Chapter 1

What Is Queerness in Games, Anyway?

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What lies at the intersection of queerness and games, and what has the bursting, proliferating dialogue centered around? Thankfully and unsurprisingly, we can find a multiplicity of answers to this question, but two large and slightly divergent currents stand out. One focuses on diversifying the content of games and representation of marginalized identities in the industry, while the other begins to investigate how to queer the structure of games.

“Queerness in games” has appeared in the media and public discourse mostly as a question of representation and inclusion: Who has been making most of our games, as opposed to who could be making them? What kind of people and experiences appear in the fictional universes that games can summon into existence, and whose life experiences are brought to bear on the stories told by or emerging from games? The status quo, to nobody’s surprise, is that games have seldom been made by or for queers, or even with queers in mind; they’re mostly created by young and middle-aged white and Asian men, to be sold to a similar if slightly younger and slightly browner audience of consumers. Just as in analogous battles in other forms of culture
and areas of public discourse, the struggle for inclusion and representation of queers has joined calls for more (and less stereotyped) representation of women and people of color.

At a 2014 Game Developers Conference panel titled “How to Subversively Queer Your Work,” game scholar Todd Harper provided one summation of inclusivity’s value proposition for the wider game industry. With greater diversity of stories, characters, and voices, Harper said, comes increased scope for the empathic possibilities of games: “Empathy is the ability to see what matters to other people. It’s the ability to see what matters to someone who isn’t you. Empathy is a muscle, and like any muscle you have to flex and use it over and over until it becomes strong.” Harper also suggested that flipping the identity characteristics of protagonists in games could broaden existing game narratives: a “bald, white, cismale space marine” could become “a half-shaved head, purple-haired, trans-woman Latina space marine.”

In contrast to the focus on representation in game content, other queer game creators have taken up the question of what happens when we question norms and conventions about how games, or specific game genres, are expected to function. Avery McDaldno and Joli St. Patrick gave a workshop at the 2013 Queerness and Games Conference that explored a dozen potential techniques for independent non-digital role-playing and story games; among other things, McDaldno and St. Patrick dismantled the notion, established since the 1970s and influential on countless video games, that a character in a role-playing game is controlled by and represents a single human player. In a workshop given at New York University’s Game Center, merritt kopas elaborated on McDaldno and St. Patrick’s techniques and urged participants to deconstruct existing game genres to find the fundamental assumptions driving patterns of play, then queer the genres by twisting, flipping, or undermining those conventions. These tactics bear more in common with the approaches of queer theory to history, economic analyses, even information science—locating unspoken norms by which a field of human activity or knowledge is operating, and finding points of rupture that destabilize those assumptions, opening up those fields to a wider and potentially more liberatory set of possibilities.
Outside the culture of games, in spaces concerned with LGBTQ activism and political organizing, the queer politic is often understood to be at odds with more dominant “gay rights” rhetoric. The latter is characterized as a drive toward acceptance into existing institutions such as legally recognized marriage or military service. Anti-assimilationist queer activists, exemplified by documents such as the Against Equality online archive, instead choose to advocate from the marginalized position of queerness to ask bigger questions about who’s excluded from or harmed by these institutions, and how existing structures are invisibly designed to support the status quo, the smooth operation of capitalism, the yoking of human beings into “productive members of society,” and so forth. It’s tempting to try to look at calls for representation and inclusion in big-budget games as being akin to the assimilationist rhetoric, but there are several nuances to consider.

Game writer Samantha Allen, another panelist from “How to Subversively Queer Your Game,” has described the move to push for a greater number of LGBT-inclusive games as “a lifeline to lost gamers,” among them “young, closeted queer people” who may not yet be aware of more experimental, lesser-known games done by queer creators outside the big-budget studio model. Her point that “we have to employ a plurality of tactics to bring down the monolith” can apply just as readily to the process of creating independent games as to advocating for the kinds of games that get made. Unlike political organizing and fund-raising, where attention and money are divided between causes that benefit people with differing relationships to established institutions, a creative process can encompass both approaches.

