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Beyond texts: Using queer readings to document LGBTQ game content

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Abstract

Queer readings of texts allow audiences, queer or not, to see the possibility for queerness in media that does not explicitly name LGBTQ identities. At times these readings are intended by creators but they need not be, as audiences themselves help establish the queer potential of texts through their own reception practices. Studying queerly read content in media necessarily requires moving beyond a singular textual object, as authorship, fandom, and reception practices are all central to identifying queerly readable content in media. Yet scholarship on queerly reading digital game texts has largely relied upon close academic readings of the text itself. Drawing on our ongoing project documenting a large number of games with LGBTQ or queerly read content, herein we argue that given the unprecedented access to fan queer readings online communities make available, we can expand our methodological toolkit for documenting this content. Specifically, rather than considering fan queer readings as data to be analyzed on its own, we argue that these sources can be read alongside game content and producer statements as evidence of queerness in game texts. That is, by moving beyond the text, scholars can address a larger scope of queer reading practices as well as properly value fan work. We conclude that queer readings available in these spaces allow us to archive and preserve queer reception activities, but also allow fans actively shape the meaning of these texts.

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Introduction

In June 2016, a thread was created on the /r/assassinscreed subreddit (Various, 2016) discussing LGBT protagonists in the *Assassin's Creed* game series. Fans disagreed about whether or not the developer, Ubisoft, should explicitly confirm if Jacob Frye, one of the player characters in *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (Ubisoft, 2015), was meant to be queer. Some felt there was a clear, if ambiguous, romantic subtext between Jacob and major antagonist Maxwell Roth. Fans argued about Jacob's sexuality on

multiple platforms, including YouTube comment sections, the TV Tropes wiki, and the aforementioned *Assassin's Creed* community on Reddit. The official *Assassin's Creed* Tumblr blog run by Ubisoft eventually responded to this debate, stating: "Jacob Frye is bisexual. This is canon. The end" [1]. Back in the Reddit thread, some fans felt that this queer male representation was "forced" and thereby inauthentic, but the Ubisoft Tumblr post as well as an interview with a lead narrative writer for the game seemed to have cemented this as canon. Rarely, however, do game makers offer such clear a declaration of characters' debated or queerly read sexualities. In the process of documenting LGBTQ content in digital games over a 30-year period, we as researchers have had to find ways to work with queer readings of games, rather than attempt reconcile what is considered canon with that which is considered fanon (terms we define below).

Explicit LGBTQ representation entails that the text itself clearly articulate a characters' gender or sexuality. However, in our research we have discovered LGBTQ video game content is often implicit in nature (Shaw, *et al.*, 2019), as the debates about Jacob's sexuality show. Further, even within this implicit content some is queerly read by fans without there being any evidence that a character is canonically queer. Canon, according to McCardle, is "the original work from which the fan fiction author borrows" [2]. Yet fan studies also acknowledge the interdependent relationship between canon (*i.e.*, what is contained within the source text and related texts produced by designers/publishers) and fanon (*i.e.*, common refrains about the source text produced by fan communities) (Hellekson and Busse, 2006). What counts as canon has largely been determined by fans themselves; it is more an emergent phenomenon than it is fact. Moreover, canon need not serve as a dismissal of all other interpretations of a text. Jacob's sexuality was available for fan interpretation long before the game makers declared one particular interpretation true. A queer reading of the game allowed fans to identify the potential for a romantic relationship between two men. If anything, the validation by the official site exemplified what Alexander Doty (1993) argued in the LGBTQ media studies classic *Making things perfectly queer*: "Queer readings aren't 'alternative' readings, wishful or willful misreadings, or 'reading too much into things' readings. They result from the recognition and articulation of the complex range of queerness that has been in popular cultural texts and their audiences all along" [3]. Similarly, much as Bonnie Ruberg (2019) shows that "video games have always been queer," queerly read characters have been a part of digital games as long as games have existed. Yet how, methodologically, can scholars properly account for these when documenting LGBTQ game content over time?

