

Abstract

Video games reflect the current culture and society. Games stand as points of transmission that reflect cultural trends and social norms, although not comprehensively. While it seems that more games have tried to be inclusive of diverse gender and sexual identities recently, there is still a lack of studies that discuss how real video game players see LGBTQ+ inclusive games. To understand the game players' perceptions in this regard, this study qualitatively analyzes online video game review postings from *Steam*, focusing on user reviews of gender and sexuality inclusive games. Based on four gender and sexuality inclusive video games selected, we collected 400 user-generated video game reviews as our dataset. Our findings identified 22 primary themes, including Mood/Emotions, Social/Cultural Importance, and Representation. This paper further discusses some of the critical topics discovered, such as identity, conflicts in game communities, and representation.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ games, LGBTQIA+ games, Player perceptions

Introduction

LGBTQ+ inclusion in games is expanding both in terms of characters within games with such identities and in works by Queer creators gaining in popularity. That said, there remains a historical absence or perhaps erasure of Queer identity in games as a medium.

Discussing Dorian, a gay character from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014 Playstation 4 game), Villemez (2020) states the following:

“In the seventy-year history of video games, from “Pong” to “Super Mario Bros” to the sweeping, hundred-million dollar epics we see today, it took over sixty for a gay person of color to show up as a major character in a mainstream release.”

The author mentions that LGBTQ+ inclusion in the video game industry has continued to increase recently, throughout the 2010s and into the 2020s, with numerous examples of games such as *Life Is Strange* (released in 2015) and *NieR* (released in 2010). Similar to Villemez's (2020) view, LGBTQ+ Video Game Archive (<https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/>), curated by Adrienne Shaw and colleagues, also shows the increased releasing of LGBTQ+ inclusive video games in recent years. While it seems that more games have tried to be inclusive of diverse gender and sexualities recently, our research team asked: Then, how do game players think of these games? What are their opinions and evaluations?

In order to understand the game players' perceptions of gender and sexuality inclusive video games, this study qualitatively analyzes online video game review postings from *Steam* (<https://store.steampowered.com/>), an online video game publishing and distributing platform, focusing on the user reviews of gender and sexuality inclusive video games (*Undertale*, *Night in the Woods*, *Gone Home*, and *Dream Daddy*). While there have been many efforts to raise awareness of the diversity and representation issues in video games and to understand games conceptually by incorporating Queer theories, there have not been sufficient studies that understand the opinions of game users who play inclusive video games. The current study focuses on users by asking the following research question:

RQ: What are the game players' perceptions of video games considered to be gender and sexuality inclusive?

By empirically understanding the game players' opinions about inclusive video games, we aim to discover key game design elements in gender and sexuality inclusive games, including positive and negative aspects of the current games that game players note. Also, we seek to understand how game players perceive the LGBTQ+ inclusive games in general, regardless of their presented identities in their reviews.

Throughout this paper, we use the term LGBTQ+ as our preferred term to indicate people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning, and with other non-binary spectra of gender, sex, and sexuality. However, to discuss some of the existing theories and practices, we will respect and adopt the domain-specific or preferred terms, such as Queer or LGBTQ, instead of altering those terms to LGBTQ+. We choose to use the term *inclusive* over the term *diverse* in an effort to avoid the lackadaisical expression of diversity initiatives as are common within the corporate and mainstream contexts. While we agree that diversity is valuable, we think the term *inclusive* offers a scope that includes unarticulated or less visible identities in addition to those which are explicitly delineated in 'LGBTQ+'. We propose that the '+' is as important as the LGBTQ part of the acronym.

In the following sections, we will introduce the relevant literature to help readers understand the currently identified problems in video game content and industry, the utilization of Queer theories in video games, and background information on the LGBTQ+ games that we selected for this study, followed by the Method section. Then, we will present the overview of the themes identified from our data and selected individual themes (high frequency/and or noteworthy) to discuss further. Our Discussion section will address some of the important issues that the authors identified while analyzing the data and connect these discourses to existing research.

Literature Review

Video Games Content and Industry

We align with Gray (2020) in our understanding of the importance of counterpublics and the "transmediated nature of contemporary gaming communities," (p. 2), which in the case of our study involves both the reconfiguration and reclaiming of particular narratives about family, belonging and identity within LGBTQ+ experience as well as the moving of creative and critical process from the space of the game to the space of gamer and reviewer's written critique. Indeed, throughout our results, we encounter a certain ambivalence on the part of reviewers reflecting on some internal conflicts within individuals and intersectional identities that we discuss in our findings and conclusion. The issues of representing gender and sexuality in video games have been often framed through the lens of video game design and development (Ahmadi *et al.*, 2020; Harvey & Shepherd, 2010; Simons & Fleischmann, 2017; Simons, 2019; Ruberg, 2019), organizing and archiving LGBTQ+ related game information (Ruberg, 2017; Shaw, 2017), and game players' sexual and gender identities (Condis, 2015; Vermeulen *et al.*, 2011).

Aligned with their views that there is a lack of diversity in creating games, Simons' more recent work on a similar topic (2019) also points out how the video game industry remains strikingly non-diverse. According to Simons (2019), the video game industry has two major problems

regarding diversity: 1) not hiring enough game designers with diverse backgrounds and 2) designers feeling that they do not have the agency to effect change within the organization.

