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KATEDRA SOCIOLOGIE, ANDRAGOGIKY A KULTURNÍ ANTROPOLOGIE

LGBTQ+ Representation in Video Games

The Power and the Other

Magisterská diplomová práce

Obor studia: Kulturní antropologie – Mediální studia

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Prohlašuji, že jsem magisterskou diplomovou práci na téma „*LGBTQ+ Representation in Video Games*" vypracoval samostatně a uvedl v ní veškerou literaturu a ostatní zdroje, které jsem použil.

V Olomouci dne   Podpis

Poděkování:

Tímto bych rád poděkoval Mgr. Jakubovi Havlíčkovi, Ph.D. za spolehlivou oporu a podnětné diskuse při konzultacích. Dále děkuji Mgr. Barboře Nohlové a Bc. Veronice Veselkové za cennou reflexi tématu a podnětné rady při psaní práce.

Anotace:

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá otázkami LGBTQ+ reprezentace ve videohrách. Hlavními východisky jsou teorie diskurzu Foucaulta, Fairclougha a Laclaua s Mouffeovou, dále pak game studies skrze Švelcha a Bogosta a queer game studies skrze Rubergovou a Palursona. Metodologicky práce vychází z Faircloughovy kritické diskurzivní analýzy, kterou aplikuje na korpus textů primárně ze sociální sítě Reddit. První část práce se zabývá přístupem herních studií a vývojářů k otázkám queer reprezentace. Ten lze charakterizovat jako balancování mezi inkluzivitou a nekonfliktností s konzervativními trhy. Druhá část poukazuje na přístup LGBTQ+ hráčů k reprezentaci v herním průmyslu. Ti poukazují na četné problémy od marginalizace queer postav k jejich stereotypizaci, která však může sloužit k prohloubení důvěryhodnosti daných osob. Třetí část rozebírá meziskupinové vztahy v herním průmyslu a nástroje, které hráči užívají k ovlivnění tvůrců her. Ty se skládají především z metod přímé zpětné vazby a diskuse, jejíž přijetí je však rozdílné v závislosti na každém z herních studií.

Klíčová slova: game studies, diskurz, reprezentace, queer studies, videohry

Annotation:

This thesis discusses the questions of LGBTQ+ representation in video games. The main theoretical framework consists of discourse theories of Foucault, Fairclough, and Laclau with Mouffe, game studies through Švelch and Bogost, and queer game studies represented by Ruberg and Palurson. The methodology of this work is based on Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, which is applied to a corpus of texts primarily from the social site Reddit. The first part of the work focuses on the approach game developers and creators choose when creating a queer

representation, which can be summarized as balancing between inclusivity and avoiding conflict with conservative markets. The second part delves into the stances LGBTQ+ gamers express towards queer representation in games. They point out various issues, such as marginalization and stereotypization, which can be however used to improve the credibility of characters. The third part takes a look at the intergroup relationships in the gaming industry and tools gamers use to influence the developers. These consist primarily of direct feedback and discussion, the efficiency of which varies depending on the game studio.

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Introduction

*"Mass effect had you fighting against eldrich machines
that looked like giant ass Squids and Cuttlefish, but Bisexuals
in space? That's a tad too far.* (Worm_Scavenger, 2022)"

This is how one of the users of the internet forum Reddit describes the irony of struggles of queer representation in video games. He points out how in settings where magic, faster-than-light spaceships, or sentient weapons are the norm, we can still find sparse imagery of queerness. And even if we do, it is very often marginalized, stereotyped and the cause of uproar in the wider gaming community. Some voices reject any sort of LGBTQ+ representation as being forced, political pandering, and "shoving the gays down our throats". The other side of this conflict calls for wider representation, a representation that is fulfilling and can serve as role models for queer people, a representation that matters. The creators of video games themselves are caught in a web of business interests and desire for artistic expression that can either support or reject any notion of queerness in gaming.

This diverse landscape is the basis for the topic of this thesis. We find ourselves in an era that relies heavily on the new media and virtual world for anything from news dissemination to artistic self-expression. In this growing field of human interaction and activity, the video game industry plays a major role on levels both obvious and subtle. The importance of focusing on gaming from the academic viewpoint can be demonstrated by several metrics. The estimated profits of the gaming industry as a whole exceed 180 billion dollars for 2021 (Dobrilova, 2022), with 11916 new titles released (SteamDB, 2022a) and a peak of

over 27 million concurrent active users on Steam[1] alone (SteamDB, 2022b). Several major esports events took place in 2021, such as the *League of Legends World Championship, The International: DOTA2 Championships,* or *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive Major Championships* streamed across several platforms and attracting millions of viewers. All of these bring together people from across the globe, allowing them to engage in a discussion and share ideas and experiences. The gaming industry, however, is not only a place of positive interaction and blooming creativity, which is best demonstrated by the ongoing sexual harassment and gender discrimination investigation in ActivisionBlizzard (Zweizen, 2021). As the gaming community does not exist in a vacuum, it is influenced by the politics of major world powers, such as Chinese censorship of the gaming platforms (Camillo, 2021) or the efforts of the European Union to regulate gambling features in games (Cerulli-Harms et al., 2020).

All of these topics and many more are valid options for academic research, which is currently mostly situated in the field of recently established game studies. This interdisciplinary approach draws from media studies, cultural studies, cultural anthropology, game design, and numerous other fields to properly describe, analyze and understand the ways people play (Payne & Huntemann, 2019). While the most common connotation with game studies involves video games, it is worth noting game studies study tabletop gaming (e. g. Konieczny, 2019) or playing games in the broadest sense as well (Walz & Deterding, 2014). One of the subfields of this discipline, queer game studies, focuses on both LGBTQ+ representation in the games themselves, the

[1] One of the most widely used PC game distribution platforms with major community elements, such as discussion forums or modding support.

issues of queer people working in the industry, and many other ways of bringing queerness into gaming (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017).

This thesis seeks to examine the discourses of the game industry, queer gamers, and mainstream gamers regarding LGBTQ+ representation in this medium and the interactions of these groups. How do gamers see this topic and what issues do they identify? How is queer representation handled by the game studios and individual developers and what are the possible impacts on their business strategies? In order to answer these questions, we employ critical discourse analysis and multimodal analysis. The framework consists of a discussion about discourse based on works of Michel Foucault, John Fiske, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and other authors and the findings from game studies and queer game studies represented by Jaroslav Švelch, Matthew Payne, Bonnie Ruberg to name a few.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter describes the methodology of the work, Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, and Gunther Kress' multimodal analysis alongside the analyzed sample, which consists mainly of communities on the social site Reddit, Twitter posts, and official statements of game studios. Furthermore, this chapter discusses the ethics of the research and reflects the position of the researcher in this study. The second chapter focuses on this topic's wider social and academic context. Its first part concerns the discussion of the concept of discourse based on the works of Foucault, Fiske, Mouffe, Laclau, Marianne Jørgensen, and Louise Phillips. The second and third parts introduce the various concepts of game studies and queer game studies, ranging from queering the process of gaming itself to the ongoing discussion about power relations within the game industry. The fourth and the fifth parts are focused on the social context of queer representation in media,

important milestones, and influential figures alongside a brief history of queer representation in video games. The third chapter focuses on the developer studios, individual creators, and games themselves. We point out the ambiguity in the institutional approach of various studios contrasted with the personal fight for queer representation of individuals and the importance of explicit identity in the games. The fourth chapter discusses the stances of queer gamers, who value the steps taken towards representation but point out many problematic themes, such as erasure and marginalization of the LGBTQ+ subgroups or the usage of stereotypes. The focus of the fifth chapter are the wider themes present in intergroup relationships in the gaming community. These consist of antagonization and usage of soft power to push certain discourses. The final chapter discusses various themes for further research surfacing throughout the thesis, such as the importance of elaborate characters when it comes to representation and the use of contrast in game design.

1. Methodology

As stated above, the topic of this study are the discourses surrounding the LGBTQ+ representation within video games. We aim to examine them through critical discourse analysis and multimodal analysis to contextualize the relationships between the three primary groups (game producers, queer gamers, and mainstream gamers) on the discourse level and point out possible issues present in this often-heteronormative entertainment industry. The primary research question is: How is the queer representation in video games perceived by the three primary groups? Secondary questions seek to answer the specifics of the general themes and the interaction of often conflicting discourses. What issues do they identify? Is the representation in particular games viewed as tokenization or are there examples of more nuanced and non-stereotypical representation? What are the main practices and challenges of construing this representation? How do the main three groups relate to each other? This chapter discusses the analytical tools used, sampling, coding, ethics and concludes with a brief explanation of the author's standpoint.

1.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

The primary research tool used to answer these questions is critical discourse analysis as described by Fairclough in *Language and Power* (2015). This approach is based on examining usually textual products of human activity and dissecting three main scopes of their social life – description, interpretation, and explanation (Fairclough, 2015). The first level of analysis – description – focuses on the linguistic structures and the formal properties of the text (Ibid: 58). When approaching the interpretation level, Fairclough emphasizes *"the relationship between text and interaction – with seeing the text as the product of a process of*

production (Ibid: 58)." Above both these components rests the explanation plane, which roots the interpretations and the text itself in broader processes and phenomena (Ibid: 59). Naturally, all of these elements are intrinsically linked and changes on any of the levels influence outcomes of the analysis on the remaining two. The main reason for using CDA, in this case, is primarily the nature of the analyzed material, which will be discussed later, and which consists principally of textual sources across several platforms. More importantly, critical discourse analysis "*in focusing upon social change, for example, it identifies ongoing change in interactions and texts in their relation to longer-term changes in practices and in structures* (Ibid: 49)," which is one of the main themes in this study. Through this, we aim to uncover not only the underlying themes in LGBTQ+ representation in video games but the relationships between participating actors.

Naturally, Fairclough's approach is not the uncriticized holy grail of critical discourse analysis. In *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* (2002) Jørgensen and Phillips offer a valid critique of several approaches[2] to discourse analysis and offer their improvements upon the method. Most notably, when discussing the issues of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, the authors offer us the concept of *order of discourse*, which is described as: "*a social space in which different discourses partly cover the same terrain which they compete to fill with meaning each in their own particular way* (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 56)." This is crucial for understanding the nature of LGBTQ+ representation in video games, as this is our *order of discourse* and the main point of this research is to uncover, how the competing groups relate to each other and construe their discourse. While the underlying analytical approach of this thesis is based upon Fairclough's works, the approach of Jørgensen and Phillips holds major influence on the

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[2] Critical discourse analysis, discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe and discursive psychology.

conceptualization of the research topic and the final results, as they highlight the need for a broader approach to discourses and the interplay between them. Furthermore, their work touches upon important questions, such as the position of the researcher in the discourse, which will be referenced later.

1.2 Multimodal Analysis

While the main focus of this work are the texts and opinions regarding the queer representation in video games, we cannot entirely ignore the games themselves and the present imagery. For this reason, when approaching the characters and themes the games display, we have chosen to base our approach on the multimodal analysis of Gunther Kress (2010). The main point of this method is to examine various societally and culturally conditioned modes and their interplay (such as image, speech, gesture, and many more) to discern the meaning of the analyzed work (Kress, 2010: 79). While the perspective of purely multimodal analysis of in-game elements is represented seldom in this thesis, it serves as important groundwork for understanding the standpoints of the examined actors. Furthermore, concepts pertaining to the representation of participating groups, such as non-representation (Machin, 2016: 146-147) are applicable even for the purely textual material we analyze.

1.3 Sampling and Coding

The analyzed material consists primarily of threads and individual comments within Reddit communities r/gaymers, r/queensofleague, and r/gaming. The primary sample includes 35 threads, each of variable length. The timeframe includes discussions from December 2020 to February 2022. Reddit is a social network organized into various communities, where users discuss news and impulses from other users within self-contained threads. The scope of topics and

themes present on the site is sweeping, from discussions about the world[3] and local[4] news to communities dedicated to specific YouTubers[5] or stock market trading.[6] Furthermore, the threads are often *cross-posted* in more communities, blurring the lines, and adding additional layers of discussion. Each of these communities has its moderators and specific rules for posting both new threads and commenting in them. All users appear under fictitious usernames, although many people do not shy away from posting their pictures or personal stories in dedicated communities, creating an environment that can be both anonymous and intimate depending on one's preferences. A common practice is also the creation of *throwaway accounts,* which serve to post content users would prefer not connected with their primary account for whatever reason.