Drawing on our experiences building the LGBTQ Game Archive, our ongoing project documenting LGBTQ content in over 1,200 games published since 1980, we discuss how the elements typically analyzed in queer reading of media per Doty (1993) — queer authorship, queer fandom, and queer reception — face particular challenges for digital games and with a project of this scale. In doing so, we explain how we have sought to reconcile game content, producer commentary, and fan debates around the gender and sexuality of digital game characters alongside our own insights as queer media scholars about how to catalog queer game content. We contend that if texts only occur through reception, following Fiske (2010), then fandoms and fan readings are part of the study of media texts, not separate from the texts themselves. We explain how our methodological process allows us to address those challenges, as well as the practical limitations of studying this medium historically, and the ethical issues regarding building projects reliant upon fan labor. This process also allows us to explore the relationship between canon and fanon without over-privileging either. In concluding, we argue that given the availability of fan content in digital spaces (*e.g.*, De Kosnik, 2016), researchers can better utilize it as evidence of queerness in the text, allow fans to help construct the meanings of these texts, and preserve queer reception activities for this medium.

Studying queer readings

Queer media studies generally have embraced the idea that obvious forms of LGBTQ representation, while politically and socially important, have never been the sole forms of visibility for LGBTQ people

(Hilton-Morrow and Battles, 2015). This work builds upon media studies scholarship which argues that audiences are active in the reception of media texts (Fiske, 2010; Hall, 1997). How audiences queerly read content has been important to exploring queer representation in television shows (Maris, 2016), films (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006), and advertisements (Sender, 2005). In his introduction to the canonic text *Making things perfectly queer*, Alexander Doty argued that queerness exists in mass culture texts regardless of whether the texts themselves are "about queers" [4]. Queer here for Doty is "any expression that can be marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight" [5], although his examples focus primarily on the potential for same-sex romantic/sexual pairings and openness to gender identities. These readings, however, do not need to be intended by the creators. Doty (1993) argued, for instance, that one of the interesting things about women-centered sitcoms (*I Love Lucy* (1951), *Laverne and Shirley* (1976), *Kate and Allie* (1984), etc.), "gay" straight man characters like Jack Benny, or the campiness of Pee-Wee Herman is that their queer pleasure derives from audiences seeing the queer subtext of the shows even when the creators and actors themselves often disavowed those readings.

Moreover, and as a useful model for the LGBTQ Game Archive, Doty's (1993) process of identifying queer readings largely entailed piecing together evidence from the popular press, actor biographies, fan material, and close watching of the shows themselves. In this mass cultural approach to uncovering queer reception practices, he was necessarily expansive in his data collection. Doty (1993) also explained that the lines between authors, audiences, and reception are fuzzy ones when identifying what leads to queer readings. Yet this messiness is also central to queerness. He asserted that we can only truly begin to appreciate the queerness within popular media when we let go of the need to assign correct interpretations to texts, a point which seems obvious given that media and cultural studies has long valued the role of audiences in making meaning out of texts (Shaw, *et al.*, 2018).

Importantly, queer readings are not about uncovering the true sexuality of media characters. Such formulations reproduce the oppressive logic of "coming out of the closet," as Doty explained [6]. Instead, queer readings are about uncovering the potential queerness in all media, regardless of producer intent, and holding those interpretations as equally valid as heteronormative ones. Doty identified three elements as central to uncovering queer media content: queer authorship; uses and interpretations of texts by historically situated gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer people (or fans); and audience reception practices that imagine queerness regardless of an individual audience members sexuality or gender identity (*i.e.*, even heterosexual audiences might see the space for a same-sex attraction between ostensibly "straight" characters). Central to Doty's argument is the political assertion of queerness as indeterminacy. It is both undeniably everywhere and also impossible to fully describe. "What queer reception often does, however, is stand outside the relatively clear-cut and essentializing categories of sexual identity under which most people function" [7]. How might an analysis of games go about defining content as queer while also not essentializing sexuality or gender?

Studying queerness in games

Early work on queer representation in digital games addressed how the structure of the game industry shapes the existence or lack of LGBTQ representation in the medium (Shaw, 2009); how queer players perform their own identities within these spaces (Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012); or same-sex relationship options (Consalvo, 2004; Greer, 2013). Increasingly scholarship has demonstrated that digital games are also a rich site for queer readings (*e.g.*, Chess, 2016; Phillips, 2017; Ruberg, 2019; Youngblood, 2018). Much of this work, however, comes from close readings of game texts by scholars. Yet in our own work on the LGBTQ Game Archive we have found it necessary to think beyond textual analysis as a way to understand queerly read game content.

Given that the LGBTQ Game Archive is focused on amassing a large database of queer game content, the playing and deep analysis of individual texts is not a viable option. Moreover, much of the LGBTQ content we have identified is in the form of a single character appearing for perhaps moments in hours of gameplay, short narratives that are not part of the larger storyline, or one-off mentions (see Shaw, *et*

al., 2019, for more details). Even the queerly read content we address does not necessarily involve central characters or plots. We argue that for some types of game analysis, looking at moments across many games can be just as important as a thorough analysis of a single game.