In 2012, during a discussion about Anna Anthropy’s Rise of the Videogame Zinesters, a senior colleague asked me what kind of benefits I thought a more diverse pool of creators, including queer creators like myself or Anthropy, had for games. My response was that creators with marginalized experiences and subaltern viewpoints have a different capacity to make new kinds of games that we hadn’t even seen yet. This answer was based largely on my experiences with two of Anthropy’s own games. Mighty Jill Off (2008) matches a narrative theme expressing the dynamics of a queer BDSM relationship
with game play that forces the player to submit to a cruel and repetitive task. What I found remarkable about *Mighty Jill Off* was not simply that game play and narrative content aligned to represent submission and dominance, but that the mode of interaction and goals also highlighted a related and broadly applicable way of seeing games, with the designer as the domme providing tasks, seemingly arbitrary outside of the system of play, that the player must willingly submit to in the pursuit of pleasure. Game designers\(^7\) and philosophers\(^8\) writing about games have echoed this understanding of games for years, but *Mighty Jill Off* was the first time I had seen the theme bound to overt narrative content—a possibility only realizable by the expression of queer lives in games.

Anthropy’s *dys4ia* (2012) goes further in the direction of queering established notions of games, to the point where game designers like Raph Koster opined that “a lot of *dys4ia* could have been built in PowerPoint and isn’t a game.”\(^9\) Koster later retracted this take, which was rooted in the convention that games must have choices that let a player alter the state of the system. *dys4ia*, however, does something more subtle with its interactive aesthetics: it’s presented as an autobiographical story, but one in which situations from life are represented by systems that the player must understand in order to navigate, rather than solely by words or images as in other forms of autobiography. *dys4ia* manages to destabilize one of the rarely questioned tenets of what a game must have to be considered a game, while also blazing new territory into overt autobiography. These two explorations are linked; unlike earlier pseudo-autobiographical games dealing in impressionistic representation of and musings on the creator’s life, such as Jason Rohrer’s *Passage* (2007) or Rod Humble’s *The Marriage* (2007), *dys4ia* recounts actual past events from the creator’s life. If Anthropy had followed the conventional rubric of games and allowed player actions to determine the course of the game, the autobiographical fidelity of *dys4ia* would have become mutable and subject to player whim.

Anthropy is far from the only queer game creator whose works combine representation of queer lives. *Realistic Kissing Simulator* (2014) by Jimmy Andrew and Loren Schmidt, uses two largely gendered heads to represent players, eluding the recently fashion-
able choice of “gay relationship or straight relationship” that has become a feature of games in franchises like *Dragon Age*. The game simultaneously does away with conventional notions of designer-ordained goals, mimetic realism (despite its title), and the automatic assumption of consent at the beginning of play, leaving players to figure out how and why to collaborate and encounter each other via a system of elongated, floppy tongues. Mattie Brice’s *EAT* (2013) is a system of rules meant to be applied to the player’s everyday life in order to approximate the challenges of her own existence as a black trans woman, student, and writer; the system is daunting enough that it’s unclear whether anyone has ever been determined and brave enough to play it. The games of Christine Love often adopt the form of an East Asian–style visual novel or dating sim, but supplement purely romantic or sexual content with explorations of changing notions of privacy and multivalent reactions of women to repressive patriarchal society; most of the player’s actions in *Analogue: A Hate Story* (2012), prior to a moment of judgment, involve reviewing an epistolary account of the past. Love’s games also frequently involve “impossible” challenges that may appear to be goals for gamers, but elude the player without cheating or hacking the game.

merritt kopas’s *Lim* (2012) has frequently been cited as an example of a queer game due to the way it systemically represents the experience of attempting to “pass” as one gender or another but ultimately failing and being subjected to harassment. (It’s worth noting that via abstraction, *Lim* contains the potential to be played as a metaphor for multiple kinds of passing, such as passing as multiple racial identities.) Beyond the act of representation, another, less-cited aspect of *Lim* deeply queers the experience: the collision of objects in the system, representing harassment of a non-passing protagonist, sometimes grows so violent that the protagonist is pushed through the walls constraining the space of play and into an empty, lonely space beyond. kopas has refused to clarify whether this effect was part of her intention as the creator, or a glitch that arose from the code of the game—an unintentional “flaw” that happens to harmonize with the rest of the game to create a possibility of utter refusal emerging from trauma and movement beyond the confines of a harsh system. By keeping this possibility ambiguous, kopas leaves open the
possibility that this is a discovery of players, not a top-down artifact of authorial intent.