On the other hand, Ruberg (2019) asks if the current wave of encouraging Queer indie game creation is, in fact, beneficial for those game makers. Video game enthusiasts, journalists, and diversity supporters have embraced creating inclusive games. In the process, game creators who make Queer indie games “are commonly lauded for inspiring change in the mainstream game industry and making the medium of video games more diverse and therefore “better.” However, Ruberg (2019) argues that Queer and indie game makers are unlikely to be fairly compensated, and their creations are often considered “easy” or “free” to make. As a result, many Queer indie game makers face severe socio-economic challenges. The author questions who truly benefit when video games become “better.”

Any discussion of LGBTQ+ game research should include Adrienne Shaw’s LGBTQ game archive project (Shaw, 2017). In order to create a historical and conceptual map of LGBTQ content in video games, Shaw and colleagues developed a game archive that includes more than 700 titles of video games with LGBTQ characters and references (Ruberg, 2017). Their archive includes not only descriptions of LGBTQ games’ content but also game fans’ Queer-oriented interpretations and scholarly analysis. According to the author, Shaw, their archive intends to provide “a better starting point for scholars to move forward” (p. 166). Shaw’s (2017) work and the related work of others at the archive represent a reflexive definition of LGBTQ gaming that harnesses Queer-identifying researchers, designers, and players to create the context for what gamers want and what games mean to the LGBTQ community. This effort represents LGBTQ communities claiming agency over the games market, and the history of video games as a medium. Our study related to Shaw’s efforts in this regard as we investigate not the content of the games themselves, but reviewers’ interpretation of the game and how they construct meaning within their experience of play.

Diversity and representation issues are not only emphasized in video game studies. Similar to the efforts made in video game studies, researchers in other media types have also tried to include the same discourses in their domains. For example, Cho and Menking (2020) point out the limits of current organizations and recommendation systems (rating systems, especially) for visual materials in that they cannot appropriately represent diverse gender, sex, and sexuality content. In fact, the well-known rating system for TV shows and movies, the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), started as a censorship program. In the world of literature, too, surprisingly, many diverse books face suppression (Haupt, 2022). There is also the fraught relationship that “mainstream” gaming journalism and discourse have specifically with LGBTQ+ identities as expressed in games. As Condis (2015) notes in her study of *Star Wars: The Old Republic* and *Dragon Age II*, the framing of LGBTQ+ identities within games discourse is complicated by a scarcity mindset among those aligned with historical hetero-hegemonic norms in media and culture who imagine there is not enough room to represent everyone. Representation is still an important issue to address in various media, even after several decades of conversations.

Queer Theory and Games

Queer theory is a category of critical inquiry that poses important questions for information literacy, categorization, and taxonomy for which we do not always have the best answers. Of particular interest for the purposes of this paper is Queer theory’s commitment to posing ideas such as the performativity of gender, and the broader context for the multitudes of expressions

of gender and sexuality outside of the hegemonic binary paradigm (Butler, 1988). As James Baldwin wrote when in an unrelated context “To defeat all labels and complicate all battles by insisting on the human riddle... (2011). That human riddle, in this case, is what liberation looks like beyond the context of oppressive essentialist historical and contemporary narratives and beyond the rigid binary characterization of the human experience of gender and sexuality in favor of a socially constructed realm in which conscious and critical conversation around what it means to be human may occur. For our study, we foreground the user reception of games in an effort to support this project of collectively defining the Queer context for games from an audience perspective, rather than simply a critical or academic perspective. Specifically, influences on our interpretations include works such as Adrienne Shaw’s *Gaming at the Edge* (2014) in which the author conducts interviews with a variety of “gamers” from historically marginalized populations and insists on the narratives from the “margins of gamer culture” that nonetheless do not constitute discrete and separate categories for interpretation.

In notes for a session at Association for Information Science & Technology (ASIS&T), panelists consider some of these specific questions about multifaceted Queer identity(ies) that cannot be easily parsed or classified with the tools we currently have available (Adler, Campbell, & Keilty, 2014). Foucault critiques bureaucratic systems and how they consistently fail to account for the possibilities and fluidity of LGBTQ identities both individually and as a larger, more generalizable whole (2014). Foucault and other theorists focus on pivots between “speech and silence” as a means to escape the tyranny of modernist bureaucratic discursive systems (Adler *et al.*, 2014, p. 1). Efforts to constantly define identity might be counterproductive to understanding the perceptions and contexts of LGBTQ people and their lives.

As people who constantly move in and out of spheres of cultural, social, and political expectation and acceptance as a means of navigating their everyday lives, LGBTQ game players and designers carry this experience of living in the intersections with them in their work and lives. These experiences emerge in their interpretations of games, characters, and of themselves as reflected in characters in their work. Ideally, the interpretation of Queer possibilities in games would be understood in light of LGBTQ experiences of the world. Like any artistic choice, there are limitations to providing either too narrow or too broad a path for the player to walk. To paraphrase Ruberg (2020), echoing Judith Butler (1988): Expressions of Queerness rooted in gameplay might themselves be limited as performative choices made by the player. As possibilities for choice within games become more diverse, so too do implications for meaning and identity become atomized.

Similar to this issue, Campbell (2000) outlines in a parallel assessment the tensions inherent in describing Queer characters in media in the first place and providing those descriptions in the form of actionable data and metadata. Conversely, various authors touch on the lack of understanding of LGBTQ individuals’ relationship with media (Floegel & Costello, 2019; Ouellette, 2013; Campbell, 2000; Condis, 2015). Other studies grapple with the differences in Queer representation by LGBTQ creators and how that compares to the representation of Queer characters by non-Queer creators (cis/het) (Bragança *et al.*, 2016; Shaw & Persaud, 2020; Ouelette, 2013). Bragança, Mota, and Fantini (2016) outline this difference in terms of the complexity of representation, which is more nuanced and expansive in the work of LGBTQ creators with regard to Queer experience(s). The authors further note that widespread representation leads to acceptance, so much the better if those representations are authentic and nuanced, and accurately reflect the experiences of LGBTQ people (Bragança *et al.*, 2016; Shaw and Persaud, 2020).