The most active community regarding LGBTQ+ topics in gaming is r/gaymers. It aims to offer a safe space for LGBTQ+ gamers and allies to discuss anything related to queer themes in video games, however, it is very lenient with allowed topics, the primary rules consisting of prohibition of selfie posts. This community, founded on the 11th of January 2011, has over two hundred thousand members as of January 2022. Another important source of discussion is r/queensofleague, which focuses primarily on Riot's *League of Legends* and supporting media. This community is heavily leaning into satirical takes on the elements of the game and its characters from the viewpoint of minority players. Posts here are mostly light-hearted and often sexualized, however, the discussions often point out rather interesting aspects of all kinds of representation within *League of Legends*, regardless of being based on gender, ethnicity, sexuality,

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[3] E. g. r/worldnews.
[4] E. g. r/news – focused primarily on the USA.
[5] E. g. r/PewdiepieSubmissions.
[6] E. g, r/wallstreetbets and r/StockMarket.

or even age of the in-game characters. This community exists since August 2019 and has currently over twenty-three thousand members. The last major community from which we draw our data is r/gaming, founded in September 2007 and surpassing thirty-one million members. This community is the broadest in its scope of topics, consisting of gaming news, controversies, opinions of specific titles, and many more. Due to this, exclusively LGBTQ+-related topics are much rarer however they do appear and offer insight into the viewpoint of the mainstream gaming community. Further important sources include official statements of game companies and personal Twitter posts of numerous people active in the game development, which will be further elaborated upon as the need arises.

An important fact that needs clarification is the demography of the sample. Due to the sheer volume of material and its nature, it was decided not to delve into the composition of the individuals responsible for the analyzed text. In my opinion and the intentions of chosen methods, the main focus are the opinions presented by various social actors (Fairclough, 2015: 10), rather than their specific affiliations and personal information. Due to this, while the main three groups are referred to as developers, LGBTQ+ gamers, and mainstream gamers in the text it is not implied that every one of the speakers is firmly part of his given group, e. g. while Worm_Scavenger referenced in the introduction posted his comment in the thread of r/gaymers we do not infer his gender and sexual orientation from this despite referring to him as a representative of queer gamers. The division is based purely on the attitudes expressed to the researched topic and the institutional settings.

Another significant fact regarding the analyzed material is the context of the games themselves. First of all, most of the referenced titles are primarily

aimed at the PC gaming community with some minor overlap with console gaming. This leaves out the entire massive plane of mobile gaming, which however was not present in the statements of the actors in any significant way. The first chapter focuses primarily on the game developers and the games themselves. The main representatives are Riot Games with their flagship title *League of Legends* (2009) and ActivisionBlizzard through *Overwatch* (2016) and the *Warcraft* universe.

League of Legends is a MOBA[7] title taking place in the setting of fictional *Runaterra,* which can be characterized as a fantasy universe with steampunk elements. This title has lately gone through major shifts regarding its storytelling, with numerous new games[8] in the setting which expand upon the lore of the world and its characters (*champions)* and a successful Netflix series *Arcane* (Beck et al. (prod.), 2021) further supported by several short stories. The relevance of this title is based on its wide popularity, with over 180 million active users in the last year (Riot Games, 2021a) combined with a very active queer themed community of r/queensofleague and the studio's expressed focus on inclusivity of representation (Riot Games, 2021b).

ActivisionBlizzard's titles *Overwatch* and *World of Warcraft* (2005) are similarly to *League of Legends* narratively rich, though these titles belong to different genres – team-based shooter[9] and MMORPG[10] respectively. Once more the studio has

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[7] Multiplayer online battle arena. Genre focused on shorter (20-60 minutes) games, where two teams of five players compete to destroy the enemy base in the bird's eye perspective.

[8] *Legends of Runaterra* (Riot Games, 2020), *Ruined King: A League of Legends Story* (Airship Syndicate, 2021).

[9] Teams of players compete for goals in a more fast-paced fashion than in MOBAs with third person perspective present.

[10] Massively multiplayer online role-playing game. Large quantities of players simultaneously explore the game world, interacting with non-player characters and each other, completing various task usually connected to the narrative arc.

explicitly committed to adequately represent the real-world diversity in their fiction (Bottegoni, 2021). All of these titles include queer representation in both obvious and subtle ways, making them ideal for further analysis and contextualization with the interpretation of social actors. Further titles and studios, such as BioWare's RPGs *Dragon Age* (2009-2014) and *Mass Effect* (2007-2017) series or Owlcat's *Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous* (2021) and numerous indie titles will have their specifics explained as needed, due to the fact they figure in the analyzed statements.

The coding of the analyzed material was based on principles presented by Saldaña in *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (2013). The primary approach chosen was descriptive coding, which "*summarizes in a word or short phrase – most often as a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data* (Saldaña, 2013: 88)," to distill the main themes common in each of the discussed groups. The main recurring themes in the case of official statements were "inclusion" and "commitment", which was however in some cases disputed by individual creators, which was coded as "fight for inclusion". In the case of the LGBTQ+ gamers, the common themes included "stereotypization", "fetishization", "uncertainty", "tokenization" and "focus on profit rather than true representation". The mainstream gamers reflect a variety of opinions ranging from "hostility" and "exclusion" to those corresponding to the queer communities. The reoccurrence of various themes across groups was used to form a network of relationships based on the notions of comparison and multivocality (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 149-152). These show us the ways the groups relate to each other, and the deeper practices and discourses present across the gaming community, which will be presented in the main body of this study.

The structure of the sample and the themes of interconnectedness that arose from the analysis have also led to dividing this thesis into segments corresponding with the three main groups of interest, rather than for example the specific discussed games or the explanation frameworks of each discourse. This will help to show the often-conflicting currents of interpretation next to each other and in the context of their wider social connections.

1.4 Ethics

The main ethical questions of this research surround the primary online sources and anonymization. The problem is whether to fully hide the identities of Reddit and Twitter users sharing their opinions of the LGBTQ+ topics regardless of them being negative or positive. After careful consideration, it has been decided to cite all comments, threads, and tweets using the real usernames of the authors and in their original form using the following reasoning. First of all, the current edition of the APA citation style contains specific guidelines for citing these sources and considers them a regular online source, which is to be cited as is, including nonstandard spelling, etc. (American Psychological Association, 2020). Secondly, in most cases, the citations in this work are naturally anonymized by the virtue of being associated with forum usernames, rather than real names and personal information. Furthermore, all referenced comments are being shared in openly accessible threads, which turns them into an aspect of the public domain. While other authors elect to fully anonymize their interlocutors in similar (although focused on more stigmatized medium – pornography) studies (Brennan, 2019), above mentioned reasons lead me to cite all statements directly and openly.

1.5 Position of the Researcher

In order to fully contextualize and understand this research, it is necessary to discuss the motivations and the personal standpoint of the researcher. I also believe this will serve to further explain the choice of the analyzed material, the structure of the work, and some of its findings and conclusions. The first relevant information is the fact, that I am by no means an outside observer. Gaming has been part of my life since childhood, starting with *Bomberman* (Hudson Soft, 1990) and *Vlak* (Miroslav Němeček, 1993) which were available on the computer in my after-school care. Afterward, I have played many titles over the years with the *Warcraft* and *Dragon Age* series holding a special place in my heart. This has influenced the sampling on the video game level, as I knew where LGBTQ+ themes were present a priori to delving into the discourses of the wider gaming community. That being said, I have also followed the discussed Reddit communities prior to starting my research as a passive observer,[11] which was also one of the impulses for conducting this research, as the issue of LGBTQ+ representation is periodically discussed in r/gaymers. Furthermore, the casual homophobia often presents in-game chats of competitive titles, such as *League of Legends.* While being a part of the "regular" trash-talk which is an issue of its own (e. g. Paul, 2018), it still raises questions about the perception of LGBTQ+ people in the gaming community, regardless of whether they are real players or fictitious characters.

As a member of both the gaming and LGBTQ+ community, I have numerous biases. I believe many of the current trends in the gaming industry are

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[11] A *lurker* in the Reddit slang. A user that does not post threads or comments, often not even having a Reddit account.

detrimental for the end-users, such as over-abundance of DLC[12] content or the focus on short-term profit instead of building a lasting satisfied customer base. I believe LGBTQ+ themes should become the norm across various media to serve as positive examples for people struggling with their identity and as a way to show the more conservatively oriented parts of the population that many of their fears and prejudices are unfounded in the spirit of the contact hypothesis. Furthermore, when discussing the position of researcher in discourse analysis Jørgensen and Phillips emphasize:

"What right do we have to contribute with such new and critical perspectives, one may ask. As social constructionists, we do not have the right endowed by possession of a final truth. But we do have the right that all people, in principle, have to intervene in democratic debate with a truth that can be discussed, in order to further our visions for a better society. (2002: 211)."

Due to this, while I will do my best to remain as objective as possible, I may feel the urge to express my personal feelings regarding some of the discussed topics in order to offer further insider perspectives. I believe this to be relevant by the virtue of the fact that just as the analyzed texts, I too am subject to the discourses present. However, I will limit these interjections only to points to which I believe I can offer deeper insight.

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[12] Downloadable content, usually smaller expansions to the base game that add features, ranging from cosmetic changes to new stories and characters.

2. Theoretical Framework

In order to truly understand the topic at hand, it is first necessary to delve deeper into several theoretical concepts, which we draw from. First, we will discuss the cornerstone term of this work, discourse – its origins, and the approaches that were crucial for this study. Further, we will explain the sources of game studies and queer game studies and the relevant theories and viewpoints present in these disciplines. The final two segments of this chapter are dedicated to a brief explanation of overall themes present in current and historic media regarding LGBTQ+ representation, as these themes and tropes are present in gaming as well and a summary of queer imagery in gaming to gain an understanding of the scope of the discussed topic.

2.1 Discourse

The origins of the theory of discourse lie with Michel Foucault. In his works, he defines this phenomenon as:

"a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation (…); it is made up of limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined. Discourse in this sense is not an ideal, timeless form that also possesses history (…); it is, from beginning to end, historical – a fragment of history, a unity and discontinuity in history itself, posing the problem of its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality (…) (Foucault, 2002: 132)."

This is accompanied by the concept of discursive practice, which is to be seen as a result of certain historical and social groundworks rather than stemming from human individuality (Ibid). From this viewpoint derive the many revisions and expansions of this concept, some of which are crucial for this thesis.

The first of these views is represented by the author of the primary method of this work, Norman Fairclough. He sees language (and through it discourse) as a social practice, which means that:

"There is not an external relationship 'between' language and society, but an internal and dialectical relationship. Language is a part of society; linguistic phenomena are *social phenomena of a special sort, and social phenomena* are *(in part) linguistic phenomena* (Fairclough, 2015: 56)."

This is relevant when trying to explain the intricate relationship between the opinions present in texts and the wider social context, which is the aim of this research.

This viewpoint of discourse is supplemented by the themes of fluidity and openness of discourse present in the works of Mouffe and Laclau. One of their main points is that social processes are never a final product, things are constantly in flux and various discourses change, and discourse is seen as the process of fixation of meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). This approach allows for the linking of competing discourses in *the field of discursivity*, which is the overall sum of all themes connected to a given phenomenon regardless of their presence in discourses (Ibid: 111). This is expanded upon by Jørgensen and Phillips through the concept of *order of discourse* discussed earlier.

Last but not least, John Fiske, similarly to Mouffe and Laclau, emphasizes the openness of power relations regarding popular culture. In his works, discourse is followed through the manifestations of popular culture, including the precursor of modern video games – video game arcades (Fiske, 1989), providing us with valuable reference and basis for our analysis. One of the main themes present is the *semiotic resistance,* which he argues allows for the wide masses to *"exert control over the meanings of their lives, a control that is typically denied them in their material social conditions* (Ibid: 10)." This in turn allows the people to

gain self-esteem and confidence for social action. As we will see further, this concept of seizing control over the meanings present (or possible) within video games is widespread.

These are the primary starting points for the conceptualization of discourse in this thesis, with the works of Jørgensen and Phillips being the crux of focus. Supplementing all this with the viewpoint of Theo van Leeuwen of discourses as social cognitions used for representing social practices in a text (2008: 6), we come to view discourses in this work as fields of human cognition used to construe various meanings in the *order of discourse* which aim to exert control either over their own lives or lives of others and which are based on the cultural, social, and historical context of each specific actor group.

2.2 Game Studies

The topic of game studies is grounded in the works of Johan Huizinga, primarily the study of play in human culture in *Homo Ludens* (1949). Here he points out the importance of play across the globe not only in childhood but throughout our lives. Furthermore, he points out that many aspects of play in modern society are losing their main charm and appeal through rationalization and organization as demonstrated by professional sports.

With the proliferation of computers and various other electronic devices in the last decades and the connected rise of games present on these platforms, academia has found the need to start researching their impact on human life. Drawing from anthropology, cultural studies, sociology, psychology, and various other fields, the origins of game studies (also called ludology) can be found in the 1990s through such works as Gonzalo Frasca's discussion about the relationship between ludology and narratology (1999).

