are no visual codes or voice lines exploring these queer identities, the only identification being their sexuality in their stats, being either straight, gay or bisexual. While player interaction will reveal their sexual identities, there is no narrative extension of these identities besides this. Notably, Shaw (2003:para.10) argues that the franchise begins to treat gender as 'a rigid binary that determines sexuality, and fantasy is made 'realistic' only when it comes to remarginalising marginalised groups as there are notably less not-heterosexual NPCs. Ultimately, it appears the label of the hero's sexuality is reduced to whom the player has married.

Although, there is a particular quest I came across replaying *Fable 2,* which upholds the developer's inclusive stance and dedication to representation. The Quest 'The Blind Date', entails a farmer asking the player to set his son up for marriage, the player is informed by the son that while he is interested in marriage, it is not women he's interested in. With this information in mind, the player can either find a male NPC as requested, earning positive morality points, or a female NPC deducting the player's morality points. This ludically demonstrates their claims of inclusivity via the morality system, however, I also came across instances where their seeming commitment fell short.

Biphobia or bisexual visibility?

The idea that bisexuals exhibit an ‘excessive and oversexualized promiscuous nature’ as often reproduced in stereotypes across media is applicable to representations of bisexuality throughout the *Fable* series (Kleese, 2011:233). I observed these biphobic stereotypes were especially evident within the original *Fable* and *Fable 2* with all the prostitutes, male and female are labelled as bisexual in their character information. This mechanical oversite perpetuates the stereotype that bisexuals will ‘screw anything that moves’ (Shaw, 2013). This could also be viewed as another mechanical oversight but nevertheless frames bisexuality in a problematic and inauthentic manner.

(Figure 1, *Fable 3* (Lionhead Studios) in-game screenshot of Reaver)

Playing *Fable 3*, I anticipated the inclusion of more queer characters, especially given the overt bisexuality of Reaver in *Fable 2*. However, Reaver remained the sole character I could identify whose queerness was explicitly integrated into the narrative, as opposed to being determined by random coding, where NPCs are either assigned straight or bisexual orientations without deeper narrative context. Reaver’s character, voiced by the talented Stephan Fry, an openly gay British actor, is one of the main characters in the second game and a side antagonist in the third. Understanding how the developers portrayed Reaver's queerness is important to underpinning Europe’s early queer representations in video games, especially considering he's the only character in the franchise explicitly written as a queer character. He was once a pirate, now a businessman, tempted by greed and desire. His sexuality is openly portrayed through his flirtatious interactions with both male and female

protagonists, making him a unique NPC in the game, explicitly coded as bisexual within the narrative and player interactions. *Fable 2*'s writer Mark Llabres Hill explains his sexuality is:

> 'just a natural result of his character. Since his driving principle is pleasure, it made sense that he wouldn't deprive himself of the company of anyone he found attractive' (The Edge 2010) (Greer, 2013:10).

However, Reaver shares multiple stereotypical traits depicted in other media representations of queer men, suggesting his sexuality has an overt visual emphasis in comparison to the narrative logic as according to Hill. He is extremely theatrical in his speech and gestures, donning various extravagant outfits throughout the trilogy and maintaining his drawn-on heart shaped beauty mark (refer to figure 1). Shaw and Friesem describe how many queer male characters are characterised by 'unambiguous signifiers drawn from stereotypes' (2016:3880-3881) such as 'visual cues of dress, mannerisms, and voice' as identified by Dyer (1977/1999) in his research on queer representations in film. These signifiers are attributed solely to highlight their sexual identity. Similarly, Shugart (2003) notes in their essay analysing media portrayals of gay men, that many gay characters are often utilised to 'renormalise heteronormativity' and these character's sexual identities are often used as 'comic devices' (Fejes & Petrich, 1993:397). This is applicable to Reaver's character, whose unseriousness and humorous voice lines even in the most delicate of situations comparatively positions the hero as more serious and assertive, enhancing their perceived masculinity and diminishing Reaver's.

Players can read Reaver's diary in *Fable 2*, where he mentions his crowded bedroom filled with 'bedfellows', inferring he often partakes in orgies, and other diary entries retelling sexual encounters highlighting his sexually devious appetite. During the main quest for *Fable 3*, players must infiltrate Reaver's ball at his manor in hopes of retrieving the missing men of the hero's ally, Paige. While thoroughly exploring Reaver's manor, I found that Reaver's sexuality was further communicated through the discourse of his environment. The player will encounter a hedonistic, promiscuous bunch of drunken aristocrats and further explore his manor to Reaver's bedroom hidden behind a bookshelf. The atmosphere in the room is dark, with an extravagant red four poster bed, a cage hanging from the ceiling, along with chains, manacles and a range of euphemistic loot including condoms, potions and even a toy sword. One could observe that the potions and toy sword have sexual connotations considering the room they are found in and the promiscuity surrounding Reaver's character. His cavalier attitude during the quest extends to him casually inviting the player and their companion,

Paige, to his bedchambers despite the seriousness of the situation. This serves to illustrate just how much Reaver really doesn't care about anything but himself. In this quest, we get to see how sadistic Reaver can be, as well his insatiable hunger for violence. Reaver stages a spectacle for his party guests, orchestrating a game where the player and Paige are led into an arena of sorts, their enemies chosen at random from a spinning wheel. From a balcony above, Reaver and his guests observe as the player and Paige engage in battles against various of the game's monsters and factions. Reaver's voice lines throughout this sequence depict joy and excitement, yet still maintain his aristocratic, theatrical language as if commentating a horse race. It is also arguable that Reaver's character depicts additional biphobic traits as discussed by Chivers (2023) in his reflective article, looking back on the character, he discussed the depiction of bisexuality as:

> 'being a refuge of the desperate, the indecisive…was definitely a type of biphobia that I not only recognised but internalised. It's also worth noting that while hedonism was a characteristic that's often, in a biphobic tone, ascribed to bisexuals, it's also something that I drew great comfort from' (2023, para.6).

Despite the character's arguably problematic portrayal of bisexuality, Chivers (2023) discovered solace in Reaver's unapologetic embrace of his own identity. While Bogost's theories of procedural rhetoric and the persuasive influence of games could be applied to Chivers' internalisation of bisexual themes, it is equally interesting that he found comfort in this character. The contagious nature of Reaver's unapologetic and unashamed attitude resonated deeply with Chivers, as he noted, 'the pride he exuded with every easy step or luscious word resonated powerfully with me' (2023, para.7).

Crossdressing and gender exploration

I came across very little in the way of gender exploration or trans representation, but the game arguably ignores many binary gendered stereotypes seen in similar media. Drawing on Butler's insights, both male and female avatars lack significant differences in their walk, mannerisms, or attitude. In *Fable 2* the avatar is silent and in *Fable 3* their voice lines remain identical regardless of gender, contributing to a sense of gender neutrality in gameplay. Unlike some games whereas playing as a female character may result in stat limitations, *Fable* generally avoids such stereotypes, allowing players to embody their avatar's male or female identity without stereotypical gendered differences (such as a strength difference in stats as seen in other games such as DnD).

However, if the player experiments with their character's gender identity by crossdressing, NPCs might react negatively and repeatedly shout 'that is just disgusting' at the player. However, some NPCs compliment the player. Generally, however, if a female avatar wears the gentleman's shoes, or a male avatar wears a dress, they will be marked as crossdressers, not simply a man in a dress. Shaw concludes that essentially, 'gender identity in the game (which is strictly controlled) overrides gender presentation in the game' denying any further gender exploration to players. *Fable 2* included a potion of 'Transmogrification', obtainable at the very end of the game, drinking it will permanently change the avatar's gender. The potion is received as if it is a reward and Shaw discusses how this appears to be a 'positive step in transgender representation' despite being hidden at the end of the game, it is still evidence of queer content (2013). However, the newly transformed avatar will receive various transphobic remarks from NPCs such as 'didn't you used to be a man'. While of course transphobia is an everyday occurrence for many people, Shaw notes the unlikelihood that the designers were trying to 'highlight and critique' its pervasiveness (2013:7). It further suggests these additions are generally humours and in no way a fight for inclusivity, as argued by Shaw:

> 'Given that this is a fantasy game, one of the few places where gender transition might not be bound to "real life" violence, why is it not celebrated? In other words, whose fantasy are we working with here?'

Shaw's question underscores a tension regarding gender representation in fantasy games: even in an imagined, fantastical world such as Fable's, gender remains cis-normative, and non-normative portrayals are positioned as comedic or unnatural. This demonstrates how

real-world prejudices can infiltrate even fictional spaces, reinforcing and prioritising normative gender expectations.

Heteronormative Coding: When Player Choice Meets Narrative Restriction

(Figure 2, *Fable 2* in-game screenshot of character choice) (Figure 3, *Fable 3* in-game screenshot of character choice)

There is notable procedural rhetoric throughout reinforcing heteronormative behaviours. Like its predecessor, *Fable 3* gives the player the choice between playing as the female or male avatar (refer to figure 3). Based on this choice, there's a default love interest introduced, who is binary opposite the player's chosen gender at the start. You play as the child of the hero from the previous game, either a prince or princess. The game starts with your brother, the king, giving you a complex choice, either to save the protesters or save the player's predetermined love interest. However, the default love interest presented in the game doesn't align with the player's romantic preferences, should the player be gay. This immediate discrepancy between the player's identity and the game's predetermined narrative can create a sense of exclusion. Moreover, these predetermined love interests are fully realised characters with much more content in comparison to any other marriageable NPC. Elliot, the male love interest is voiced by Nicholas Hoult, who would want to marry an NPC with voice lines used for multiple other characters when you could have Elliot? Elliot and Elise are absent from the game if you choose to save the protesters instead, closing the predetermined romance narrative with them. Similarly, *Fallout 4* (Bethesda, 2015) also depicts the backstories of the possible playable characters that are explicitly coded as heterosexual. Choosing between the husband or wife in a suburban nuclear household only suggests the PC's sexuality is canon despite having control over almost every aspect of their identity. This suggests the game's procedural mechanics prioritise heterosexual rhetoric with queer content side-lined, and barley visible in comparison.

Trepte and Reinecke (2009:67) found that players generally prefer their avatar to maintain elements of their identity, specifically their gender and sexual orientation. Similarly, Schrier's (2012) study had very interesting results in regard to this conversation of avatar

gender and love interests. They had a large sample of male players play the game, with half using the female avatar (condition 1) and the other half playing with the male avatar (condition 2). This revealed a notable difference in behaviour: male players controlling female avatars were significantly less inclined to pursue or help Elliot compared to those using male avatars who pursued Elise. Respondents 'had a harder time imagining a potential relationship with a male romantic partner' and thus, the majority dismissed Elliot and saved the protesters, effectively side-lining Elliot's role in the story. The respondents who sacrificed Elise to save the protesters felt guilty as they would never be able to further explore a relationship with her, but strikingly, 'none of the Condition 2 participants expressed regret at not saving Elliot' (2012). Schrier concluded that 'participants playing as the same gender avatar were more connected and identified more strongly with the avatar as a representation of themselves'. This study emphasises the significance of inclusive content and critical engagement with gender and sexuality in game development to improve player experiences.

In *Fable* and *Fable 2*, Lady Elvira Gray is one of the few romanceable NPCs with a narrative history, making her stand out from other options with limited content and narrative in comparison. She is portrayed as conventionally attractive with a unique design. In *Fable 2*, the player is tasked by a grave keeper with the disturbing quest of collecting her scattered body parts so he can resurrect and marry her, using a love potion to ensure her compliance. The player faces two choices: leave her with the grave keeper (which earns positive morality points) or marry her themselves (losing morality points). However, if the player delays proposing with a five-star ring, she vanishes from the game. While her autonomy is ignored and her character reduced to a quest reward, her only accepting the most expensive ring available shows her snobbish attitude isn't fully erased. The fact that she's one of the only marriageable characters with more than five lines of dialogue, yet her story arc is so limited, is a missed opportunity. She doesn't comment on the player's gender, reducing her to a 'player-sexual' NPC. Since, in the original *Fable*, where players could only play a male avatar, it would have been a meaningful addition to include dialogue reflecting her queer identity if she marries the female avatar. Unfortunately, her agency remains limited. The morality of leaving her with a stranger is questionable, yet the only option for players aiming to maintain a 'pure' morality score, ludically framing this as the moral choice.

Another quest necessary to address is *Fable 2*'s Till Death do us Part, revealing the dominant themes of heteronormative ideology. The player will come across a ghost telling them about how their lover, named Alex, left them at the altar. The ghost will then quest the player with seducing Alex, convincing him/her to marry the player, then handing them a note

of rejection before the wedding, gaining morality points if you destroy the letter, and deducting them if you give the note to Alex. The ghost will always match the gender of the hero. Like Lady Gray, Alex is one of the few NPCs with more lines of dialogue, although they aren't visually unique, being an exact copy of other male or female peasant NPCs.

Conclusion

This analysis underscores that heterosexual players have access to a broader array of romance options and content. While queer players have some representation, the depth and diversity of romantic opportunities are extremely limited in comparison to those available to their heterosexual players. The procedural rhetoric often suggests heterosexuality is default. This disparity in gameplay experiences based on sexual orientation emphasises the need for greater inclusivity and equality in gaming narratives. *Fable* was undeniably shaped with a predominantly heterosexual audience in mind. The prevalence of default heterosexual romance options further emphasises a missed opportunity for more inclusive storytelling. While the only overtly queer character, Reaver, provides glimpses of queer identity, his portrayal is superficial and exaggerated. There was potential for a richer exploration of diverse identities, particularly through characters like Reaver, but this potential remained largely absent.

Life is Strange (Dontnod Entertainment, 2015)

The *Life is Strange* franchise was developed by the French studio Dontnod Entertainment by Raoul Barbet and Michel Koch and the first purchasable episode of the game was released in 2015. While set in an imaginary, quiet, seaside town in America named Arcadia Bay, the issues raised reflect struggles known to people all over the world. From issues of suicide, drug abuse and sexuality, *Life is Strange* tells a beautiful story through the eyes of an awkward protagonist, Max. While *Life is Strange 2* and *3* are also worth discussing, the first story that Dontnod introduced us to, from the perspectives of the characters Chloe and Max, is where this case study will focus. The game earned numerous awards and became a significant topic of discussion in journalism and video game studies. It features queer characters central to the narrative, offering a story that can be read as one freedom to explore identity. However, it also employs various stereotypical tropes and plot devices, leading to criticism that the company prioritised profit over genuine storytelling (King, 2024). To gain a deeper in-sight into how queer characters were depicted, the DLC, which takes place before the events of the base game, will also be considered.

Max Caulfield: A Subversive Protagonist and the Question of Queer Potential

(Figure 4, Max (left) and Chloe (right), in-game screenshot in Life is Strange)

Max represents an ordinary teenager navigating her life as a photography student. Eventually, Max discovers she can rewind time, and the narrative follows Max using these powers for trivial tasks, to uncovering the mysteries of Arcadia Bay and disappearance of another student named Rachel Amber. She is reunited with an old friend, Chloe, saving her life by rewinding time and preventing another student, Nathan Prescott, from shooting her. Max and Chloe work together to solve the mystery behind Rachel Amber's disappearance and the other strange happenings in their town. The DLC explores Chloe's past and relationship with Rachele Amber, whose disappearance is investigated in the base game.

Max's character contradicts many of the female protagonists gamers were accustomed to. Players cannot simply kill characters they dislike but utilise her dialogue or time travel to diffuse dangerous situations. Her awkwardness is portrayed through her animations and dialogue, adding a unique depth and interesting scope for a protagonist, as one who does not really understand her own identity. Unlike Bayonetta or Lara Croft, Max's struggle with self-identity makes her a relatable character for minority players, offering a fresh perspective in the realm of video game protagonists. Max serves as the conduit for player's agency, whose decisions will ultimately determine the fate of many characters. Unlike the repeated reproductions of 'the dude in cargo pants' protagonist as Shaw argues, Max's character offers a new perspective within video game narratives (Beyond Solitaire, podcast, 2023). However, where Max could of have a canon moment of self-actualisation about her identity, this aspect of her is completely avoidable should the player wish.

‘Bury your gays’ and queer tragedy

Many argue the game is an example of ‘queerbaiting’ lesbian and bisexual women who were previously captivated by the promise of queer content. As argued by Fredenburg (2019), queerbaiting occurs when developers rely ‘on the promise of LGBTQ+ representation to attract a large audience and then leaving that promise unfulfilled, unexplored or killing off the queer characters’ (2019:104). While the promise of a queer story attracted new intrigued audiences, the devastating conclusion to gay relationships resulted in many queer gamers feeling unfulfilled and that the designers utilised what some call the 'bury your gays' trope (Fredenburg, 2019:104). Fredenburg argues this trope explicitly perpetrates the homophobic ideology that LGBTQ+ people should 'suffer for their sins'. However, Fredenburg also suggest that the use of the tragic deaths of queer characters could serve as lessons to teach heterosexual and cisgender people tolerance and kindness for others. Despite this, the ‘bury your gays’ trope could echo other queer media productions such as *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang, 2005), a heart-breaking story following a gay relationship, where one of them is ultimately murdered in a hate crime. It is arguable that when queer people appear in the media, 'they must either be serial killers, or they must die as punishment for their identities' (Fredenburg, 2019:104). Arltoft & Benkö (2019) point out that queer women in particular are often victims of this trope, provoking an alternative name for the trope being ‘Dead Lesbian Syndrome’ (2019:4).

With the primary relationship ludically doomed, this analysis will underpin the many ways *Life is Strange* and the DLC depicting the events prior, subscribe to these tropes. I played the DLC to learn the relationship between Chloe and Rachel, surprised at the depth and complexity of their story considering their predetermined doomed romance. Rachel is encountered at the beginning of the first episode, helping Chloe in an altercation at the venue they both managed to get into underage. The following episodes allow the player to witness their bond grow. While Rachel's character exhibits some flirtatious dialogue before Chloe has the option to kiss her, Rachel's positive response confirms her bisexuality. However, as we know from the narrative of the original game, Rachel will be murdered. The DLC’s ending exhibits a montage of Chloe and Rachel’s relationship after the events of the DLC, with romantic and platonic moments that really highlighted their affection for each other. Following this however, there is a clip of Rachel’s phone on a desk with Chloe ringing her, slowly the shot pans out, there are flashes from a camera and then the credits start. This

ominous juxtaposition perfectly captures the arguments that LGBTQ+ characters will often be killed off as a plot device, both Rachel and Chloe's fate is sealed, and it is even arguable that had they never met, the numerous events leading to their deaths would never have occurred. The game's mechanics created expectations for these queer relationships through romance options and story hints (superficial agency, flirty dialogue options, etc), only to later disappoint players. Ultimately whether you're playing as Chloe in the DLC or as Max in the original game, the queer love interests are tragically doomed from the start. No matter what choices the players make, they cannot prevent their deaths and save Arcadia Bay.

As the ending approaches, it becomes evident the player must make a choice: either save Chloe which results in the Arcadia Bay being destroyed or save Arcadia Bay and let Chloe die. The only path a player can take to successfully romance Chloe is one that will passively kill hundreds of people, framing it as a selfish and unethical choice in comparison to saving her. The only real confessions of Chloe and Max's romantic feelings towards each other that cannot also be portrayed as a passing joke, only occurs if the player makes this decision to destroy Arcadia Bay. Eventually Max and Chloe realise the storm approaching Arcadia Bay is a result of Max's use of time travel, and the only way to save their town is by going back. Max would have to let Nathan shoot Chloe instead of rewinding time to rescue her as she does when they first reunite.

While framed as a utilitarian decision, Butt and Dunne (2019:434) point out how 'sacrificing Chloe would quantitatively prevent the greatest amount of harm in saving the greater number of lives' thus positioning the choice of saving Chloe as an incredibly selfish deed in comparison. Chloe's death is thus positioned as the 'greater good'. Butt and Dunne argue 'Chloe's entire independence can be read as a mistake in the face of her character being fated to die' which in turn 'positions the player to choose the utilitarian, hate Chloe, anti punk, anti-woman, antiqueer option' (2019:425). They argue Chloe's character may reflect a patriarchal status quo, as othering Chloe reproduced a:

> 'patriarchal and heteronormative valuation of women and queer folk as only definable when placed against others, rather than existing in their own right as human beings' (2019:425).

This could be interpreted as framing Chloe's identity as a problem to be erased, rather than valued and explored.

Representations of Queer women

Interestingly, the queer relationship between both Max and Chloe and Chloe and Rachel abides by Lee's 1988 study on representations of adolescent lesbian relationships. She argues there are four steps in lesbian coming out narratives: firstly, a female protagonist will begin garnering feelings of confusion toward another female character, this reaction is often depicted as a 'feeling that is difficult for her to describe' (Lee, 1988:154). Second, the other female protagonist will demonstrate these feelings are mutual in some way, conveniently leading to the third step where 'the feeling is manifested in physical intimacy' (1988:154), in Chloe and Max's case, the kiss. Lastly there will be 'forced' public exposure of their relationship which Lee adds that the 'relationship does not always survive this public 'outing'. This formula is overtly echoed in their relationship progression, the last step is mimicked in the way that their relationship will not get as far as a public 'outing', as everyone in arcadia bay will die should the player choose to keep Chloe alive.

This formula is also applicable to the DLC where the feelings of confusion are particularly apparent. Players can access Chloe's journal at any point, which contains a character sheet detailing Chloe's opinion on various characters, with diary entries recounting particular events of her daily life. Here, Chloe expresses her confusion and the complexity of her feelings for Rachel. She explains that Rachel is perceived as a popular "good girl" and a straight-A student, someone Chloe would not typically associate with. This also contributes to the repeated stereotype that those who identify as bisexual are 'confused or conflicted, even in nonsexual contexts' (Burke & LeFrance, 2016: 247). In addition to this, Chloe's homelife is often represented in conflict, with Chloe's dad passing away years before and having to accept her mother's partner, David as her stepfather. David's character is an accumulation of traits regarding the all-American veteran. Of course, this in turn juxtaposes Chloe's character, with numerous heated arguments between the two in regard to Chloe's language, smoking, drug use, and other actions that could be regarded as anti-social behaviour. David's identity as a veteran could also contribute to discussions of homophobia, as his character embodies aspects of traditional American masculinity. His frequent appearance in a security guard uniform further reinforces his role as a threatening authority figure. The tight loving support network she once had has now collapsed, her home is contrastingly now a hostile environment as opposed to a loving one. She also grew apart from the protagonist Max when she lost her father, further isolating her and moulding her into a character that is angry at the world.