The interaction between Queer/LGBTQ audiences and mainstream culture is particularly relevant to the health and happiness of LGBTQ people. Interrogating this interaction is also crucial to deconstructing games-as-text from the diverse perspectives of Queer people (Shaw and Persaud, 2020). Ouellette (2013) notes that cis/het gaming audiences miss out on the “rough edges” of Queer experience that publishers round off for mainstream consumption, recommending authentic representation over archetypal characters. Pozo, Ruberg, and Goetz (2017) discuss some inherent difficulty Queer theory has in grappling with games as a medium, mirroring how early games research was positioned vis-a-vis film studies, as the medium attempted to establish itself as a “serious artform.” Condis (2015) laments the cry of “no politics in gaming’, which serves as a dogwhistle for the privileging of unobtrusive escapist leisure comfort for cis/het players over the lived reality of Queer gamers and those who would like to see more diverse representations of characters in games. Haines (2019) relies on Garry Crawford’s frame analysis to root the experience of video games in everyday experience rather than a bounded “video game space.” This is especially relevant to us for Haines’ exploration of themes of sexuality and gender in contemporary triple-A video games, which 1) points to the widely recognized overabundance of cis-white men as characters in those games and 2) describes the tendency of the few LGBTQ characters to be “buried” in the background of narratives of the aforementioned cis-white-males, if present at all (2019).

Reception of Individual Games

As our slightly unconventional efforts to provide background information about the four games selected in this study, the authors include relevant studies on these games in this literature review for readers who are unfamiliar with those games. Of the four games we chose for our study, *Gone Home* was most visible in the literature (Sloan, 2015; Pavlounis, 2016; Veale, 2017, Tulloch *et al.*, 2019; Bolter & Gruisin, 2015), whereas the *Night in the Woods* (Veale, 2021), *Undertale* (Ruberg, 2018), and *Dream Daddy* (Schaufert, 2018; Dym *et al.*, 2018) were only present in a few studies, or as part of broader discussions of multiple games.

Authors frame *Gone Home* in the context of its experiential modality as a walking simulator in some cases (Ruberg, 2020), but frequently also discuss the ways in which the context of familiarity and nostalgia play into Queer experience in this game (Sloan, 2015; Pavlounis, 2016; Veale, 2017). Tulloch *et. al* (2019) discuss the game as subversive in the face of misogynistic gaming tropes, but ultimately still falling prey to white-hegemonic pitfalls throughout the narrative. Ruberg (2020) notes that *Gone Home* offers numerous opportunities to expand on the complexity of Queer experiences of youth and becoming, but ultimately fails to do so. Ruberg indicates the fundamental ambiguity and the insubstantial expressions of queerness in the gameplay itself as evidence that *Gone Home* is only a first step “beyond surface-level LGBTQ representation” (2020, p. 649). Sloan (2015) places *Gone Home* in the context of “hyperreality and commodified nostalgia” for the 90s alongside *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*, which utilizes the same mechanism to draw on 80s nostalgia. Sloan uses Baudrillard’s theories about consumer objects and simulated realities as well as a theory of remediation posited by Bolter and Gruisin to explain these two games as expressions of an idealized past, filtered through codified cultural signifiers like television and consumer products (2015, p. 547). Veale takes this a step further discussing the “affective materiality” of video games as a whole, and in the case of *Gone Home*, an opportunity to place that materiality and nostalgia in a political context that produces empathy for the Queer sister of the protagonist (2016).

The other three games in our study had far less academic conversation happening around them. Our research team hypothesizes that this is due in large part to their more recent

publishing, and lack of similar adjacency to widespread controversy (though each, in its own local context, is contentious). Veale's (2021) concept of affective materiality illuminates how players become invested in narrative structures through emotional and intellectual labor (2021). This applies to both *Night in the Woods* in which the players closely follow the day-to-day activities of Mae the protagonist, and in *Undertale* in which players take on complex ethical and moral decisions that have a real psychological impact on the players themselves. Ruberg expands the conversation around *Undertale* to touch on the "limits" of LGBTQ representation in games, writing that many of *Undertale*'s critics praise the game and completely ignore its clear LGBTQ characters and content (2018). They ask both how we should measure the success of Queer representation in games, and how we should understand the clear validation many LGBTQ players find in the narratives in light of the reception of *Undertale* more generally (Ruberg, 2018).

Dym *et al.* (2018) point out that *Dream Daddy* is (as of the writing of their article) the most visible game in which one can play as a trans character who can become romantically involved with other trans characters. The authors also bring the realm of fanfiction into the discussion of games in terms of how fans can create and mediate their own tangential or associated virtual contexts through engaging with games-as-art, which relates to the previous point made by Floegel and Costello (2019) regarding the importance of fan-fiction to LGBTQ communities. Dym *et al.* (2018) analyzed the metadata from 402,084 works of fanfiction through AO3 (Archive of Our Own), an open fan forum for creating and sharing fanfiction (2018). Among their findings most relevant to our study are 1) that fanfiction is a space in which players can recontextualize themselves in games and media, 2) that video games cannot satisfy the need for more thoughtful representation of diverse identities and sexualities simply by providing more characters with those characteristics, and 3) that fan-fiction (and texts in general) are an underutilized way to understand fan reception of games and media that allows some degree of bypassing industry critics and other gatekeepers (2018). Schaufert (2018) additionally underlines the depiction of homonormativity within a fantastical setting that is somewhat class-specific and also glosses over the more nuanced and complicated reality that the role of "daddy" occupies in this context. In particular, Schaufert examines conflicting relationships between supportive parental roles and healthy paternal relationships and the converse sexualized and subverted familial "roles" within the context of kink. The conflating of these two elements within a single set of characters and gameplay mechanics complicates the understanding of the real history of 1) kink and 2) normative familial roles within queer experience, but also to some extent allows players to grapple with the real conflicts inherent within lived queer experience in the real world (Schaufert, 2018).