Despite being a young field, game studies have already gained a significant following, delving into a broad spectrum of topics from the use of videogames in education (Feenstra & O'Neill, 2016), inner workings of community in the virtual world (Bainbridge, 2012), the game creators themselves (Nieborg, 2021) to the discussion of the role of the end-user in content creation (Newman, 2019).

The main impulse from game studies important for this thesis is the research concerning the relationship between the consumers and the game makers. The main point being demonstrated is the ambiguity of agency, or rather agencies present in the gaming world due to the complex network of various actors: players, game creators, independent modders, software pirates, shareholders of the production studios, and many more. This leads to the conclusion that the traditional approaches to agency and these relationships require reframing not only in the context of the gaming world but the broader social situation (Muriel & Crawford, 2018). Further arguments about power relations in gaming can be seen in the discussion about cheating in the spacefaring simulator *EVE Online* (2003), where the distinction between fair play and cheating is highly contextual (Bergstorm, 2019). This points to the recurring theme in the discussion about power relations in gaming: everything is highly contextual and should be judged on a case-by-case basis, rather than making broad statements about the nature of this topic – sometimes the relationship can be described as the typical producer-consumer one, whole other examples can demonstrate more open and interactive features.

2.3 Queer Game Studies

A subfield of game studies significant for this thesis is queer game studies. Their main focus is the study of various manifestations of queerness present within the

game industry (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017). Questions of gender, sexuality, and overall "otherness" are present in numerous forms, and while the direct depiction of queer characters is the most obvious one, other ways of queering videogames exist. One such option is the intentional aim to play the games in a way that contradicts the original idea of the creators. This can manifest either as breaking the game environment using exploits[13] and bugs (Halberstam, 2017) or forming one's queer reading of the themes present in the title (Krobová, Moravec & Švelch, 2015), which is however not exclusive to gaming as we will discuss later.

For the purpose of this research, however, the most important role is played by the study of direct representation within the medium. Existing research suggests significant ambivalence of representation and its reception by queer gamers (Pelurson, 2017). This is further reinforced by the themes of exclusion present in the process of game-making itself (Shaw, 2009). However, due to part of the focus lying with the game studios and creators themselves, we also base our research on the perspective of queer game makers and the recent advances in this field (Ruberg, 2020). Furthermore, queer game studies are based on the theories present in the general field of queer studies. This means much of the findings draw from concepts such as Butler's gender performativity (e. g. Biscop, Malliet & Dhoest, 2019), Crenshaw's intersectionality (1989), or the idea of queer art of failure (Halberstam, 2011).

2.4 Media and the LGBTQ+ Representation

For the research of discourses, the social context is as important as the academic groundwork for it offers insight into the explanation levels of discourse as per

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[13] Which however begs the question, whether various forms of in-game cheating are to be considered queer.

Fairclough. In the case of queer representation in video games, we need to first consider the wider themes and issues of this representation in more traditional media such as television or literature.

We will be basing most of this framework on the themes present in the American media environment. This is warranted by the fact that over the decades, American media presence has heavily influenced the global mediascape (Katerji, 2014). Moreover, the majority of the significant game studios are based in the United States, with the ESRB[14] keeping a watchful eye over the game content, in a similar fashion to Motion Picture Association's film rating system. While many countries in the world have their own rating systems, e. g. PEGI[15] for European Union and Israel, the ratings rarely differ and are based on similar principles as the American ones, such as assigning warnings about profanity, graphic violence, or sexual content in the title.

The attitudes of the American popular media towards queerness and general otherness have been long subject to the Motion Picture Production Code (also known as the Hays Code) which was enforced from 1934 to 1968. This code prohibited the depiction of various themes considered morally questionable at the time including but not limited to homosexuality, interracial relationships, overindulgence, and set strict rules for the display of moral values and family life (Billheimer, 2019). While the societal change during the 60s and 70s led to the abandonment of the Code, it can be argued its legacy is still alive and some of its themes carry over to these days, as demonstrated by the reluctance to display queer characters (Eaklor, 2012).

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[14] Entertainment Software Rating Board. US based self-regulatory organization responsible for assigning age ratings to video games.
[15] Pan European Game Information.

While the media presence of queer characters has exponentially increased in the recent past (Townsend & Deerwater, 2021), this trend has not remained without issue. One of the widely debated topics in the current media environment is the question of queerbaiting. This phenomenon is described as *"implying either in the text or in commentary same-gender desire between characters, but never following through on it by depicting a real relationship* (Popova, 2018). As we will discuss later, not only does this happen explicitly in the gaming environment, but the inclusion of optional queer plotlines can be seen as a facet of this phenomenon. Before the allusions of queerbaiting, however, a widespread theme of queer coding was prevalent in the media. This principle is based on representing the underlying queerness of characters through indirect traits and stereotypes or modeling them based on real-world queer people (Jaigirdar, 2021). This is most commonly mentioned in connection with Disney fairytale villains however the theme is more prevalent and has been present since the days of the Hays Code (Mislak, 2015).

Beyond these two general concepts, we can find numerous tropes connected to the display of queer characters. The "bury your gays" trope is based on the premise of unfortunate endings and general suffering of explicitly LGBTQ+ characters ("Bury Your Gays", 2022). Numerous statistics show (e. g. Heather, 2016), that this particular theme is still prevalent, especially in television shows. Furthermore, the existence of this trope in video games has been noticed by the gaming community (Heather, 2018). Other tropes include "armored closet gay[16]",

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[16] A homosexual man that loudly states his disgust by other homosexuals and their appearance in public ("Armoured Closet Gay", 2022).

"but not too gay[17]" and "gay panic[18]". As we will see further, all of these trends and concepts have their impact or equivalent in the gaming world proper.

2.5 Brief History of Queers in Video Games

The journey of LGBTQ+ representation in gaming begins with the French studio Froggy Software and their *Le Crime du Parking* (1985) (Donovan, 2010: 144). In this crime story, the murderer is revealed to be a homosexual man named Paco. A more famous milestone is however the title *Moonmist*[19] (1986) which features a failed relationship between two women: Vivien and Deirdre. Throughout the 80s and 90s, we can see queer characters occasionally appear, usually in supporting or antagonistic roles, such as deceased Danny McCormack and his boyfriend in *The Orion Conspiracy*[20] (1995). One of the popular examples of early representation is the same-sex marriage present in *Fallout 2*[21] (1998), mainly due to the fact that legal same-sex unions were rare in the real world[22].

One of the major milestones is the first installments of *The Sims* (2000). This life simulation allowed the player avatars to date, anyone, regardless of gender. While according to some accounts, this feature was included by an accident at first (Greer, 2018), the studio embraced this and eventually incorporated it into their marketing strategy (DarkWillUser, 2011). The importance of this lies with the sheer popularity of *The Sims* franchise, which is hailed as one of the best-

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[17] The practice of toning down the displays of affection of same-sex couples compared to heterosexual ones ("But Not Too Gay", 2022).
[18] Objections of real-world authorities to displays of homosexual behavior in media and consequent removal of such characters ("Gay Panic", 2022).
[19] An interactive fiction about the investigation of Tresyllian Castle in England.
[20] A graphic adventure about investigation of the death of Danny McCormack.
[21] An RPG set in postapocalyptic United States.
[22] Only Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, and the Netherlands recognized same-sex unions on the state-wide scope.

selling video game franchises of all time (Rhinewald & McElrath-Hart, 2016) across its four installments, each with countless DLCs.

The most famous and discussed examples of queer characters in gaming are present in the works of BioWare. The first herald of this was Juhani in the RPG *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*[23] (2003). Further BioWare titles such as *Jade Empire*[24] (2005), *Mass Effect* series, and *Dragon Age* series also feature prominent queer characters and allow players to engage in relationships with them. Due to the fact that the latter two titles are often referenced by the actors of this study, we will discuss them further in later chapters. Since the days of BioWare's queer pioneering, the number of LGBTQ+ characters in widely popular games grows, through games like *Stardew Valley*[25] (2016), *Hades*[26] (2020), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*[27] (2011), and many more. As we will discuss further, however, this representation is often construed as optional and depending purely on the player's choices and desires.

An important part of the game industry are indie titles and titles created by small independent studios. In this environment, queer themes are far more abundant than in the big-budget mainstream. The genres range from visual novels to adventure games and many more. One of the most popular examples of this is *Gone Home*[28] (2013), which is centered around the coming of age of young Samantha. Furthermore, the subgenre of dating simulators is rich in queer-

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[23] An RPG set in the universe of Star Wars long before the movie saga.
[24] An action RPG in fictitious far-east Asia themed setting.
[25] Farming simulation with heavy role-playing elements.
[26] Action role-playing roguelite focused on Greek mythology. Roguelite genre is based on tackling procedurally generated rooms with enemies over and over again.
[27] An RPG set in Nordic-inspired province of a fantasy world.
[28] An exploration adventure with no specific set goal.

themed titles such as *Coming Out on Top*[29] (2014), *Monster Prom*[30] (2018), or *Butterfly Soup*[31] (2017).

The overall state of queer representation in gaming is however still somewhat marginal. As Greer (2018) points out, out of the thousands of games released every year only a fraction features any queer characters at all and only eight main characters are consistently identified as queer regardless of player choice. This ambiguity and disparity lead us back to the topic of this thesis. How do the actors present in the game industry deal with this kind of representation, the pressure to be more inclusive, and surrounding issues? In the next chapter, we will start answering this question, starting with the game studios and developers.

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[29] A dating simulator visual novel centered around college graduate.
[30] A dating simulator set in a fantasy high school.
[31] A visual novel centered around queer high school girls.

3. Developers

When considering the questions of queer representation in the gaming industry, it is only natural we start with the creators of the games on both individual and institutional levels. These are the social actors that determine the final form of the games, and the themes present. These are the people who hold the power over what is represented within the medium and how. But how do they actually achieve this? What are their approaches? How deeply do they care about the issue at hand? What does the end in-game result even look like?

3.1 The Institutions

On the institutional level of entire game studios, we can often see a very diplomatic approach. Various public statements and overall themes of communication emphasize *"creating worlds that are inhabited with characters that our players can understand, relate to, identify with, and enjoy, is critical to achieving our mission* (Bottegoni, 2021)."* At first glance, this looks like a positive attitude and commendable approach. There are however several glaring issues.

The first crucial explanation context of these statements is the timing of their publishment. This coincides with the June celebrations of LGBT Pride Month in the United States in the case of ActivisionBlizzard's statement. The same practice is present in Riot Games, only their celebrations are connected to the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia on May 17th (Riot Games, 2021b). Riot Games further reinforces this temporal division by publishing their first true depiction of homosexual relationship through the short story *Rise with Me* (Shaw, 2021) in June, again coinciding with the generally accepted timing of Pride Month. And while Riot promoted this occasion by stating this is *"one of many more LGBTQIA+ stories to come* (Riot Games, 2021c),"*

this remains unfulfilled at the time this thesis is written, unless we count very heavily veiled allusions, which is a problem of its own we will discuss later. Returning to the question of timing, we must ask ourselves a question. Is putting all the queer stuff into its own little corner of the year truly acceptance and inclusion? Or is it a form of appeasement, giving the queer community their timeframe to express themselves so they can be non-represented for the rest of the year?

The connection of statements and Pride Month also offers a further framework for the interpretation and explanation of these statements, as they are beholden to the general social ethos. If we consider the political reasons for the existence of the Pride movement, which is the commemoration of the Stonewall riots and the push for LGBTQ+ rights (Library of Congress, 2022), we can conclude, that it would be a questionable business practice to alienate the liberal portion of society over the issues of minority representations. This political aspect of queer representation in media is further expanded upon through the commodification of LGBTQ+ identity as discussed by Skover and Testy (2002). When concluding their point of influence of media representation on the fight for legal rights, they point out that:

"the general populace looks at the LesBiGay identity as mediated by popular culture, and interprets it for what LesBiGays 'really' are. Since LesBiGays are not the majority of the populace and must appeal to the majority for its tolerance or acceptance, they must account for their commercially constructed identity. (Skover & Testy, 2002: 253)"

This leads us to the interconnectedness of the queerness in gaming with real-world attitudes of people to minorities. Should we see the demonization of queers through popular media, we can expect the public sentiment to oppose them as well. As we will see later, however, even positively meant representation

can meet with resistance from both the majority populace and the represented minorities.

This business-minded approach leads us to the realization that just as in the liberal environment companies show a more tolerant and open approach, when selling to markets in conservative parts of the world there need to be ways to adjust the product to the local market. This can be seen in the example of the *League of Legends* short story *Rise with Me,* whose various translations[32] censor the explicitly queer moment, where the two female protagonists share a kiss. This is warranted by the various local government policies limiting LGBTQ+ presence in the society, such as the Hungarian anti-LGBT laws (FRANCE 24, 2021) or the ban on effeminate men in Chinese media (Timmins, 2021).