(Figure 5, *Life is Strange, Before The Storm*, in-game screenshot, Rachel (left) and Chloe (right))

Chloe's character is coded as queer, not only in her relationships and interactions, but via specific stylistic rhetoric which many queer players would be able to identify. Like *Fable's* Reaver, Chloe's design and personality resemble similar biphobic or stereotypically queer signifiers. The unnatural blue hair, dislike for authority figures, substance abuse and overall problematic behaviour reinforce this view. The 'I don't give an F' attitude is extremely evident, not only visually but within the narrative of how these bisexuals fit into their heteronormative worlds, a symbol of resistance and difference. Arltoft and Benkö (2019:19) point out the 'You Gotta Have Blue Hair' trope in their research on common tropes in queer representations, arguing this trope is often employed as a visual narrative driver indicating a queer identity. Chloe dyes her hair from just the blue streak to all over blue after her relationship blossoms with Rachel, possibly metaphorical for the self-actualisation of her queer identity. Similarly, Rachel's one feather earring (refer to figure 5) could also be read as queer signalling, while she is almost perfect and described as a 'good girl' by Chloe herself, her asymmetrical jewellery suggests a defiant edge echoing of this type of identity signalling. Other visual indicators could be her heavily tattooed arm, beanie, ripped jeans and rock band t-shirts. These elements are also noted in earlier research discussing queer signalling in fashion (Clarke & Turner, 2007:269-270).

While arguably stereotypical ways to visually code queer characters, a vast amount of research suggests that style is used as a semiotic marker of identity, thus this type of queer signalling is a very valid experience for queer individuals (Clarke & Turner,2007) (Schofield, & Schmidt, 2005). This could add a layer of authenticity to these characters and representations of young queer people.

Chloe's bedroom, like Reaver's, serves as a reflection of tropes associated with bisexuality. The atmosphere feels palpable, as if you can smell the scent of dirty clothes and marijuana. The rock posters covering all the walls further emphasise a defiance of societal norms, creating a space that embodies her rebellion and a nonconformist attitude. The DLC opens with Chloe trying to get into a dodgy venue underage to see one of her favourite rock bands. This introduction establishes her character as a rebellious teenager, defiant of rules and fiercely independent. She meets Rachel at this venue, suggesting Rachel also embodies aspects of the rebellious teen bisexual trope. Furthermore, Chloe often demonstrates her non-conformist attitude by her dislike of authority figures such as her stepdad and head teacher, as well as via her punk rock visual aesthetic. Like Max, her dialogue is very awkward at times, even when picking a particular dialogue option which is seemingly not hostile at all, Chloe will have her spin and turn of phrase making all her dialogue representative of her attitude and pessimistic approach to life.

Johnson (2016) argues recent depictions of bisexual characters can be problematic in their:

> 'willingness to use female bi characters as vehicles for themes and employ bisexual tropes to create a 'convincing' characterization of recklessness or evil.'(2016:383)

Such portrayals, as Johnson warns, risk reducing the character of Chloe to a 'reckless' bisexual stereotype and in turn, overshadowing her deeper emotional complexity and reinforcing rather than challenging harmful tropes. Similarly, many agree that 'Bisexuals and bisexuality have routinely been exploited in symbolic and material ways, in many contexts' (Eisner, 2013: 75). In terms of consumerism, many feminists argue that capitalisation of female bisexual identities is actually a tactic 'to attract male audiences without any concern for the identity itself' (Johnson, 2016). This could be supported by the abundance of pornographic content featuring Chloe and Max on sites like Xvideos and Pornhub.

Unlike Reaver's character, Chloe is depicted as monogamous. The two narratives in which she is present, see her either the pursuer or a love interest, or possibly the pursued. Either way, Chloe is loyal to both Max and Rachel if a romantic relationship is initiated. To highlight her loyalty, Chloe's story in the DLC repeatedly demonstrates her care for Rachel. Chloe can sacrifice her place at school to prevent her being expelled, along with many other acts of selflessness. Furthermore, the original game's narrative revolving around finding Rachel, is heavily encouraged by Chloe's presence and desperation to find her. While one could argue this reflects the stereotypical notion that bisexuals are 'excessively driven by

sexual impulses' (Burke & LeFrance, p.247), it is hard to believe Chloe's character would sacrifice what she did (school, family) simply for sexual gratification.

Furthermore, as Foucault suggests (1967), the idea that sexuality is shaped by the world around us could be applied to Chloe's character. Her queerness is not hidden; it's expressed through her style, diary entries, occasional dialogue, and the narrative choices available to the player, all of which influence how her identity is perceived. The game presents her queerness as something real and visible, but also ties it to rebellion, emotional chaos, and the aforementioned recurring tropes often associated with bisexuality in media. So, while Chloe's queerness is acknowledged, it is still framed within a familiar and limited view of what being bisexual can look like.

The Tension Between Queer Representation and Heteronormative Choices

Although many players were captivated by the queer nature of the game, I found it is also possible to play the game without inciting any queer behaviours. The player can deny Chloe's kiss and pursue a male love interest, Warren, instead. If the player tries to romance both characters, Max will have a vision of Chloe and Warren discussing how Max 'played' them both, with no option to be non-monogamous.

Warren's character is arguably designed complimentary to Max's character, both exhibiting a sense of innocent nervousness, awkwardness, and cringy geekiness. It is made clear to the player early on that Warren wishes to pursue Max, and the player can romance him instead, denying any exploration into her feelings for Chloe. Procedurally, however, the game generally directs the player to understanding and bonding with Chloe, leaving Warren in comparison, 'arguably deliberately, less developed and interesting than Chloe' (Biscop et al., 2019). This suggests that the game procedurally encourages players to pursue a romantic relationship with Chloe over Warren. However, it's intriguing that in a game heavily centred by queer discourse, Max can only achieve a successful outcome that doesn't result in the deaths of thousands, if she chooses the heterosexual relationship.

While breaking into the school, Chloe will persuade Max to have a swim with her in the school pool. She asks Max 'boys or girls?' pertaining to the changing rooms they will use. If the player chooses the girls changing rooms, Chloe will say with a flirty tone 'oooo' as if the question was more literate and void of the context in which she was asking. Besides this, there is little dialogue firmly concreting Chloe's sexual identity should the player not pursue a romance.

Throughout the DLC in which the narrative focuses on Chloe and Rachel as aforementioned, it is debatable if their relationship is initially portrayed as plutonic or romantic. Chloe's queer identity does not have to be explored by the player, players can instead pursue a friendship with Rachel instead, although her identity is made evident in her journal. While not made explicit by the game, players can read Chloe's journal and watch it grow over the duration of the game, gaining deeper insight into her character. Ultimately, the ludic perimeters doom Chloe's queer identity, despite the queer discourse surrounding her character.

As noted by Maja (2019:43), all the hetero couples are presented in a particular gender normative light. For example, Chloe's sweet grieving mother who works in a diner is with David, a rough, serious authority figure. The same is notable in the cases of Rachel

Amber's parents and Nathan Prescott's parents (a privileged boy at the academy directly linked to Rachel's death), 'all paternal figures are framed in a harsher light than their female counterparts' (Maja, 2019:43). The recurrence of this dynamic contributes to the 'overbearing father figure' and thus reflects a 'patriarchal viewpoint of family and family life: where children are the property of the father to be formed and moulded according to what he perceives as best for the family' (Maja, 2019:45). Maja also argues that throughout the game, the female image is viewed as frail and continually victimised' as a justification used by traditionalists to subordinate women in their conception and formation of patriarchy. It is also notable how these straight male characters are portrayed as 'very antagonistic and prone to violence' (2019:44). While this could be a social commentary in regard to toxic masculinity, it may also be that 'the game's automatic representation of male characters is that they are "all bad" and the obstacle to our female characters' goals' as concluded by Maja (2019:49).

Conclusion

Despite the series' central queer themes, queer relationships are ultimately doomed in gameplay, undermining any claims of true inclusivity. Playing *Life Is Strange* deliberately and ignoring queer content is in fact, easy.

Furthermore, regardless of the choices players make in the DLC, Rachel's death is inevitable, players are forced to confront a grim decision: either sacrifice an entire town or let Chloe die. Despite the game's emphasis on player choice, these relationships were doomed from the very beginning, the outcomes were predetermined, reinforcing the sense of tragedy surrounding these queer characters. *Life is Strange* therefore, quite literally had 'buried their gays' before the player turns on the game. This results in an ironic dissonance considering queerness is a central theme throughout and yet, queer relationships are either doomed from the outset or can only be fully realised through great personal or communal sacrifice. Ultimately positioning queer love as inherently tragic, reinforcing the long-standing trope that queer relationships are destined for loss or consequence.

Baldur's Gate 3 (Larian Studios, 2023)

Baldur's Gate 3 won multiple Game of the year titles in 2023, inviting new audiences into the world of *Dungeons and Dragons* lore. With many drawing similarities between this game and games with similar inclusive attitudes such as Bioware's *Dragon Age* Franchise, *Baldur's Gate 3* is arguably one of the best examples of LGBQT+ representation in a mainstream digital game. The story follows survivors, infected by a mind-controlling parasite, as they embark on a quest for a cure. Players can create a custom character or play as one of the origin characters (or companions). The game has been described as a 'deeply political work in our current socio-political landscape' largely due to the 'representations of normalised and destigmatized bi/pansexuality, polyamory, and non-normative gender expressions' (Smith, 2024:1). Throughout the game's world (*The Sword Coast*), queerness is seamlessly woven into the society. Players will encounter numerous queer NPCs by progressing the game, demonstrating queerness is a normalised and integrated part of this universe. This world-building reinforces the idea that queerness is not seen as something 'other' or unusual, but in it is depicted as a natural aspect of the world. This normalisation and inclusion in both the main narrative and the broader game-world highlight the Larian studio's commitment to representing diverse identities authentically.

This space reflects a cultural shift from what Shaw and Friedman (2016) observed in their expansive analysis of earlier games where queerness was often inconsequential, treated as an afterthought or an example of token inclusion (2016, p.3880). Here, queerness is deeply woven into the game's world, demonstrating a significant evolution in the representations of LGBTQ+ identities, and therefore a case study critical to contemporary queer game studies.

An alternate reality, void of heteronormativity?

The companions in *Baldur's Gate* all have narratives featuring a system of abuse, whether it be blind dedication to a cruel god, or trapped in a pact with a devil. These storylines offer multiple outcomes, influenced by the player's choices, either breaking the cycle of abuse or continuing it. The player's agency also serves to mould and solidify their character's identity by exploring their moral compass, resulting in a large range of narrative outcomes and character arcs for the player to experience. The depth of character identity here encompasses more than just appearance, background, and personal relationships has a pivotal role in shaping the direction of their narrative and determining the fates of other characters.

The science fiction and fantasy genre thrive in denying normative notions of representation and narratives, imagining alternate ideas and realities, reflecting and deeply criticising the one in which we live in today. Regarding *Dungeons and Dragons*, there are multiple scholars discussing how tabletop fantasy games allow imagined realities in which players can create and experiment with identity via their characters. However, Berge argues that:

> 'despite cursory improvements in superficial representation, D&D's hostility to trans play is coded deeper than any single narrative or mechanical system. Instead, it is inscribed in the game's promise of fantasy realism—which is used to exclude trans bodies, vilify trans stories, and diminish trans power' (2023:4).

Berge (2023) discusses how their last campaign highlighted the absence of trans bodies in the world of D&D, after encountering a sex-changing fountain, they were left confused as to how it would affect their nonbinary character. There is further evidence of such binary rhetoric in D&D, such as dungeons featuring sex-reversing curses. Early editions of D&D also saw stat limitations for female characters (limited strength stats for example), and as Berge suggests, these changes could have also been 'devastating for players who realised that their characters' identity and stats had been altered (2023:3). This will be considered here, with *Baldur's Gate 3* proudly informed with the lore of D&D, it is imperative to reflect upon Burges arguments here that D&D 'fosters ludo narrative hostility to trans play'.

Like other games praised for inclusivity, the romanceable characters of BG3 are 'player sexual'. These romance mechanics have received a mixed reception, as referenced by Brierley-Beare (2024). Some gaming news sites claim the freedom to romance any of the companions available is diverse and freeing, while others have 'questioned the design philosophy of attributing no sexual preference to potential paramours' (Zak 2023; Petit 2023). The sexuality blindness therefore is more complex than simply appealing to everyone.

Afterall, if sexuality as integral to one's identity is dismissed, how is there any real sexual representation that queer players can identify with? Petit (2023) agreed, arguing that:

> 'One of the best moments romance-wise I've had in any game was when a character in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* wouldn't be with me because I was a woman. Like, yeah man, that's life. These games should break your fucking heart sometimes. You don't always get what you want'.

In *Dragon Age Inquisition* (2014, Bioware), romanceable characters will openly express that they do not share the same attraction to the player character if you persist in flirting with them. They reveal their preference for either men or women, and if you don't align with their orientation, they gently turn you down. This interaction adds depth and visibility to these characters' identities, allowing for more authentic portrayals of diverse sexual orientations of these characters. However, we play games to escape, to experience alternate realities that do not reflect real-life constraints, creating a discrepancy between authentic representations and realism.

Is the ‘Gay Button’ already pressed down?

In contrast to what scholars call the ‘gay button’ (as coined by game designer Ana Anthropy) or ‘opt-in opt-out’ content, I found queer content in BG3 is not something players can avoid if they interact with NPCs and progress through the main quests. The ‘gay button’ is an interesting idea to apply to *Baldur’s gate 3*, as in comparison with the other case studies here, canonically queer characters are central to the plot.

(Figure 6, Baldur’s Gate 3, in-game screenshot of Aylin and Isobel)

Two queer characters central to a morally 'good' playthrough in *Baldur's Gate 3* are Isobel and Dame Aylin. Jewett (2023) describes the couple in Gamerant as ‘More Than Just a Power Couple’ but an incredibly ‘powerful example of queer representation’. Dame Aylin is the daughter of Selûne, the goddess of light, followers of Selûne embody moral clarity and goodness, with little time for morally ambiguous behaviour. This contrast between the followers of Selûne and Shar (Selûne’s sister, the goddess of darkness and grief) highlights the clear moral paths within the game's narrative, reinforcing the themes of good versus evil. Following the ‘good’ path eventually leads to the defeat of Ketheric Thorm and the liberation of the Nightsong, who is then revealed to be Aylin. The player is aware that Ketheric draws his immortality from the Nightsong but remains unaware of her true identity until the climactic moments when it is revealed that the Nightsong is a living being. Ketheric's ability to remain immortal hinges on her imprisonment, freeing her is crucial to defeating Ketheric. If players decide to free Aylin, she will be reunited with Kethric’s daughter Isobel, revealing they have been in a romantic relationship.

In many traditional fantasy narratives, characters like the Aylin might be portrayed as passive victims or as tools for the hero's journey. However, Aylin has agency and narrative depth, transforming her from a mystical artifact to a character with her own past and significance. Aylin excels in numerous battles, consistently outperforming my party due to her ridiculously high damage output. Even when my party members are levelled up to the maximum, Aylin still surpasses them in terms of effectiveness, highlighting her power within

ludic confines. This challenges previous research that LGBTQ+ characters often fit into stereotypical, inconsequential, or reductive roles (Chang, 2015:7) (Shaw, 2018:3880). Instead, it highlights a shift toward LGBTQ+ characters being portrayed with greater complexity and agency in.

Aylin's story could be metaphorical of the struggles faced by LGBTQ+ individuals confined by societal norms or expectations. Freeing her mirrors the broader fight for liberation and recognition of queer identities, a theme that resonates strongly within LGBTQ+ narratives. While the specific storyline of Dame Aylin and the Isobel is not overtly about queer relationships, it takes place in a broader game world that is inclusive of LGBTQ+ identities. These characters reinforce that diverse identities are integral to the narrative, rather than inconsequential or tokenised, demonstrating how modern video game narratives can move past traditional tropes and offer more inclusive stories.

Astarion's character, who I romanced during my 'good' playthrough, stands out as one of the most complex in the game. As described by Smith (2023), he is 'rhetorically and functionally queer, like all the party members being bi/pansexual, but also has what can best be described as queer mannerisms' (2023:2). His vampirism is also evident in this; vampires have long been associated with themes of sexual deviance in literature, film, and popular culture. The vampire's ability to seduce, their desire for blood and defiance of traditional sexual norms makes them a symbol of sexual deviance and sexual transgression (Lau, 2018:4). His use of words like 'darling', his vanity (the player gets approval for complimenting him and he often remarks about his attractiveness) and mannerisms suggest discourse evident in media depictions of a gay or queer man (Dyer, 1977). His character demonstrates aspects of stereotypical male queerness as observed by Dyer (1977), who discusses how aspects of queer identities are often linked to a 'repertoire of signs' such as gestures, expressions, stances, clothing and environments. These signs are linked with assumptions, often in relation to non-gender normative aspects of behaviour. These traits, combined with his vampiric nature, explore deeper themes of sexual transgression and deviance. Foucault's describes how homosexuality is often disguised as a threat, as a result of protecting the norm and banishing the abnormal as many considered queerness to be (Uygur, 2013:49).

Depictions of vampires are often intertwined with sexual deviance (Ames, 2010) (Lau, 2018). The image of a vampire bite on the neck is inherently erotic, evoking feelings of danger and allure. Interestingly, Lavigne discusses how early depictions of vampires in media have:

> ‘traditionally been defeated by heterosexual heroes: in all his incarnations, Dracula falls again and again before Jonathan Harker… It was not until the…1970s that the genre broke with past stereotypes and gave rise to the new idea of a vampire protagonist – an idea that was subsequently embraced by authors in the queer community’ (Lavigne, 2004:1)

Astarion can be the hero or the villain depending on the route chosen by the player.

Most interesting is the fact that his storyline and the character himself are easily overlooked with no impact on the main questline. Unlike the other main companions, Astarion's location is not dictated by the primary narrative but assumed player exploration. Shadowheart is conveniently located next to where the player spawns on the beach, just metres away. Gale is found trapped in a large, conspicuous portal along a main road. Further on, players will encounter Wyll engaged in a fight, then he quests the player with finding another companion. In contrast, Astarion's introduction is less overt if players focus solely on the instructions given in their quest journal. Even if Astarion is found and recruited, his questline is still completely avoidable. There is no reason rooted in the main narrative to follow his questline; it does not advance you further to a cure for the infection or help you defeat the cult.

If the player asks about his past once earning his trust, he will disclose that he was kept as a slave of a vampire master for 200 years, forced to seduce victims and take them to his master, Cazador, eventually leading to a fight against Cazador. On entering Cazdor’s dungeon and finishing his questline, players encounter cages full of victims who were taken to Cazador by his Spawn (vampires who were turned by a master vampire). Astarion recognises a man caged, called Sebastian. This unfolds into an emotional scene in which Astarion confesses how he never forgot Sebastian after leaving him here. He remembered him being ‘handsome’ and that he’d ‘never been kissed’. Astarion’s rare show of sincerity and regret here, infers that his conquests weren’t simply to please his master, although that was the main motive, but he has felt feelings of real sincerity and attraction towards his victims. This depiction shows that his vampiric identity does not confine him to a role of villainy or arrogance, but highlights his vulnerability and humility, illustrating his past as a victim rather than a perpetrator.

Astarion’s character appears to be an authentic example of a character whose intersection of trauma, identity and sexuality is explored in depth. One could also consider the intersection of his Elvin racial identity. This intersectionality showcases the diversity of

queer experiences and the ways in which they can be intertwined with other aspects of one's identity. These elements of identity create a space where sexuality is portrayed as fluid and multifaceted. His characterisation denies rigid categorizations as seen in previous depictions of vampirism or queer males, generally reflecting a diverse and evolving understanding of queer identities in mainstream games.

Astarion's character resonated among many communities (Murtagh, 2023). As a result of his overt sexual trauma, he will happily have an asexual relationship with the player. Unlike many romanceable characters in video games, his story does not have to follow the typical trajectory of a passionate, physical relationship. Instead, his romance arc can involve a deep emotional connection that doesn't necessarily culminate in sex, but rather, emotional understanding and comfort. Although, the player will need to sleep with him at least once to unlock future romance, undermining this possible romance arc. However, this complexity adds layers to his narrative, showcasing a character who, despite his traumatic past, is capable of forging meaningful, non-traditional relationships

In summary, Astarion enriches LGBTQ+ representation by portraying complexity with vulnerability, challenging stereotypes, and exploring the intersection of one's identity and trauma. Despite the inherent dangers and seductive allure of vampirism, his character's depth reveals a history marked by suffering and subjugation, a history many communities can identify with, not just queer ones. While his optional storyline can highlight ongoing issues of visibility and integration in media portrayals of queer characters, Aylin and Isobel's roles in the narrative show how queerness is also portrayed openly and their roles positioned as fundamental to a morally 'good' playthrough.

The Bear Scene – interspecies identities and sexuality

(Figure 7, Baldur's Gate 3, in-game screenshot of Halsin)

Interspecies relationships are common in Ferûn, players can 'romance' a variety of non-human characters. Halsin, an elf druid character central to a morally good playthrough, is a crucial example. His character is surrounded in both positive discussion and controversy, mainly stemming from the infamous 'bear scene' (Stanfill et al., 2024). Shepard (2023) describes what happens during the scene in which Larian presented at the official showcase:

> 'The exchange starts normal enough. The player (controlling the vampire Astarion as their main character), approaches Halsin in a discrete area of the woods. As things start to get hot and heavy, he strips and things seem to be taking their natural course. Then, Halsin loses control of himself and transforms into his bear form. He quickly reverts to human forms and apologizes. Sometimes this happens when he's giving in to his base desires.'

