A Case for LGBT Representation in Video Games and the Gaming Industry

While many other forms of media like film and television have seen advances in the representation of sexual and gender minorities within the past few decades, video games still have room for improvement. The representation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, as well as other sexual and gender minorities, is not only important for allowing queer gamers to see themselves reflected in video games, but also to facilitate the normalization of queerness in the medium and fight against heteronormativity in the gaming community. While the voices of LGBT gamers are needed to normalize their representation, it is also necessary for creators to be aware of their audience and for queer creators to be an active part of the industry. In her essay, "Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay," Sharon Marcus states that "*Queer* has become a compact alternative to *lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender*, but it also emphasizes affinity and solidarity over identity" (Marcus 196). For this reason, as well as the association with pre-existing fields such as queer theory, "queer" will be used synonymously with LGBT throughout this essay.

The most obvious reason for increasing the amount of LGBT representation in video games is to allow for players to see themselves within the medium. This is true of representation in all forms of media, but the interactive nature of video games makes the effects of representation far more pronounced. While many games have set characters and stories, many other games allow players to customize the protagonist. While playing a game, the character the player controls becomes a representation of themselves within the game, known as an avatar. While this is true when the player is role-playing as a pre-existing character, the connection is more pronounced in customizable characters. A study conducted in Singapore found that the

majority of adolescent gamers, especially those playing online games such as *World of Warcraft*, show strong connections to their avatars (Li, Liau, and Khoo 259-260).

Games allow for players to experiment with their identity in a number of ways. The study by Li, Liau, and Khoo found that gamers with more avoidant personalities especially tend to use games as a way of experimenting with different identities (258). In their study "Dressing Commander Shepard In Pink: Queer Playing In A Heteronormative Game Culture," Krobová, Moravec, and Švelch define several ways of "queer play," including the "queer reading" of characters with ambiguous sexualities, as well as "queer performance," in which player's avatars are treated as queer by the player (4). Queer performance is especially helpful, as games can allow a safe space for players who are unsure about their sexual orientation to experiment. In the documentary *Gaming in Color*, George Skleres, a game engineer at Riot Games, states that "Gaming provides young, gay people, who may not be comfortable with themselves, an outlet to be themselves that is totally forgiving, totally accepting, and you get to be anyone you want to be."

In the same way, perhaps even more so, games allow for players to experiment with their gender, which Krobová, Moravec, and Švelch also include under "queer performance." Nearly all games that allow for character customization allow players to choose the gender of their character. If a game lacks voice chat features, a transgender player can play as the gender they identify with without scrutiny from other players. This, however, comes with the caveat that, especially in online games, players are often assumed to be a man regardless of their avatar's gender, due to the perception of a typical gamer as a heterosexual man, as Jenny Sundén notes in her study of queer player interactions in *World of Warcraft* (6).

While the inclusion of queer characters in games might seem like it would turn away a larger audience, this seems not to be the case. In fact, over 40 percent of players tend to play as characters of genders other than their own in role-playing games (Krobová, Moravec, and Švelch 4). Likewise, around 24 percent of those who played Bioware's titles chose to pursue the same-gender romance options, as David Gaider notes in his talk "Sex in Video Games." Studies have shown that players tend to develop empathetic feelings towards their avatars during play (Li, Liau, and Khoo 261). This and the above statistics point to the possibility that games could help players learn to empathize with LGBT people, either by playing a queer avatar or through interactions with other LGBT characters.

An additional function of LGBT representation is fighting heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is the idea that a person is heterosexual until the proven otherwise, and is often seen in games through their romance options. On occasions that the player is given the opportunity to pursue a same-gender relationship, it is typically optional, and thus can be avoided. Skleres notes that "You get to pick if you wanna be gay, but you can also pick to be straight. You're never really forced into the role, and you see that all the time with heterosexual protagonists" (*Gaming in Color*).