This effect of local pressures on the global media industry is basically further confirmation of the merit of Arjun Appadurai's thoughts presented in *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy* (1990). There he discusses the effects of globalization on various aspects of human activity, including media. An important point for our work is the interaction of the global and local pressures, which influences the *mediascape:*

"Thus the central feature of global culture today is the politics of mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thus proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas of triumphantly universal and the resiliently particular. (Appadurai, 1990: 307-308)"

If we consider this statement from the perspective of the game industry, we can see that while the many genres can be considered universal, the local creators often add their spin on the mechanics or story. Furthermore, the governmental level of *ideoscape* often pushes at the developers either directly or

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[32] Most notably Chinese and Turkish.

indirectly through influenced players. This can be demonstrated in the case of the Taiwanese horror game *Devotion* (2019), which got pulled from Steam over a negative reference to the Chinese president (Arif, 2019), and the only way for the creators to make the game globally available was to become distributors themselves, as other services such as GOG[33] rejected the title as well (Farokhmanesh, 2020).

The reverse mechanisms however play a role as well. The studio Owlcat Games, with offices based in Cyprus and primarily Russia, does not shy away from displaying queer themes in their games, especially *Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous.* Despite the official stance of Russia on the so-called "*LGBT propaganda*", which consists of laws aiming to remove it (ARTICLE 19, 2013), the studio doesn't seem to be facing major pressures against the LGBTQ+ themes in their works. This may be connected to the transnational nature of the company or perhaps even the fact, that Russian law enforcement has not yet caught up with these events. Regardless, the existence of this title shows us, that the global sentiment of inclusivity can take root even in environments actively fighting against it.

An additional recurring theme in these statements is the emphasis on the internal diversity of the specific company. In the case of the ActivisionBlizzard statement, we are met with claims of:

"Tying back to our company purpose of bringing more people around the world together through our games, I continue to work to add even more diversity to our creative teams—especially in the areas of storyboarding, directing, and writing, which are where many ideas for our game universes are born. Combining Blizzard's long-held principles for story development and game design with a diverse base of highly talented creative professionals is a good way for us to achieve the goal of delivering stories that even more players around the world can enjoy. (Bottegoni, 2021)."

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[33] Another online distributor of video games similar to Steam.

Once more, we need to consider the specific context of the given companies, as per the case-by-case approach of Bergstorm (2019) and others. The recent history of ActivisionBlizzard is plagued by a string of controversies leading to major hits to the public opinion on the western markets. These range from overall tone-deafness in communication towards their player base (Grayson, 2018) to censorship of certain political statements in the esports scene (Clark, 2019). The greatest current issue of the company is however the ongoing investigation and lawsuit concerning serious allegations of workplace inequality and sexual harassment (Zweizen, 2021).

Since this issue became public in July of 2021, there have been numerous statements (Velocci, 2021) addressing this and it is hard to imagine that these themes would not have any impact on the publication of *Building Inclusive Game Worlds,* as the official lawsuit followed only three days after the Bottegoni statement, and the company has been under investigation for years. All of this we can argue, with the goal to placate the public and investors before the situation is resolved, as a similar statement was not released in any of the earlier years by the company. If we consider the fact, that Riot Games has faced a similar issue in the past (Carpenter, 2021), we can infer, that the need to issue these statements is indeed connected to the need for improving the public image and the marketing strategies of the companies. This is further supported by the fact, that similar statements are sparse (e. g. Calvin, 2019) and a recent phenomenon. As we will see further, the statements about inclusion are often disputed by the internal viewpoints and experiences of specific people.

This leads us to the question, where is the individual creator present in the process of game making and construing LGBTQ+ representation in gaming. As we will see in the following section, the agency of individuals is often somewhat

suppressed and needs to be negotiated in opposition to the above-mentioned bigger picture of business practices or individual conservative values.

3.2 The Individuals

When approaching the role of the individual in the game-making process, we need to consider the dynamics of each company somewhat separately, as the philosophies often differ as we will see throughout this section. Starting with Riot Games, while the above-mentioned statements emphasize that: *"our commitment is to better equip our developers with education and best practices so every player can see themselves in our characters and games* (Riot Games, 2021b)," the individual experience is somewhat contradictory. As the now-former employee of the company points out when discussing their efforts to push through a canon male/male relationship:

"[clears throat, preparing to make the only League of Legends tweet I've made in quite some time]

TF and Graves are married, and it's because I planted the seed of that shit when I worked at Riot despite getting In Trouble for it all the time

One of my managers aggressively told me to shut up every time I pitched stuff about their dynamic, and then later took credit for the same shit around the time of the Bilgewater Event, and I spitefully will never let that stand

fuck you, all the office political cloud i lost pitching that they're like a married couple with palpable sexual tension to the shittiest dudebro squad of writers still resulted in a fun set of characters (Giehl, 2020)."

This shows us the internal power struggles that dictate the possibility of representation in the gaming space. Furthermore, we can see that the conservative (or perhaps homophobic?) pressures inside the company itself can be very impactful, as the result is that the relationship in question remains uncanonized. The effect on the product itself here is, that the in-game representation limits itself

to queerbaiting hints and allusions. This creates a paradoxical situation when the primary author has to circumvent the official viewpoint by individually supporting the queer reading of his characters, which was originally supposed to be a part of the full story. This paradox leads us to the question, who is truly empowered to determine the intended reading of queerness in games. As we will see in the next two chapters, this responsibility falls mainly to the individual players, creating a loop back to the creators and studios who may, or may not, turn these interpretations explicitly canon.

On the other hand, when discussing the approach of BioWare studio and its creators we are met with a mostly unified viewpoint, where rather than a disjuncture between individual and institutional, the viewpoints are represented by the individuals. For example, Cameron Lee[34] expressed the opinions that:

"It goes back to fantasy fulfilment. Your fantasies may be different to mine in terms of gender, sexuality, race, class, how you look, all these things. We're not going to force you to be a fixed character, that you have to be this male guy that runs through the world and looks a certain way, walks a certain way. We even give you choices of voices. So why picking a gender or sexuality is an issue is beyond me. We have the technology to do it, and we have for a long time, so why not let your fantasy be different? (Garratt, 2014)."

And while this statement occurred eight years ago, we need to account for the fact that the studio has released only two new titles since his departure: *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) and *Anthem*[35] (2019). This commitment is widely accepted as a fact and more recent interviews with other employees support the ongoing validity of this sentiment (Phillips, 2017). This interview however points out a crucial detail:

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[34] Part of BioWare until 2016.
[35] Action multiplayer shooter role-playing game.

"BioWare takes shit from both sides. It brings the ire of more socially conservative players, but it also means, because BioWare has done more than most developers, unless it continues to do more than most developers, it gets stick for it. BioWare has to tread a careful path between doing enough and doing too much – you're going to annoy someone somewhere down the line (Ibid)*."*

This brings us back to the theme of business-minded balancing between various markets and further supports the notion, that even the most progressive big studios calculate their representation based on these metrics.

On the topic of conservative viewpoints in the game-making process, the director of the Quantic Dream studio offers us an extreme example of a possible approach. During a trial regarding sexual harassment and toxic working conditions, it came to light he publicly remarked that *"at Quantic Dream, we don't make games for fags"* and various other sexist comments (Wright, 2021). This brings us to two interesting topics. First of all, the LGBTQ+ gaming community was not entirely surprised by this as one user points out when discussing their title *Detroit: Become Human*[36] *(2018):*

"I'm so disappointed, but as much as I loved Detroit: Become Human, I definitely picked up those vibes while playing. (…) It felt really off as Marcus with that romance to the female Android, it came out of left field for me, especially thinking that there was some kind of romantic relationship between Marcus and his initial 'owner'. It constantly felt thrown in my face of 'Look how straight this relationship is!' Then, the only LGBT pair of Androids in the game are forced workers in the sex industry, and murder their owner/boss. (KulaanDoDinok, 2021)"

This points in the direction, that the imprint of creators is often deeply reflected upon by certain gamers and that the general tropes for LGBTQ+ representation are present in video games, as the mentioned pairing clearly plays on the "bury your gays" trope. The second topic is the attitude consumers and social media users may adopt towards similar aggressive statements or more

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[36] An adventure set in the near future where humans live alongside androids.

broadly any opinion or practice they do not agree with. We will discuss these strategies in the fifth chapter, as they are a part of wider practices in the gaming industry exhibited by all the gamers.

The line between individual and institutional is somewhat blurred when it comes to smaller indie studios. For example, the author of *Coming Out on Top* Obscurasoft is a single-person studio. This influences the way the author engages with the player base, as they were active on social media during production and agreed to an interview with a community member on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the game release (Terry'sBiggestFan, 2018). The result of such close interactions in cooperation with the usage of Kickstarter campaigns is not uncommon in the indie development scene and alters the power distance between the players and game makers through direct investment a chance for personalized interaction. The notions of personalized game making are supported by the claims of many creators present in the *Queer Games Avant-Garde* (Ruberg, 2020), which in turn points us to the existence of certain discourse among queer (or perhaps independent) creators concerning the process of game making. If we expand this by the above-discussed opinions of actors in larger studios, I believe we can infer that the *order of discourse* of LGBTQ+ representation from the viewpoint of individuals is leaning heavily into the desire for artistic expression and true inclusion within the games themselves.

As we can see, the power is located in several places when approaching creating explicit queer representation and each of the studios has its own discursive template to depicting queerness in games, whether striving for realism and inclusivity or rejecting it altogether. Some studios truly empower the individual creators, and some studios suppress their ideas, forcing them to seek external outlets to express their intentions. But the picture would be not complete

without reflecting upon the end product itself and how do these pressures manifest in the games, which are the primary texts players interpret later.

3.3 The Games

Once more we must preface this section by pointing out the uniqueness of each individual creation, just as each studio has its approach to the LGBTQ+ representation. That being said, we can notice some more general trends when examining queer characters across video games.

Starting with Riot Games' *League of Legends* and the supporting media, we meet a grand total of three (out of 159 and counting) properly represented and confirmed LGBTQ+ characters: Neeko, Leona, and Diana. Queer males are 'represented' by Varus, who is however a demonic entity possessing the conjoined corpses of a gay couple, which as we can imagine is seen as *somewhat* problematic. When discussing the broader universe Riot created, the number slightly expands, as there exist a trans character (The Traveler) and further background queer characters present in *Legends of Runaterra.* The Netflix show *Arcane*[37] all but confirms an attraction and budding romance between two lead characters, Vi and Caitlyn.

The important part here being the fact that all confirmations of character queerness are done primarily out of the game (*League of Legends)* itself. The player has to look for[38] the short stories explaining the lives and background of most characters, as the summaries in the game client are very generic short characterizations. And even then, these confirmations are often limited to one-

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[37] The actual relevance to the video game lore is however still unclear, as there are numerous contradictions on levels of timeline and previous background of many characters.
[38] The most recent and impactful stories tend to be accessible from the game client, however the archive is fully separate on official lore site (Riot Games, 2022).

time blurbs never to be referred to again. Or as is the case of the relationship between Ezreal and Ekko, two male *champions,* it is enclosed in its own parallel universe, where the relationship is somewhat ambiguous, as the explicit in-text confirmation is open to interpretation (Yichao, 2022). The author himself points out in one of his tweets which concludes with a link to this story that:

„Diff companies have different approaches. Some fragment their stories so a character is queer in core canon and primary expressions, but omits this for specific regions. But this creates a fractured continuity for different audiences and undermines the sense of character truth.

Others avoid having queer characters in the main expressions of their IP (in the game, in the films) but try to incorporate it in auxiliary media. That often feels worse: like a non-commitment to storytelling, or that queer characters can't ever be seen "on screen." Queerbaiting.

As a creator, it's immensely frustrating to have your hands tied in terms of how you can execute a story, and what you can confirm publicly without any doubts about a character's perceived attractions. Love and attraction are core to many stories and characters' journeys!

Despite all this, all you can do as a writer is write what you can, as authentically as possible. (Yichao, 2020)"

The context leads many to believe, that the portrayal in the short story is intended to be that of a romantic relationship. This returns us to the previous sections, further supporting the points of internal censorship and the creation of easily excisable queerness, which can be expunged for conservative markets to the discontent of creators themselves.