While some viewed it as inappropriate and taboo, this only fuelled the game's popularity, sparking curiosity about what else the game has to offer. This resulted in the game gaining attention before its release and a surplus of memes. Marshall humorously discusses how:

> 'The scene is so spicy it even got Larian Studios banned on TikTok, which is the sort of thing that has ironically made it more viral. And at a glance, it's a pretty simple joke — you can bang a bear in this video game? But the sheer size of the response to this scene says more about role-playing games than you might think.' (Marshall, 2023:para.3)

The scene challenges ideas of normative sexuality in multiple ways. By presenting an option that defies human-to-human interaction, the game rejects heteronormative and species-normative assumptions about sexuality. This scene could even be a metaphorical message of embracing difference and diversity in sexual desires.

There are several examples of interspecies relationships for players to explore, as humans only comprise a small proportion of Ferûn's inhabitants. For instance, Lae'zel who I romanced during my 'evil' playthrough, a recruitable party member, and a Githyanki, a humanoid race that reproduces asexually by laying eggs. The player can bring this up in conversation with her, and Lae'zel suggests that their biology is superior to other humanoids, allowing them to engage in sex purely for pleasure.

Another example of this is the Emperor. After players create their character, they design their 'Guardian', who appears in their dreams and is later revealed to be a Mind flayer which are tentacled, purple humanoid aliens. If players build and maintain trust with the Emperor, they have the option to engage in a unique sex scene where their characters float in the air, and the player can interact with the Mind flayer's tentacles. The player can request that the mind flayer transform back into the form they initially designed. This depiction of inter-species sexual intimacy challenges conventional norms and provides a contrast to the predominantly heteronormative and male-centric depictions of sexual desire.

The infamous bear scene and integrations of interspecies sexuality can be understood through queer theory as a deliberate move to challenge normative assumptions about sex, sexuality and identity. Halsin and the Emperor offer the player the choice to maintain their humanoid physical form or to inhabit either the bear form (Halsin) or the Emperor's natural body. This choice allows players to explore and engage with romance and intimacy from a perspective that aligns with their preferences, enhancing the sense of agency and personal connection. By embracing the fluidity of sexual intimacy and the breaking of traditional boundaries, the game invites players to engage with and reflect on the diversity and complexity of desire in a way that aligns with the core ideas of queer theory.

Gender and non-cis identities

There's a variety of queer characters, although the exploration of gender queer identities is relatively limited in comparison. This observation aligns with insights from Shaw (2016), who noted that 'representations of explicitly transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, and intersex characters are less common in games than homosexual and bisexual characters (2016:3882). While *Baldur's Gate 3* features few gender-queer characters compared to other queer identities, the inclusion of even two such characters are significant. This marks an important step forward in the traditionally limited representation of gender-queer identities.

To encounter the game's one overtly trans characters, the player must first find a mushroom which can restore memory. If the player gives the mushroom to Shadowheart, whose religious cult ceremonially wipes the memories of their followers, she will remember a friend she made there named Renard. Players later find a woman named Nocturn as part of Shadowheart's quest 'A Familiar Face'. Players can locate Nocturn's diary in which is written 'I am Nocturne, I think as her. I see her when I look in the mirror' entailing her trans identity. She discusses the issues she faced being deadnamed, and how Shadowheart was swift in challenging those who used her 'foreswarn name in malice'. Deadnaming is a struggle for many trans people, and what can feel like a direct attack on their sense of self and identity (Freeman, 2018). Highlighting the struggles she faced transitioning may provide comfort and character trans and non-binary players can identify with in a medium infamously known for overproducing white, straight male identities. However, locating the mushroom and choosing to give it to Shadowheart is easily missed, meaning many players overlook this part of her story, and thus, the significance of Nocturn's past.

The companions in *Baldur's Gate 3* will not react to your genitals, and the sex scene animations are in accordance with the player's body type, with no voice lines regarding the avatar's visual features. While this allows any player to feel accepted by their partner there are arguments regarding the lack of gender expression outside the character creator. While the player can 'mix-match' their avatar's genitals, body type, voice and pronouns, some players have expressed their disappointment regarding:

> 'the gender expression being merely cosmetic; the world or the companions whom the player character can form romantic and sexual relationships with do not react to it' (Kuusrainen, 2023:14).

Furthermore, as argued by Lacey (2023: 53):

> ‘If nonbinary avatars behave and are interacted with in the same way that cisgender avatars do and are, is it truly a representation of the nonbinary experience’

The fact all NPCs respect the player character’s pronouns has also been criticised. Smith writes in PCGamer (2023, para.7):

> ‘I was extremely impressed that Dror Razglin, the barely literate hobgoblin warlord, actually internalized the mandatory True Soul Sensitivity Training Seminars he was forced to sit through and noted my pronouns before ordering his goons to crack open my skull…. ‘This is a fantasy world, all right—there's no getting around that in real life, there are always gonna be people that just don't get it. In D&D, I suspect hobgoblins would be part of that crowd, and thoughtful writing has the ability to do something meaningful with that reality—what if I had to pass an intimidation check to make Dror Ragzlin fall in line with my pronouns…?’

Smith notes that in reality, many genderqueer individuals face misgendering, often leading to emotional harm. This harsh reality could be integrated into the game to reflect real-world struggles, potentially helping players empathise with genderqueer individuals. However, there's an underlying paradox in this idea as while many players can empathise with such struggles, many may also seek escapism in fantasy settings, desiring to avoid the difficulties they face in everyday life, possibly in regard to their gender identity. This dilemma highlights the complexity of representation in games: balancing realism (such as acknowledging social struggles) with the desire for escapism and the comfort of a world free from discrimination. Unfortunately, many genderqueer individuals experience misgendering, while deeply hurtful, remains a harsh reality for those within the community. However, Nocturn, the game’s only overtly trans character, notes in her diary the pain she feels as a result of people using her ‘foresworn name’, highlighting the game's incorporation of real-world normative gender binaries. This inclusion suggests that while Larian Studios offers some representation of gender diversity, it also enforces the societal struggles trans individuals face on this particular NPC, such as misgendering and the emotional harm that comes with it.

Players can also encounter Lucretious, a character heavily inspired by drag culture who leads the circus. Voiced by a drag queen and speaking with the camp flair typical of drag performances, Lucretious adds significant visibility to those who do not conform to normative gender conventions.

It is arguable that gender is something we can ‘equip’ in character creation, manifesting in the performance of our avatars and how they interact with the game world.

However, apart from Nocturne and Lucretious, there are no other explicitly gender-queer NPCs in the game. That said, the absence of evident gender-queer characters does not imply their non-existence within the game's world. The very possibility that these identities exist, even if not overtly represented, is a step forward in acknowledging and embracing gender diversity in gaming.

Polyamory and monogamy

Interestingly only three romanceable characters allow the player to involve them in a non-monogamous relationship. Unlike other games praised for their inclusivity such as *Dragon Age* (Bioware) and *Stardew Valley (ConcernedApe)*. In fact, if the player is to romance more than one character in these games, the player will be confronted in a scene, with Stardew's romances confronting the player with all the characters publicly shaming them for their choices and destroying the player's reputation among all other romanceable options.

In the game, only Astarion and Shadowheart consent to a polyamorous relationship involving Halsin. Notably, both characters are depicted as morally ambiguous, which could subtly suggest that those who are open to non-traditional relationship dynamics are inherently less virtuous, there by reflecting a problematic association between moral ambiguity and non-monogamy. Contrastingly, Halsin is a morally good character, so it is unlikely non-monogamy is intentionally framed this way.

Alternatively, there are multiple of games that prevent players from engaging in polygamous relationships. *Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011) and *Fable* (Lionhead Studios) among others, don't include a divorce option and *The Sims* have only just included polygamy as a relationship preference. This leaves one wondering why these options were not implemented into games, possibly communicating negative discourse regarding polyamory. There's a particularly obvious example of this in *The Witcher 3*, (CD Projekt Red, 2015) should the player decide to pursue both love interests, Triss and Yennifer, the player will have a scene in which the two women suggest a ménage-à-trois: Triss says 'We've always loved each other, you're in love with us' and Yennefer responds 'There's no point in fighting it. We must enjoy what we have.'. While implying that they wish to dismiss their previous romantic rivalries, it is ultimately a ruse, as they tie Geralt to a bed and leave him there, as punishment for his non-monogamous and hedonistic behaviour (Adams & Rambukkana, 2018). Why restrict romance in a digital environment, when gaming spaces can provide relationships beyond hegemonic ideologies such as monogamy. Polyamorous gamers may feel invalidated by this confrontation and overt 'slut shaming' from NPCs. There are two distinct arguments presented here. Firstly, there's the notion that players should have the freedom to form in-game relationships that are not bound by heteronormative or monogamous values. Secondly, there's the argument that rejection is a natural aspect of life and even enhances the realism of characters and their identities and beliefs, particularly in the context of games like *Baldur's Gate*. This relates back to the paradox between realism and escapism.

Conclusion

While some might argue that featuring Astarion and Halsin's romance scene in promotional material could be seen as "queer baiting," it's actually just one of many examples of queer expression within the game. This suggests that the marketing wasn't merely a tactic to attract queer audiences for profit, but, as this analysis demonstrates, a genuine reflection of the game's openness to a diverse range of identities.

This analysis shows queer content is integral to the game, with narratives and NPC central to the main plot, as well as a vast range of options regarding gender expression for the player's avatar. The implementations of queer content in this game reflect significant progress in diversifying character portrayals and recognising a broader spectrum of gender identities in video games. While it is possible to suggest Astarion's traits are stereotypical of queer men, he also defies a range of tropes regarding vampirism and queer identities. However, as all the characters are potentially queer, queerness is the norm rather than a minority identity, which leads to queer issues not being explicitly explored. This normalisation exposes a paradox between realism and escapism. By creating a world where misgendering and discrimination is incredibly rare, the game offers a safe, escapist refuge—but in doing so it also removes an element of real-world struggle that can deepen empathy and understanding of queer and gender queer experiences.

Game Analysis Part 2 – North American Games

The following 3 case studies will first examine the queer representations produced by North American game developers. This region's industry remains one of the most economically powerful and influential globally, in part due to the widespread cultural appreciation and global consumption of their video games. There will be a specific focus on the following cases: EA's *The Sims* franchise, Bioware's *Mass Effect 3* and Blizzard's *Overwatch 2*. While the North American video game industry has been hailed for the success of their mainstream titles, controversy remains regarding the seemingly white, male dominated industry, and the resulting game content.

Mass Effect 3 (Bioware, 2012)

Biowear's *Mass Effect* game series is often referred to in queer game scholarship today, along with Biowear's other successful franchise, *Dragon Age*. Both franchises have been praised for their inclusive storytelling, exemplifying the potential for games to embrace and explore the full spectrum of sexuality and identity. While mainly focusing on *Mass Effect 3* (2012), this analysis will also touch on aspects evident throughout the franchise, including *Mass Effect* (2007), *Mass Effect 2* (2010) and *Mass Effect Andromeda* (2017). Despite long standing criticism of heteronormative and binary depictions of gender by academics and journalists, genres such as science fiction have increasingly challenged these narratives, offering new perspectives beyond our conventional social understanding, making one of the most iconic science fiction games a perfect scope to reflect on pre-Gamergate queer content.

According to Shaw et al's research (2019), video games have limited non-gender normative content. While *Mass Effect* attempts to explore alien identities in which binary gender is not embedded into hegemonic ideals, it is crucial to analyse how this was executed. Examining sexuality and character identities in a world imagined to be far more advanced than ours, could be a reflection on identity politics today. Afterall, many argue that 'when humanity left earth in 2069CE, we packed up heteronormativity and took it with us' (Nicholas, 2021), limiting the queer potential of this science fiction narratives. The plot follows Commander Shepard's fight against the Reapers, a race of powerful machines threatening to wipe out all civilizations in the galaxy. Shepard must unite various alien species to form a coalition to combat the Reapers and protect the civilisations across the galaxy. Players form alliances, friendships and can romance a range of NPCs. The storyline is heavily shaped by player choices, which impact relationships, alliances, and the final resolution.

The Queer History of the Mass Effect Series

In the first two games, Commander Shepard could only pursue heteronormative relationships, unless one played as female Shepard, there are then few options for same-sex flings, but for male Shepard, the relationships exclusively heterosexual. Although male Shepard can have a 'fling' with Liara T'Soni, a 'monogendered' alien whose species doesn't conform to human gender binaries, her depiction is and remains heavily influenced by male desire. Ultimately, the series prior authentic queer representation, one article highlighting the invisibility of queerness in the past *Mass Effect* games states:

> 'Getting through *Mass Effect* 1 and 2 with your identity intact as a gay man is an act of resistance. It's to look a heteronormative world in the face and say 'no' you will not define who I am in this universe' (Shepard, 2020).

Shepard argues that while these games are in some cases a great example for enabling player expression, ultimately 'that wasn't always the case, especially not for people like me: gay men' (2020). Shepard's frustration at this is clearly evident as he:

> 'watched people on forums and in comments sections come up with all sorts of reasons why protagonist Commander Shepard, a character capable of committing genocide or fighting through the galaxy under a banner of human supremacy, being a gay man was "too far "'(2019, para.3)

This perhaps also highlights contemporary arguments regarding appearances of female protagonists, with many gamers adamant that 'ugly' or unconventional female protagonists are detrimental to one's enjoyment and willingness to buy/pay for a game. While homophobic responses to Commander Shepard's sexuality as a reflection of the early twenty ten's social consciousness, these hetero-dominant attitudes are evidently still rife among game communities. Other articles further promote this idea claiming this 'disturbing trend is courtesy of woke video game studios who seem to derive pleasure from making their male target audience feel uncomfortable' (Wolfshead, 2023). Clearly, there is a large proportion of male gamers who feel defensive regarding their video games 'wokeness', or whatever that term means to them. This, ironically, echoes Gamergate, with audiences demanding via their criticisms that developers should aim to create content not only in the hetero-male gaze, but for heterosexual men.

Nevertheless, these reactions to Shepard's sexuality were possibly ignored, as we can explore more male gay relationships in *Mass Effect 3*. Throughout the series, there are 5

romanceable characters for gay male Shepards, straight female Shepards can romance 12, with 14 love interests for gay female Shepards, and lastly, 21 potential love interests for a straight male Shepard (Wright, 2022). YouTuber JTurn (2021) examines the series' male gay romance options, ultimately concluding that there was little effort given in the inclusion of these character's sexual identities and relationship with Shepard. In fact, he states that the game is not for queer people instead overtly displaying the male hetero space fantasy, he asks why isn't space gayer? (JTurn, 2021). His question is valid, especially if you apply the contexts of existing all those years in the future in an environment no longer restricted to human societal expectation and normative behaviours.

The lack of visibility of gay males is also evident later in *Mass Effect Andromeda* (2017), which included an achievement for players who have romanced with 3 separate characters, and as noted by Hernandez (2017), straight, bi and lesbian players can 'complete the achievement without wading outside their sexualities, but strictly male characters can't'. An interesting exclusion, and an incredibly annoying one for gay, male, completionist players.

Pre-defined heterosexuality

While many queer audiences celebrated Bioware's *Dragon Age* game series for their inclusivity, they were met with confusion at the hetero dominant nature of *Mass Effect* (J Turn, 2021). The CEO of Bioware studios announced that while *Dragon Age* was a 'choose your own adventure' as a first-person narrative in contrast with *Mass Effect*'s third person narrative. Ray Muzyka (in Smee, 2012) argues that the lack of queer content is due to the protagonist, Commander Shepard, being a 'pre-defined character'. This argument could be considered ironic considering players can customise Shepard in many ways, from age, backstory, gender, and skill set among other options that transform that character's identity. The players dictate Shepard's morality and decisions, so the question is, how is Shepard a 'pre-defined character' if we can edit almost everything about them? Despite the binary gender categorisations typical of games from this era, the character creation menu allows players to imagine their own Commander, despite Bioware's notion otherwise.

One noticeable difference in the previous two games is romanceable alien character's dialogue and inferred characteristics for heterosexual Shepards, male and female. Almost to normalise the already alien part of their identities, it is plausible to argue these characters were thus designed with characteristics stereotypically conventionally desired by heterosexuals. For instance, both Tali and Liara, romanceable female alien characters available to male Shepard, are both implied to be sexually inexperienced. Adams (2015) suggests this is intended to 'counteract the extra-game societal taboo against interspecies sex', by intentionally framing these characters with a 'focus on their youth, innocence and relatively untouched bodies' (2015:48). Another example of this is the alien options for female Shepard, Garrus reflects on sleeping with a female co-worker, and Thane discusses his wife, both confiding in Shepard about their heterosexual pasts. They both display moments of vulnerability, as well as strength and pride. Adams argues this demonstrates:

> 'sharp gender differences regarding what game designers felt players operating a male Shepard or female Shepard would presumably want from alien partners. Their particular sex hierarchies are assumed to differ, and the game adjusts its romantic offerings accordingly' (2015:48).

Interestingly, in *Mass Effect 3,* while playing as female Shepard it became quickly evident that she uses some of the same animations as male Shepard, this was due to recycling the data of the motion capture for male Shepard. This resulted in a range of clippings issues, and stereotypically masculine body language ('man spreading', wide strides, etc). Many players

found the lack of feminine animations for female Shepard immersion breaking, disrupting the feminine ‘performance’ as described by Butler (1990). This leads to what some players found to be an ‘immersion-breaking’ experience, where the lack of stereotypically feminine body language (narrower strides and less ‘man spreading’) made female Shepard feel less believable to them. One player argued on GameSpot that ‘just because female Shepard is supposed to be a badass doesn't mean she has to play the butch card’ (JustinMathews, 2011), reflecting how deeply ingrained these gendered expectations are, even in a fictional world the audience desires traditional gendered animations. However, Shepard is a commander, guided by her leadership and professionalism, I personally wouldn’t expect her to be animated like other female characters whose sexuality is central to their character’s appeal such as Bayonetta or Widowmaker.

Male bisexual identity and heteronormative assumptions

Many players believe Kaidan's character was originally meant to be bisexual, with voice lines cut from the game after developers decided 'America wasn't ready' (Mazanko, 2021). Kaidan is a potential romantic interest for a female Shepard throughout the series. If he survives the events of the first game, he becomes a romance option for a male Shepard in *Mass Effect 3.* Therefore, to many players, his bisexuality is a significant aspect of his character in the final instalment. Since Kaidan isn't canonically bisexual in the earlier *Mass Effect* games, players can interpret his bisexuality as a signal of his strength and growth. As in *Mass Effect 3* he finally is able express his true self after all the challenges and experiences he's faced. This evolution in his character could add depth, reflecting personal growth and the freedom to embrace his identity. Krampe also notes that:

> 'His combat abilities and narrative complexity, too, are significantly upgraded, making it impossible to discard him as a flat character or stereotype of effeminate masculinity' (2018)

Krampe's assessment further suggests that Kaidan's evolution highlights not only his personal growth but also his development into a fully realised character, presenting a bisexual identity that transcends the stereotypical tropes often seen in media texts. His bisexuality is presented with nuance, offering depth beyond the clichés explored in other case studies within this research (*Fable*'s Reaver and *Life is Strange's* Chloe). Instead, it becomes a nuanced part of his character, open to interpretation. However, 'if the PC (player character) is female, any reference to Kaidan's potential bisexuality will disappear from the game text' (2018) thus erasing bisexuality from his identity entirely. While romancing him as a female Shepard, had I been unaware of the character's sexual contexts; it is unlikely I, or other players would have known about his queer identity. Kaidan is by far the most obvious option for gay men in comparison. The other gay male characters are not squad mates, meaning they will not join Shepard on expeditions off the ship. Squad mates have much more content in comparison, with more dialogue as well as cut scenes, suggesting that there is less romantic content for gay male Shepard, which is what many players had felt.

One could suggest that Kaidan's evolution into a bisexual character led to the assumption that there are fewer straight human men available for female Shepard to romance, to possibly combat this, James Vega's introduction in *Mass Effect 3* seems designed to reassert a conventional heterosexual fantasy. James (refer to figure 10), with his distinctly

masculine, tough persona, and history as a soldier, was likely implemented to fulfil the stereotype of heterosexual female desire. His character appears to provide a more conventional romantic option for female Shepard, reinforcing traditional gender roles and catering to a heteronormative framework within the game's narrative.

(Figure 8, Mass Effect 3, in-game screenshot of James Vega)

As a female Shepard starting *Mass Effect 3*, I was immediately drawn to James Vega, a new character absent from the previous games. He's a party member/squad mate from the start and is hard to miss as his flirtatious behaviour quickly became apparent. Despite my initial interest in pursuing a romance with Liara, who is also available early in the game, Liara's responses remained distant no matter how often I tried to engage with her romantically. Similarly, I picked any romantic option available with Kaidan and as with Liara there was no overt romantic interest returned to my character, or at least nothing early in the game. In contrast, James Vega almost immediately, after his introduction, actively pursued a flirtatious relationship with Shepard, even going so far as to suggest calling her 'Lola' because he feels it suits her better than 'Commander'. His informal and flirtatious demeanour, despite being subordinate to Shepard, seemed designed to fit a stereotypical portrayal of heterosexual female desire. While James is not a full romance option, he will have a one-night stand with female Shepard only accessible through the *Citadel* DLC and only if the player is not locked in a romance with another character. Nevertheless, their dynamic places the romance with James in a distinctly heteronormative framework, where the male character's charm and assertiveness are positioned as the obvious and more accessible option for female Shepard, reinforcing traditional gender roles and romantic tropes. This is further evident in multiple scenes where James appears completely shirtless (refer to figure 8), his exaggeratedly muscular physique presented in a stereotypically attractive way, as though the developers are pandering to conventional heterosexual female or queer male players with visual fan service

(Lima, 2023:9). This could be compared with Miranda Lawson, another character in the trilogy, whose characterisation many consider to be based on providing fan service to male heterosexual players (Fransworth, 2022). The characters are thus framed within a heteronormative paradigm, reflecting the developers' assumption that players will find them sexually appealing according to traditional gender norms.