Method

We used a pragmatic qualitative approach to understand how players framed their experience of four games with significant LGBTQ+ characters and themes (*Undertale*, *Night in the Woods*, *Gone Home*, and *Dream Daddy*) in reviews on Steam. Our approach comes from the Uses and Gratification perspectives (U&G) which claims that users are actively involved in their selection of media and cognizant enough of the nuances of their motivations and tastes to describe them accurately and with relative objectivity (Katz *et al.*, 1974; Rubin, 1979; Oliver, 2009). In accordance with this perspective, we collected 400 user-generated video game reviews as our dataset from an online video game publishing and distributing platform, *Steam*. Then, we performed a content analysis using the collected data; we used a hybrid process of inductive and deductive coding in this process (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). While adopting some of

the previously identified themes and vocabulary from existing video game literature, we also aimed to discover new themes from the current raw dataset.

We chose games in a multi-stage deliberative process that began with a list of games compiled by our team of researchers. These games were significant to LGBTQ+ communities as reflective of their lived experiences in various ways, for example: having LGBTQ+ protagonists, depictions of the experience of LGBTQ+ characters, relationships, or cultures. Our compilation is derived from various publications from games media across multiple platforms (e.g., Reddit, Ranker, and IGN). We looked for commonly-mentioned games, and discussed criteria for inclusion. After extended discussion, we chose nine published lists to include that we felt reflected widely held perspectives and preferences of LGBTQ+ gaming communities.

Our selection criteria included 1) if the games are popular enough to be relevant to a broader cultural zeitgeist beyond just a small number of people, in other words, games featured in the aforementioned articles, 2) how many of the 9 articles mention the games, 3) if the game was a production of an indie studio (our operational definition for indie production was the teams fewer than 100 people), and 4) if they had come out in the recent past. Also, the team excluded games that had only minor LGBTQ+ characters because themes relevant to LGBTQ+ communities might not be central to the experience of those games.

The four games we chose (*Dream Daddy* (appeared eight times on our list), *Night in the Woods* (8), *Gone Home* (7), and *Undertale* (6)) were indie studio creations with relatively small budgets. These games had prominent LGBTQ+ characters and had relatively recent releases. After finalizing the game list, we collected their publicly available game reviews from *Steam*, using their Web API. From the collected responses we randomly selected 100 reviews for each game (400 overall) to analyze for this study.

To create a codebook, we first reviewed this random sample and derived initial codes from user responses, which we discussed and grouped on a *MURAL* board (a web-based collaborative application: <https://www.mural.co/>). From this first pass, we identified, refined, and grouped responses into themes (codes) through various iterations, and finalized a codebook. After this step, we selected a random pilot sample of 40 reviews from each game to measure intercoder reliability. Two researchers coded the sample dataset, which resulted in a coefficient (Cohen's Kappa) of 0.92, indicating a high level of agreement. With a sufficiently high intercoder reliability established, the same two researchers completed coding the entire dataset.

Findings

Based on the collected reviews, our research team identified 22 parent codes (themes). One of the identified codes, Value, has two child codes: Commodity/Price/Package and Social/Cultural Importance. The codebook also includes two auxiliary codes, [+] Positive Responses and [+] Negative Responses, to capture any strongly sentimental reactions from the reviews. Applying these two auxiliary codes occurred only with other codes together; for example, "[+] Positive Response AND Characters" to note when reviewers express satisfaction towards certain game characters.

Table 1 shows all the identified codes with their operational definitions and frequencies. The frequency column refers to the number of reviewer responses that discuss the code. Story/Plot/Narrative was the most frequently discussed topic among reviewers at 145 appearances, followed by Characters (113), Mood/Emotions (90), Gameplay (74), and

Music/Sound (63). The following sections will discuss some of the frequently mentioned and unique topics identified in our dataset.

<TABLE 1: GOES HERE>

Table 2 shows the co-occurrence matrix coding results based on each game title. Highlighted cells indicate a frequency value higher than 20. All of the games received a high number of Positive Responses from reviewers generally; *Dream Daddy* received the highest number of positive reactions, followed by *Undertale* (74), *Gone Home* (72), and *Night in the Woods* (64). While the rest of the three games were frequently associated with the Story/Plot/Narrative code, *Dream Daddy* only had 19 Story/Plot/Narrative incidents. It may be due to the game's genre, a dating sim where the game player determines how the story unfolds rather than following the intentional storyline created by game designers.

Night in the Woods received the most mentions regarding Characters (47), followed by *Dream Daddy* (30), *Undertale* (26), and *Gone Home* (10). In addition to the character aspects, *Night in the Woods* was often the most frequently discussed game among reviewers, in codes such as Mood/Emotions (32), Music/Sound (28), Art (24), and Representation (23).

<TABLE 2: GOES HERE>.