Based on the ActivisionBlizzard inclusivity statement, we would expect their games to be full of queer and otherwise marginalized characters and stories of their empowerment and positive imagery. Wrong. In the case of *World of Warcraft,* the long-time flagship of the Blizzard portion of the company, until very recently, all we could see was based on randomized gender of spawned

background NPCs or allusions to predominantly lesbian relationships. In the past, representatives of the studio claimed, that:

"We have I don't know how many quest designers. Probably seven? So there's a lot of people that plug away on story for this thing and certainly, like, our CDev's department's always chasing fiction and hooking characters and stuff like that, and we totally appreciate every component of our audience and want the game to kind of sing to everybody, so... Off the top of my head, I don't know if we're currently developing gay or lesbian characters but it's certainly a possibility. As long as the story's compelling... I think everything's gravy as long as it's just a really good character, well-rounded character that people really respond to, so I think it's totally an open possibility. (SoMuchMass, 2011)"

While this *"open possibility"* existed for nine years, change has occurred only recently with the last expansion *Shadowlands*, as we can find passing references to married same-sex couples of either gender. Additionally, one of the more notable characters of the expansion, Pelagos, is revealed to be transgender. Once more, however, queer representation is reduced to passing one-time remarks and out-of-game confirmations, such as the romance between characters of Flynn Rider and Matthias Shaw, who featured prominently in the previous expansion *Battle for Azeroth*, however, their relationship is referenced solely on the pages of supporting novel *Shadows Rising* (Roux, 2020). Another of Blizzard's popular titles, *Overwatch*, features two LGBTQ+ characters, Tracer, and Soldier 76. And again, their identity was expanded upon through short stories.

We could argue, that expanding characters through these methods is not inherently wrong, as the games are often constrained by their genre which does not allow for proper exploration of the narrative aspects. This however does not truly explain the reluctance to display hints of these topics in games themselves. Furthermore, if we juxtapose the approach to queerness in *World of Warcraft* to another title of the same genre, *Guild Wars 2* (2012), we can see that the decision to include queer characters in leading narrative positions is truly an individual

thing. The story of *Guild Wars 2* introduces us to the characters of Kasmeer Meade and Marjory Delaqua. The importance of these characters is twofold. First of all, they are recurring companions of the player character as he travels the world of Tyria, aiding each other in various crises, and they will feature prominently in the upcoming expansion *End of Dragons.* Secondly, these characters do not start as a couple, their relationship is expanded upon over the years[39] and they overcome various personal issues with the help of the player and each other, creating an image of a realistic relationship with all of its ups and downs on the background of the story of a fantasy world. All of the above examples however are already pointing in the direction of an issue we will discuss in the following chapter: the fetishization of female same-sex relationships in mainstream games.

BioWare studio is considered the pioneer of queer representation in gaming, with the *Dragon Age* series being the primary example. This fantasy role-playing game shows us a setting, where the main reason for oppression is based on access to magic, rather than sexuality (though racial tensions are also one of the heavily thematized topics). The three titles offer the player the choice to realize relationships with his companions, some of which can be considered bisexual (or perhaps pansexual), and some have an explicit gender preference. As Palurson discusses in his dissertation the approach of both queer and general audience to the character of Dorian Pavus in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* ranges from celebration to revilement of the "contamination" of the medium with real-world politics (Palurson, 2019: 79). And while the merit of BioWare when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation in video games is widely accepted, the overall execution is somewhat divisive even in the queer community. As we will see later, the

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[39] The story of this game is delivered through missions and *Living Story,* which is system of periodical releases of new content over the years.

question of the *playersexual*[40] main character and the related bi/pansexuality of many companions creates a discussion. Furthermore, the characters themselves, while not being one-dimensionally revolving about their sexual identity often still play on the various stereotypes, sometimes combining ethnic and sexuality-based ones.

For example, the first installment introduces us to Zevran, an elven assassin from the late medieval/renaissance Italy-inspired city-state of Antiva. This character combines the archetype of dashing foreign seducer with aspects of the "bury your gays trope" through his backstory of brothel-raised, assassin-indoctrinated cynic. However, the tragedy of this character is not final, as he can have somewhat of a happy ending and relationship based on the player's choices. This organic approach to characters, which can develop throughout the story offers an opportunity to explore the themes of queerness in far deeper contexts than the approaches of different studios, which offer queerness based on character X is now LGBTQ+ because we said so on the grounds of the easily censurable short story. The deeply narrative approach, as Palurson points out, can allow everyone to explore different perspectives and experiences on their own through the virtual media (2019:79).

While being different enough as is, when relating Zevran's presence to the overall tone of *Dragon Age: Origins* we can see a fascinating case of contrasting representation of social actors (Machin, 2016). The setting of the first installment of the *Dragon Age* series can be characterized as bleak feudal fantasy inspired by the history of the British Isles. The kingdom of Ferelden is being assaulted by supernatural invaders from the underground while also struggling with a bloody

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[40] This describes the writing technique, which leaves the playable character clean slate, and all of their potential romances are based only on player choice.

coup staged to prevent forming of an alliance with the neighboring France-inspired nation of Orlais. The entire setting often shows racial tensions, as elves are seen as second-class citizens at best compared to the dominance of humans, dwarves are an isolationist caste-based society on the brink of a collapse due to the activities of the same supernatural invaders that ravage Ferelden and further north the race of Qunari has made landfall, seeking to establish collectivist cultural hegemony across the entire continent of Thedas. Beyond this, any person capable of using magic is seen as a threat and must be contained in *Circles of Magi* or risk being hunted by the templars, military arm of the dominant religion. Most of the game takes place in settings where grey and brown are dominant, further reinforcing the dirtiness and struggle present. The people of Ferelden are on the pale side of the skin tone spectrum, speaking with British or Irish accents.

Cue Zevran, who speaks with a notably Mediterranean-inspired accent, has a tanned skin tone, is an elf, and is a representative of a widely feared organization of assassins for hire, The Antivan Crows. Zevran, who makes suggestive comments towards all the party members, often to their discomfort. Zevran who hails from a nation run on principles clearly inspired by medieval Venice. This character's queerness stems not from the fact he is attracted to people of either gender, as the topic of queerphobia is not present until *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and the setting overall can be described as mostly tolerant of various sexualities, but from his inherent otherness as a foreigner. This theme is present in many of *Dragon Age's* queer romance options: Leliana in *Origins* hails from Orlais, the entire cast of *Dragon Age II* are refugees and migrants to the city to Kirkwall and while *Inquisition* takes place in Orlais and Ferelden, the queer romance options consist of Josephine from Antiva, Dorian from mage-run Byzantium inspired Tevinter, Iron Bull the Qunari intelligence agency and Sera,

who while being born in Ferelden rejects her heritage, describing herself as being from "wherever". This kind of work with identities is what we can relate to the ideas of multimodality, as rather than focusing on the explicit manifestations of sexual identity, the queerness of characters can be and is conveyed through their relation to the other themes and components of the story. They are queer not because they are gay, lesbian, or trans, they are queer because they are not part of the majority society for one reason or the other, be it rejection by their home as is the case of Dorian or the fact of foreignness as in the case of Zevran. It is this intersectionality, that as we will discuss further creates characters that are seen positively by the queer community, due to their relatable issues. Some of them struggle because they are queer (Dorian). Some struggle because they were used by their loved ones (Leliana) and some struggle because they feel they do not belong (Zevran).

This chapter introduces us to the main issues of queer representation from the viewpoint of game creators, both individual and institutional. We have discussed the societal pressures for greater inclusion of minorities in the game industry and their clash with the business interests on conservative markets. The individual creators are very often at odds with their higher-ups when it comes to creating LGBTQ+ characters, however, they are not entirely powerless, as they can share their own interpretations individually. The topic of specific representation in games points us in the direction of nuanced and carefully crafted narratives on one hand and themes of non-representation and ablation of queer characters to background actors on the other. We also pointed out, that some games may choose to manifest the queerness of characters through their overall otherness to the setting of the title rather than direct discussion of their sexual identity. The

next chapter will lead us among LGBTQ+ players and their attitudes towards the products of this environment they consume.

4. LGBTQ+ Gamers

When approaching the statements of players themselves, we need to consider the following issues first. Mainly, there is no monolithic opinion present in either the LGBQ+ or the mainstream group, which we will see in the following chapters. Furthermore, even the opinions presented here are only a shard of the greater mosaic, as we base our research primarily on the opinions expressed on Reddit. Many (if not all) game studios have their own discussion forums and numerous fan pages, and fan forums exist for many of the mentioned titles. Even more importantly, the number of players that actively engage with any of these outlets is very hard to pinpoint and it is safe to assume that a large portion of the player base is silent. This is supported by Certeau's notions of marginality in modern society, pointing out: *a marginal group has now become a silent majority*" (1984: 17). However, it is also hard to imagine, that even the silent players engage with the games in a vacuum, ignoring reviews or various discussions surrounding the chosen title, which is supported by the idea that social media have at least partially taken over as a source of information, rather than purely interaction platform (Biały, 2017). With all this in mind, let us now focus our attention to the discourses of the LGBTQ+ community, their concerns, and the way they relate to the wider game industry.

4.1 The Good

One of the main (and few) positively viewed themes in the eyes of the LGBTQ+ community is the existence of any kind of representation at all. As one of the users says:

"Representation matters so much! It normalizes our existence, especially when we are seen as "other" and "outsiders" to our own country we were born into.

As a queer women of color it is so rare to see any form of representation that I latched onto whatever queer icons and whatever people of color I see in media, comics, games, tv shows, or books. I have always felt alien no matter where I go, its finally now in my early forties that I see people like me getting represented in big name media productions. It makes me happy that kids don't have to grow up like me. I grew up in a time where "bury your gays" was the only type of rep we had, a sad tragic short life was the only viewpoint we had. Or the only POC rep was a token character/rather racist stereotype in the background, never ever truly in the forefront.

I'm glad the lens is shifting and its slowly getting more diverse. I wish I could live to see the day when everyone understands one another. (Not-A-SoggyBagel, 2021)"

This is supported by the opinions that LGBTQ+ themes in games can serve as a source of inner strength and courage, presented by the respondents in *Dressing Commander Shepard in Pink* (Krobová, Moravec & Švelch, 2015). As we will discuss further, the fact of some queer representation is scrutinized by the actors and while they acknowledge the strides towards inclusivity, they are often less than satisfied with the results.

The crux of positive discourses connected with the queer representation in gaming is connected with the statements of individual creators we mentioned in the previous chapter. For example, user Ash04123 says:

"(…) *I will say that Yichao and I are mutuals and he likes to tease me a lot because he knows I love Ezreal. I think he was hinting at the Ekko / Ezreal hints in the Pulsefire story he wrote a few months back when the new set dropped. I WOULD very much love for Ezreal to move on from Lux because I have a lot of annoyances with the two together, but I wouldn't take this as a confirmation. Would he nice though... Would be very nice.* (Ash04123, 2020)"

This sentiment is expanded upon often when discussing the more intimate approach to queer representation as can be seen when discussing BioWare's characters:

"*Dorian Pavus from Dragon Age Inquisition. He's intelligent, capable, genuinely a good companion in the game who actually cares about the main character.*

Set a pretty high bar for my expectations when dating lol. (schadenfreude_q, 2022)"

However, the most perceptible positive discourse is present when relating to the smaller studios and creators: *"Hades for sure had the most meaningful rep I've seen in a long time. Probably my favorite I've seen in any game. (…)"* (Em_Pedy, 2022). If we frame this attitude by the notions of Laclau and Mouffe's nonexistence of fixity and non-fixity in the society (2001: 111), we come to the conclusion that while the group of individual creators and queer gamers are separate[41] entities their discourses not only overlap but support each other in the *order of discourse* of LGBTQ+ representation in video games.

Most of the positivity is directed at the niche titles that are explicitly aimed at the queer community, such as *Coming Out on Top*. When discussing these titles, the sentiments are usually similar to: *"(…) I love some of the characters and hate some of them, which I always take as good writing. (…)"* (Yakscamelsandmules, 2016). This can be explained by connecting this discourse to the discourse of queer game makers. In *Queer Games Avant-Garde,* the creators often reflect that their personal experiences and struggles manifest in their games (Ruberg, 2020). This personal approach is probably what resonates with the queer gaming community, as they can see themselves in the authors or their works directly, rather than through the lenses of "some" multinational company and their more distant and anonymous employees.

Furthermore, the focus on making games for a specific narrow audience, such as gay men, allows for the representation of intersecting identities that are often otherwise omitted in the media image of queerness, such as LGBTQ+ people of color. While recent reports indicate that the situation is improving (Townsend & Deerwater, 2021), the indie gaming scene is more inclusive and has

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[41] At least for the purposes of our research as we can hardly determine the actual overlap of these groups, but it would be naïve to assume there is none.

been for quite some time, as can be demonstrated by characters of Phil and Jed in *Coming Out on Top* or the Asian cast of *Butterfly Soup*. Concerning the big studio games, BioWare is once more somewhat ahead in this respect, as Palurson points out that the inclusion of interspecies relationships further pushes the players to challenge their views of heteronormative romance (2017: 72). As mentioned above by Not-A-SoggyBagel, the normalization of queer identities is connected to questions of ethnicity and body image just as to sexuality itself.