Mass Effect's handling of bisexuality and heterosexual attraction ultimately reflects a broader tension within gaming narratives: the attempt to include diverse identities while still securing romantic dynamics in traditional, often heteronormative, frameworks. While characters like Kaidan offer glimpses of more inclusive storytelling, characters like James Vega reveal the franchise's continued reliance on conventional representations of gender, sexuality, and desire.

Non-gendered or just blue?

(Figure 9, Mass Effect 3, in-game screenshot of Liara)

As the first bisexual character in the series and the only one in the first instalment, Liara provides a compelling section of this case study for analysing how interspecies sexuality and bisexuality are represented and where these themes may intersect. Liara is the character I romanced as part of my initial playthrough, curious to whether the non-gendered aspect of her species would be limited by a heteronormative framework. Asari is an alien race, presented as a greatly intelligent and advanced. While a mono-gendered race, presented with traditional feminine features, female voice acted and are able to procreate with any species. This arguably offers a 'differentiated representation of gender dynamics and reproductive politics' as argued by Kilzer (2022, p.55). Many players celebrated the inclusion of the Asari in the games, 'interpreting the race as a science fiction response to transgender identity politics' (Stark & Hammer, 2017, p.13). I will refer to Liara with feminine pronouns, as she and the other Asari characters are referred to with throughout the series.

Liara is encountered early in the game, as an active squad member to accompany Shepard on missions. To ensure I would get any possible romance scenes with her, I made sure she was always in my squad, and I spoke to her, pressing every possible dialogue option following every mission. Eventually she will disclose some information about her species and mono-gendered dynamic. Liara tells Shepard that 'Male and Female have no real meaning to us. We do, however, have maternal instincts. so perhaps we would fill what you consider a female role'. If we consider Butler's theory of gender performativity, for a mono-gendered species, their performance is stereotypically mostly female. Not only in the Asari's appearance and voice, but in their animations and via camera framing. In comparison to male

characters, there are many low shots framed by Liara's waist, behind and the side of her breasts. I found her feminine 'attributes' are often highlighted in her scenes. Furthermore, Liara's animations also mimic that of other female companions, with more conventionally feminine sitting animations in comparison with female Shepard. Liara also claims the Asari aim to make peace in the universe and dedicate their resources to helping and understanding other species.

Although, it is also arguable this design of the alien species is specifically dedicated to staying in range of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). In fact, their head shape and blue skin colour is really the only differentiating features in comparison with all the other objectively attractive women in the game (refer to figure 9). Their body shapes remain the same as other female body models alongside a small waist and large breasts (which were increased in size for the Legendary edition). This is hardly surprising, given the recurring use of similar looking body model for female characters across the gaming industry (though, studies show this trend is slowly starting to decline (Liu, 2019:72-75). Nightingale (2021) argues in ThePinkNews.com that Liara is simply the 'sexy blue alien' and that is exactly what she was intended to be.

The Asari have been frequently sexualised throughout the series. They are presented as 'universally sexually attractive' to all other alien races (Adams, 2013:36). Davies refers the Asari as the 'sex aliens of the *Mass Effect* universe' arguing that 'despite their supposedly exalted role in the galactic hierarchy, the Asari do double duty as the universe's preferred sex objects' (2015). Players can even find 'Asari also function as decorative pole dancers in every nightclub'(Stark & Hammer, 2017:11) entertaining all species and races in the Citadel clubs. Furthermore, in each *Mass Effect* 1 to 3, there has been a quest involving Shepard rescuing Liara. This stands in contrast to their emphasised intelligence, especially considering that throughout the games, the Asari characters players encounter range from scientists, politicians, and even detectives. Liara frequently discusses her passion for historical research, further underscoring the Asari's intellectual capabilities which are arguably overshadowed by their physical attractiveness, invalidating the intelligence and complexity of the alien race.

Falk and Flejmer (2022) asked their participants how they felt about heteronormative rhetoric surrounding the Asari race. All the respondents expressed 'feelings of being taken out of immersion when arguably the queerest race in the game expressed themselves in such a binary and heteronormative way' (2022:17). Furthermore, despite the genderless aspect of the Asari race, heteronormative language is constantly used by and to describe the Asari. One

reoccurring example I found rather contradictory is their use of ‘mother’ and ‘father’, which are terms that a genderless species would seem incongruous and ironic to use.

While technically pansexual, Liara’s lack of preference for the gender or species of her partner cannot technically be considered homosexuality because she is non-gendered (Monzón Díaz, 2022:28). The developers themselves claimed a female Shepard romancing Liara is not queer as Liara is mono-gendered. However, it is arguable that when romancing female Shepard, their relationship is framed in the fantasy of a scopophilic, heterosexual male desire.

After committing to a character long enough, completing any personal quests or dialogue they may offer, players will then get the chance to sit back and watch the romance scene. In my case, I was ecstatic to finally have my moment with Liara after hours of space combat. Although, the framing of our character’s resonated with King’s (2021) feelings that:

> ‘it felt like a lesbian relationship viewed through the eyes of heterosexual men, with the angles and execution for more intimate scenes leering on certain body parts like an awkwardly produced adult film. It feels woefully archaic today, especially when you take a step back and analyse the series from a wider perspective’ (2021, para 2).

This reflects the trope that bisexual characters in media are often depicted with an ‘excessive and oversexualized promiscuous nature’ (Kleese, 2011:233). While the Asari may be portrayed this way, it could be interpreted that, within the context of this universe, this characterisation is a product of how the idea of Asari sexuality has been universally constructed and reproduced. This is plausible when considering Liara as an individual, separated from her species. Davies notes that:

> ‘if Shep talks to Liara about her species, Liara stammers to defend herself against assumptions about Asari promiscuity, informing Shep that just because Asari can mindmeld with any alien species or gender doesn’t mean they will do so at any chance they get’.

This instance of hesitation from Liara reveals her awareness of the stereotypes surrounding her species, possibly offering a subtle critique of the oversexualisation that often accompanies queer-coded or bisexual characters in sci-fi and fantasy genres.

(Figure 10, *Mass Effect 3*, in-game screenshot of EDI)

Another example of heteronormative frameworks limiting gender ambiguous characters to stereotypical portals of femininity is EDI, an acronym for Enhanced Defence Intelligence. EDI was uploaded into the Normandy and eventually she found a way to recycle a robotic body to use. The decision to give EDI a hyper-feminine body model (refer to figure 10), despite her origins as a non-gendered AI, could suggest the reinforcement of traditional gender binaries. Despite being the body of a non-organic robot being from another planet, the body conforms to conventional standards of femininity. This ties back to Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, as EDI's new body enforces a specific gender role through its design and the narrative choices surrounding her character. Again, despite being 'non-gendered' EDI has a female voice, and wears high heeled boots on every mission. EDI's interactions with the crew illustrate how she internalises these gendered expectations that they have of her. She mentions to the player that she has observed a noticeable shift in how male crew members, particularly Joker, interact with her. Joker, who previously treated her dismissively as just the ship's AI, now shows an affectionate attachment to her once she adopts a more traditionally feminine form. EDI's gradual shift in behaviour, as she picks up on human emotions and motivations, reflects her attempt to conform and perform the normative role of a woman. This transformation suggests that EDI is not merely acquiring a gender but is performing it based on the cues and behaviours of those around her, in which she then reacted to by further incorporating them into her feminine identity. As noted by Brittany (2018), 'EDI assimilated flawlessly into life among organics. If only that assimilation didn't come at the cost of falling into a repressive, male-dominated, heteronormative gender role'.

Conclusion

Characters such as Kaidan, whose sexuality was introduced subtly after his initial introduction, offer limited examples of queer representation due to the limited integration of queerness into his characterisation. Despite some exploration of non-normative sexual and gender identities, these attempts are limited, and a clear boundary of normativity persists throughout this game world, reflective of the gaming landscape of 2012. Ultimately, queer content was harder to access, and much of the queer content and dialogue was absent in the main narrative. While *Mass Effect 3* made efforts to deconstruct the heteronormative constraints that were evident in the previous two instalments, many aspects of gender and sexuality remain confined within conventional norms. However, despite these limitations, this does show how, in 2012, even big titles like *Mass Effect 3* were attempting to include queerness into the heart of their stories. By offering non-normative romance options, the game took a step forward, showing there was a real demand for more inclusive storytelling. It also highlighted the ongoing need for writers and designers to go beyond surface-level representation and create fully integrated queer characters and narratives.

The Sims (Electronic Arts, 2000-2024)

In a world where gay marriage is not accepted in many cultures, and laws prevent equal rights in comparison to heterosexual couples, as Sicart puts it, *The Sims* franchise has always been a 'step ahead of us' (2003:6-7). This section will analyse Electronic Arts' (EA) and Maxis' *The Sims* franchise, with a particular focus on *The Sims 4* with consideration of the latest patches and DLC's of the time of this research. Ruberg and Shaw (2014) noted that queer game scholarship has historically focused on a 'relatively narrow' range of titles, with *The Sims* as a key example. *The Sims 4* in 2024 still has updates and new downloadable content (expansion packs, game packs, and more), it's important to analyse its development, given its central role in queer game theory (Ruberg & Shaw, 2014:3878). This will provide insights into the evolving landscape of inclusion and diversity within the series. EA's *The Sims* is a life simulation and management game, in which the player picks or creates a 'household', then controls every aspect of the Sim's life. The player dictates almost every detail, from the Sim's job, to when they go to the toilet. With minor AI intervention, some Sims perform acts of care themselves if their needs are dangerously low and ignored. There is no specific aim or ending in *The Sims* games, with some describing them as glorified dollhouses for adults. Unlike other games with specific narratives, urging or hinting the player to complete certain objectives, the player is free to experimentally navigate the virtual world their own way. Furthermore, since the first *The Sims* on PC, the franchise has attracted a large modding community, allowing players to further customise their Sims, houses and worlds even further. The freedom of these games is not simply reflected in the mechanics; *The Sims* has been long recognised as 'socially progressive' in contrast to its competitors (Curlew, 2005).

Some argue that *The Sims* caters to a majority female and LGBTQ+ demographic and thus lacks authentic male representations. Palmer's 2023 qualitative analysis of *The Sims* unofficial subreddit uncovered that many male simmers felt 'neglected by the developers' by the expansive content designed for women and LGBTQ+ players 'occurring at the expense of "masculine" content' (Palmer, 2023:1-4).

Considering the arguments of scholars such as Henry Jenkins and Stuart Hall, one could also consider that these implementations of liberal and progressive ideology could act as a 'commercial appropriation of difference'. This implies that the company aimed to gain traction from marginalised audiences, Curlew (2005) describes this as an 'exploitation of diversity initiated by targeting nontraditional markets to better tap into the consuming

potential of millions of non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual people'. However, who would be playing *The Sims* if this content was not there, and how much this inclusive content solidified such a dedicated and diverse player base? Furthermore, as noted by Süngü (2020), EA was heavily scrutinised due to their strange regulation system regarding the uploads of player's creations to the gallery. The game prevented players from uploading their content if tags or the content itself was related to themes of 'lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender' (2020:386). Fortunately, the EA team were quick to react and fix the problem (Pitcher, 2021), although, it left players questioning why their content was ever restricted simply for gay themes, especially considering the game's significance to queer theory and apparent dedication to queer player bases.

Efforts of inclusivity in *The Sims 4*

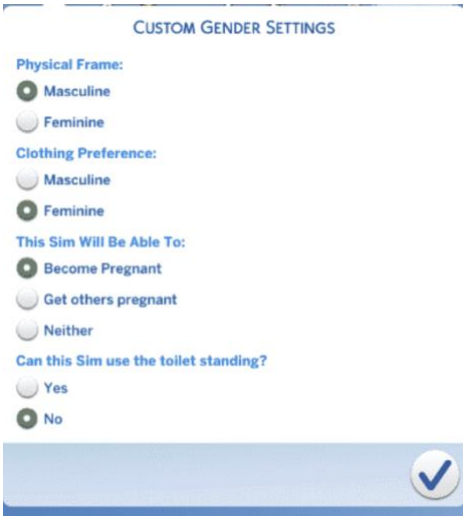
This section will explore the recent efforts made by EA to incorporate more inclusive content. In 2022, *The Sims Wedding stories* (2022) was released as the eleventh game pack for *The Sims 4*. Weddings in *The Sims* games have gained notoriety for their tendency to be extremely buggy, often stemming from the inability of players to control the actions of the guests. Consequently, many simmers were excited with the introduction of this pack, hoping for smoother and more enjoyable wedding experiences. Ultimately the pack was greatly criticised, with many arguing it ironically made the weddings buggier (Lee, 2022). Despite these drawbacks, the pack seemingly provided visibility for the LGBTQ+ community. This is evidenced by the inclusion of new Sims, the same-sex couple named Cam and Dom who featured on the cover and whose relationship story was explored in the trailer. However, two weeks post release, EA announced that due to federal laws, players in Russia will not be able to purchase this pack as they 'became aware' Cam and Dom's story would not be something they could 'freely share around the world' (EA.com, 2022). Cogswell's (2022) article on GameSpot notes that while this seems like a selfless move on part of the EA team, as it means limiting sale potential by maintaining their stance of allyship, it also excluded many players. Players were quick to argue that this decision was exclusionary to the Russian LGBTQ+ community; one Twitter user wrote 'we have a big LGBTQ+ community that is suffering so much' under Putin's regime and 'homophobic laws that are harsher and harsher every year' and that they often look to Western media for the 'freedom' it can offer. Ultimately this decision denies 'the chance for exploration of complex, intersectional identities' (Kilzer, 2022:36). After a week of 'relentless pressure' (Regan, 2023) from fans, the EA team announced they have reassessed and can release the pack in Russia 'unaltered and unchanged' (EA.com, 2022). This only further clarifies how important it is to represent these intersectional identities.

In terms of premade Sims, it is evident that within *The Sims 4*, there are a variety of explicitly queer premade Sims. This is evident in their bio and their household/relationship status. There are also more subtle indicators of gender queerness, such as premade Sim, Lia, introduced with the *Island Living* DLC who had a masculine body type but a preference for feminine clothing.

Townies, randomly generated Sims unique to each save file, can also display a range of non-normative identities, as they are created from all the available CAS options (including mods and DLC). However, while the game accommodates a wide array of non-normative

identities, these representations are superficial unless explored or imagined by the player. Nonetheless, the lack of limitations in creating different Sims allows for a broad spectrum of non-normative identities to be represented.

While there are definitive romance preferences, if you persist, you can romantically interact with positive responses to other Sims who are not sexually attracted to your Sim's gender. Enabling persistent players to bypass a character's pre-established sexual orientation, risks undermining the authenticity of those characters' identities. Although, it is worth mentioning that an early *The Sims 4* update made the Grim Reaper impossible to romance, or at least Sims could no longer 'woo-hoo' with or 'try for a baby' with them. The Grim Reaper's non-normative sexuality in comparison to other sims or NPCs could be read as an 'asexual and aromantic character' as the LGBT Videogame archive suggests (Shaw et al).



(Figure 11, *The Sims 4*, in-game screen clipping of custom gender settings menu)

The Sims 4's dedication to 'inclusive gaming experiences' is evident is their expansive create a Sim (CAS) option which have been gradually added with different updates such as the inclusion of top surgery scars, binders, the ability to choose pronouns, access to all 'masculine and 'feminine' clothing options despite the sim's gender and a variety of rainbow clothing items. Most of this content was introduced in an update in June 2016 for the first time in *The Sims* history, players could further customise their sims and experiment and express non-cisgendered identities. Under the male or female avatar option in CAS, players can now click the three dots to see a new menu called 'gender customisation settings'(refer to figure 11).

While *Fable*'s clothing items are categorised by class and gender, *The Sims 4* now allows for both masculine and feminine framed sims to access all the previously categorised clothes. This further widened the possibilities for non-gender normative Sims.

However, the CAS system does have some ludic limitations. While the new click-and-drag mechanic introduced in *The Sims 4* allows more detailed and individualistic-looking Sims, there is arguably a lack of body shape representation. There are two sliders to increase muscle and weight or 'bulk'. If these sliders are both at maximum, the weight hides the muscle, so some contend that making a fat-but-muscular Sim is 'impossible' (Harper 2020:268). It is also impossible to adjust your Sim's torso or leg length and thus, all Sims are the same height. Although, Harper's study into fat bodies in video games concluded that *The Sims 4* character creation is one of the 'best and most granular tools for making a body that 'felt fat' compared to one that was simply 'large', but even they had limits' (2020:272). Despite its limitations, *The Sims 4* offers genderqueer players diverse options to authentically represent themselves and explore various identities in the game.

Players can adopt children, and *The Sims 4* also introduced the option to have a 'science baby'. The player can choose whether to raise the baby as a single parent or choose a Sim to 'have science baby with'. This option further expands the possibilities for family-building in the game, reflecting a broader range of family dynamics and offering an inclusive feature for LGBTQ+ players and Sims.

The build/buy mode also now includes a great variety of different LGBTQ+ flags to display in Sim's homes, making their identity transcend the avatar/Sim but reflecting it in their environment. While *Baldur's Gate 3* allowed players full customisation of their avatar's gender identity, there was no further extension of this onto the virtual world besides all NPC's using preferred pronouns. Furthermore, in Pride month 2019, *The Sims 4* collaborated with It Gets Better, a charity working to empower LGBTQ+ youth. EA announced the addition of more pride clothing options, LGBTQ+ flags and a gender-neutral toilet door. However, many simmers were quick to point out that the sign on the gender-neutral bathroom door almost undermines the objective of genderqueer visibility. By using both male and female symbols to indicate gender neutrality instead of just one, does it not simply reinforce dominant codes by depicting binary gender? As Foucault's idea of surveillance suggests (1976:42), even intended inclusive content can unconsciously reinforce control by keeping players and their Sims inside heteronormative, established frameworks. Similarly, one Redditor commented on r/Sims that the 'door isn't gender neutral. You can clearly see it only depicting two genders: Male and Female' (TheAlexer, 2019). In 2014 and 2015, Texas and

several other states proposed "bathroom surveillance" bills. These bills, mandating that transgender individuals use bathrooms corresponding to their assigned birth gender. Antognoli, and Fisher (2021) suggest that *The Sims* team's resistance to what they call the 'bathroom wars' 'read as a direct response' demonstrating their determination to maintain their dedication to inclusivity in their game.

The Sims 4 launched their newest game pack in late July 2024 called *Lovestruck.* This DLC adds more options for Sims to interact on dates, a new dating app, new locations and more. What is of interest to this research, is the patch that accompanied the DLC, introducing polyamory into the game with a new 'romantic boundary system'. The official *The Sims* blog stated that the new system will allow players to:

> 'define how your Sims approach romantic relationships in terms of physical and emotional romantic exclusivity. This allows for Sims to date multiple Sims without impact to other relationships' (Electronic Arts, 2024).

This feels like quite a big shift considering how the majority of games procedurally insist upon monogamous relationships. As discussed previously in the *Baldur's Gate 3* section, many games permit players to engage romantically with multiple NPCs, only to face consequences such as losing all involved parties or experiencing severe slut-shaming. This patch offers a more inclusive representation of relationship dynamics.

Mechanical capabilities and romantic interactions

There are also questions regarding the ludic logic of physical, romantic relationships in games. Generally, in mediated romantic interactions, there is a dominant who controls the interaction, and it is received by the submissive. This dynamic is often associated with heterosexual relationships; the male would take a position of dominance, as evidenced countless times not only in games and film depictions but also explicitly in pornography. In terms of same-sex intimacy in video games, mechanics often rely on normative assumptions rooted in heterosexual hegemony that intimacy roles in relationships should follow a heteronormative framework. In the case of *The Sims* franchise, this has remained the same, in that the Sim that initiates the action, is the one who takes a position of dominance. For example, in T*he Sims 3*, the make-out interaction, although nearly identical in *The Sims 4*, features the initiating Sim passionately tipping the other Sim into their arms, providing support as the recipient Sim almost appears to go limp. This portrayal suggests a clear distinction in roles. This echoes Mulvey's (1975) argument that the 'active male' assumes power over the 'passive female'. With one Sim taking on a more assertive, dominant position while the other assumes a more passive, submissive stance echoing mediations of male romantic dominance, except the player has the power to create their own romantic dynamics.

In comparison, *Baldur's Gate 3* utilises a different method of positioning in romantic interactions. In the character creation menu, while hailing a huge range of avatar customisation options, players are surprisingly limited to just four body types to choose from. These options include a muscular, taller version of a male and female body, or a slighter, smaller body. This restricted selection is somewhat ironic, given the disparity between the limited body types and the multitude of options available for choosing the avatar's genitals. In many cases the avatar's body type dictates their positions in these interactions, with larger body types assuming dominance.

Ludological freedom

Ultimately, *The Sims* is a simulation, and the world is a reflection of the players, who can customise almost everything about the game world, how it looks, feels and the Sims that reside there. Comparatively, role playing games such as *Baldur's Gate* and *Dragon Age*, have characters predesigned with unique characteristics and narratives (Süngü, 2020, p.386). However, simulation games offer a player driven experience, where players create their own narratives.

The Sims 4 has transformed into a digital environment where the player sets up the systems, contexts and rules according to their preferences. Gradually, barriers of fixed heteronormativity have faded into the background as the series developed. The 'gay button' could be considered just as relevant as the 'straight button'. As observed by Biscop et al:

> 'Playing as a non-heterosexual character does not result in narrative tragedy, game-overs or other punitive measures, nor in the erasure of potential bisexuality, because players can choose to pursue a new partner of another gender than their previous partners' (Biscop et al., 2019:26).