Story and Characters

Story/Plot/Narrative and Characters were the two most frequently mentioned codes in our dataset (Story/Plot/Narrative was mentioned 145 times, Characters 113 times). This result was not surprising considering that the games this study selected tended to be narrative-heavy, with characters representing diverse groups. Also, based on the co-occurrence analysis, our research team found that reviewers' comments that discuss the story and character aspects of the game together were common as well (54 times exactly), indicating the close relationship between these two elements of the game. Reviewers appreciated strong plots of games that incorporate thoughtfully created characters, such as the reviewers 85370.

"The story, as well, is very amazing, allowing for characters that not many people can relate to. This game provides so many positive things, and this is why I love it. You're not just playing a game, you're getting immersed in a story and the world these characters live in." (Reviewer 85370)

Our findings suggest the importance of a game environment within the context of a fictional universe that reflects the real lived space that players occupy. This includes the space for aspects of character identity within the game world as represented through setting as in Sloan's (2015) discussion of commodified nostalgia and on a subtler level the recognition of performativity of, for example, gender roles by fictional characters as proposed by Butler (1988). This emphasis on the importance of player social experiences recurred throughout our results and was true both of LGBTQ+-specific identifiers as well as other identity signifiers related to social roles and contexts. The perceived success of characterization and immersiveness within the games we studied, as our reviewers note above, relies on a correlation to real world experiences of social relationships, gender and sexuality, as well as other features of human identity. Creating a context for interpretation based on player experience allows for new trajectories in critical analysis and games research based in Queer identit(ies) and values (Shaw, 2014; 2017; Ruberg 2017; 2018; 2019).

Emotions and Atmosphere

In the current study, we define Mood/Emotion as “Feelings and emotional responses are evoked in the player when the player encounters elements of the game,” shorthand throughout the study will be “players’ felt experience”; and Tone/Atmosphere as “Feelings and emotional elements that the game designers, artists, musicians, and creators added to the game or inherent to the game,” shorthand throughout will be “emotional aesthetic” differentiating mood (players’ felt experience) and tone (emotional aesthetic). Particularly, players’ felt experience refers to what game players feel when playing games, and emotional aesthetic refers to the general atmosphere of the game that the designer intended to create.

As an extreme example, a game may have a scary tone or atmosphere, but the game player might feel relaxed by playing this horror game. So, the comments like “a completely earnest and heartfelt game, with consistently funny writing (Reviewer 18872)” or “the art style of the graphics are beautiful and the music adds a lot to the game’s atmosphere (Reviewer 56525)” are considered as emotional aesthetic in our study. In comparison, “i [sic] cried like twice during this game” (Reviewer 41118) and “*Undertale* made me laugh, it made me cry, it made me think” (Reviewer 12188) are considered players’ felt experiences.

Price Value, Artistic Value, and Social Value

Among our themes, the overarching expression of the *value* of a given game came up time and again in the responses. We soon realized that this theme of *value* includes multiple themes: the social and personal importance of a given game, the financial cost of the game compared to the amount of enjoyment derived from it, and the artistic importance or artistic merit of a game as a work of creative expression. All three types of *value* were sometimes contained in the same response, such as the response of reviewer 84925.

"I bought this game for \$10 and I think that is an appropriate price. This is a wonderful, evocative, and well put together piece [sic] that anyone who finds themselves in the "games as art" mindset will enjoy. [...]" (Reviewer 84925)

More frequently, the responses fell into one of three categories (See Table 3). The number of responses that point to price value (46) greatly outweighed those that specifically talked about artistic or social value (17), but given the nature of the source of the responses (*Steam* reviews), we understand this to be due mostly to the expectations reviewers have about the purpose of *Steam* comments and review; i.e. To tell readers if the game is worth buying or not.

<TABLE 3: GOES HERE>

When writing about price value, respondents compared the given game to another game, and made a judgment based on that comparison, such as the reviewer 79419:

“You can complete this game in under two hours, having done everything possible. Personally it's not worth the £14.99 in the store, but at least I got it during the recent sale for £1.79 - I think the most it should be is ~£4.99..”, (Reviewer 79419)

Price value judgements were also described based on how much time a player could spend playing the game and enjoying it:

“This game was a gem, especially to kick onwards this year. I'd spend 20\$ just for another game like this.” (Reviewer 10988)

Discussions of games-as-art were sometimes framed by describing the game as transcending the category of “game”. For example, “*Gone Home* challenges the definition of a “game” but it is absolutely worth playing (Reviewer 79525).” In very few cases was social value expressed explicitly as a value separately from either price value or artistic value, instead it was usually combined with one or the other. In most cases, the game was described as having value based on a combination of some or all three facets of value together (price value, artistic value, and social value).

Representation

Reviewers discussed LGBTQ+ representation in a number of reviews (50). This took a variety of forms, sometimes explicitly praising the representation of LGBTQ+ characters, with some reviewers directly pointing to 1) a game’s depiction of the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., “Great game to represent the LGBT community...” (Reviewer 72976)) or to 2) how the representation of LGBTQ+ characters directly relates to or impacts the players’ own identity (e.g., “As an LGBTQ player...” (Reviewer 86541); “A good game to try if you’re gay or trans...” (Reviewer 00424)).

In some cases, reviewers tried to distance themselves from the LGBTQ+ community, by making clear their disavowal of LGBTQ+ identity, or their acceptance of their own LGBTQ+ identity that they said did not impact their interpretation of the game. In other cases, respondents said that their identity did not cause them to have a positive interpretation of a game with LGBTQ+ characters, even though they claimed a Queer identity of some kind (e.g., “not homophobic as I am gay myself but...” (Reviewer 72976)).