There already exists a large body of game studies literature on how to analyze games as texts, mostly focusing on development contexts (where games are made and played); interactive, narrative, and ludic elements of games themselves; procedural rhetoric (or ideologies built into the underlying logics of the game; and social play dimensions (where and with whom a game is played) (*e.g.*, Carr, *et al.*, 2004; King and Krzywinska, 2006; Consalvo and Dutton, 2006; Bogost, 2006; Fernández-Vara, 2014). Still, often this work treats the text as a bound object to be studied. Building on T.L. Taylor's (2009) discussion of the assemblage of play, we suggest that discussions of LGBTQ representation in games must look beyond the game itself. While her discussion is focused on the assemblage that structures the experience of play, building on queer media and cultural studies scholarship (Doty, 1993; Hall, 1997), we argue that our approach addresses the multifaceted forms of queer representation that are possible in this medium. Our process is distinct from how others have used fan discussions to situate game content, however. Condis (2015) and Brock (2011), for example, have used fan debates over "controversial" representations of homosexual or Black people in games to situate their analyses of the games. Similarly, Pavlounis (2016) utilized responses to the game *Gone Home* to analyze the representational work of that game. We, in contrast, view the fan interpretations as part of the meaning of these games.

Our work on the LGBTQ Game Archive, also contributes to the broader theoretical discussion in game and media studies of "what is the text?" For our purposes, it is worth taking Carr's argument that "the game is a text, for the moment, because I am doing textual analysis" a bit further [8]. Specifically, we see queer readings of games as superseding the boundary of the game as an isolated text. That is, if our unit of analysis is queer readings, we must go beyond the game itself. As Doty wrote: "As long as the analysis of mass culture remains dependent primarily upon texts, with their unstable representational codes ... the queerness of mass culture ... will remain in the twilight zone of connotation" [9]. Can we make sense of myriad manifestations of queerness historically and holistically, drawing on multiple data sources, by equally valuing fan readings and digital game canons?

Studying fan readings and canon

According to Jenkins (1992), a key difference between typical audience reception and fandom is a level of investment and a sense of ownership of the text by fans. Yet one of the key distinctions made in determining canon is precisely this issue of ownership. As Kahane (2016) outlined, contemporary distinctions between canon and fanon are largely built upon ideas of copyright ownership, and often pit legacy models of media production against digital modes of fan production. He goes on to argue that if we look at the long history of the idea of canon, it has always been a communal process or repetition. From Greek epics to academic fields, what counts is that which communities continue to repeat and refer back to. He wrote: "We should understand canon not as any particular fact, story line, or set of characters nor as an object, but, more flexibly, as the text's (sometimes self-chosen) containment practice that is invoked by the perception of superabundant potential, even as such potential can present in different ways and through different media in different historical contexts," rather than what he calls the practical definitions of canon used in fan studies [10].

Canon in fan studies is typically defined as what the origin text says, as declared by the leading creative voice. Brooker (2002), for instance, found in one study that *Star Wars* fans defer authority of the canon to George Lucas, who they have identified as the core creative force behind that media universe. However, Lyden's (2012) study of *Star Wars* fandom showed that what counts as canon is debated within fan communities. Canon is as much a communal activity as queer reading practices. Determining what is canon is an interpretive process driven primarily by the fans coming to consensus around a definition.

In the language of fan studies, traditional forms of game analysis give us insight into one version of canon. Yet aside from queer game studies, where in the academic documentation of LGBTQ game content lies fanon or "headcanon" (individual interpretations of texts)? Indeed, that fan circles have come to differentiate what is really in the text (canon) and audience interpretations shows that popular understandings of where meaning gets made tend to over-privilege the main text. If anything, as Elena Maris (2016) has shown in the case of the television show *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995), Internet-based interactions between fans and producers allow queer readings to work their way back into the text itself.

Rather than determine the true content in these games, we are assessing the totality of their potential for LGBTQ representation. In challenging the role of authors in defining characters genders and sexualities, we also want to push back on the privileging of academic analyses or producer declared canons. Informed by fan studies as well as critical cultural studies, we ask: What does an accounting of LGBTQ content in digital games look like if we take what the text, producers, audiences, and scholars have said as equal sources in the construction of meaning, while simultaneously accounting for the instability of and tensions around defining queer representation in the first place?