This flexibility empowers players to explore and express their own identities, making *The Sims 4* and its advancements toward inclusivity, a valuable case study in the evolution of LGBTQ+ representation in gaming.

Conclusion

With the game pack's inclusion of a queer couple in the marketing, array of LGBTQ+ support and collaboration with charities, EA has provided visibility to queer identities.
Queer content is explicitly presented as an option to the player, from the CAS menu, build/buy menu and in-game situations.

The lack of fixed narrative evident in many simulation games like *The Sims* allows players to craft their own identities and stories. While these narratives unfold within boundaries set by the game, the extensive updates and inclusive quality-of-life additions have significantly expanded these boundaries. The huge modding community also provides PC players with more freedom to personalise their gaming experience. *The Sims* 4 now offers a wide range of customization and representative options, allowing for a more diverse and inclusive experience.

This flexibility really shows how The Sims gives players a space to not just escape but to be seen. It lets players explore identity without fear or judgment, offering a freedom that is rare even in real life. At the same time, it creates an unrealistic utopia where issues like homophobia or misgendering do not exist. That can feel incredibly comforting, but it also means some of the real-world struggles queer people face are not reflected. However, by putting choice and self-expression at the heart of the experience, *The Sims 4* sets a strong example of what inclusive gaming can look like.

Overwatch franchise (Blizzard 2016-2024)

To begin the analysis of LGBTQ+ representations in North American-made games, I will analyse *Overwatch* produced by Blizzard Entertainment. Renowned for their iconic MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (2004) and other celebrated titles like *Diablo* (1996) and *Hearthstone* (2014). Blizzard Entertainment has won numerous awards and was even 'heralded as one of the most diverse and inclusive companies to work for within the industry' (Devereaux, 2023:1), thus, many supported the company and respected their seemingly inclusive attitudes. To further highlight their outwardly dedicated crusade for inclusivity, in 2023 they posted a statement on their website arguing how critical it is for them to 'represent' their millions of players, in their stories, characters, and global offices. Finishing the statement with 'representation matters, a diverse employee population matters, inclusion matters' (Blizzard Entertainment, 2023). Therefore, it seems fitting to incorporate *Overwatch*, one of Blizzard's most successful series, as one of the case studies. Blizzard's professed dedication to inclusion makes *Overwatch* an intriguing game for scrutiny and investigation, possibly offering valuable insights into the complex landscape of representation within the modern gaming sphere. Although, the company has been scrutinised for their disproportionate male workforce and workplace discrimination, possibly reflected within in-game representations.

Overwatch transcends the boundaries of a video game but is a multi-media series replete with numerous comics and YouTube shorts that look further into the intricate stories of its diverse characters within a conflicted, futuristic universe. Characterised as a first-person shooter (FPS), the game offers a plethora of characters to play, each with unique abilities and roles, all centred around the objective of defeating the opposing team. *Overwatch 2* was released after the company's lawsuit had been made public, clearly tainted by the company's controversial history. The community was further disheartened by *Overwatch 2*'s lack of innovation, rather than another game it resembled an update, and its free distribution disregarded players who had previously purchased the deactivated *Overwatch 1*. Unlike *Overwatch 1*, players must buy in-game cosmetics and new heroes instead of earning them. Many argued this shift towards a more monetised model felt exploitative, especially considering the significant investment they had already made in the original.
However, *Overwatch 2* was chosen for this research to investigate whether the recent assertions made by Blizzard Entertainment regarding the importance of inclusivity are reflected in their game now that increased scrutiny is upon them. This raises concerns about

tokenism and the potential for inauthentic representations solely aimed to ‘tick the boxes’ or attract marginalised audiences without genuine commitment to inclusivity and diverse representations.

Blizzard and controversy

The company's reputation has been tarnished by recent scandals involving a lawsuit concerning sexual discrimination, and recent light cast on allegations as far back as 2004, highlighting that these issues existed since the dawn of the company. These allegations were ‘swept under the rug’ (Deveraux, 2023:82) until recently casting a permanent shadow over Blizzard’s otherwise illustrious history. In 2021, the California Department of Fair Employment and Housing uncovered concerning and disturbing disparities within their workforce. They revealed that only 20% of their employees were women, who not only received significantly lower salaries, offered fewer promotions and faced faster termination compared to their male counterparts (California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, 2021). Furthermore, the working environment for their female employees has been described by many as ‘dangerous’ following the revelation that the female employees were subjected to ‘cube crawls’, where male colleagues consumed extreme amounts of alcohol and proceeded to ‘crawl’ their way through various cubicles in the offices, engaging in inappropriate conduct towards female colleagues (California Department of Fair Employment and Housing, 2021) (Deveraux, 2023:56). These revelations not only exposed a toxic work culture but also raised deeper concerns regarding how Blizzard's internal dynamics may have influenced the in-game content they produced. This internal dynamic and the overrepresentation of heterosexual men in development and leadership roles suggests further scrutiny of how these power structures shape the portrayal of gender and diversity in their games is warranted. Addressing these issues is not just about workplace reform but also about understanding the broader cultural impact of Blizzard’s creative decisions.

Queer potential

Science fiction media is often acknowledged in queer theory as a genre that experiments with non-normative identities and cultures. Afterall, the genre's ability to envision worlds beyond our own provides a unique space to challenge established normative ideas and reimagine them. Hollinger's ideas are particularly relevant to this argument, she suggests that:

> 'Science fiction would seem to be ideally suited, as a narrative mode, to the construction of imaginative challenges to the smoothly oiled technologies of heteronormativity, especially when/as these almost invisible technologies are pressed into the service of a coercive regime of compulsory heterosexuality' (1999:24)

Hollinger's argument that the genre's ability to imagine new worlds and alternative futures void of these compulsory regimes is evident in the portrayal of the tensions within *Overwatch*'s universe, which bear striking resemblances to real-world struggles over LGBTQ+ rights, especially in America. *Overwatch*'s futuristic setting of Earth offers a glimpse into a world where humans and Omnics (robots) coexist. The narrative reveals how Omnics were exploited, with many protesting they are unequal to Earth's human residents. The significance becomes more apparent after watching the *Overwatch* shorts on YouTube, featuring depictions of romantic relationships between humans and Omnics (refer to figure 12), as well as protests advocating for their equal rights. These portrayals could reflect a broader societal discourse mirrored in contemporary political landscapes. In certain states in America, debates over LGBTQ+ rights often intersect with notions of family structures and cultural values, mirroring the tensions depicted in *Overwatch*'s science fiction narrative. This parallels contemporary political landscapes, echoing real-world struggles over LGBTQ+ rights and the challenges they pose to traditional societal values. Here, the intersection of LGBTQ+ rights with traditional notions of family structures and cultural values mirrors the nuanced complexities explored within *Overwatch*'s narrative, offering profound insights into the ongoing dialogue between societal norms and progressive change. While this observation aligns with Hollinger's theories on the progressive potential of science fiction, the context regarding the studio's history shows the need to remain critical.

(Figure 12, Blizzard screenshot from YouTube short ‘Awake’ (2024) depicting human and Omnic couple)

While the idea of Omnics and humans living in peace is behind the efforts of the morally good characters, none of the Omnic heroes appears to be in any romantic relationships, and none of the human heroes in romantic relationships with Omnics. This could have added a further layer of context in the game world, without watching the YouTube shorts, players are unaware of the contexts to the game world. Rather contexts are communicated by environments and character dialogue.

Visibility or box ticking?

(Figure 13, *Overwatch 2* in-game screenshot of Tracer) (Figure 14, *Overwatch 2,* in-game screenshot of Soldier:76)

Blizzard has confirmed that both Tracer and Soldier 76 are gay, but their queer identities are revealed in external media, such as comics, and are almost entirely absent within the game itself. This raises important questions about visibility and whether Blizzard's characters' identities are genuinely representing queer identities or merely 'ticking diversity boxes'. This was significant considering the two characters in question are incredibly important to the lore, and Soldier 76 even being the tutorial hero (Tassi, 2019). While these characters had in-game voice lines that hinted at their identities, the full context was provided by the comics, thus, it is unlikely these queer identities are identifiable simply from the in-game content.

Firstly, unlike other female heroes in the damage division (Widowmaker and Symmetra, who exhibit more traditional feminine traits), Tracer's (refer to figure 13) design features a slimmer, straighter physique, fewer curves, and a short, spiky haircut. I found that while Tracer's design aligns with her role as a nimble pilot, there are subtle visual cues in her character design that hint at her queer identity. Tracer's appearance in comparison to the other female characters could counter arguments such as Mulvey's (1975) that female characters serve to provide for the male gaze, which feels ironic given her sexuality as one would assume she would occupy a position suited more to the female gaze, over that of the male gaze. However, her character is sexualised in multiple ways, not only by the community

cosplaying her and animating her among countless other characters in pornography, but many argue she was overtly sexualised in game (Blom, 2020:193). This raises questions about why characters who are openly lesbian like Tracer are often depicted through a supposed male fantasy lens, even when their written narratives and identities suggest otherwise. Tracer still fits into the category of female characters created to gratify male heterosexual desire.

(Figure 15, *Overwatch,* Tracer's controversial pose)

Blizzard was involved in another controversy in 2016, when players criticised Tracer's victory pose (refer to figure 15), as 'overly sexualized and unbefitting the character's personality', reducing her to eye candy, an object of the male gaze even (Mulvey), rather than depicting the character's skill, smarts and playful nature (McWhertor, 2016). While some argued that any shot of Tracer from the back would look similar due to her skintight legging's emphasis on her rear, others argued the pose is undeniably suggestive and misfitting of Tracer's character (Tassi, 2016). This debate was contrasted with characters like Widowmaker, whose characterisation as a femme fatale makes such a pose more fitting. Windowmaker's identity is closely tied to her overtly sexualised presentation, making the same pose more contextually appropriate for her than for Tracer.

At first glance, it is fair to assume that Jack Morrison (refer to figure 14), better known as Soldier 76, falls into the 'dude in cargo pants' category Shaw (Beyond Solitaire, podcast, 2023), considers a character type that many feel is overused and lacks originality. These archetypical characters usually have a rugged countenance, a no-nonsense attitude and a heavy past weighing on them. Blizzard's description of the character on their Wiki says:

> ‘The former commander of *Overwatch* turned physically enhanced vigilante, Jack Morrison travels the world hunting those responsible for the downfall of *Overwatch*. It is unknown whether he seeks justice... or revenge.’.

The insight into Soldier’s identity came about in the *Baset* (Blizzard, 2019) short story Overwatch comic. Here, he and another playable hero and old friend Ana, reminisce about the days they had on their original strike team before *Overwatch*’s collapse. When Ana hands Soldier a photo of him with his hand around another man, he reflects:

> ‘Vincent deserved a happier life than the one I could give him.” Jack sighed. “We both knew that I could never put anything above my duty. Everything I fought for was to protect people like him… That’s the sacrifice I made’

Ana’s response:

> “Relationships don’t work out so well for us, do they?” (:12)

Soldier’s sexuality was then officially announced by *Overwatch 1*’s senior designer for lore and story, Micheal Chu. He posted on X that ‘Jack and Vincent were in a romantic relationship many years ago announcing that ‘both identify as gay’ (2019). Despite being made official, I found no in-game content besides one voice line referring to Vincent. It is a generalisation to assume all players will read the comics or watch the *Overwatch* shorts, so as Shaw mentioned in regard to the ‘gay button’ if players do not see the content, they are unconsciously consuming a hetero dominant text (Shaw 2014:34).

Vivero (2023), a YouTuber who makes content about video game news, argued in his video that as a gay man, ‘Soldier 76 did not make him feel seen and represented’. Rather, he felt these inclusions are simply Blizzard wanting to get their ‘flowers for diversity without having to do much’. He summarises that ‘corporations aren’t allies, they’re corporations’. The lack of exploration into Soldier’s gay identity is evident and further suggests his queer inclusion is a result of Blizzard's efforts to receive praise for diversity than making meaningful changes or inclusions. Ultimately, besides the comics and developer’s announcements exterior to the game space, there was incredibly little content signalling Tracer or Soldier’s queer identity.

Parshakov (2023) analysed the pick rate of Soldier 76’s before and after his LGBTQ+ announcement. They found a dramatic decreased after the announcement. While the decline in pick rate was temporary, it highlights how character identity can influence player

perceptions and choices reflecting internal biases, even in a game where gameplay mechanics should be the primary concern. This could be representative of homophobic or even unconscious biases, but the fact it was only temporary could indicate that the idea of picking a gay hero slowly normalised over time.

(Figure 16, *Overwatch 2*, in-game screenshot of Lifeweaver)

By playing these characters in games to hear their dialogue with other characters, and by playing with them in the training room I was able to analyse how these queer identities were implemented. Firstly, Lifeweaver (refer to Figure 16) is a new Thai character released in April 2023 whose pansexuality was announced as part of Pride 2023. He's a scientist whose powers are highly connected with nature. Notably, he stands out as one of the most caring and morally good characters. He is fun to play with new, innovative mechanics unique to his character. While male presenting with a soft masculine voice, his flower motifs, feminine face, flowing hair, and pink pallet contrast with and reject previous binary signifiers of masculinity. This is further evident in his emotes; he sits elegantly with a straight back and his legs crossed juxtaposing the sitting animations of other male characters who are incredibly casual in contrast with their legs are often spread apart and uneven posture. Sarkeesian discusses how if feminine signifiers are placed on an otherwise male-presenting character, it can result in a 'homophobic and transphobic joke' (2013).

Furthermore, his classification as a support hero adds further to his submission, as the role aims to heal and support the rest of the team rather than focusing on damage and kills, with the support role often meeting the most in-game aggression and blame in team chat (Caddick, 2022). Zhou et al's 2021 study of gender-based play styles concluded that female players preferred the support role as they are 'scared of being blamed for not doing well' by their male teammates. Zhou et al note this reinforces their seemingly subordinate position, reflecting archaic values that women should remain in the backline, even in a video game. These are not isolated incidents however, the game chat in multiplayer online games is often

an incredibly hostile space for minority players, with ‘racism, sexism and heterosexist language’ (Chess, 2017:12) often alienating these players.

Some argue that overtly queer designs, such as Lifeweaver’s, undermine the diversity of queer culture and expression by repeatedly applying these stereotypically feminine signifiers to portray a queer, male character (discussed by multiple players on Blizzard Forum: general discussion - Is The Character of Lifeweaver Homophobic?, 2023). So how can queer male characters be represented without relying on feminising signifiers? Clearly the use of binary gendered signifiers dominates the characterisations of female characters, therefore the aim of deconstructing and analysing the following case studies is to determine what and how signifiers can depict queer characters. Many of his character-to-character voice lines are flirtatious, perpetuating a recurring trope in media that pansexual or bisexual characters are inherently promiscuous and overly sensual. This is evident in characters addressed in other case studies within this research, most notably, Reaver (*Fable 2* and *Fable 3*) and Chloe Price (*Life is Strange*). This portrayal risks reducing his pan identity to a one-dimensional stereotype, rather than offering a nuanced representation of pansexuality.

Furthermore, there are characters such as Moira, whose striking visual resemblance to David Bowie, including her heterochromia, could signal a queer identity via iconography. David Bowie challenged traditional gender norms and aesthetics, serving as a beacon of hope for those marginalized by heteronormative ideologies (Parahoo, 2020:48-49). His iconic presence in popular culture transcended conventional boundaries of normative gendered behaviour. In the realm of video game character design, visual cues such as this are powerful tools for conveying identity and personality traits. Moira's resemblance to Bowie may suggest deliberate artistic choices by the developers to signal her alignment with themes of nonconformity and individuality. While not canonically announced as a queer character, her design resonates with queer signalling, perhaps offering a more nuanced representation of queer identity.

(Figure 17, *Overwatch 2*, in-game screenshot of Venture)

Venture (Figure 17) was introduced in April 2024 and represents *Overwatch'*s first non-binary hero. Designed to (according to Blizzard):

> 'fit the archetype of an adventurous archaeologist, we wanted someone who was daring, passionate, and unabashedly themselves. This personality ended up meshing really well with Venture's gender identity. Venture is our first trans non-binary hero, and they use they/them pronouns'(Blizzard, 2024).

Venture is a DPS hero, and the 40th hero to be introduced. In researching public responses to the character, they were extremely mixed. Many online posts and in-game communications among players misgender them purposely to disenfranchise gender queer identities. In defence of misgendering them, one Reddit user argued:

> 'Imma be real with you. Most people playing overwatch do not give one shit about gender ideology. Venture has a voice that sounds more like it belongs to a female than a male so that's what most people are going to sex her as.' (allmatteeverything, 2024)

This shows how external gendered signifiers such as voice can be regarded as a signifier of sex. Despite Venture's androgynous design, neutral animations and severe contrast to traditionally feminine heroes such as Widowmaker and Symmetra, according to this Reddit user, voice dictates the gender in which the player assumes the character is. This shows how a character's voice can overshadow their gender-neutral design, leading players to assume their gender corresponds with gender normative and traditional expectations.

Conclusion

Pride events introduce a great range of aesthetic content in maps including pride crosswalks, Pride flag player icons, etc, however, there is little overtly queer content that is not limited to visual or aesthetic. Cassell and Jenkins (2000) discuss this concerning the emergence of the girl games market in the late 90s to early 2000s. They discuss the sudden rise in girl games being released and marketed to young girls pointing out how the sudden rise in games marketed to young girls was largely driven by the desire to capitalise on 'minority players' rather than a true commitment to diversity.

Tracer's design and past controversy suggest her character is partly a fetishisation of lesbian women, however, Blizzard did listen to the criticism and change the controversial victory pose. Seemingly, with reference to Venture, when a character is designed to be ambiguous, the way they sound can influence the assumption of their gender.

Besides the Pride month additions, in-game queer content is limited with exterior media announcing queer identities. Although the implementation of a range of Pride flags allows players to express themselves in some way in the game space and there is a limited amount of flirty dialogue and mentions of partners during gameplay, without context the player is unassuming.

Game Analysis part 3 – Japanese Games

Japan’s video game industry has long been celebrated for its technological innovation and compelling narratives since the 1970s. The industry began to take shape in the late 1970s and early 1980s with pioneers like Nintendo, Sega, and Namco creating arcade games and early home consoles (MacKnight, 2012:30). Their contributions have shaped the industry into what it is today, making Japan's gaming scene vibrant, influential, and captivating for players around the world. Growing up with Japanese games, particularly those from Nintendo, has greatly inspired me. Notably, some refer to Shigeru Miyamoto (Nintendo’s lead designer for some of their biggest franchises) as the Shakespeare of gaming (Paumgarten, 2010), a notion that is hard to dispute.

It is critical to examine the cultural contexts in Japan to analyse the meanings in the games they produce. Understanding the societal norms, historical influences, and cultural nuances can provide deeper insights into the themes, character representations, and narratives found in this selection of Japanese games. As discussed by Kawasaka, the 2010s was a crucial decade in regard to LGBTQ+ rights in Japan, finally garnering attention in mainstream media.

Kawasaka (2024) discussed how LGBTQ+ visibility in the 2010s, describing the period as a ‘monumental decade for the progress of LGBTQ+ rights in Japan’ (2024, p.21), despite the ‘limited effectiveness’ of particular social policies. In terms of Japan’s social and political policies on LGBTQ+ rights, progress has been objectively slow. It was only in 2015 that the first municipality, Shibuya Ward in Tokyo, introduced a system to recognise same-sex partnerships, issuing certificates that, while not legally binding, granted some rights like those of married couples. This system has since been adopted by other municipalities and prefectures across Japan, but it is not equivalent to full legal recognition of same sex marriage (Takao, 2017:7).

While the English language has terms categorising gender and sexual identities, other languages are arguably behind in their evolution in response to social change. Terms like gei boi, danshō, and okama, which describe gender nonconforming men or trans individuals who have sex with men, do not clearly separate gender, sex, and sexuality in the Japanese language (McLelland, 2004). The terms ‘gay’ and ‘trans’ do not fully capture their meanings For example, ‘okama’ can range from a casual synonym for ‘gay’ to a man dressed in women's clothing with stereotypically effeminate traits (Wysocki & Lauteria, 2015:44). Additionally, Snyder concludes that:

> ‘Gender in Japan is deceptively complex. Due to the visual nature of the culture, gender is almost impossible to differentiate from sex, meaning that cross-dressing, drag, and androgyny have no real powers of subversion’. (2010:25)

Snyder’s interpretation reinforces the notion that gender is closely tied to visual cues, making it challenging to distinguish from biological sex. This blurring of boundaries means that elements like cross-dressing, drag, and androgyny may be integrated into the culture in ways that may not carry the same connotations as they do in Western contexts.

Before commencing this section, it is important to note that in comparing these findings with Western games, I hope to avoid possibly othering Japan and their cultural products. As noted by MacKnight I also aim not to ‘“other-ise” their perspectives’, but in fact to examine the ‘cultural influences which may have shaped them’ (2013:37). MacKnight (2013) proposed using Foucauldian genealogies to describe current circumstances of sexuality by examining the ‘historical forces that shaped them’. This approach will help contextualise and understand the meanings embedded in Japanese games and how Western audiences may interpret them.

In comparison to European and American games, queer characters in Japanese games tend to be much more ambiguous in their representations, leading many player bases to engage in rumouring and speculation (Thach, 2021:20). This ambiguity can result from cultural differences in how LGBTQ+ themes are approached and portrayed. While Western games often include more canonically queer characters, Japanese games frequently leave these aspects more open to interpretation, encouraging players to read between the lines and form their own conclusions about a character’s sexuality or gender identity. This subtlety reflects the broader cultural context and societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ issues in Japan. It is important to consider the Western bias in studies such as Shaw’s LGBTQ+ archive in which this study utilises throughout for their current statistics and quantitative data. The archive as well as similar studies are often analysed via a Western perspective, and as previously mentioned, what one writer may perceive as queer may not be the same for another. Snyder (2010) also suggests that as Western societies move toward more inclusive forms of masculinity due to a decline of homohysteria (the fear of being seen a gay), meanwhile Japan navigates a complex interplay between state-imposed Western gender norms and traditional, pre-Western expressions of masculinity (2010:26-27).