Based on our findings, there does seem to be general approval of LGBTQ+ representation in games, and very little outright rejection of games or premises based on LGBTQ+ content within our sample of reviews. More common are ambiguous criticisms of the LGBTQ+ characters or the LGBTQ+ community of gamers couched in an “objective” hegemonic (male/cis/white/gamer) frame. Reviews tended to frame positive responses in relatively short and succinct discussions when referencing LGBTQ+ identity and negative responses in longer block discussions and contain extended equivocation

<TABLE 4: GOES HERE>

Reviewers more regularly identify with the characters, rather than specifically with an aspect of the character’s identity (e.g., “She feels like a real teenager who loves her father to bits, but has her own mind and ambitions” (Reviewer 17853)). This suggests that while some reviews appreciate LGBTQ+ identity, that alone is not sufficient to deem a game enjoyable or “good.” One reviewer notes:

“And lets [*sic*] not get started on the secret ending because if that ends up being true you wouldn’t only have my bad review but leave this queer kid actually in tears, the bad kind of tears. Was expecting much more and let me down.” (Reviewer 33206)

LGBTQ+ identity of characters may potentially have been a motivation to try a game in the first place (e.g., “[I] thought this would be a great game to represent the LGBT community but it felt more or less of a let down.” (Reviewer 72976)).

Controversy and Escapism

Respondents were ambivalent about controversy in the background of the game developers as well as the controversy surrounding three of the four games (excluding *Dream Daddy*, which ironically was fairly uncontroversial among reviewers even though it is a dating sim).

Night in the Woods, for example, had controversy around the suicide of one of the game's producers Alec Holowka, which reviewers in the current study mentioned several times (such as reviewers 46371, 96820, 25917, and 56394). On August 26th, 2019, game developer Zoe Quinn posted several tweets outlining the abuse she received while in a relationship with Holowka. Reactions to these posts were mixed. Studio founder Scott Benson gave credence to Quinn's claims, a stand against abuse that is rare in the video games industry, and both he and developer Bethany Hockenberry detached Holowka from the studio. Zoe Quinn has been the target of a hate campaign called Gamergate, causing believers in the campaign to withdraw support from the studio for cutting ties with Holowka. Several days after this announcement, on August 31, 2019, Eileen Mary Holowka tweeted that her brother Alec Holowka had committed suicide (Prokos, 2019). The response from Gamergate participants was extremely negative causing Benson to deactivate his Twitter for an extended period of time, with Benson eventually sharing his own account of non-sexual abuse from Holowka. These users claimed that the studio acted unethically. This linked more broadly into the Gamergate controversy, which also included *Undertale* and *Gone Home*. Reviewers alluded to these controversies in their posts, but very rarely did so in a direct sense such as Reviewer 25917:

"This man was killed by an angry twitter mob, Zoe Quinn, his developer partner Scott Benson and the biggest culprit of them all, cancel culture. After his death both Zoe and Scott set their twitter accounts to private and proceeded to hide. These people are cowards and should not be supported in anyway." (Reviewer 25917)

More frequently, reviewers gestured toward drama or controversy in some way, or talked about toxic elements of fandom, generally with reference to *Undertale*:

"Yes, the fandom for this game is incredibly toxic. It is best to avoid it as best you can" (Reviewer 35436)

"The game is great, the fandom is cancer" (Reviewer 42865).

The reviews that mention the relevant local and broader controversies make it clear that fan communities are aware of these issues, but the lack of extensive discussion of the minutiae involved suggests that the nuances may not be interesting or relevant in an immediate way. In fact, the extensive mention of escapism or escapist elements in these games suggests instead that fans might play games (even games that are involved in controversy) to escape the realities and stresses of the real world.

This perspective aligns well with Ruberg (2017); when they interviewed the founder of the LGBTQ+ Game Archive, Adrienne Shaw. Shaw talks about how little representation of the AIDS crisis there was in LGBTQ+ games in the late 80s and early 90s, even though it was of widespread concern by 1987-88, especially to LGBTQ+ communities (Ruberg, 2017). Reviews mentioning escapism are frequent. Characteristic examples might include something as simple

as “You forget what reality is..” (Reviewer 44474), or might contain specific complaints that the theme of the game is too much like real life, such as, “[I] thought people play games because they want to escape real life, not get more of it” (Reviewer 05515).

Discussion

Players’ ethical considerations toward games

Users review games on *Steam* for a variety of reasons and with diverse motivations. Users nonetheless reveal some commonalities that are relevant to our understanding of their perceptions of LGBTQ+ characters and ethics. Certain reviewers implied concern with more than the content of the game itself. These reviewers focused on the game’s creation as well as its place in society. Reviews discussed the game creators in light of their ethical and social capital, both a negative and positive light, such as disapproval towards the *Night in the Woods* team’s reaction to Alec Holowka’s suicide and commending the Game Grumps’ progressive work on *Dream Daddy*.

Further, reviewers often considered the ethics of a game based on its fanbase, such as those comments focusing on *Undertale*’s fans. This indicates that the political and ethical implications of creating the games figure into the decision-making process when it comes to buying or recommending games for users. For games that center LGBTQ+ characters and their stories, there is a clear need for game creators to practice what they preach. Gaming journalists have noted that there is a precedent for ideologically charged comments in game reviews and discussions online, even before flashpoints like Gamergate (Romano, 2021).

When identities influence game reviews

Identity is an occasional consideration for the reviewers. Generally expresses this not in the context of how they perceive themselves, but rather in terms of what they see in the game. One wonders how conscious reviewers are of their own identities as they write reviews about characters like Mae in *Night in the Woods*. Mae is a “Queer” character, but her queerness is in no way central to the game itself. Conversely, it is difficult to believe that anyone plays *Dream Daddy* without some conscious awareness of Queerness simply because this is a major theme of the game and indeed is central to the mechanisms of gameplay (i.e., in choosing and pursuing a “daddy”).

The inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters and relevant plot/narrative has been emphasized not only in game communities but also in other types of entertainment media, such as anime, comic books/graphic novels, TV shows, and films (such as Benshoff & Griffin, 2011, Cho & Menking, 2020). While media studies frequently discuss the need for the representation of the LGBTQ+ community, not many studies have revealed how media users responded to or reviewed the materials that already have LGBTQ+ inclusive characters and narratives. The findings from our study show that many reviewers appreciate the representation of LGBTQ+ but at the same time, it is not a *sufficient condition* for “good” entertainment material.

In their ethnographic study, Shaw (2012) claims that “those invested in diversity in video games must focus their attention on the construction of the medium, and not the construction of the audience as such,” (p. 28). In addition, Shaw (2012) describes that “how interviewees identify themselves in the interviews, moreover, must be understood as a particular, momentary

articulation of how they view themselves,” noting that their participant’s own identification could change at different times and in different contexts. With the added element of anonymity, our current study does not claim that our findings can be associated with any particular identities other than playing the “game critique” role in this context.

Reviewers occasionally couch their reviews in terms of their own identity. More often, reviewers perform the role of reviewer into being, much as Judith Butler would describe performing gender (1988). In other words, reviewers put on the mantle of “reviewer” to meet a perceived need for good descriptions and advice about a game in the space of *Steam* game pages, and in doing so create a locus of meaningful and intentional decisions for readers. That said, reviewers certainly carry forward unconscious and conscious bias in the course of their expressions of opinion in reviews, and identity inevitably plays a role. In our results, overt expressions of identity appear to be secondary to the role that reviewers are playing when they post to a game’s review page.

More research into how reviewers obfuscate, center, or otherwise position their identities when performing specific informal roles like reviewing video games might yield interesting insights into how identity functions within the space of games and leisure. As Leavitt (2015) discusses, individuals online decide what to share about themselves in the virtual environment that assures anonymity, practicing selective self-presentation. That said, there is a possibility that analyzing the reviews created in LGBTQ+ communities may yield more contextualized results by including another layer/overlapping of identity, being a member of LGBTQ+ communities. Also, while not predominant, several reviews presented homophobic views in this study, relying on anonymity provided by the *Steam* platform. These reviews attacking particular demographics may benefit from further discussion through the perspectives of cyberbullying research (such as Wright & Wachs, 2021) in future studies.

Quality assessments of games

Quality assessments of games were as idiosyncratic as the reader might assume, but patterns do emerge from the categories of *positive, negative, and ambivalent* reviews. Purely negative reviews were quite rare and tended to be short (e.g., “boring game” (Reviewer 26901)). This might be because reviewers would not choose to review a game in which they found absolutely no redeeming qualities or possibilities. On the other hand, lowing positive reviews were more common. Positive reviews focused on elements of the game that made it worth the player’s time and money and made the player feel good vicariously, because the player could draw parallels between the game and their own life. These identified elements could be useful places to uncover what it is that players actually want from their games. Positive reviews also attempted to counteract adjacent negative reviews or to tell the reader to overlook bad press a game had received elsewhere. The point of these reviews appears to the researchers fairly straightforward: to get the reader to purchase and play the game.

The focus on the various aspects of value within the game certainly reflects an overt capitalist-oriented commodity culture system of interpretation utilized by players, which to some degree must depend on the “storefront” context of games on steam. That said, the work of Haines (2019) and others looking at the inseparability of gameworlds from real world experience indicates that players understand the time they spend in games as part of their real lives, as they remain aware that they are still playing a game and participating in an interactive fantasy. Playing games in this context can be an extension of expressions of identity, or merely a passing experiential encounter with elements of the lived experiences of fictional characters

who either do or do not overlap with the player's own identity. In fact, some reviewers noted that the appeal of escapism in games was to engage with this opportunity for expansive empathetic experience. Deconstructing games as texts (Shaw and Persaud, 2020) then should include not simply the games in isolation, but also the experience gamers have of those games as they play.

Perhaps the most illuminating set of quality assessment results were those that expressed reviewer ambivalence. These reviews expressed some form of tension in which the reviewer levied criticism at one element of the game while praising something else, such as "It's a good game, don't get me wrong. But there are bugs..." (Reviewer 17178). These reviews tended to be the most complex and lengthy. In reviews that touched on LGBTQ+ characters and themes, reviewers expressed nuanced narratives about their own experience in or outside of the game, the game's cultural context, and more mechanistic elements of the game like gameplay and sound design. These reviewers frequently returned to revisit their reviews after putting more hours into the game, often changing their conclusions.