An interesting explanation framework can be inferred from statements similar to:

"(…) I fell like good gay rep it's the one that can be kept both realistic and idealistic, a perfect balance between what it is for queer folks and what we wish it was for us, like Sex education it touches queer topics and handles them in such an amazing way, we need yo show people specially you g audiences that queer topics are nothing to be weird out about, (…) (C4rlonator1903, 2021)"

This is very close to the general idea of contact theory originating in psychology. This approach is based on the idea that intergroup contact diminishes prejudice and hostility and has proven to be effective when discussing the topic of sexuality (Smith, Axelton & Saucier, 2009). This also ties to the wider context of the fight for LGBTQ+ rights through the concept of "we're here, we're queer, get used to it", originating in the 90s protests. This attitude can and often does add to the pressure on the studios and creators to include queerness in the games and the process of making them. However, as we have seen when discussing the internal dynamics of studios and as we will discuss with the opposing sentiments in the mainstream community, while it seems the pro-inclusion discourse has the upper hand, the struggle is far from over. Speaking of which, the existing themes of representation are seen as problematic and contested by the LGBTQ+ gamers on many grounds.

4.2 The Bad

One of the most glaring issues is the perceived (and hardly disputable) disparity of the ratio of gay men to gay women in popular titles. Putting aside BioWare titles, where the situation is somewhat[42] more balanced, the primary examples of major queer characters in popular games are Leona and Diana in *League of Legends,* Kasmeer and Marjory in *Guild Wars 2,* Ellie and Dina in *The Last of Us Part II*[43] (2020). This is somewhat infuriating to many of the members of the queer community as we can see from statements such as:

"I read a post on this subreddit earlier about how we're currently lacking proper MLM[44] *representation in League of Legends. It really hit me that I lack anyone in League that I see myself in and it does irk me quite a bit. There are, what, 160 champions now and none of them are gay, bisexual or pansexual men. That subtle homophobia really hurts.* (…) (PurpleSpaceSquid, 2022)"

The members of the LGBTQ+ gaming community go as far as to label this phenomenon as the fetishization of lesbian characters. This is an explanatory framework that is not unheard of throughout society, being described as reducing people to objects of sexual desire based on their identity (Chapman, 2021). The reasons for the prominence of this type of representation may be rooted in the fact, that lesbian relationships were generally perceived as a more tolerable quirk in the history of sexuality, opposed to male homosexuality, which was often rabidly prosecuted in the Western societies and the prevalence of sexism. The queer gamers also reflect the notion, that lesbians in gaming and media are okay, because of the influence of lesbian pornography aimed at heterosexual men:

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[42] Then again, their first queer character was a lesbian woman and the possibility of male/male romance in *Mass Effect* series happened only the last two installments, opposed to the numerous female/female romances available in all four games.

[43] Action-adventure set in postapocalyptic United States.

[44] Men loving men.

"Of course its more acceptable do have lesbian characters. Not only does it cater to a lot of straight male fantasies (yuck) but its also more acceptable since these kinda guys view two women as 'hot' or even say shit like 'they just never had a good dick' LMFAO IM PUKING.

But then imagine one of these guys, especially a typically toxic and 'manly' champ like Yasuo, Trynda or whatever to be gay. That's just gross and if course indicates that the player is gay too, right? Haha.

It also doesn't help that Tencent, the company Riot runs under, it Chinese and thus very anti-LGBTQ+. They prohibit men to be portrayed as feminine or even gay a whole lot. Lesbians are frowned upon but fine since lesbians still cater to fantasies blabla. I really hate it. (gokkyun, 2021)"

The current wider social discourse supports this and points out that:

"Lesbians aren't viewed in relation to their value for themselves, they are viewed in relation to their value for men. This can lead to lesbians and other sapphic identities being invalidated and primarily viewed for their sexual value. (Chapman, 2021)."

If we connect these statements with the facts of sexism and toxicity of many gaming studios we mentioned earlier, it is hard not to see the merit of this particular viewpoint present in the community and the critique it offers.

Speaking of disparity, the situation is even direr when discussing the representation of further portions of the LGBTQ+ community. The order of letters in the abbreviation corresponds to the prevalence of the given minority in games. We meet numerous lesbians, some gays, bisexuals "in space are tad too much" (which we will elaborate upon when discussing *playersexuality*). We can find a single-digit number of transgender characters and asexual, genderfluid, and various "plus" identities will be present far and few between. This phenomenon points us to the existence of a certain hierarchy in sexual identities that are more and less acceptable to promote through media. The reluctance to represent, especially when connected to transgender people may be a part of a wider social theme of transphobia.

Regardless of the subgroup represented (or maybe not represented), queer gamers are fully aware of the practice of sidelining LGBTQ+ characters to minor or easily censorable roles we discussed in the first chapter.

"It seems obvious higher-ups at Riot are either (i) actively homophobic or (ii) passively-homophobic (i.e., afraid of pissing off homophobic players and therefore encouraging the censorship of queer narratives we've seen in the past). TB Skyen, a largely-League-focused YouTuber who is friends with some Rioters while also being very willing to call Riot out on their bullshit, has talked a bit in a few of his streams about how far queer censorship allegedly went at the company - even indicating that Varus' cinematic went unreleased for a period of time after it was complete because execs were hesitant to give even Varus-level queer representation at the time. (amageish, 2022)."

As we can see, they reflect on the nature of the business-minded decision making, however, the sentiments are often positioned between putting the blame on studios and the conservative markets or even the specific states known for censorship of queer themes. This reinforces the notions of conflict of progressive and conservative discourses across the world at large, making much of the conflict regarding representation in the gaming community a symptom of global processes, rather than particularistic views of power in game studies we mentioned. The particular however stays with the solutions and specifics of each studio and title.

Another issue manifests through the gay-themed visual novels. Many players point out, that reducing the presence of homosexual men in gaming to sex-focused games further hurts this group and, while representation, reinforces many of the hurtful stereotypes about gay men:

"Oh, I know there's a lot of gay dating sims being made. But when I (and I assume most people) complain about the lack of gay games, I mean lack of gay games that aren't *dating sims/porn. I want an action adventure/RPG in the style of the Witcher, just... instead the protagonist is gay. And I don't mean playersexual—I mean canonically gay. Triple A games constantly ram into the player's head about how straight the protagonist is, whether it be his tragic backstory about his dead wife or including a random scene where*

a succubus seduces him. I want that, but instead of a dead wife, it's a dead husband, or instead of a succubus, it's an incubus. (Riley_The_Thief, 2022)"

Furthermore, this marginalization can be framed through the lenses of classic anthropological theory. If we consider the perceived "natural" order of things, the binarity of male and female, and their relationship, the LGBTQ+ community becomes an affront to this order. Considering the ways cultures deal with out-of-place phenomena according to Mary Douglas, some of the attitudes towards queerness often correspond with the idea of labeling anomalies as dangerous and to be avoided (1984: 40-41). This is not a novel idea, as elaborated upon by Wilson when discussing the liminal transgender identities (2002). As the binary focus of human cognition is supported by various sources in cognitive science (Cohen & Lefebvre, 2005), we should consider that the discourses surrounding queerness and its place in the world (and gaming in our case) are further shaped by the primal instinct of humanity, rather than just purely socially constructed on both sides of the "barricade". While the anti-queer discourse seeks to deal with the anomaly of queerness through exclusion from society and everyday lives as per Douglas' theses, the pro-queer discourse seeks to incorporate it into the narratives, "*to enrich meaning or to call attention to other levels of existence* (Douglas, 1984: 41)," thus removing the conflict from society altogether.

The mechanics of this opposition are consciously reflected upon by the members of the LGBTQ+ community, often in a somewhat emotional and hostile way:

"*(…) I'm here to discuss the chat. It should be no surprise to anyone that people on the internet can be terrible, but this was painful to watch. When the segment about LGBT gamers came on and they discussed their struggles and how they found solace in games, the majority of messages and donations were full of hate and homophobia, saying things like "wtf is that thing" or "get it off my screen" when a drag queen appeared. And I'm*

aware that this is not necessarily LGBTQ+ themed, but oh my god after the BLM segment the comments were flooded with "LET'S GO BRANDON!!!!". But what really worries me is that a lot of the people who were watching and/or commenting were probably kids. It just disgusts me that we as a society are teaching these impressionable young minds that racism and homophobia are the norm. And again, I'm aware that this has been and will continue to be a problem, but it was just so overwhelmingly terrible that I felt like I had to say something, even if nothing comes of it. Ok, rant over, sorry for taking up your time. (CBass189, 2021)"

The perceived slights originating from the mainstream community are also notable in the posts concerning the attitudes of the Quantic Dream, citing disappointment yet expected. This creates an environment, where the conflict becomes self-perpetuating as both sides see each other as in the wrong, leading in turn to the desire to establish their own discourse as the dominant one. This process is described as:

"*The limit of the social must be given within the social itself as something subverting it, destroying its ambition to constitute full presence. Society never manages fully to be society, because everything in it is penetrated by its limits, which prevent it from constituting itself as objective reality.* (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001: 127)"

While Laclau and Mouffe consider this natural and arguably part of healthy discussion, the lived reality shows us these processes often cultivate negative feelings (in our case represented by negative-leaning vocabulary) and further insulate involved groups from each other, rather than allowing for discussion and developments of the society as a whole. As Jonathan Rauch points out in *Kindly Inquisitors*:

"*Our greatest enemy is not irrational hate, which is pretty uncommon. It is* rational *hate, hate premised upon falsehood. (If you believe homosexuality poses a threat to your children, you will hate it.) The main way we eliminate hate is not to legislate or inveigh against it, but to replace it – with knowledge, empirical and ethical.* (2013: 225)."

Furthermore, the division is not limited only to the pro- versus anti-LGBTQ+ discourses, as there are conflicting views concerning representation in the queer scene itself.

4.3 The Questionable

The first of these divisive topics concerns *playersexual* characters. Two manifestations of this phenomenon exist. The first one is characterized by turning the main playable character into a clean slate regarding their sexual preferences, leaving the choice up to the player. The second practice stems from the first one, as this approach turns various non-player characters open to a relationship with player characters of any gender. It is this second manifestation that is the target of critique from queer gamers:

"(…) While I understand people wanting to have some prudence over their own story, I feel like characters should have their own sexuality rather then being attracted to the main character regardless.

This is for several reasons. The way to make a character feel less real is to deny them their own identity. Gender and Sexuality is definitely a huge part of that. To make them player sexual takes away from the experience. To meet someone, and realize that no matter how you feel about them, they may not feel the same way.

That said, it can work. Stardew Valley is a great example. Alex and Abigail both have some hang ups in regards to dating a character of the same gender… but both realize that their feelings override their fears. And they have very few issues getting with the player anyway.

The best way to play that would be to have the characters come to such realizations. The character coming to terms with these new feelings. (Kayden_Pauser, 2020)"

This comment manifests the primary problem seen in this practice: cheapening the complexity of characters by giving them no clear agency regarding their preferences. Further statements point once more to the erasure of bisexuals on the grounds of indecisiveness or even loose morals. According to

Klesse (2011), this attitude to bisexuality is widespread and leads to further marginalization of the group even in the progressive context of the fight for LGBTQ+ rights. Furthermore, some players frame *playersexuality* through the lenses of marginalization and erasure, as user spedumon (2020) summarizes: "*I've always said that playersexual characters are inclusion but not representation.*"

On the other hand, we can see the defense of this concept:

"*It's funny isn't it? When it comes to selecting classes in games - warrior, mage, rogue, healer etc... there's no debate whatsoever concerning whether we should force a certain class on people or not.*

"*Oh, I like playing as warriors, therefore everyone should play the warrior"... It never works that way. And yet when it comes to romance options - it's all about limiting this and not shoving that down a throat. "How dare you add gay romances in my straight game"... or "is it ok to turn a gay character straight"?*

Here's a simple solution, when it comes to role playing games the prior question should be does the player want a romance or not. If the answer is no then they'll just play the game straight through without bothering with relationship side-quests/story arcs etc.

But if we choose romance - give us choices!

As a gay player (or gaymer) all my life every time romance comes into question in a game it's about limiting options for me, while providing more options for straight gamers. It's never been fair, so of course I'll side with playersexual.

Let me play my game the way I want to play it and I'll be more satisfied about the 60 or so bucks I paid to play it :) (Kaiosama, 2020)"

This viewpoint can be framed through the concept of the interactive nature of the gaming medium. The importance of this fact is further elaborated upon in *Subversive Ludic Performance*, the primary point being, that this wide variety of choices is crucial for individual exploration of themes of sexuality and gender (Biscop, Malliet & Dhoest, 2019). Rather than cheapening given identities, this approach empowers the player to project themselves, which in turn can lead to queering the gaming experience in the sense of negotiating personal identity in

otherwise non-queer environments (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018). This player agency-oriented focus can however conflict with the principles of contact hypothesis, as it allows the gamers to excise queerness from their experience themselves. Still, being given the choice to be queer is arguably better than being non-existent or being seen and represented as a depraved and adverse entity.