The Japanese company Capcom created one of the first transfeminine characters in video games, Poison, who appears in Capcom's *Final Fight* (1989) and *Street Fighter* series. To side-step then company's fears of a critical feminist reactions to violence against women, Poison was later marketed as a 'transvestite' character in Japan to 'appease' to sensitivity of the Western audiences (MacKnight, 2013:3). Their identities are explored no further in game. Furthermore, *Final Fight*'s character designer Akira Yasuda added to the confusion surrounding Poison's gender by stating 'that he believes her to be cisgender in Japan but transgender in America' (Mermaididols, 2020). Mermaididols argues:

> 'Capcom has more or less taken the stance that Poison's transgender status is ambiguous or region-specific, but that hasn't stopped them from contributing to the confusion with jokes and innuendos that frequently teeter on being offensive'(2020)

The ambiguity surrounding Poison's gender, compounded by conflicting statements from character designer, highlights the complexity of cross-cultural interpretations and the challenges of representing LGBTQ+ identities in a global context.

Bayonetta (Platinum Games, 2009)

Platinum Games' 2009 release, the hack'n slash game *Bayonetta*, has sparked contrasting discussions. Many view the series as a clear objectification of women, while others see Bayonetta as a campy, feminine queer icon. The debate surrounding the game remains polarised among player bases, journalists and academics. The character of Bayonetta is central to these opposing views, which question whether she is an iconic figure or simply a product of sexism. The game is set in modern time, following Bayonetta, one of the last surviving 'Umbra' witches. The Umbra witches were tasked with maintaining the balance between darkness and light. The story unfolds as Bayonetta awakens two hundred years after a great war between the all-female Umbran witches, and the all-male Ithavoll sages. The war took place during the historical witch hunts in early modern Europe. The game follows Bayonetta's quest to restore her memories and unveil her destiny.

*Bayonett*a serves as a crucial case study due to her profound resonance with queer audiences, despite or perhaps due to her overt and exaggerated portrayal of sexuality. In a world where femininity is frequently equated with weakness, and before the events of Gamergate, the unapologetic sexually empowered protagonist Bayonetta subverts this notion, possibly queering the image of female protagonists. This complex relationship between gender, sexuality, and empowerment makes *Bayonetta* a compelling text to be examined as part of this research. As Philips (2017:109) asks, 'What role does sexiness play in the cultural construct of the progressive heroine?', this case study will examine Bayonetta's position amid these diverse interpretations of her character and the queer power dynamics that may—or may not—be at play.

Object or icon?

(Figure 18, Bayonetta cover art)

Bayonetta was initially imagined by Japanese game developer Hideki Kamiya, who, as many writing on this topic note, has been 'open about describing Bayonetta as his 'idea woman' (Wundergeek, 2020) and an object of his sexual desire. In an interview Kamiya participated in on Platinum Game's official YouTube channel, he is asked what percentage of Bayonetta's sexiness reflected his own tastes to which he responds, '100%' (PlatinumGames Official, 2016). Kamiya compares Bayonetta with male characters in the game and how they would be characterised as male protagonists, alternatively concluding that 'since it is a girl this time, it was about being sexy'. If we were to simply focus on this interview and ignore the game content and fan base, the case would be closed, Bayonetta reflects the sexual desire of her creator, and thus she is objectified and projected in the male gaze. Sarkeesian of Feminist Frequency (2018) argues Bayonetta is a quintessential example of multiple tropes they highlight, specifically the 'fighting fucktoy' trope.

Myers (2014) agrees Bayonetta's character design is greatly influenced by Kamiya's gaze but adds that Kamiya's fetishes might not 'match up with what's 'typically' considered attractive'. Myers concludes that Bayonetta's character is an example of why 'the term "male gaze" can sometimes be' thoroughly unhelpful' in examining video game characters. While Bayonetta's character is in the gaze of Kamiya, it is impossible to generalise what all straight men desire.

While Sarkeesian (Feministfrequency, 2014) discussed Bayonetta she argues that the lines between female empowerment and sexualisation have been blurred. With reference to Bayonetta, she argues the sexualisation of female characters is not empowering as their sexual nature was manufactured for men by men. She repeats multiple times how important it

is to remember the game was designed for a presumably straight male audience. Building on this, Souza (2016) states that:

> ‘Despite a noticeable attempt to create independent women, in several moments in Bayonetta’s representation it is still possible to observe the narrative perspective through a male gaze due to a constant irrelevant objectification of her body, as in the frequent focus on her crotch.’ (Souza, 2016:100)

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The game is played from a third person perspective, allowing players to see the environment while maintaining a focused centre on the protagonist, Bayonetta. Reynolds (2015) argues that the visual availability of female characters from third person view such as Bayonetta and Lara Croft are ‘overly sexualized and made available for the male gaze similar to the ways in which Mulvey details women are objectified through film’ (2013:13). As the player has active control over the camera with Bayonetta as the subject, players are in full control over what they see of her. As affirmed by Reynolds:

> ‘this inventive narratives device serves the sole purpose of making Bayonetta's (almost) nude body available to the player on frequent occasions throughout game play. The gaze here is in the hands of the player and they can subject …Bayonetta to it at will. (2013:18)

Additionally, during fights, techno-pop music will play with a fast tempo with soft female vocals throughout; it is almost like Bayonetta is performing a dance for the player. Furthermore, Bayonetta frequently breaks the fourth wall by winking directly at the camera—or rather, at the player. This is particularly evident after intense fight sequences or during montage moments, I found it almost personal, interpreting these instances as Bayonetta saying, 'I know you're watching and enjoying what you see.' This reinforces her role as the 'fighting fuck toy,' a term coined by Sarkeesian, positioning her as an object designed for the assumed male heterosexual player. However, this can also be seen as camp, with the wink's playful juxtaposition against a battle with heaven’s angels adding to the sense of exaggerated, over-the-top outrageousness. Nevertheless, the player cannot ‘opt out’ of bearing witness to Bayonetta’s exaggerated sexuality, Mulvey discusses scopophilia as one of the ‘possible cinemas’ offered by visual media:

> ‘Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze’ (2006:344)

Every level the player can purchase a new lollipop; Bayonetta will suck on it during cut scenes. This ludically unavoidable mechanic emphasises her sexualisation, creating highly sexualised moments designed in the male heterosexual gaze.

The camp aesthetic

However, one could also interpret Bayonetta's identity as more nuanced in contrast to being a 'fighting fuck toy'(Sarkeesian, 2016), Harper (2015) assessed that:

> 'more expansive reads of Bayonetta's style and depiction suggest that she may be easily read as embodying the performative aspects of drag and camp, relying on excess, spectacle, and ironic subversion for some of her impact and charm'.

While evident that Bayonetta represents many aspects of straight male desire, her character ironically radiates a particular queerness. As noted by Phillips (2017):

> 'while much popular critique holds Bayonetta up as an example of straight male desire run wild, this femme fatale is not typical in her orientation toward heteronormative masculinity or in her relationship to the apparatus of the gaming machine: there is something distinctly queer at her core that disrupts efforts to cast her according to this timeworn trope..' (Phillips, 2017:110).

Her oversexualised nature borders on parody, shifting the focus away from mere sexuality and embracing a camp sensibility. As stated by Sontag (1964), the ultimate camp statement is 'it's good *because* it's awful'; the sheer exaggeration of her sexuality arguably loops from sexy to ridiculous. Before discussing how Bayonetta can be perceived as 'camp' as opposed to hypersexual, it is important to define campness and explore how it can be interpreted. Medhurst compares defining 'Camp' as 'attempting to sit in the corner of a circular room' (2013:237). However, a critical passage to understanding camp is Sontag's 1964 essay, initiating its recognition and influencing future academic discussions. She initiates her essay in a rhetorical tone stating:

> 'Many things in this world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have not been described' (Sontag, 1964:1).

She describes 'camp' as a 'sensibility' contending that the 'essence of camp is its love for the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration' (1964:1). While some might see these elements of Bayonetta's characterisation and aesthetic as bordering on objectification, it is precisely this exaggeration that embodies the camp aesthetic. Sontag also lists random examples which are 'part of the canon of camp' (1964:2), including items such as Tiffany

lamps; their embrace of an unnatural aesthetic over practicality is exactly how they can be categorised as camp. Like Tiffany lamps, Bayonetta embraces a love of exaggeration, the unnatural and the excessive, which is key to defining camp and perhaps the queerness in her core that Phillips (2017) described. While Bayonetta is objectified through her overtly sexualised and hyper-feminine characterisation and design, the game's use of exaggerated femininity and consequently, camp, creates a space for queer interpretations and empowerment.

Butler, gender performance and subversion

Through researching Bayonetta, it became apparent she has often been compared with the character Lara Croft (Core Design, 1996-2023) (Engelbrecht, 2018:30; Reynolds, 2013:18) from the *Tomb Raider* series, however, I found Bayonetta is significantly more sexualised and theatrical in comparison, demonstrating the jump from sexiness to camp. My analysis suggests Bayonetta overperforms gender to a new extension of overt femininity. I observed this was particularly evident in how she is animated. Her long legs and flexibility are highlighted on most of her animations; her walking animations mimic a runway style, with over exaggerated hip movement. Lara's walk from the original 1966 release of *The Tomb Raider* is extremely subtle in comparison, in fact, given her body proportions and design, I would consider the modesty of her walking animation rather unexpected. Bayonetta's animations are arguable exceeding Butler's (2003) 'heterosexual matrix' and land on unnatural. Ultimately, most player interaction with Bayonetta's body exhibit over-feminised, sexual and camp expression.

(Figure 19, Bayonetta in-game screenshot of torture attack)

When pressing L1, Bayonetta will perform a series of provocative poses and taunt the enemy, often making sexy gestures accompanied by provocative dialogue. Some of her voice lines, such as 'Do you want to touch me?' are delivered in an overtly sexual tone, as if she is taunting the enemy by teasing them. Special attacks or 'torture attacks' include Bayonetta spinning on a trident like a pole dancer, whipping enemies (Refer to figure 19) and pushing then into sarcophagi. The BDSM aspect is evident throughout, not only via the animations but from Bayonetta's design. Despite her clothing being made from her hair, it initially appears like latex or leather, materials iconic to kinks such as BDSM.

Spencer (2022) suggested by applying Butler's theory of gender performance to Bayonetta, it is the player who 'manipulates the character Bayonetta via the game controller, which interprets and re-interprets how the player views Bayonetta as a woman of power' (2020:57). Therefore, as Spencer suggests, by controlling Bayonetta, players are not just

seeing her as a static character but are actively involved in shaping her identity and her performance. This suggests a player's actions can alter how her power and femininity are perceived, illustrating Butler's idea that gender is a performance influenced by repeated actions and interactions.

It is arguable that by manipulating her in various ways (e.g., taunting enemies, performing special attacks), players contribute to how Bayonetta's identity as a powerful woman is understood. Her actions and appearance are not just predefined by the game but are also shaped by the player's interaction. Despite the flexibility players have in manipulating her actions, the representation of Bayonetta remains confined within the limits of the game's pre-established parameters as my ludic analysis suggests. This highlights a tension between the idea of gender as a fluid performance and the reality of fixed representations within a game's framework.

Witchcraft, Empowerment, and the Queering of Heroism

Souza's (2016) article outlined many instances where witchcraft has been associated with women's rights and feminism and discusses the marginalization (social exclusion) that witches have suffered throughout history. She concludes that witches represent:

> 'a break from gender notions since they surpass what is expected of women in society. The power of the witches relies not only in magical skills but in the creation of a confident persona that knows how to deal with obstacles and problems' (2016:101)

This could influence her queer following; witches have been marginalised for centuries and described as threats to society. Perhaps this mirrors the queer fandom of *Baldur's gate* 3's vampire companion, Astarion. However, Bayonetta was not intentionally designed to appeal to marginalised audiences, making this connection more of an interpretative reading than a definitive aspect of her character.

The concept of an anti-hero introduces an inherently queer dimension to the character and narrative. Traditional hero archetypes often draw power from divine or morally 'good' sources, as seen in games like *The Legend of Zelda*, where protagonists are empowered by gods or some force of good. Contrastingly, Bayonetta subverts this by wielding the powers of hell, juxtaposing conventional depictions of heroism. This subversion or 'queering' of the typical hero-antagonist dynamic disrupts the normative framing of good versus evil, creating a narrative that is both subversive and complex. Bayonetta's alignment with hell and her battle against the forces of heaven symbolize a rejection of traditional binaries and moral certainties, embodying a narrative structure that resonates with queer theory.

The game play in fights is highly sexualised, but it is essential to consider two critical aspects: the player's control over her sexuality and the weaponization of her sexuality. As Sarkeesian notes, these sexualised moves 'have nothing to do with sex, they just obliterate her enemies', thus directly linking her sexuality with empowerment (Feministfrequency, 2016). Although, the more powerful she is in battle, the less clothing she wears, transforming Bayonneta from empowering, to objectifiable (Reynolds, 2013:18-19).

(Figure 20, *Bayonetta*, Bayonetta's hair attack, in game screenshot)

One of Bayonetta's iconic features is her hair, doubling as her clothes and can turn into beasts and weapons of her choosing. Depending on how powerful the attack is, more hair will unwrap from her body to attack her target, often leaving her completely naked. While the use of this traditionally feminine trait could be seen to convey empowerment through weaponising conventional beauty, it mainly serves to highlight her physical form rather than communicate messages of female strength. Essentially, the emphasis is on displaying Bayonetta's naked body rather than on meaningful statements about female empowerment.

The narrative use of the term 'climax' is arguably rooted in a heteronormative, male-centric perspective, where climax is viewed as the 'ultimate' moment. In Bayonetta, this is also the point when she typically sheds her clothes, allowing her hair to transform into a massive, monstrous weapon. The concept of climax can be interpreted as inherently heterosexual, where climax represents the ultimate moment of release in sexual encounters. As Chess (2015: abstract) argues, 'narrative theory relies on masculine, heteronormative conceptualisations of a necessarily reproductive climax'. This idea is literalised in the gameplay, where the player is prompted near the end of combat to initiate a 'climax' to execute a special attack finishing a fight. True to Bayonetta's style, selecting this option triggers her hair to unwrap from her body—leaving her increasingly exposed—as it transforms into a dragon to defeat the enemy. The climactic moment is thus visually marked by Bayonetta's near-total nudity, reinforcing the association of climax with vulnerability and exposure.

Adoption of queer community

Game rant argued that in response to Baynonetta's romance with a male character in the third game that:

> 'years of character development dedicated to making the titular witch an emancipated, queer woman who derives pleasure from her own sexuality get completely thrown out of the window in the third instalment of the series.' (Trama, 2022)

Evidently, many view Bayonetta as a queer icon due to her embodiment of exaggerated, deadly femininity, subversion of traditional gender norms and implied romance between her and another female character. One Twitter user and games journalist tweeted that:

> 'There's a huge reason why the games attracted a big queer audience… I think thinking about it in terms of story is not exactly describing what queer players are picking up about Bayonetta. It's got very gay vibes. It shoots for objectification and lands on camp instead' (@xoxogossipgita, 2022)

Many Twitter users responded with varying arguments. Youtuber SwitchPlayed (2022) discusses the 'angry Twitter mob' and argues these 'Twitter weridos' conjured the idea of Bayonetta's queerness. He argues her sexuality is overt in her flirty communications with male characters and her being queer was 'never even hinted at'.

In response to backlash from those disagreeing, the original poster followed up with:

> 'Queer people are very much aware this isn't intentional—a lot of queer culture comes from finding ourselves and our experience in the subtext and the margins. It isn't so much a disappointment that her queerness isn't confirmed as it is sad that it's explicitly denied.' (@xoxogossipgita, 2022)

However, I observed through cut scenes and dialogue that Bayonetta's character clearly views women as superior. In comparison to her male peers, Bayonetta treats Jeane as an equal. After observing this, I understood why many players assumed Bayonetta was queer. Despite this, it is critical to acknowledge the possibility that Bayonetta can be queer and also in a relationship with a man. Bisexuality is often overlooked in discussions of queer representation, and there are many voice lines between Bayonetta and Jeane that can be

interpreted as flirtatious. Furthermore, the cover art for the games has both women in very suggestive poses together. However, this could simply be a commercial trope to attract a wider audience.

Conclusion

As a pre-Gamergate game, *Bayonetta* highlights the contrasting intersection of camp aesthetics and gender representation. This analysis demonstrated that rather than being shaped by market forces to appeal to queer audiences, Bayonetta was designed primarily to satisfy the heterosexual male gaze. While queer audiences may find meaning in her character, it's important to recognise her origins and purpose: she was created to gratify her creator. Ludically, it is impossible to 'opt out' of her extreme sexualisation.

Although lacking canonically queer characters, its appeal to queer players through its camp and feminist readings demonstrates how queerness can be a central, resonant element even in mainstream titles. While initially created to gratify the male gaze of her developer, and her character's physicality and personality demonstrate this overtly, her weaponised, exaggerated femininity, camp aesthetics, and complex relationships also make her a significant figure within queer communities. This shows how a character can take on new meaning depending on who engages with them. Even though Bayonetta's character wasn't originally designed with queer audiences in mind, many players still find empowerment and resonance in her exaggerated femininity and stylised presentation. It demonstrates that queerness in games is not limited to overt representation but can also emerge through interpretation.

Catherine and Catherine: Full Body (Atlus, 2011-2019)

Atlus' 2011 *Catherine* and its 2019 rerelease *Catherine: Full Body. Catherine: Full Body* is told from the perspective of Vincent Brooks, a man in his 30s who enjoys drinking with his friends and is in a long-term relationship with his girlfriend, Katherine. Katherine is professional and career-driven, and as their relationship becomes more serious—marked by her plans of moving in together or having a baby—Vincent begins to feel trapped and insecure. Amidst these feelings, Vincent encounters a younger, hypersexualized, and flirtatious woman named Catherine, which leads him to grapple with thoughts of infidelity. Then in *Full Body*, Rin is introduced, as another possible path for Vincent. Each night, male characters find themselves in a nightmare world where they need to complete puzzles and answer philosophical questions regarding relationships. The game explores complex issues such as infidelity, gender roles, sexuality, and marriage, exploring the challenges that come with relationships in Japanese modern society.

Atlus is also well known and acclaimed for the *Persona* series; however, many have questioned their queer representations. YouTuber SuperButterBuns (2022), commented that *Catherine: Full Body* is another example of Atlus 'dabbling in queer issues and characters while not fully realising how tasteless and insensitive these moments can appear' (2022). FemHype magazine (2017) also addressed this stating Atlus' *Catherine* series' 'transphobia is routine and pervasive' throughout and Atlus needs to acknowledge or take some accountability for it (Dakota, 2017).

(Figure 21, Atlus's Box cover for PS4 release of *Catherine Full Body* (2019) featuring Katherine (right), Rin (middle) and Catherine (right))

Some argue the franchise's unique narrative significantly contributed to recognising the medium's storytelling capabilities. Fontes describes *Catherine* in the TheGamer as:

> 'A puzzle game with a morality system centered around staying faithful to your partner; there's really nothing else like Catherine. One of Atlus' most emotionally mature and thoughtful games, Catherine is a testament to the potential of storytelling in the gaming medium' (2020).

Furthermore, trans journalist Blondeau argues the *Catherine* series is 'one of the most delicate portrayals of sexuality to ever come out of this medium' (Blondeau, 2020). Others argue the series depicts insensitive and 'messed up gender politics' (Links, 2013). Plot points such as the games only canonically trans character subscribing to offensive stereotypes such as trans women 'tricking' men into sleeping with them.

Atlus and LGBTQ+ issues

Atlus has been criticised for their representations of queerness throughout their popular *Persona* franchise. One example often examined by academics in relation to gender issues is *Persona 4*'s (2008) character Naoto Shirogane. Naoto is a masculine-presenting detective who struggles with societal expectations regarding their gender identity. Despite Naoto's discomfort with being perceived as female and their adoption of a male persona, the game frames it as a result of societal pressures rather than a true exploration of gender identity. This sparked debates over whether Naoto is a transgender character or if Atlus missed an opportunity to provide more nuanced representation. Critics argue that the game's resolution, where Naoto ultimately 'accepts' their female identity, undermines the potential for a meaningful exploration of gender dysphoria, instead reinforcing traditional gender norms. The opportunity to explore Naoto's journey in a more meaningful and authentic way feels unfinished. YoungBlood agrees:

> 'Within the confines of the game's procedural rhetoric, Naoto will always come to this answer (accepting a female gender identity), always assert the primacy of her "natural body" and foreclose the utopic possibilities of change with the conservative sanctity of the unified flesh' (2013:13).

This sentiment that Naoto's gender journey felt unfinished is further echoed in Naoto's own words: 'I was just a child, dreaming of becoming a detective. But being a man or a woman... I never thought about it (Naoto Shirogane, Persona 4)'. Such dialogue suggests that Naoto's struggle with gender identity is more complex than the game allows it to be. With Atlus's possible reluctance or unconscious ignorance of this, it is critical for this research to explore how they present canonically queer characters like they have in *Catherine* and *Catherine: Full Body.*

Vincent and masculinity in Japan

Vincent appears to fall into a category of Japanese male that Chen (2012) refers to as the salaryman. Once a prosperous and respected group, during the economic decline in the 1990s, they experienced a crisis of masculinity (Roberson & Suzuki, 2002:9). Chen (2012) suggests that 'The uncertainty and loss of national confidence wrought by economic decline invalidated salaryman masculinity and brought attention to masculine expectations (2012:292). Vincent could be one of these men, afterall he is depicted with a 'loss of authority, loss of seduction, and loss of genius' (Chen, 2012:294). Vincent embodies the anxieties of modern Japanese men who feel the pressures of traditional masculinity but are increasingly uncertain about their roles in a changing society. His design reflects this tension: while his cream blazer suggests professionalism, it contrasts sharply with his pink t-shirt and messy hair, undermining any clear alignment with conventional masculine ideals. This internal conflict around masculinity reflects broader themes in queer theory regarding the pressures of normative gender identity. Therefore, this crisis of masculinity creates an interesting scope for exploring how, from his perspective, queer issues are examined, and there is a plethora of them.