Studies of game design have long succumbed to a kind of dualism, a bifurcation of the game experience into two supposedly separate aspects that are often portrayed as being in tension. The narrative content of a game, sometimes called the dramatic elements, includes characters, plot, fictional world, spoken dialogue, and so forth, while the systemic structure of a game, also known as the formal elements, consists of things like the rules, pieces, interactions and choices available to the player, underlying algorithms or mathematical models of economies or physics, and so forth. Theoretical arguments between “narratologists,” supposedly advocating the importance of dramatic elements, and their opponents, the “ludologists,” date back to 1997; the formal elements have long been held up as the unique provenance of games, that which distinguishes them from other forms of culture (many of which, of course, involve narrative content but not playable systems). The two sides of formal/narrative dualism are often described as being in an irreducible tension that designers must do their best to manage or mask, lest “ludonarrative dissonance” color the player’s experience.

Vocal critics, many of them consumer fans, have attacked many of the games described above—as well as other games with queer themes, such as the Fullbright Company’s Gone Home (2013)—on the basis that they’re “not real games” or “just very simple games.” This understanding is based entirely on the formal elements of the game, as was Koster’s initial critique. Reducing a game to its formal elements, whatever the rationale (e.g., “It’s the aspect that only games can do”) seems akin to insisting that invertebrates, as a class, must primarily be understood by examining and evaluating their internal bone structure. Giving primacy to the skeleton of a game, this approach flays off the skin and flesh, the distinguishing characteristics of experience that are the first encountered by a player, to prioritize the skeletal system that more expert forensic analysts (most of them game designers or theorists) can take apart to gain a supposedly truer understanding of the game.

When fleshed of content and linkage to the context of lived experience, the systems of many queer games may appear to such a “forensic examination” to be identical to older interactive forms. Tra-
ditionalists describe *dys4ia* as akin to a PowerPoint presentation, or games made with Twine are equivalent to *Choose Your Own Adventure* game books. It’s only when looked at in context, clothed in flesh, that this illusion of retrogression vanishes and we can see that new relationships between different aspects of games can arise from queer modes of creation—which, it should be added, are nearly always operating outside of a profitable market context or financial support from publishers.

Ironically, it’s the refusal to obey orthodox conventions about games, and a willingness to embrace bare systems, that makes it easier for queer games to achieve striking new forms of interplay and consonance between the experiences and aspects of queer existence they represent and the structures of interaction that players encounter. The relationship between experience and systemic representation in the games by queer creators mentioned above is often crisply straightforward—sometimes simply revolving around what’s placed on or removed from the canvas of possibility. These simple approaches manage to sidestep the complex, yet supposedly inevitable and frustrating, clash between “ludo” and “narrative.” Queer game creators have already imagined queer modes of game play in which ludonarrative dissonance, at least, is not a vivid concern.

Although we may wish to question the taken-for-granted dualism of narrative and game play and we can dismiss the false either/or binary of “push for inclusion of marginalized identities in big-budget games” or “queer existing norms of game play to create new types of work,” it’s still worth asking a final question: if different approaches to queerness and games aren’t necessarily in tension with each other, what are they in tension with?

One possible answer returns to the question of assimilation of marginalized identities rather than maintaining the possibility of an outside, questioning, and destabilizing voice. Rather than associating assimilation with the demand for greater representation in game fictions, it may be useful to consider assimilation as the legitimation of games as a social good.

Games, much like queers, have a long history of being maligned and regarded as frivolous, jejune, or degenerate. Sports were regarded separately for much of games’ history, and many of the most widespread games played by adults were games of chance used for gambling—
associated with the lower classes, soldiers, criminals, and so forth. In the nineteenth-century United States, game creators began to try to rehabilitate the image of games when they sought to sell games to families. Some game creators replaced dice, strongly associated with gambling, with a new random-number-generating spinner (the “teetotum”); other board games, like *The Mansion of Happiness*, added content to the traditional race game genre that promoted Christian morals.14

Twentieth-century stereotypes about games and gamers are much more familiar to today’s gamers and game developers: parents accusing *Dungeons & Dragons* players of placing suicide curses on their children, video games becoming secondary culprits in school shootings, studies of game addiction and whether games cause violence.15 Rather than thuggish gamblers, the popular conception of gamers is now that of an overweight, unshaven, socially maladjusted, immature white man. Game academics, gamers themselves, and the game industry have continuously struggled against these perceptions by deploying counter-studies, reactionary anger of the sort that exemplified the #GamerGate movement, and public relations tactics, respectively. The game industry, in particular, has benefited from a broadening of market categories (the introduction of “casual gamer,” for instance) that helps normalize the idea of games and creates the perception that most average people play games.