Speaking of depravity, many of the queer characters are being criticized on the grounds of using various hurtful stereotypes connected to their sexuality. Naturally, the negatively coded characters, such as murderer Paco in *Le Crime du Parking* are judged harshly, however even in the case of multidimensional characters we can see opinions such as: "*Honestly, I feel like Zevran being an assassin and also being portrayed like a fucked up deviant in general is decidedly NOT good representation. (…)* (miracleorange, 2022)." And while we already discussed Zevran is in the long run a character with depth, the negative first impression is hardly deniable, as the character was originally hired to assassinate the main protagonist. The usage of stereotypes to represent queer characters is prevalent in wider media and is a mere step above complete invisibility and non-representation as pointed out by Gross (2001: 253). Palurson points out that in the context of queerness stereotypes: "*are inevitable because they are part of wider societal structure. Consequently, they should not be shunned but used as a tool of resistance to promote that which goes against the norms of the ruling group that create them* (2019: 79)." This also leads us to consider the constraints and common practices of the medium in question. According to Amossy and Heidingsfeld, the role of stereotypes in fiction is not based on purely reductionist tendencies. Rather it serves to elaborate and problematize the commonplace views of the world (1984: 700). If we consider even older theories of archetypes in cultural narratives (Campbell, 2004), we may conclude, that the importance of stereotypization and

framing characters through well-known concepts serves to bring the fictitious character closer to the real person and his perception of the world.

This leads us to the question of how (and whether) we can even reconcile the usage of stereotypes in fiction and the desire for representation through intricate multi-faceted characters. As one of the actors points out:

"Pathfinder games have had some awesome representation in games. A lesbian couple plays a prominent role in Wrath of the Righteous and honestly they are just so cute (and I will do literally anything to protect them).

Their romance-able characters run the gamut of alignments, classes, sexuality, etc. They honestly do a wonderful job with it, more so in Wrath than Kingmaker since a male MC had only one option for a male lover. (FromSuchGreatHeight5, 2022)"

In the context of *Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous,* it is more difficult to separate characters from certain stereotypes, such as the hedonistic arrogance of Daeran, who is a romance option for the character of either gender. Even miracleorange ends his critical assessment of Zevran with: " *(…) That said, I romanced him my first time through and I have absolutely no regrets. The writing in that game is so GOOD.*" Circling back to the stance of developers, their primary approach meets the desires of the queer community, as both sides aim for representation based on life-like narratives and characters. When we discussed the way Zevran relates to the overall theme of *Dragon Age: Origins* we pointed out the importance of intersectionality for the way characters are construed. If we consider the above statements of gamers, we conclude that the usage of stereotype is not truly seen as hurtful if it goes in unison with further elaboration upon the character's personality, further proving the merit of Amossy and Heidingfeld's views.

When analyzing the stances presented by queer gamers on Reddit, we can notice that much of the discussion is skewed towards critique and negativity.

Thus, we must ask ourselves a question: is the dominance of negative attitudes and perceived problems connected to overall attitudes present on Reddit, the queer experience, the gaming industry, or maybe some external factor? By taking a look at a case of discussion regarding queerness outside Reddit, we may be able to offer a possible explanation. A thread from the official *World of Warcraft* forums titled *"Cease and Desist the LGBT disgusting agenda in this game"* was filled to the brim with statements citing ruination of gaming experience with the existence of queer themes in-game. The "discussion" there has devolved into an exchange of threats and insults, despite attempts to offer queer viewpoints, which resulted in the thread being closed and expunged from the archives. When this thread appeared in the Reddit community related to *World of Warcraft* r/wow, the comments mostly express an opinion that:

"People always talk shit about r/WoW but the official forums are such a cesspool. I don't think a day passed when I visited them that someone didn't say something blatantly homophobic or racist and people discussed it like normal. When they redid humans and added proper dark skin tones, I just went there for info and Jesus fucking Christ. (Sanddaemon, 2021)"

"Well, r/WoW at least has real mods who pay attention. The forums.. don't.In the german forums we had a thread where one guy just posted rant after rant about women who need to stfu about sexual harassment because he has a much harder life, having been convicted for ra*e and how it's their own fault that they got in this situation. It needed 2 days for the thread to get closed down and guess what.. this guy didn't get banned and now he thinks he's right and it was just a normal opinion. Edit: He got banned a while later, I guess. We wrote a complaint in the customer support-forum and the mod there told us that it takes a lot of time, sorting out all of the reported posts in this thread. No wonder.. they ignored the thread for a week. (Nilanar, 2021)"

From this viewpoint, we can infer that the overall climate of Reddit is somewhat more open to discussion and the existence of devoted queer communities offers LGBTQ+ gamers to express themselves in safe spaces, where the probability of being insulted is lower and usually ends with individual

disciplinary action by the moderators. Connecting this with the problem of in-game toxicity of many (if not most) online games, where slurs such as "faggot" and "X is gay" are commonplace (Paul, 2018), we are led to believe that this focus on the problematic by queer players is a part of the LGBTQ+ life experience. This is further supported by the fact, that the constant adversity towards queer people in the world has fostered a highly self-conscious and solidary community (Gross, 2001: 19).

This chapter was dedicated to the stances present in the queer gaming community regarding the state of LGBTQ+ representation in the industry. The first part introduces us to the positive themes present, namely the continued proliferation of queer representation and faith in individual creators that fight to normalize this inclusion. The second part shows us the various points of critique, ranging from the fetishization of lesbian relationships and erasure of other parts of the LGBTQ+ community to the struggles against the anti-queer sentiments in gaming. The final section shows us the internal friction regarding the use of stereotypes and *playersexual* characters in games. In the following chapter, we will frame the subgroup of queer gamers in the wider context of the gaming community and their relationship to the industry and LGBTQ+ representation.

5. Mainstream Gamers

By the word mainstream, we mean actors that do not explicitly relate themselves to the LGBTQ+ community. As with queer gamers, this group can in reality include people that do identify as a variety of minorities in private, however, the main distinction for us is the point of origin of statements we will discuss in this chapter, which is the general "queer-less" communities of Reddit or official forums of various developers and games. When discussing a satirical post about the prevalence of heterosexual themes in *The Last of Us Part II*, we can find a wide variety of approaches:

"What the fuck am I reading? Most people on this planet are straight, so why is it a problem if most characters in a game are straight? Jayeeeesus.

Am I whooshing here? I hope I am. I just honestly could believe a post like this would exist in 2020. (artamba,2020)"

"I get the joke and all, and I have no problem with the gay characters in this game. Their sexuality isn't emphasized in any weird way, and ND did a good job representing homosexuality as it should be: normal, the same as heterosexuality. But gay people make up like 4% of the population. Whether or not you have a problem with it, there undeniably is a vast overrepresentation of LGBT-ness in the game, and I don't think its uncalled for to acknowledge there was an agenda being pushed. It is an anomaly that three of the most featured characters in terms of screen time are LGBT and it's ignorant to pretend otherwise. (Utilityanonaccount, 2020)"

"This game is so overrated and overhyped by those who liked it, that it's not even funny. Most who disliked the game could give two shits about the sexual orientation and gender identity of the characters.

This is a game (even series) with gameplay elements that have little variation, and become a chore over time. The story, and its pace was the saving grace of the first brilliant game.

The second game had bland characters, slooooow pace, and a story thats all over the place.

Game struggled to sell after the initial (driven by name recoginition value), precisely because many fans of part 1 had mixed feelings about it. And for most of us it had zero to do with someone being transgendered or lesbian or jewish or asian or whatever the fuck. (Mudassar40, 2022)"

"I loved this game, even if it was shorter than I expected, and when people started complaining about the forced agenda, I lost my shit. It was a gripping story that had a lesbian couple and a trans boy. It didn't feel forced. Ellie was never meant to be straight, her partner being bisexual did nothing to detract from he storyline, and Lev's story fit in with the cult plot. Where's the forced gay agenda? (Monolexic, 2022)"

As we can see, the opinions expressed by these posters range from open hostility to ambiguity and indifference to support of proliferation of queer representation in gaming. Due to this wide spectrum of viewpoints this chapter will focus on the relationship of queer and mainstream communities rather than to representation itself. Later we will discuss the tools gamers can employ to make their opinions heard in relation to the game developers and wider society, as they are shared by both groups.

5.1 The Other

The main theme displayed in the way queer and mainstream gamers relate to each other can be summarized as antagonization. The most common way this manifest is through the creation of a clear distinction of "us" and "them". From the viewpoint of non-LGBTQ+ gamers, the usage of derogatory terms is common, as seen in the case of this user as we have seen with the *World of Warcraft* forums. Another strategy we can see can be described as avoidance, where the opposing group is not explicitly named, however, the meaning is clear from the context, such as artamba's emphasis on the "straight majority". As we can see in these comments, the primary argument of the mainstream side is based on the premise of politicization of media and entertainment, citing escapism or even the opinion that queer characters make no sense in the setting of the game. From the viewpoint of discourse theory, this is nonsensical, as all levels of public discussion are beholden to the power relations and the political climate context of the given time. This leads to the conclusion, that the main aim of this viewpoint is to

establish dominant discourse of "games are entertainment and thus should be apolitical", where the word apolitical actually means conservative.

The queer side of the discussion exhibits similar tendencies, as the anti-LGBTQ+ stream of discussion is often referred to as "the straights" and are ridiculed for the deep offense they take at being confronted with queer characters:

"Imagine if it was canon the starggots would foam at the mouth cuz they'll complain SyndraxZed is more popular and came b4. Almost wish Riot would do it to see all the drama unfold in that league meme subreddit 👀 (ISpread4Cash, 2021)"

Here we can also see a fascinating term *straggot,* which is becoming derogatory for the anti-LGBT heterosexual combining the slur *faggot* and the word straight. If we consider the continuing proliferation of queer characters in gaming we discussed earlier, we can argue that the pro-queer side does not truly need to push their agenda hard, as they already have the upper hand. Much of the discussion and conflict is now aimed at the attitudes of the stereotypical toxic white straight male gamer, who is (at least on Reddit) seen as the majority.

The isolation of both sides can be seen and reinforced through incidents such as being banned from the game by automatic systems for even saying the word gay:

"Here is my ban appeal,

Hello,

Upon opening Apex Legends to get my nightly fill I was greeted with the message that I was suspended for a week, it left me quite confused, some would way that it bamboozled me. When I looked at the reasoning, while I can see why I was banned I believe that I should not be and that it was a flaw in the ban system. Here is the context of why I said that "I'm gay", "cose door", and "for being gay".

(…)

They asked me what gender I was, I responded, female. Then they asked me what kind of guys I was into and in order to keep my message short as we were in-game, I simply

responded with, "i'm gay" and as a lesbian this is true. This was my first of 3 offenses that the system picked up and it does not "harass, threaten, bully, or embarrass" anyone involved, or at least as far as I am aware.

(…)

Alast my third message, "for being gay" was me explaining that because I am in a homophobic household and I was nearly kicked out for being myself, a lesbian. (ShafowPuppet, 2022)"

This kind of misfiring of behavioral systems, while aimed against the toxicity and slur usage may actually lead to reluctance to express own identity in the online gaming environment, as the actors have to fear not only the reaction of other players but also the possibility of being banned from the game altogether, albeit unjustly.

After examining this visible divide between the two groups, we may feel that the situation is dire. There is no way to reconcile the friction as both groups have made their case and discussion has devolved into mutual name-calling and ousting each other from the discussion both on Reddit and elsewhere as seen with the case of Blizzard forums. This is however not entirely true, as seen in the case of discussion concerning queer characters in *Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous.* The discussion here emphasizes the humanity and realness of the characters regardless of identity:

"One of the sweetest moments for me is at the very start when you meet Irabeth. She drops everything in pure joy finding out her wife survived. It wasn't some forced scene. It didn't feel out of place. It felt pure. I really loved that scene.

The devs at Owlcat have a way to write scenes that just fit. You don't feel awkward seeing it. They don't force it. It's just human love and joy. (Koobitz, 2022)"

"I'm straight, but representation really makes me happy too! (ThatOneGuy7832, 2022)"

As we mentioned, similar themes can be seen in the discussion regarding toxic threads on *World of Warcraft* forums. This leads us to a possibility, that the

antagonization is specific to communities surrounding particular games, rather than being a universal phenomenon, which would be in line with the particularistic approach to the gaming world of Bergstorm and others. Furthermore, this can be connected to the fact, that competitive and multiplayer games foster toxic environments (Paul, 2018), which in turn "poisons" the entire group. In interplay with the existence of anti-queer sentiments in the wider society, it is to be expected that large player bases will contain distinct opinion groups among the silent majority and that these groups will not refrain from pushing their agenda.