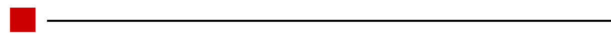
Developing the LGBTQ Game Archive

Begun in 2015, the LGBTQ Game Archive is an ongoing collaborative research project and community resource primarily serving as a database of information about games with LGBTQ content. The authors of this article are the founder and primary investigator of the project, as well as a research assistant who worked on the project for two and a half years. At present, the master list for the project includes over 1,200 games from over three decades, numerous countries of origin, and platforms. The master list is compiled from existing lists of LGBTQ game content (*e.g.*, Wikipedia or game news articles), new games found during the research process, a shared database with the Queerly Represent Me (https://queerlyrepresent.me/) team, and submissions of games to our public comment page.

Researching the LGBTQ content in each game takes between 5 and 80 hours. To research each game, we draw on academic and popular articles, game and fandom wikis, textual and video walkthroughs, online message boards and forums, YouTube videos, professional and amateur game reviews, and any other material covering the LGBTQ content that is the subject of our inquiry. The process for developing archive's categorization system are detailed elsewhere (Shaw and Freisem, 2016), as here we focus just on the queerly read and rumored content the archive documents as responses to the questions asked at the end of each of the previous sections.

Since the beginning, this project has focused on documenting all LGBTQ game content to include both explicit and implicit depictions, including those that are queerly read. This approach draws upon decades of queer film and media scholarship that has identified implicit and queerly read media content as sites of representation equal in importance to explicit content (Russo, 1987; Benshoff and Griffin, 2006; Sender, 2005; Gross, 2001). This challenge is also perhaps why we get the same question at nearly every public presentation of this project: How do we decide if a character or game is really queer? Although we published one study that attempts to put precise labels on (and numbers to) LGBTQ character and related game content (Shaw, *et al.*, 2019), for the most part the LGBTQ Game Archive is decidedly not invested in arbitrating the genders and sexualities of game characters. At the same time, we assert that the documentation of queer readings of game texts is important. We argue, as Doty did, that "as with the constructing of sexual identities, constructing the sexualities of texts results in some 'real thing'" [11]. Queer readings of characters, whether validated by creators or not, are a key site of resistance on the part of marginalized audiences who use them to reorient dominant narratives around their own subjectivities (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006). That said, we have faced some challenges of fitting this study of digital games into Doty's focus on authorship, fandom, and reception practices. In what follows, we use specific case studies from creating the LGBTQ Game Archive to address how our research methods help redress some of these difficulties. These are examples we found to be

particularly illustrative of the challenges posed and the methodological approaches we used to respond to them. Similarly, as Jones (2002) suggested, queer readings are rarely treated by fan scholars as uncovering something that is already present within the text; instead such readings are framed as "deviant" readings. In contrast, we have endeavored to treat these readings as part of the record of what is known about these games.



Locating queerness in games

Thanks to the massive trove of fan-produced data online, we can begin to piece together the content and interpretations of media texts across sites of production and reception. Rather than only studying fans as communities, or the relationship between canon and fanon as one of original versus transformative texts, scholars can utilize fan interpretations as part of the body of material, or the "assemblage" (Taylor, 2009), that makes up the game as text. Using multiple data points, we can begin to address some of the factors raised by Doty as useful in hinting at the queer possibilities of texts. This is particularly vital in a project that seeks to address LGBTQ content on a large scale, rather than on an individual text scale. Moreover, it offers a more ethical approach to valuing fan labor and interpretations in research that cuts across online spaces.

Queer authorship

When it comes to queer readings, Doty (1993) was interested in how the known (or suspected) sexuality of authors is used to identify the potential queerness in a popular media text. Setting aside debates about the "death of the author" and whether, as Barthes (1977) argues, the more open to interpretation texts are the less of a role the author has in imposing a particular interpretation upon them, what Doty means is that audiences use knowledge or suspicions about authors to support their own queer readings of texts or even genres. The queerness of designer Matt Boch, for instance, has been used as a lens through which to interpret the very open relationship to gender used in the game series *Dance Central* (Alexander, 2012). Similarly, when a number of queer indie game makers used Twine, an open-source hypertext tool, and other freely available tools, to create games those platforms themselves began to be identified as potentially queer (Anthropy, 2012; kopas, 2015).