This is not to say that heterosexual romance options should be removed entirely, or that they should be reduced to the same completely optional status that same-gender romances often have. Rather, any romance option, queer or not, should be used to further the development of the characters involved. Krobová, Moravec, and Švelch note that "All of our players agree that gameplay and story come first – not romance. Therefore, they tended to be more open to the gay romance with Anders in *Dragon Age II*, which was integral to the main storyline" (9). Characters do need to be left with ambiguous sexual orientations, but if a romance does impact the narrative

in some meaningful way, it would be best be left to minor character interactions, such as off-hand comments in the dialogue or flirting.

LGBT representation also helps to fight heteronormativity in the gaming community itself. The first step in creating acceptance of queer gamers is for developers to acknowledge their existence. Gaider notes that "The moment we approached the subject of romance and sex, we were saying something about what was acceptable, and what was normal, and who we thought our audience was." Likewise, when game developer David Cage was interviewed by Adrienne Shaw for her essay "Putting the Gay in Games: Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Video Games," he stated that "'having a gay character was also some kind of political message for homosexual rights'" (236). Just as with race or gender representation, queer representation is an acknowledgement from the developers that that group is part of the audience and that they are equal to people in the majority.

The main obstacle to this goal is the relative lack of titles developed by large studios with LGBT representation. One reason for this might be the homogeneity of the gaming industry itself. According to the International Game Developers Association's workplace diversity survey in 2005, 91.6% of game developers reported that they were heterosexual, and 89.1% of developers surveyed were male (Shaw 234). Game designer Jeb Havens notes that when he attended a game conference "'there was such a strong frat-boy heterosexuality among the industry people that it made me realize that even if there were gay people in the industry, they probably wouldn't feel very comfortable talking about it'" (Shaw 235-236). In the years since this comment was made, it seems the industry has at least acknowledge this problem. Game designer Naomi Clark notes that "A lot of gamers, but even more so people who make games, are aware that it's embarrassing that games are so far behind [in diversity].... And there's more

and more anxiety, at least among people who make games… to sort of grow out of that"
(*Gaming Color*).

If the industry knows that it has a problem with diversity, then it needs to be more
proactive in creating a diverse workplace. Given the above statistics from the IGDA, perhaps the
first step might be to put more effort in encouraging women to enter the industry. Shaw notes
that underrepresented groups, such as women, are more concerned about diversity in video
games than those of majorities (235). Though they each experience it differently, all minority
groups share the experience of being oppressed and thus are able empathize better with one
another than those of the majority. Not only would increasing the amount of women in the
industry help put an end to the game industry as a "boys' club," but due to close intersection
between gender and sexual orientation, this might be more productive than focusing on other
non-LGBT minorities, at least when it comes to LGBT issues.

While the industry should not employ people solely based on some aspect of their
identity, whether that be their race, gender, or sexual orientation, making sure that their
perspective is consulted is still important. Gaider recounts how he consulted a transgender person
in the industry when writing a transgender character into the *Dragon Age* series, as well as
listening to female members of his team when an uncomfortably rape-like situation went
unnoticed by the male members. Reaching out to LGBT people, whether they are in the industry
or part of the audience, in the most important part to attract future LGBT creators. Shaw notes
that increasing acceptance of queer creators in media such as film, journalism, and marketing
have all led to an increase in LGBT representation in both the medium and the industry (234). If
players are unable to see themselves in games, some might be encouraged to try and change that,
but others might be discouraged altogether from the industry. However, if minority fans see that

their feedback is acknowledged by the industry, they would be more likely to see the industry as a welcoming environment to pursue a career in.

In *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, Ronald Takaki states that "The Master Narrative's narrow definition of who is an American reflects and reinforces a more general thinking that can be found in the curriculum, news and entertainment media, business practices, and public policies" (5). Though Takaki is speaking specifically of racial issues, the same thought can be applied to LGBT issues. While problems in racial relations continue to persist to this day, racial minority representation in communication forums such as school curriculums and television have made later generations more receptive to these issues. In the same way, LGBT representation in media has made strides to increase acceptance of the queer community. Due to the way games' interactive nature creates a deeper connection between the player and the characters, video games might be able to act as a powerful tool to create empathy not only for LGBT people, but other minorities as well. As the game industry moves forward and the amount of LGBT creators increases, queer and non-queer creators can work together to create a better social environment for LGBT gamers in the gaming community, game industry, and society as a whole.

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