The majority of player agency and choice comes into play when Vincent is asked philosophical questions during his nightmares in a 'confessional'. There are questions such as 'Are you prepared to accept all of your loved one's secrets?' and 'Are you interested in what others think?', requiring players to choose between two options, usually 'yes' or 'no', presenting a binary exploration that limits expression and agency. While this mechanic is intended to emphasise player choice, the lack of clear guidance on how answers align with each character's morals can lead to players missing desired content.

Trans Identities: Representation or Reinforcement of Harmful Tropes

(Figure 22, *Catherine: Full Body* in-game screenshot of Erica)

Erica is especially popular among LGBTQ+ groups, being one of the first canonically trans female characters in video games. However, there are those who argue Erica's character is 'extremely problematic' (Bryce, 2014). Bryce argues that while Erica herself is a relatable character, the 'politics surrounding her doesn't provide any optimism for trans-folk and their allies' (2014). Additionally, there are multiple instances I came across of the game deliberately deadnaming Erica, thus, invalidating her identity along with other overtly transphobic content. Instead of focusing on the issues trans people face such as the known dysphoria perpetuated by deadnaming, it appeared as an effort to announce her gender identity to players. Game Assist (2021) notes that much of the negative responses to the trans representation were in response to the 'continued inclusion of trans misogynistic jokes' directed at Erica throughout.

Furthermore, Erica mentions having the same nightmares as her male peers. Eventually we discover most men are enduring the nightmares, so players can no longer assume it is an isolated case among the group's hangout spot, The Stray Sheep. While it could be regarded as clumsy writing, it could also be a homophobic undertone, or even the idea that the dreams are intrinsically connected to one's biological sex rather than gender, again separating Erica from her identity.

Not only is there casual transphobic rhetoric within the game, but transphobia is evident in external media. For instance, Erica is deadnamed in the credits and in the official artwork. It seems like a disservice to Erica, who appears secure in her identity and has been a loved supporting character throughout both games, to simply invalidate her identity like that suggests her deadnaming could be some homophobic joke to surprise players who are yet to

understand Erica's trans feminine identity. Furthermore, to support this sentiment, Blondeau argues in TheGamer that:

> 'The thing that immediately sticks out about Erica, to me, is how little overt oppression she seems to face in her day-to-day existence. So much media deals in transgender suffering – dwelling on just how horrible it is to exist, and how oppressed we all are. A lot of the time, this is done with white characters, which is disingenuous when you stop to consider that the predominant victims of transphobic violence are black and Latino. But I digress (2019).'

After Vincent's reaction to Rin's gender queer identity, Erica scolds him and insists that he calls Rin to apologise, which may reflect her own experiences as a trans woman. Vincent ultimately does apologise, prompted by Erica, positioning her as one of the more morally upright characters. This is particularly evident when contrasted with Vincent's friends, who are openly sexist and homophobic, even in Erica's presence. Erica is ironically one of the most likeably characters in Vincent's circle.

(Figure 23, *Catherine: Full Body* in-game screenshot of Erica and Toby)

Toby, one of Vincent's friends and youngest in the group is often framed as the most naïve, asking the other men questions about women and relationships. His attraction to Erica becomes apparent, and after they sleep together, he admits that 'there was something weird about it'. Orlando, another friend, reacts with wide eyes and uncomfortably tries to change the subject. Later, when Toby discovers that his friends used to refer to Erica as Eric, he angrily demands his 'V card' back. In response, Erica hugs him tightly, preventing his escape, and exclaims, 'Sorry, but once that hole is punched, there's no refunds' (as seen in figure 23). This scene frames Erica within the problematic trope that trans women are deceptive or try to 'trick' unsuspecting cis heterosexual men, despite Erica's sweet and loving character. By having Toby express discomfort and regret after realising Erica's gender history, the narrative

reinforces harmful stereotypes that trans women are somehow dishonest or misleading in their relationships with cisgender men. Erica's playful response, while intended to be light-hearted, unfortunately perpetuates this damaging trope, which can contribute to the stigma and misunderstandings surrounding trans identities.

(Figure 24, *Catherine: Full Body* in-game screenshot of Rin)

Rin is an abbreviation of Qatherine (or Katherine and Catherine) but also a unisex name in Japan, which is a small hint of her gender Japanese players may have caught on to. Rin is very soft spoken, voiced by a female voice actor. She is smaller in stature and has a childlike look both in colour palette, aesthetic and her mannerisms. Rin's soft but contrasting colour scheme which today many would recognise as the colours of the transgender flag, further represents her gender ambiguity. As noted in Christenson and Unéus' (2017) research, 'in the Western culture pink and blue are used as gender codes, pink for girls and blue for boys' (2017:5) (Ambjörnsson, 2011). Visual gender descriptors are often in the form of colour to symbolically communicate different aspects of their personality. This form of character design ultimately limits ideas of gender to a binary understanding. Nintendo have often used colour to communicate gender, especially in their animal characters. Examples could be characters like Cyrus and Reese, a reoccurring alpaca couple throughout Nintendo's *Animal crossing* franchise. While alpacas lack external signifiers people would recognise signalling the animal's gender, Nintendo relied on stereotypical, binary markers of gender. Pink signals softness, cuteness and love, while blue sends messages about authority, infinity and truth (Lindstrand and Walter, 2016).

(Figure 25, *Catherine: Full Body* in-game screenshot of Vincent (right) reacting to Rin's (left) genitalia)

I felt it was a significant disservice when Vincent, my only point of agency, reacted to Rin's identity with such a volatile response. It is plausible that Rin's trans identity is used as a gag, and Vincent's reaction to seeing Rin naked plays into a problematic trend in which shock value and humour are used to expose trans identities (refer to Figure 25). This has been seen in previous games such as *Leisure Suite Larry* (Sierra Entertainment, 1993), *Persona 3* (2006), among others. Wjik (2023) argues that the 'shocking revelation' creates humoristic mishaps where the transness of the character serves as the comic relief' (2023:62). Rather than exploring Rin's emotions revealing this, the emphasis is on cisgendered Vincent, and he's feeling about the situation. His almost violent reaction makes the scene more comedic than what could have been an understandable, and empathetic moment. These in-game cases also mirror the ''trans panic' defence, which can be used in legal cases involving violent crimes against transgender individuals when the assailant discovers different genitalia than they expected (Thach, 2021:31-32).

In response to Vincent's shock, Rin reaches her hand out to comfort him, when Vincent slaps it away and shouts 'don't touch me', with Rin tearfully exiting. Unlike the offensive route of this 'big reveal' trope, Rin is vulnerable and hurt. Rin never planned to 'trick' Vincent as previously seen in other media depictions of trans women. For instance, Shablee from *Leisure Suite Larry* (Sierra Entertainment, 1987) proceeds to assault Larry after her 'reveal', perpetuating the offensive stereotypes of transwomen as dangerous aggressors. Atlus decided instead to allow Vincent, with a rather dislikable personality, to feel empathy for her. Generally, this seems like a move in the right direction for positive representations of trans women, but the 'shock reveal' gag contrastingly reduces her identity to a plot point of self-realisation of the straight, cisgendered protagonist. Thach's study also concluded that in comparison to past media, we are seeing more narratives of 'trans reveals' over 'trans shock'

narratives (2021:33). However, the trope of 'mentally ill killers' peaked in the 2000s and is declining with increasing social change and understanding of trans identities.

Wiik notes the ‘problematically narrow representations of transfeminine characters’ are limited to ‘desirable and/or disgusting sexualized objects for the cisgender consumer’ (Wiik, 2023:40). However, many players found Eric and Rin’s character to be a great social advancement for gender representation in Japanese video games. One user on Reddit responded to a thread regarding Rin’s character with:

> ‘I love how it seemed like it was gonna be the "haha man in dress" stupid anime trope, but it turned out to be a nice story about love and acceptance.’ (ImHereForTheMemes184, 2020)

With this interpretation in mind, it is plausible that Rin’s queerness is explored in a mindful and sensitive way, if we are to ignore the ‘trans shock’ reveal trope discussed earlier.

Butler’s (1990) ideas regarding gender as performative, is applicable to Rin’s character in multiple ways. Butler describes the notion of gender performance as a ‘sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body’ (1990:1). Despite lacking sexual markers to the extent of Vincent’s other love interests, Catherine and Katherine, Rin’s femininity is exhumed via dress and characterisation. Rin never tells Vincent her gender, he and the players will simply assume as a result of Rin’s ‘performance’. Until the reveal gag, players and Vincent lack any indication of Rin’s biological sex, besides their external gender performance. Vincent claims ‘I mean, what kind of guy looks like that, what was I supposed to think?’ in a way of reassuring himself his attraction to Rin is nothing to do with Rin having male sex organs. However, as Butler argues, gender is not determined by biology; it is a 'doing' that perpetuates the socially constructed ideas of gendered behaviours (1999:4). Rin’s assumed sex and gender identity is thus constructed by players in response to her performance. Rin’s gendered performance coincides with ideas of innocence and delicate femininity which may be a deliberate choice, similar to the gendered representations in *Mass Effect*'s interspecies relationships. These characters are often portrayed with ‘safe’ gendered indicators to add an aspect of normative human sexuality, this approach helps to mitigate societal discomfort around interspecies relationships. Adams (2015) suggests, these elements aim to ‘counteract the extra-game societal taboo against interspecies sex’, by intentionally framing these characters with a ‘focus on their youth, innocence and relatively untouched bodies’ (2015:48).

If the player chooses Vincent to be with Rin, it's reasonable to interpret Vincent as queer, possibly pansexual. However, it's important to note that Vincent fell in love with Rin before discovering her gender and sexual identity. This could suggest that Vincent's attraction to Rin transcends traditional gender boundaries and potentially positioning him as a bisexual icon when in a relationship with her. There is no mention of Vincent being queer before the questionable reveal gag, nor in the first game. This section of the text can be interpreted as Vincent 'coming out' to Katherine. While hesitant to admit, this exchange goes as follows:

Katherine: What kind of woman is she?
Vincent: Well, the thing is… "woman" might not be the best word…
Katherine: Huh?. You mean… it's not a women?
Vincent: Uh… Yeah
Katherine: They must really be something special, I didn't stand a chance, huh?

In stark comparison to Katherine's sentiment, Vincent's friend Orlando suggests he just 'takes that loss and move on'. Similarly, his other male friend seated at the table suggests 'you just can't judge a book by its cover these days', echoing sentiments that trans women aim to deceive straight unassuming men. Interestingly Vincent shuts down these comments and asserts 'it is not a loss'. One could interpret this scene as a progressive step from Atlus to battle toxic heteronormativity and transphobia, by having the protagonist stand up to his friends in Rin's defence. They have this conversation in front of Erica, further suggesting Vincent's friends are ignorant of Erica's identity as they make these transphobic comments about transfeminine women.

However, this journey could be read as Vincent's self-actualisation and growth. Near the end of the game during one of the last puzzle trials, Vincent will exclaim: 'Men and women. They're more complicated than you think!', suggesting he could understand the gender in a more fluid way in comparison to his homophobic, sexist and bigotry friends at the bar. Ultimately, as Rin's ending is happy and presented overall as a morally good path to take for Vincent, this change and development in his character is a positive example of LGBTQ+ representation. Vincent is the protagonist, and the player's choices made him reflect on how he understands sexuality and gender, contrasting with his male peers. Possibly an example of a male character challenging barriers of heteronormative masculinity

Conclusion

While they are there, the depictions of transfeminine identities are evidently framed by heteronormative standards of beauty, from their body types, feminine and childish mannerisms, to their styles of dress provide harmful and fetishistic representation Rin's gender ambiguous identity holds more significance than her being an alien, and her alien identity is positioned as some kind of explanation for her non-normative gender identity. While Erica is a character whose identity is made evident, she is surrounded with transphobic rhetoric. The shock reveal trope and the forceful portrayal of Erica in her moment with Toby reinforced the harmful stereotype that transfeminine women are deceivers. Although there is visibility and potential for a positive outcome, these representations can still be harmfully inauthentic.

The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild and *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of The Kingdom* (Nintendo, 2017 – 2023)

The last case study to be examined is Nintendo's most recent releases in their Legend of Zelda series. *Breath of the Wild* (*BOTW*) was released in 2017, followed by *Tears of the Kingdom* (*TOTK*) in 2023. While earlier instalments of this franchise are significant, the later games offer much more in terms of content and narrative, featuring in-depth characters ripe for analysis. However, there is significantly less literature on these newer games compared to the earlier ones, leaving room for in-depth analysis of these newer instalments to the series. The plots of both games run seamlessly into the next. *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of The Wild* (*BOTW*) begins 100 years after Ganon defeated the kingdom's champions and plunged the land into darkness, unleashing monsters to terrorise the inhabitants. Link then awakens from a long sleep, with no memories of the past and the battle they had lost a century prior. Link then is quested with recovering his memories, gradually leading to him saving the spirits of the champions, and of course rescuing princess Zelda and banishing Ganon. The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom (*TOTK*) continues the story as Ganon's spirit reawakens, threatening Hyrule once again. Link must confront new challenges, and harness new abilities to combat the resurgent evil. With Zelda by his side, Link explores uncharted territories, forms alliances with new and old allies, and ultimately faces Ganon in a final showdown to restore peace to Hyrule.

Starting with the original Legend of Zelda in 1986, the series has continuously pushed the boundaries of game design and storytelling. Each instalment introduced new gameplay mechanics and narrative techniques, from the 3D open-world exploration in *Ocarina of Time* (1998) to the innovative motion controls in *Skyward Sword* (2011). *BOTW* and *TOTK* represent a significant leap in this evolution, with *BOTW* introducing a truly open world and physics-based gameplay, and *TOTK* building on this foundation with deeper storytelling and more complex character development. Each *TLOZ* game follows almost identical narratives, threaded by a heteronormative framework, many closely associate the 'predictable hero-rescues-princess trope' with series (Stang, 2019:383), consequently being a frequent subject of academic analysis, especially within feminist and queer literature.

Scholars often critique Zelda's character for her perceived lack of agency throughout the series (Feminist Frequency, 2015; Hansen, 2018), however, as the series progresses, these gendered roles appear to be evolving. Female characters now exhibit more agency, Link is

portrayed with a more gender-neutral appearance, and the series increasingly includes NPCs, interactions, and themes that invite queer readings (Lee, 2021: 34-35). This case study will explore these elements, examining how a game often seen as canonically heteronormative can also possess significant queer potential (Pugh, 2018:245).

Nintendo and queer inclusion

To begin this case study, it is critical to reflect on Nintendo's controversial past in regard to inclusive content. Japanese digital games have long been praised for their incredible character designs, for instance, throughout the *Mortal Kombat* series (Midway Games & NetherRealm Studios, 1992–present). While there is evidence of explicit heteronormative and hypersexual designs, there is also evidence of queer coding implicit in these designs.

Instances of queer coding are evident throughout Nintendo's games, with gender ambiguity and nuance favoured over overt LGBTQ+ representations. One of the earlier examples of a queer character in games is rather nuanced and subject to great debate by the player bases. Of course, this character is Birdo, a pink, happy looking dodo bird. A particular example of this is Birdo's gender in the *Mario Bros* franchises. Shaw (2016) discusses how in *Captain Rainbow* (2008), a game only released in Japan, the player must free Birdo from prison after she had been caught 'using the wrong bathroom' (2016:3882). Along with male pronouns in the original instruction manual for *Mario Bros 2*, and explicitly feminine design, it is arguable that the Birdo character is transgender or gender queer.

Similar gender exploration is evident among many characters throughout *The Legend of Zelda* franchise, with non-normative clothing, gestures, and ambiguous relationships among various NPCs in the series. Although these aspects may be less overtly queer compared to other case studies, they provide space to explore ambiguous queer signifiers and analyse potential queer readings.

The *Animal Crossing* series has progressively moved away from heteronormative constraints, allowing players to dress their avatars in any clothing, with items appearing the same on both masculine and feminine body models. Players are no longer scolded by NPCs for wearing clothes of the wrong 'gender'. However, it wasn't until 2023 that the series introduced its first male villager with an interest in fashion, signalling a slow but meaningful shift towards more inclusive representations of gender and challenging social expectations. According to Blanco-Fernández & Moreno 'ACNH serves as a platform for the LGBTIQA+ community for self-expression and relatedness' (2023).

Despite Nintendo's lack of diverse representations in many cases (No character customisation options for black characters until 2015 in *Happy Homemaker*), some argue there is queer potential within their games. Pugh (2018) contends that despite the 'overarchingly heteronormative plots of male heroes rescuing imprisoned maidens, subversive potential emerges in numerous Nintendo games' via underlying elements possibly

challenging these norms (Pugh, 2018:227). This subversive potential can be found in various aspects of gameplay and character interactions, suggesting that while many games may appear traditional on the surface, they could offer opportunities for players to explore non-normative identities and experiences. This case study will allow an in-depth look at nonnormative or queer expression in two of Nintendo's most recent and successful releases.

The Androgynous protagonist

(Figure 26, *BOTW*, in-game screenshot of link) (Figure 27, *TOTK* in-game screenshot of link)

During these play throughs, I paid close attention to gender presentation and noted that Link's design in these games (see Figures 26 and 27) contrasted with the more conventionally masculine designs seen in *Twilight Princess* (2006). I was surprised to find that his design in these games more closely resembled the softer, youthful portrayals from much earlier entries (*Ocarina of Time*, 1988; *Majora's Mask*, 2000, etc). Clearly the designer's decision to go back to presenting Link as a 'more gender-neutral character' is visually evident (cited in Peckham, 2016, para.4). This is just one way Link subverts conventions of the masculine hero evident within other video games and narratives. Whilst there is evidence of reinforcement of gender roles, the character Link and displays a type of vulnerability unconventional of the male protagonist. Link is skinny with long hair and earrings and similarly Nintendo's other famous male protagonist, Mario is a short heavy-set plumber with a moustache (Gailey, 1993:89). This could be Nintendo suggesting anyone can be a hero, yet the aim of both these character's existence is to rescue blonde princesses from a green villain's castle. Notably, however, Link's androgynous, ambiguous gender presentation allows for the players to identify with him regardless of his gender or that of the player's due to his feminine features and very little verbal speech (Stang, 2019) (Gailey, 1993:89). According to Ryuji Kobayashi, one of the leading designers for Link's character, explained that they aimed to create him as 'blank and relatable as possible' (2013). Furthermore, Nintendo producer Eiji Aonuma affirmed this in a later interview about Link's design rationale:

> 'Back during the *Ocarina of Time* days, I wanted Link to be gender neutral. I wanted the player to think 'Maybe Link is a boy or a girl.' If you saw Link as a guy, he'd have more of a feminine touch… if you related to Link as a girl, it was with more of a masculine aspect. I really wanted the designer to

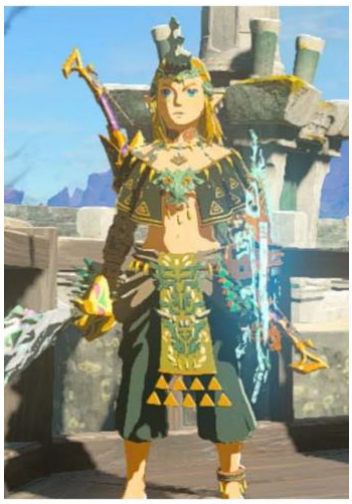
> encompass more of a gender-neutral figure. So I've always thought that for either female or male players, I wanted them to be able to relate to Link.' (cited in Peckham, 2016, para.3)

With little backstory and no verbal communication besides grunting, the interpretation that Link is androgynous is plausible. A silent protagonist, particularly in RPGs like *Skyrim* (Besthesda, 2011), allows players to imagine aspects of their personality or even self-project their own, fostering a deeper sense of immersion. This contrasts with Bethesda's other RPG, *Fallout 4*, where the voiced protagonist's speech reinforces the character's quirks and predefined personality.

Stang notes the reactions to the trailer of *BOTW* revealed the prominent belief among the players that gender is directly tied to exterior biological markers (2019:376), reinforcing arguments made by Michel Foucault (1976/1978). Foucault believed associating 'gender with physiology, as well as the assumption that the body can be read to uncover its sex or gender, is a function of medical and political discursive power exercised on the body' (Stang, 2019:376). Despite Link's young, innocent and 'presexual nature, Pugh points out that:

> 'Link is also implicated within narrative frameworks that exhibit female characters' libidinous investment in him due to his heroic status' (2018)

As Pugh's assessment points out, there is a great range of young female NPCs who swoon over Link, suggesting he is a conventionally attractive male in the contexts of Hyrule. This style of white, thin and conventionally attractive androgyny aligns with an increasingly dominant aesthetic or mode of 'ideal male beauty' in contemporary Japan (Monden, 2018:1). Moden suggests there is a growing 'boyish, kawaii male aesthetic' that greatly differs from 'generalized Western ideal of muscularity; being slender, shōnen-like (boyish), and predominantly kawaii (cute)'. Macknight (2013) even suggests in regards to Link's design that in many ways Link presents as 'the body image ideal to many gay men (who often refer to the style as "twink-ish")'(2013:99).