Much of this discussion is framed by the concepts of identity politics. Interestingly though, the stance of anti-queer gamers is also deeply based on their identity as heterosexuals, which should be in opposition to their sentiments, such as when Utilityanonaccount seeks to support his opinion that fewer queer people should be in media based on demography. It is no surprise that, while vehemently opposing the very idea of identity politics, the conservative viewpoints have adopted the image and identity of the straight white male as a victim of the postmodern progressive society. With this clash in mind, let us now examine the mechanics both sides use to influence the gaming industry and each other.

5.2 The Power

The first and foremost theme present in relation to games and the gaming industry from the side of players is the emphasis on interpretation liberty and production of meaning. The aim of this production in popular culture is "*to produce meanings that are relevant to everyday life* (Fiske, 1989: 6)." This concept allows all of the participating actors to find their own meanings and reflections in various fields of human culture. The nature of the gaming industry supports this

by default, as games are inherently interactive and open-ended, offering the player many playstyles, narrative developments, and much more. As we demonstrated earlier, even in moments when the creator intent is more or less clear, the consequent player interpretation can alter the main takeaway.

Important for us is when these individual interpretations begin to aggregate and start influencing the game creators to alter and reinterpret their prior creations. For example, in the case of *League of Legends'* Diana and Leona, their original relationship was based mostly on religious antagonism. The romantic themes had to wait for years of player discussion and support of the notion to manifest explicitly. It will be interesting to see if a similar pattern repeats in the case of recently released *champions* Aphelios and Sett, which became widely popular ship[45] among a portion of the player base, though it is my opinion that the fact both characters are male will delay the process and all official allusions to their relationship will be heavily veiled. This soft pressure, often supported by individual creators seems to be one of the primary tools used by the queer community.

Another widespread tool gamers use to express their opinions and influence gaming studios is *review bombing*. Usually done through Steam and other platforms allowing player rating of titles, this practice consists of flooding a specific title with negative reviews based on a single typically political issue, regardless of other qualities of the game. As we have mentioned when talking about *Devotion,* this can lead to a halt of distribution of a given title, tough usually these reviews are moderated by Steam. However, it is undeniable, that this kind of direct assault is noticed both by the gamer community and the developers,

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[45] Phenomenon where fan bases see romantic or sexual relationship between characters regardless their relationship in the source material.

sometimes leading to the opposite effect, as it creates interest in the title due to perceived controversy, *Devotion* being the prime example.

If we consider the entirety of the gaming industry and present issues, it turns out that the most efficient tool players have is a civil discussion and feedback regardless of the topic. Most game studios have various ways for players to express their opinion, from in-game bug report frameworks to community managers that engage with the players on various channels, Reddit included. This is in turn reflected in the way companies communicate these changes as they tend to emphasize hearing the feedback of players and their focus on the best player experience, which can be seen even in the inclusivity statements of ActivisionBlizzard and Riot Games. This is however also one of the most glaring cases of particularism in the gamer-developer relationship, as every studio has a different approach and the results of their interaction can be a cause for fierce discussion, should the players feel their feedback was ignored. This leads to an environment, where much of Blizzard's communication regarding *World of Warcraft* is met with a great deal of mistrust and criticism, whereas Arenanet's relationship to their *Guild Wars 2* community is far less strained and Square Enix's *Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn*[46] (2013) is often put on a pedestal regarding listening to player feedback leading to an influx of players (Colp, 2021).

If we now return to the subtitle of this thesis *The Power and the Other,* we must ask who is this Other in the gaming industry. As we have seen, all of the involved groups are clearly aware of their social role in the relationship and construe themselves as such. The gamers are divided from the developers, the queers from the straights. This leads us to the main point of this chapter and indeed the entire thesis. While the specific issues and the actors vary, the gaming

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[46] A MMORPG set in the fantasy world of Hydaelyn.

industry is beholden to two basic principles when it comes to relationships between involved groups. First is the importance of categorization and clear division of groups in the population of gamers. While we discussed mainly the divide along the line of queerness, this is often present on various levels. For example, the environment of *World of Warcraft* is in the minds of players divided into *casuals*[47] and *hardcore players.*[48] This division is then reflected upon when discussing various game mechanics, as some are criticized for being too *casual-friendly* and devaluing the investment hardcore players make, while the other side argues that even then, the majority of game design focuses on the activities *hardcore* players take part in and aspects such as exploration or story are put into the background. That being said, we must not forget all of these identities intersect and overlap in various contexts, further blurring the lines across the gaming industry. The queer casual player of *League of Legends* can easily become representative of the heteronormative developer studio focused on *hardcore* players should he become employed there.

This leads us to the other universally applied principle, which is the usage of soft power to push the agenda of any of the groups. This can be done either through direct feedback or aligning with sympathetic actors in the game-making process and as seen in the case of queer representation, is often aimed at the creation of balance in all things, rather than becoming the primary narrative in the given *order of discourse*. Yet there are cases, where the opposing side or the creators refuse any sort of compromise, which can lead to a more radical solution, such as *review bombing* or simple abandonment of the title and developer

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[47] Players that engage with the game to a limited extent, usually not taking part in the more competitive aspects.

[48] Players that aim to clear the game's most challenging content when it is current and investing massive amount of time to this goal.

altogether. Though this is often complicated through the mentality of sunk cost fallacy, as was visible during the various Blizzard controversies. All of this ties back to the inner workings of the *order of discourse* where conflicting discourses seek to exclude other meanings in their path to establishing hegemony (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 56).

Throughout this chapter, we have shed light on the relationship between the mainstream and queer portions of the gaming community. This relationship is mostly construed in an antagonistic fashion with clear signs of isolation, though there are various points of positive interaction. Further, we mentioned the primary tools groups in the gaming community use to push their discourse, the soft pressure through feedback and aligned creators, and more direct tools of *review bombing* and boycott. The final chapter of this thesis shall focus on the various new questions and themes that arose during the research.

6. Discussion

Throughout the various statements, we could see that all involved groups regardless of their sexual and gender identity emphasized the quality of writing of characters and the overall story, rather than the identity or stereotype they embody. This view creates a contradiction with the widespread view that stereotypes are hurtful essentialization and leads me to wonder, how deeply rooted is this discourse in the wider framework of identity politics. Furthermore, the importance of storytelling in videogames and their often-repeated interpretation as Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk* (e. g. Bainbridge, 2012; Bogost, 2015) leads us to wonder how deeply this view is reflected upon by the creators themselves. What happens if one or more parts of this system do not correspond with the remainder of the title. In the case of *World of Warcraft,* it would be even possible to study how do the changes in storytelling impact the quality of the work and the reception by the community, which is currently deeply disturbed by the perceived deterioration of the quality of the stories present.

As we were examining various groups of social actors present in the gaming industry, it became apparent that the particularistic approach to game studies, while justified, is not entirely irreplaceable. We have demonstrated that many of the frameworks, discourses, and strategies are repeated across various studios and titles. If we consider the sheer volume of titles and developers active in the industry it may be even impossible to examine each of the titles and audiences individually. For this reason, I believe it would be more reasonable to study the larger phenomena present and then circle back to the particular variations present in specific cases. This is warranted by the fact, that many trends in the gaming industry are based on imitation, as seen in the case of waves of popular genres when once a title of a niche genre gains popularity, many studios

follow suit and create their own take on the themes. This presents in cases of general ideas, such as behavioral systems seeking to discipline players in online gaming.

Another interesting topic we have discussed only briefly is the usage of themes of contrast and many other techniques of multimodal theory. In the case of interactive media, the definition of a mode must become much broader as everything from music to the overall setting is deeply connected and conveys a specific message. As with the case of Zevran, this can even lead to the creation of alternative manifestations of certain social phenomena, such as queerness. The question for further research is how prevalent this is in gaming and even wider popular culture. How often is this done and how do the audiences respond?

The issue of behavioral systems on self-expression is also worth delving deeper into, as it is a double-edged blade. While the primary goal of preventing the proliferation of toxic environments is admirable, the actual execution may lead to reluctance to be authentic and could lead to feelings of otherness in the context of the game. This may create a space that is, rather than inclusive, devoid of individuality and defeats the purpose of the social aspect of online games. How can this be prevented? Are there ways to refine these systems?

The last topic that I would like to mention is the question of the LGBTQ+ abbreviation. The many variations thereof, from GLBT to LGBTQ, the questions of inclusion of the plus symbol, point us to the fact, that even this simplest manifestation of queer identity is deeply contested and constantly changing. Why however is it presented the way it is? Why is it not just Q, as the concept of queerness can encompass any not-mainstream identity? Whose stance on the queer community does it even reflect? Are we truly the "alphabet mafia" some paint us as?

Conclusion

We have started the main body of this thesis with the approaches and themes present with the game developers. The institutional view of game studios is torn between the push for inclusion and the business-minded model that seeks to attract as many customers as possible. The individuals are often advocating for queer representation, we can however find cases of open hostility. The manifestations of queerness in the games themselves are often done in easily alterable and inconsequential ways, though certain studios choose to incorporate explicit and meaningful representation in their titles. Queer players are highly critical of LGBTQ+ representation in gaming. While they appreciate the increasing number of queer characters in games, they point out that they are often sidelined, marginalized, and stereotyped, which is viewed unfavorably. The gaming community as a whole displays a wide array of opinions, from hostility to acceptance. The main themes present in the relationships between all involved groups can be seen as antagonization and isolation with emphasis on indirectly influencing the opposing groups through pressure on the developers to push for further inclusion.

The perception of queer representation in the gaming industry by the three groups can be summarized as somewhat accepting, with plenty of critical remarks. While all groups reflect on the existence of queerness in gaming (and wider society) they point out that the representation is done often in very problematic ways depending on their explanation framework. Many examples of queer representation are seen as mere lip service and efforts to placate the Western push for inclusivity without angering the conservative markets in the east. All of the involved groups cite the importance of life-like characters and their depth, which can override the stereotypes present with the given person. While

the relationship between all the groups is often antagonistic with clearly defined boundaries, we can see there are various points of discussion. The depth of isolation depends on the specific studio and title in question, as competitive and multiplayer games seem to foster a more hostile environment. The player groups usually push their agenda towards the gaming world through soft pressure present in direct feedback towards the developers, who may or may not take this to heart.

The main limits of this research are present in the sources used. We are operating primarily in the environment of Reddit, which seems to be a social network leaning more into the pro-inclusivity Western discourses. We have also focused more on the broader themes present in the gaming industry rather than keeping to the particularistic study of a single studio, which leads to a certain nebulousness of the entire research. While this could be prevented through the study of a particular studio (Riot Games would be probably the ideal choice), I believe this wide scope creates a framework we can use for further case studies. We have also heavily leaned into the LGBTQ+ portion of the viewpoints, which leaves us majority of the players to research further. Are the negative views of queerness in gaming truly that prevalent or is this just a vocal minority? Another limiting factor is the fact we have no deeper insight into the process of game making and construction of queer representation by the developers themselves. While we have seen some hints from BioWare and individual creators, we do not know who the main actors in the policymaking in various studios are and how does this manifest in the games themselves.

The main asset of this work is the reframing of the relationships within the gaming industry. As we have seen the various groups do not work on the premises of hierarchy, where developers are above the player and merely deliver

a product, but all involved actors are aware their opinions can have an impact. While we have pointed out the antagonization and isolation of queer gamers they still partake in this system through cooperative means rather than boycotting. All the groups present seem to be aware of each other and the influence they possess and, often depending on the studio, foster this cooperation in order to push their agenda, whether for profits or self-fulfillment. We have also demonstrated the importance of storytelling in the gaming industry, which can be used not only by scholars but developers themselves to refine their products. Another important point of this work is the further affirmation of the social awareness of the queer community, who reflect their status in society even in the gaming world and the works of fiction. Last but not least we have at least partially opened the question of multimodal analysis of interactive media, which seems to offer very interesting results.

While much of this work circles around the themes of exclusion, antagonism, and other varying negative ideas, I believe the situation is not that dire. Much of the gaming industry is currently built on the principles of cooperation, discussion, and engagement. We can see this through various social events, support of feedback systems, crowd-funding projects, and modding frameworks offered by the developers themselves and many others. Should these trends continue, we may see a day, when even the themes of antagonism will be limited to the last few remaining die-hard nay-sayers. And for this reason, the game studies community should also emphasize the cooperative aspects of the gaming world, rather than focus on the negative struggles as we have throughout this thesis.

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