Based on the differences in quality and nuance between the polemic reviews (pure positive/pure negative) and the ambivalent reviews, we suspect that the role in which the reviewer places themselves greatly influences the end result of the review. The performative identity of "game reviewer" parallels with LGBTQ+ identity; and demonstrates that the two are sometimes unable to meet in a single coherent review. Polemic reviews tended to be decoupled from the "objective" voice of the amateur games journalist, whereas the ambivalent reviews gave more space to deliberation and description. We suggest that this expression of ambivalence within reviews might reflect a conflict with the hegemonic category of "gamer" that in mainstream understanding historically refers to a particular identity (cis/het/male) and reviewers' more nuanced identities. Players who identify as gamers and who write reviews on Steam, express when their identities are in conflict with this hegemonic category. When their identities fall within the hegemonic "gamer" category, they may still explicitly express rejection of racist, sexist, or homophobic beliefs sometimes associated with "gamer" if they value diverse experiences and perspectives (e.g., LGBTQ+). Ambivalence could mean, as Jagoda (2016, p. 224-5) envisions it, a centrality of critical perception or "extreme presence" in the reviewer. The implication being that the lack of superficial clarity in critical expression is appropriate given the complexity of the game-as-artwork, the player as a being containing multitudes, and the cultural moment that renders superficial coherence out of the question when atomized identities within the individual produce disparate conclusions and impulses. In other words, a reviewer in conflict merely reflects a world in conflict. Ambivalence may also reflect the non-discrete categories of gamer 'from the margins', as articulated by Shaw (2014), in which representation within marginalized communities is itself varied and diverse. Additionally, the findings of Dym *et al.* (2018) with regard to fanfiction as a space in which fans can rearticulate identity in novel and nuanced forms may also be applicable to both games-as-spaces for play and reviews as spaces for rearticulating identity. In this case, ambivalence may simply point to nascent identities as they are collaboratively or individually codified in the critical review itself. Since our study did not glean demographic data explicitly from reviewers, we can make only limited claims about the nature of this ambivalence, other than to point out that it is clearly expressed within particular reviews as part of the interpretation of the relevance or value of a given game. Ambivalence here also points to Gray (2020) and her aforementioned analysis of intersectional identities and interpretation of digital culture. Ambivalence may reflect not cognitive dissonance in this case, but simply parallel goals or values that hold equal importance for the reviewer and, as such, they must address in the course of making decisions about what aspects of games are meaningful or significant. More research into how these informal roles overlap with roles related

to race, sexuality, and gender could yield a great deal of information about what it is gamers and reviewers are actually looking for.

Conclusion

Game industries and communities are evolving. Game players expect more diverse and accurate representations in games—in characters, stories, and the creation and distribution process. Our user-centered focus allows us to emphasize the nuances within the umbrella LGBTQ+ identity among gamers. Some players privilege their status as gamers above that of casually-mentioned Queer identity, at least within particular contexts like that of writing a review on Steam. Other LGBTQ+ gamers may agree that greater representation is needed or is a positive development but have profound disagreements about the form or prominence that representation ought to take. These are common trends within any broad category of human identities, and differences of opinion in this regard should come as no surprise to anyone. To understand the game players' perceptions of gender and sexuality inclusive video games, the current study collected and analyzed 400 user reviews. Our main findings are as follows:

1. We have identified 22 themes in this dataset. Story/Plot/Narrative was the most frequently mentioned by reviewers, followed by Characters, Mood/Emotions, Gameplay, and Music/Sound.
2. Reviewers discussed representation from diverse perspectives; some reviewers expressed excitement about games' having LGBTQ+ representation, the others associated their own identities (regardless of their being a member of LGBTQ+ communities or not) as understanding or evaluating the games.
3. Some of the identified themes such as Social Interactions, Creators, and Political Aspects highlighted social and ethical issues observed in game communities. Reviewers indicated their strong desire to support the healthy and ethical game industry. Game players do not only care about the game itself but also the ethics of the game's creation.

The question then becomes, why do these findings matter? The themes we identified in our coding are, first of all, user-centered and so provide us some sense of what it is that gamers actually care about when they write reviews. This provides a balancing force to prevailing industry misconceptions about what gamers want (Shaw, 2014; 2017). Because our reviewers were not exclusively LGBTQ+ identified, we also could get a limited broader context for how LGBTQ+ identity organically emerges in the discourse around games. This means that interpretation of LGBTQ+ games and identity within those games was quite varied but provided nuanced impressions of the contextualization of these games within two broad overlapping identity landscapes: LGBTQ+ and gamer identity. Finally, the discussion of games' social and political context indicates that gamers do indeed care about such discourse, despite occasional insistence that games should not be political. Our findings demonstrate that gamers care not just about the form that games take, but also about their cultural and ethical context.

An implication here is that academics should take the clue from reviewers in our study that games and games research should not only be ethically created, containing gestures toward performative ethics within the context of the game or academic content but should also be created under ethical conditions within game studios and academia respectively (Ruberg 2017; 2019). Media, and particularly games, are inherently political in that they engage with constructed meaning derived from an external world in such a way that ideas and perspectives might be impacted or reassessed, and later acted upon in the real world. "Real world" meaning may be reconfigured or recapitulated within the fictional worlds of games, even as players

express interest in escapism within games. This expression is itself a political action implying that even temporarily separating from a stressful or problematic external reality has merit for whatever reason, whether one is escaping the reality of a diverse world with which one is uncomfortable, or whether one is escaping the reality of an external world that is oppressive to the one based on their identity as an LGBTQ+ person.

This study investigated online game reviews, which are public and anonymous. Even those of us within the LGBTQ+ community have individual perceptions and beliefs based on generational, class, race, or other dividers that make it difficult for one person or group to account for the diverse spectrum of perspectives within the community(ies) of Queer gamers. As the literature suggests, LGBTQ+ identity is multifaceted and constantly evolving, and it should not be considered a fixed point or merely a target demographic for developers (Shaw, 2014; Adler, Campbell, & Keilty, 2014; Condis, 2015; Vermeulen et al., 2011). While we could see how gamers in general view and evaluate the four gender and sexuality inclusive video games, we believe that future studies should communicate with game players from LGBTQ+ communities directly and listen to their needs and thoughts. This is the only way to truly address gamers in a way that meets their needs and sparks their interests.

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