(Figure 28, *TOTK* in-game screenshot of charged armour set) (Figure 29, *TOTK* in-game screenshot of frostbite armour set)

These armour sets from *TOTK* (figure 28 and 29) exemplify the gender experimentation evident in Link's design. There was a range of positive reactions to these armours, on r/Zelda one user commented 'I'd like to thank the designer who gave Link the SLUTTIEST outfits known to mankind' with reference to the frostbite armour set (Misssmaya, 2023). This design differs from the repetitive design choice Shaw (2023) discusses of 'the dude in cargo pants' instead, offering a visual exploration of gender differing from the traditionally masculine protagonist archetype which maybe more akin to Link's default BOTW outfit (figure 26). Players can also dye armours, so if the player wishes for Link to save Hyrule in multicolour attire, they can. These increasingly experimental designs and outfit customisation could demonstrate a shift towards more nuanced and varied gender expressions in game character design. This is especially evident as Link is one of the most well-known, iconic and popular protagonists in the industry even in a global context.

Zelda's agency in a heteronormative narrative

(Figure 30, *BOTW* in-game screenshot of Link protecting Zelda in)

Research regarding Zelda could be described as rather polarised. Some argue she is the victim of gender normative narrative compulsions (Feminist Frequency, 2013), others argue that as an incarnation of a goddess, Zelda is a powerful character challenging the damsel in distress trope firmly associated with the series (as seen in figure 30). In regard to Zelda's slow character progression, Lee states:

> 'In early iterations of the game…Zelda existed only as a damsel for the player to rescue. However, over the course of the series, she has grown to have much more power and personality' (2021:6)

In *Breath of The Wild*, Zelda's character appears more developed, now interested in research and sees herself as a scholar, which her father, the king, scolds her for ignoring her royal duties in turn for her research. Clearly, Zelda's character has seen some development since earlier games with her very limited agency, if she even had any at all. Reflecting on earlier games, Zelda's limited moments of agency only arise when she is in disguise or cross dressing, as noted by Stang:

> 'two versions of her character have managed to overcome, at least temporarily, her inevitable powerlessness by challenging her assigned gender role: Sheik and Tetra' (2021:378).

(Figure 31, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998), in-game screenshot of Zelda as Shiek)

Zelda's disguise as Shiek (refer to figure 31) overtly challenges media depictions of a princess, especially Nintendo's pervious representations of one. *Ocarina of Time*, sees Zelda disguised as Shiek for a large portion of the game. To the player, Shiek is a male (appearing) survivor of the Shieka tribe, hiding out in Hyrule. Shiek is assigned male pronouns, appearing and performing incredibly masculine, especially compared with Zelda's princess identity. Similarly, in *Tears of the Kingdom*, Zelda undergoes a transformation into a dragon, remaining this way for years until Link breaks the curse. Confining her agency to that of a girl in need of rescue, overshadows her potential as a scholar or adventurer. If we were to further queer the image of the heteronormative princess, Zelda's character could evolve into a richer exploration of identity and challenge traditional tropes, but she remains firmly within the heteronormative confines of her narrative.

Crossdressing, gender diversity or homophobia?

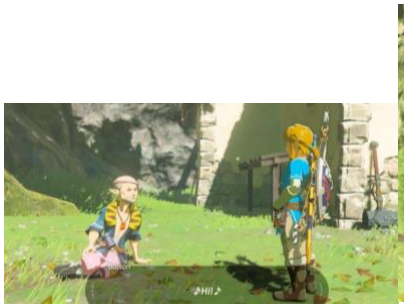
Choosing *The Legend of Zelda* as a case study stems from childhood memories of playing games like *Majora's Mask* and *Twilight Princess.* I was intrigued by the characters' experimental and 'camp' designs and expressions. While the series lacks explicitly and canonically queer characters, there is a great amount of queer discourse in various character designs. This section will explore NPCs whose designs and characteristics evoke a sense of queerness or camp. Some may even argue these characters are examples of queer coding.

(Figure 32, Zelda Wiki - Fandom, Fyer (left) and Falbi (right))

These two characters appeared in *TP* (*The Legend of Zelda, Twilight Princess*) and their designs are no less than captivating. Fyer (figure 32, left) and Falbi (figure 32, right) used to work in a circus but now run a canon ride together which Link will inevitably need access to in the main story. While not hugely significant characters, there are queer readings that can be taken from these characters. Their bright colour palette, makeup and non-gender normative clothing style, expressive mannerisms resonate with campness, manifesting the notion of a love for the unnatural and exaggeration as explained by Sontag (1964:2). Falbi's feminine mannerisms and expressive behaviour also contribute to this reading. Furthermore, there is concept art that depict Falbi as a female, leading many to assume the two were originally meant to be married or lovers, suggesting perhaps the two are more than just work partners, though there is no dialogue canonically affirming this. However, the queer-coded design of these characters could also evoke offensive stereotypes of queer men, with their disguising it as ex-circus performers.

(Figure 33, Skyward Sword in-game screenshot of Ghirahim)

Ghirahim, *Skyward Sword's* antagonist, is one of the most blatant examples of queer coding in the game's series (Feminist Frequency, 2019). While in no other title, many players remember his unique aesthetic, flirtatious dialogue with Link, and his disturbingly long tongue. He dons a skin-tight white outfit beneath a short, collared cloak, is adorned with jewellery, and sports makeup, including bright purple eyeliner and a black diamond drawn on his face. His meticulously maintained haircut further accentuates his distinctive look. Evidently, via his visual analysis, this character is vain, materialistic, and arguably, camp. As theorised by Sontag, the 'essence of camp is its love for the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration' (1964:1). The cacophony of colours throughout his aesthetic, along with his extravagant and unserious gestures and movements, mirrors the unruly nature of his character. This exaggerated look, especially in comparison to Link, complements his flamboyant persona and Sontag's definitions of campness. His physical characteristics also align with what Kim describes as a method of queer coding a villain with feminine features, extravagance and vanity (2017:159).



(Figure 34, BOTW in-game screenshot of Bolson) (Figure 35, BOTW in-game screenshot of bolson dancing)

Referencing Sontag's (1964), I observed that Bolson's character in *The Legend of Zelda* is a prime example of a camp and queer coded NPC players might come across in BOTW and in *TOTK*. His feminine animations, such as sitting with his legs tightly together, paired with effeminate voice lines and mannerisms, strongly suggest that Bolson is a queer character, or

at least, a queer-coded character. He stands out among the other workers at Hudson's construction, where the other employees embody traditional masculine traits typically associated with builders. Contrastingly, Bolson's dancing (refer to figure 34 and 35), bright clothing, and accessories further distinguish him, adding to his camp identity. It's important to recognise that possessing certain traits does not necessarily make a character queer. Instead, it's the repetition of traits commonly associated with queer characters that can suggest a character is queer-coded.

During *Breath of The Wild*, Link must disguise himself as a female in order to gain access to Gerudo Town, an all-female town which follows a strict matriarchy and is home to the women of the Gerudo tribe. While subverting tropes of masculinity in this female dress, his actions here are a 'pretty creepy testament to the pervasiveness of the voyeuristic male fantasy that involves violating women's spaces through deception' (Cox, 2017). Possibly aligning him with male protagonists who conform to hegemonic masculine codes and desires. Notably, while Link can pass as female when he wears female-coded clothing' he is recognisably male when he does not (Stang 2019). Therefore, while he is androgynous by design, he is not presented as gender-neutral despite being the blank and relatable hero (Kobayashi, 2013). Ultimately aligning Link with the 'special, fated attributes of the monomythic hero' being white, heterosexual and male (Jennings, 2022).

(Figure 36,Vilia in BOTW, in-game screenshot) (Figure 37, Link in BOTW wearing Gerudo outfit, in-game screenshot)

In *BOTW*, when getting access to this disguise, the player will eventually find a character described by various NPCs on the town's outskirts as a male merchant that somehow has

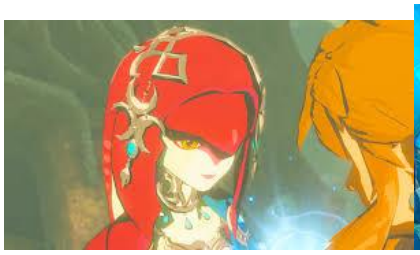
access to the town. The search will eventually lead players to a character named Vilia (see figure 36), dressed in the traditional feminine Gerudo dress, with a veil covering her face. Initiating the conversation, she says ‘Oh, my. What a lovely young lad you are’ dissonating the otherwise cautious dialogue of other NPCs on the outskirts of Gerudo town. While she claims to be unaware of any male entering the town, she sells a set of feminine Gerudo clothes to Link. She claims ‘people will see you completely different’ if he wears them and that she doubts anyone will even suspect he’s a man if dressed in the outfit. This of course, insinuates she intends for Link to wear them to disguise himself as a female, giving him access to the town. After this conversation, a gust of wind blows away Vilia’s face veil, revealing her facial hair. Reminiscent of the ‘shock reveal’ trope (Thach, 2021:31-32), the camera quickly zooms up to Link’s face, with his eyes widened. The comedic zoom following the ‘dramatic reveal’ (see figure 39) subscribes to the ‘shock reveal’ trope, inviting players to laugh at the ‘cisnormative joke that frames trans identity as criminal and deceptive’ (Liang et al, 2023:13).

(Figure 38, Link in *BOTW*, reaction to Vilia’s beard, in-game screenshot)

Many consider Vilia a transgender woman and refer to her with feminine pronouns in articles and academic works (Kilzer, 2022). However, it is unclear whether her negative response to being suspected as a male is due to possibly jeopardising her ability to enter the town, or because she is a transgender woman responding to Link’s misgendering of her. Furthermore, assuming the latter, there are many reasons why this depiction of a transgender woman can be considered transphobic and offensive. Liang et al (2023) argue this representation invites players to ‘view trans feminine characters as deceitful men’ who disguise themselves to infiltrate female-only spaces. They add this depiction reflects a ‘central component of TERF anti-trans rhetoric’ (2023:12). One Reddit user posted on r/NintendoSwitch:

> ‘The method for obtaining it (the Gerudo outfit) contains a questionable portrayal of an assumed biological male in feminine clothing acting flamboyant and dainty before being exposed for their horrendous crime of, gasp, having a beard’ (terrysaurus-rex, 2017).

Evidently, the game frames Vilia’s gender identity as a gag rather than respectful inclusion. During the conversation, the player is presented with two contrasting dialogue options: they can either compliment Vilia and 'stroke her ego' to obtain the necessary information or belittle her. This implies that both the player and Link are in on the joke, reducing Vilia's gender identity to a mere punchline. The ludic logic here gives players no option to ‘opt out’ of being transphobic in this exchange. Ultimately ‘what the game gives us, and what most people will experience is a cruel and unnecessary mockery of trans identities’(Feminist Frequency, 2019).



(Figure 39, *BOTW* in-game screenshot of princess Mipha) (Figure 40, *BOTW*, in0game screenshot of prince Sidon)

Puc (2023) suggests that the ambiguity surrounding Link's romantic relationships adds to the protagonist's 'blank slate', allowing players to imagine what they would want for their version of Link. In *Breath of the Wild* and *Tears of the Kingdom*, Link encounters Prince Sidon of the Zora people (refer to Figure 40). The Zora are designed with an aquatic aesthetic, featuring fins and colourful skin and scales, but otherwise remaining humanoid. Throughout the game Link gradually recovers his memories, eventually remembering that Link had a romantic relationship with Sidon's sister, Mipha (see figure 39). Mipha is one of the champions who previously lost in the fight against Ganon, her spirit trapped until freed by Link. While evident that Link and Mipha shared a romantic past, the relationship is only briefly referenced and remains largely unexplored, missing the queer potential of exploring the contextual complexities of a interspecies relationship. Notably there is a interspecies relationship between Queen Sonya and Kinga Rauru in *TOTK*, though this is left unexplored. Furthermore, while clear Link and Mipha had a romantic history, the relationship between Link and her brother can also be read as romantic, as Puc (2023) suggests:

> 'his very flirtatious banter with Prince Sidon, who's widely considered to be a queer-coded character on his own. Although Link has to rescue Sidon's sister from the Divine Beast Vah Ruta, it's clear that there's an emotional connection between these two men as well.'

(Figure 41, *BOTW* in-game screenshot of Link and Sidon)

Sidon's dialogue repeatedly demonstrates his liking for Link, repeatedly calling him his best friend. Link rides on Sidon's back during this quest (refer to figure 41), while technically doing all the dirty work, the player must rely on Sidon and cannot succeed without him ludically demonstrating the two sharing 'mutual trust and physical intimacy — even if it's not canonically romantic' (Puc 2023). This relationship has been further explored exterior to the game, with many players creating their own fan art/fanfiction of the two characters, as well as more mature representations of the couple. Puc notes that despite the lack of in-game exploration into his relationships:

> 'fan content…is everywhere, and queer fans especially seem to produce content in droves. From the thousands of fanfiction stories on AO3 to academic articles exploring queer themes in the franchise to fan art depicting Link and Prince Sidon in both wholesome and horny but decidedly romantic contexts, it's clear that Nintendo's opinion on the matter doesn't much matter. For many, Link is gay or trans or both, and that's a powerful thing that can't be taken away.' (Puc, 2023)

Fandom culture, therefore, does not only critique texts but also actively reshape them, making them more reflective of the diverse experiences and identities of the audience. As Chang (2017) describes, queer gaming is a 'heterogeneity of play, imagining different, even radical game narratives' (2017:15). Evidently, through fan culture or a player's interpretations, they can escape what Chang (2017:15) describes as a 'gamified version of Butler's (1999) 'heteronormative matrix' which dominates the gaming sphere. Jenkins (2007:362) claims fan culture is 'born of a mixture of fascination and frustration' which 'involves both accepting certain core premises in the original work and reworking others to accommodate our own interests'. While the games centre on saving Zelda, her absence, plus the lack of explicit sexual or romantic interactions/narratives, players can imagine their own romance for Link, aligning with their preferences. Macknight suggests that this

> ‘absence of explicit sexuality in the Zelda franchise encourages gay players to read Link as uninterested in Zelda, or that his relationship with her fits more within the dynamics of a “beard” (a fake heterosexual courtship, meant to disguise queerness), or “fag-hag” (a woman who desires to be around gay men – or a particular male – for either romantic or non-romantic purposes).’ (2013:99)

Players can make their own interpretations through fan creations and via ‘shipping’ (short for relationship), a common practice among communities such as r/gaymers. As contended by Macknight, ‘literally any character can be queer…, reading homosexuality into them allows for an infinitely diverse exploration of sexual norms’ (2019:102). This is similarly evident in modding communities as discussed previously in *The Sims* case study, introducing new content into games to satisfy the player’s preferences. However, as noted by Jenkins (2007:362), one can also assume this content is also influenced by the frustration regarding the lack of diverse identities implemented in the game and narrative.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Link's design has become more gender ambiguous, potentially appealing to a wider audience who may identify with him. Despite this, he remains canonically male and is treated as such in the game world. The absence of explicit sexuality allows players to project their own interpretations, but the overarching narrative consistently places this game firmly within the heterosexual matrix. While certain characters may be signalled as queer through design elements and animations, this remains speculative, as there is no concrete evidence within the game to confirm their queerness. Additionally, the use of a trans shock moment perpetuates harmful stereotypes about transfeminine individuals, further complicating the representation of gender diversity in the series.

Findings

This data suggests a shift towards more diverse identities represented in mainstream video games. However, it raises the question of whether queer representation has evolved since Gamergate or if market forces have motivated this shift. North American triple-A, video games like *Overwatch 2* mirror pre-Gamergate inclusions of queer content as seen in *Mass Effect*, possibly evidencing 'rainbow capitalism'; this is due to the fact characters such as a non-gendered alien or a non-binary hero feel like surface-level, superficial inclusions to entice a wider audience rather than an authentic exploration into these identities.

This limited exploration into queer identities may reflect a notion Curlew (2005) discusses in his article discussing *The Sims*. That is the idea that 'inclusive' or queer content does not necessarily mirror the ideologies of developers but often 'reflects a change in how traditionally marginalised people are marketed to in late capitalism'. Similarly, *Life is Strange* could also be considered in this rainbow capitalist framework, providing a narrative with queer themes at the core but ultimately relying on narrative tropes and positioning the destruction of the central queer relationship as the greater good.

Overwatch 2 continues to release more LGBTQ+ content, from heroes to aesthetics, allowing a broader range of players to feel represented in-game. However, because Blizzard officially announces heroes' sexual identities outside the game, players might be completely unassuming unless they 'opt in' by accessing exterior media content such as comics. These identities may be made evident to some players if they listen to the in-game dialogue between particular heroes and pay attention to the design of characters like Lifeweaver or Moira. However, the lack of exploration or in-game clarification of these identities raises questions about queer visibility and the motives behind their inclusion.

While avatar customisation systems are increasingly adding more inclusive options to players, as in *Baldur's Gate 3* and *The Sims 4*, little content is projected into in-game narratives; instead, this content remains purely aesthetic. These inclusive avatar additions have very limited extension, other than visual, into the game world. Although, this content equips gender queer players with the tools to create an avatar they feel represented by. This data suggests that post-GamerGate games generally shift towards more LGBTQ+ content. *The Legend of Zelda*'s two most recent additions to the franchise, are the only post-GamerGate games in this research to entirely dismiss canonically queer characters completely.

This data also suggests contrasting depictions of bisexuality. While *Mass Effect* 3 barely touched on the subject, implementing Kaidan's identity in the third game, *Fable* featured a range of stereotypical biphobic rhetoric. There is a temporal shift towards more portrayals, although, as evidenced by *Life is Strange*, a range of tropes still influence these portrayals.

The analysis also evidenced that the use of 'queer coding' remains in *The Legend of Zelda* series, mirroring the use of the device in earlier games rather than including canonically queer characters. Evidently, Nintendo's iconic series is yet to be developed in regard to its queer representation.

Queer identities in games such as *Overwatch 2* or *The Legend of Zelda* often remain unconfirmed in-game, relying on visual cues rather than explicit acknowledgement. Regional differences also influence queer representation, with European examples offering more overt queer inclusion, while North American and Japanese games tend to include subtle, non-normative gender expressions. However, Japanese company Atlus's portrayals of queer identities, especially in characters like Rin and Erica, often come across as inauthentic or offensive. Trans identities were explored with little sensitivity, as evidenced by Erica's deadnaming and the troubling trend in the portrayal of transfeminine characters as 'deceivers', reinforcing harmful stereotypes. The lack of explicitly queer content in both the recent *The Legend of Zelda* and the Japanese Pre-Gamergate example, *Bayonetta,* resulted in players taking it upon themselves to create their own interpretations, as evidenced by the great variety of fan content. However, this research demonstrates that there are forms of camp expression throughout, possibly reflecting a cultural tension regarding the portrayals of queer content.

Baldur's Gate 3 demonstrated how games can implement a diverse range of identities and experiences into games. While set in a pan-normative world, the game provides a space to express and explore queer identities in multiple ways. While more queer issues could be explored, a mainstream game providing such content signals a positive shift towards the outside of a space often considered a 'heterosexual matrix'.

- Post-gamergate, are we seeing a more comprehensive range of representations of queer characters in video games?

The data suggests that post-Gamergate, there is a more extensive range of queer identities depicted in mainstream video games. All case studies featuring romance narratives, contained

at least one queer example. Although, as evidenced by *Overwatch 2*, some queer inclusions could evidence 'rainbow capitalism'. These characters, while notable, lack any in-depth exploration into aspects of their identities and appear as if employed as a marketing tool to appeal to diverse audiences rather than as integral parts of the narrative, the gameplay or a show of support of the LGBTQ+ community.

- To what extent is queer content explicitly presented in games, and how does it align with or diverge from the concept of the 'gay button'?

Where queer content is not explicit, the Japanese case studies: *Bayonetta* and *The Legend of Zelda* (*BOTW* & *TOTK*) evidenced that players often take it upon themselves to incorporate or imagine it, effectively pressing their own 'gay button'. This is a result of the lack of explicitly queer content in these games as demonstrated by this data. This can be achieved through mods, through 'shipping', fan fiction, or, in the case of *Overwatch*, accessing external media. While content can allude to this via taking queer readings, ultimately, the extent of queer fan fiction demonstrates the lack of queer content as this analysis shows.

- What recurring tropes and narrative devices are employed to depict queer identities in video games?

Several characters in modern mainstream games are characterised predominantly by their stereotypical queerness, which serves as their primary defining trait, mirroring devices used to communicate queerness in earlier portrayals such as *Fable's* Reaver. Character design and non-gender normative aspects are frequently employed to signify queerness in games like *Overwatch*, *Catherine: Full Body*, and arguably throughout *The Legend of Zelda* series. However, these queer identities are often left unconfirmed, instead relying on visual cues such as non-traditional gender expressions, clothing styles, and mannerisms to hint at queerness rather than explicitly stating it. This subtle approach suggests queerness without fully embracing or confirming it within the narrative. Secondly, there is a troubling portrayal of transfeminine individuals as 'deceivers'. This is exemplified by the near-identical scenes in which cis gendered male characters like Vincent and Link react with shock upon discovering that someone's biological sex does not align with their perceived gender. Despite the differing contexts, these moments reflect a shared, offensive trope that underscores a broader issue in the representation of transfeminine identities.

- How does the portrayal of queer content vary across different regions?

While we have more overt examples, as seen in our European post-Gamergate case studies, the North American games also demonstrated queer inclusion; while not so overtly in the characters, the game's narrative or more subtly integrated into the game, there are forms of inclusion. Although, *Overwatch* 2 appears to display more 'aesthetic inclusion', the characters were canonically queer rather than as an afterthought, as evident in *Mass Effect*.
Japan's case studies all demonstrate some form of non-normative gender expression, although respectful and authentic portrayals of queer characters remain limited. The Japanese Post-Gamergate case studies highlight a problematic trend of inauthentic and, at times, offensive portrayals of queer identities. This was evidenced in *Catherine: Full Body*, and T*he Legend of Zelda*, featuring almost identical cut scenes insensitively portraying transgender reveals.

As a qualitative study focusing on queer identities in video games, this research acknowledges its limitations in addressing other important aspects, such as disability, body and racial representation, which merit further exploration. Additionally, the insights are based on my subjective analysis, drawn from varying gameplay durations across these titles. These factors highlight the need for further comprehensive studies to examine the representations of diverse experiences and identities in gaming.

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