The most enduring perception of games, however—so fundamental to commonly held notions of games that it has structured human–game relations throughout history—is that games are “only” a leisure activity, a “pass-time” engaged in for pleasure rather than productivity, as an escape from work and possibly from mundane reality. This notion can be seen as a generative base for other stereotypes: games are frivolous, meant for children’s abundant free time rather than for serious adults, save for moral degenerates who may become so enthralled by the possibility of escape from the ordinary that they become delusional, unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. This primal understanding of games is also the most recent to be the subject of an attempted rehabilitation: the Games for Change movement suggests that games can be deployed on serious subjects to convey political consciousness, while the use of games as produc-
tive components of education has most lately been practiced under nomenclature like game-based learning. Gamification, meanwhile, seeks to use games in whole or part to adjust player motivations, at their own behest or in accordance with institutional goals. These approaches have two things in common: goals involving harnessing games for more “productive” and “useful” ends than leisure, and Jane McGonigal.

McGonigal exemplifies the intersection of various productive uses for games; she advocates the potential for games to prevent PTSD in trauma victims, creates games that teach or raise consciousness about an issue, and designed a gamified system to cultivate positive motivation and psychological reinforcement toward a player’s self-defined goals. Her vision for games doesn’t just involve rehabilitating and assimilating them into a “productive member of society,” participating in established institutions from education to the nonprofit industrial complex; she orates about the potential for games to become a savior, the most productive aspect of society. The goals McGonigal advocates and designs for—awareness of peak oil problems, recovery from traumatic injury, motivated physical exercise, learning about public libraries, planting community gardens—are difficult to impugn. The conversion of play into a resource to be harnessed, however, is perhaps the most ambitious attempt to assimilate games into usefulness. According to McGonigal, the libidinous energy of engagement with games—the pleasure of unproductive play, the nebulous notion of “fun”—can potentially be channeled towards all sorts of productive goals. By the same token, this energy could also be harnessed for goals diametrically opposed to the positive ends that McGonigal champions.

The work of philosopher Bernard Suits forms one of the foundations of McGonigal’s approach to game design, specifically the definition of games from his 1978 text, The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia. According to Suits, a game must involve “voluntary obstacles”—another lens on the system that a player submits to in order to play a game. McGonigal sees this aspect of games as explaining “everything that is motivating and rewarding and fun about games.” Her method of design involves placing voluntary obstacles—challenges that one decides to overcome—along the way to a goal that’s productive or
improves life in some way. Unlike McGonigal, however, Suits rejects the notion of productive goals for games. In The Grasshopper, the titular protagonist is a version of the same character in Aesop’s fable about the ant and the grasshopper—an insect who eschews work for pleasure. Suits reimagines the grasshopper as a philosopher who seeks ultimate goods—activities that are pursued for their own ends, and for no other reason. The laboring ants, preparing for the winter, are working for a purpose, but the grasshopper seeks only happiness for its own sake, and concludes that games are the way to this utopia. In an ideal world, he reasons, we would do nothing but play.

Although Suits may not have been entirely serious in his characterization of games as the main ingredient in utopian living, the cast he gives to the inherently unproductive nature of games is striking; in light of movements to rehabilitate and instrumentalize games for productive ends, we must ask what we are losing in the rush to raise games out of the scorned red-light district of trivial, immature pleasures. Games can be legitimized by yoking them to support the institutions of education, propaganda, nonprofit organizations, and behavioral psychology—but should they be yoked? Games are even on a climb toward legitimacy as an art form, and the debate over whether games “can be art” is nearly a foregone conclusion as the Museum of Modern Art adds games to its collection.

Even Eric Zimmerman, who in 2013 predicted that the twenty-first century will be the “Ludic Century” where games become the preeminent creative form, wrote to discourage the assimilation of games as an accepted form of art exactly a year later: “Once games are just another department in the academy, just another section in the newspaper, just another kind of festival or marketplace or catalog then they no longer have the disruptive power that makes them so special. Art is the name for establishment culture—works that have ceased to challenge and offend.”

Anyone who has engaged with video games in the last three decades is familiar with the primary institution that games have been successfully deployed in service of: the consumer marketplace. Games were once created and mutated as a form of folk creativity, distributed and taught by word of mouth; the rehabilitation of games’ asso-
eration with morally degenerate gambling made the family-friendly board game market possible, and the computing revolution enabled an explosion in the number of increasingly disposable product choices available for consumers. Further assimilation in the service of established institutions could herald a turn toward other productive uses for games besides profit and employment. But the queer question must remain: What will we lose in the process as we make additional bids for legitimacy?

Notes

11. Ibid., 26–33.