When it comes to looking at historical games as well as games produced by game companies rather than solo-authors, however, there are many challenges to using authors' queerness as a way to identify potential queerness in the text. Many games from the 1970s through the present, for example, were and are produced and distributed through Internet networks under aliases (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009). Although in some instances we might suspect author identities from the content of their games, we cannot always be sure. When it comes to the mainstream game industries, the members of each team that makes mainstream games may number in the dozens to thousands, not all of whom have publicly disclosed their sexual and/or gender identities. Although games do have directors, producers, lead writers, etc. as identified in Shaw's (2009) work, some instances of LGBTQ content in games are inserted by a single programmer responsible for one element of a game. This makes determining the decision-maker in a particular moment of LGBTQ content difficult to ascertain. The bulk of game industry "authors" that have been identified are heterosexual, cisgender men (those who were assigned male at birth and identify with that gender) or, in some cases, heterosexual, cisgender women (Edwards, *et al.*, 2014). While there are certainly LGBTQ people who work in the game industry (Edwards, *et al.*, 2014), few have been identified as the creative force behind a specific game or series the way film directors or television producers generally are.

Although the "queer games avant garde" began around 2010 (Ruberg, 2020) and the public documentation of the authors' identities are available through scholarship, blogs, and popular press articles, there are few earlier indie games of which we have records about the authors. For example, there are currently only five games in the LGBTQ Game Archive produced by independent designers before the 2010s: *Mad Party Fucker* (Stretch and The Spy, 1985), *The Warden Game* (Ed Mead, 1987),

Caper in the Castro (C.M. Ralph, 1989), *GayBlade* (Ryan Best, 1993), and *Foobar vs. the DEA* (Tom Kluge and Dr. Dick, 1996). Of these, we have only identified the legal names of the authors of four of these games, and the sexual identities of three of these authors. *Mad Party Fucker* was released under two hackers' aliases, and while we do not know their names or sexual identities, we can infer, from the game's homophobic narrative framing and its characterization of its antagonists as gay men with HIV/AIDS, that this was not a game produced by or for queer people. The designers of *The Warden Game, Caper in the Castro*, and *GayBlade* all have given interviews stating that their homosexuality influenced their game creation and their content. The two designers behind *Foobar vs the DEA* originally used aliases and later included their names on the game's Web site; nothing is known of their sexualities. We only have records of these games in the LGBTQ Game Archive at all because the content of them was explicitly queer enough to show up in our searches for LGBTQ video game content. All five of these games were the only games created by the authors, that we know of, therefore the knowledge (or not) of their sexualities does not lead to a greater body of work we now identify as queer.

Although there may have been more work produced by other queer people in the earlier eras of game development, it has not been documented in a way that we have been able to trace, due to the largely anonymous sharing of these games that took place. Even more recently, we have found no clear statements about the sexualities of the small team which produced *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013), a game that has a central storyline about two teenage lesbians. This is just one set of examples illustrating some of the difficulties in locating queerness in games using authorship as an entry point.

We must also ask whether and how to interpret the work of authors whose identities have been subject to archival erasure. For instance, Danielle Bunten Berry underwent gender confirmation surgery in 1992 and following this was less active in game development. Her writings (Berry, n.d.) around her gender transition, which are still available through the Internet Archive, suggest a very queer relationship to gender and sexuality throughout her life. This information is not readily available in archival materials curated by her estranged daughter, who often refers to Berry in interviews using her pre-transition name. As Whitney Pow's (2019, 2018) recent work has considered, given the absences in the archival record we simply do not know if there was a fanbase that saw the queerness of Berry's games as an extension of her own queer identity.

The nature of game production, moreover, can call into question how one might weigh different declarations around a character's gender or sexuality. For instance, a single comment in 1994 from Hirofumi Matsuoka, a Nintendo graphic artist in charge of background production on *Metroid*, referring to the game's protagonist Samus Aran as a "newhalf" has been used to defend the reading her as a transgender woman (Wu and McGrody, 2015). In the interview, at least according to the translation from Japanese to English by the fan run site Metroid-database.com, he was asked for a "secret of Samus" that only he knew and he responded "Samus isn't a woman. As a matter of fact, she's actually a shemale" [12]. As McLelland (2003) points out, however, "newhalf" (the word Wu and McGrody [2015] assert was in the original Japanese version of the interview) is an ambiguous term in Japanese and we cannot be sure if the fan site's translation captures the intended meaning. Moreover, it is unclear how seriously the comment was meant to be taken.

The question of authorship also shapes how fan communities cohere around and interpret a queer game. Consider the visual novel *Dream Daddy* (Game Grumps, 2017), which is about a newly single father protagonist looking to date other dads. Shortly after *Dream Daddy's* release, there were various controversies between fans of developer and media producer group Game Grumps and fans of the game. On one hand, some Game Grumps fans felt that the game was supposed to be a humorous, satirical take on the dating simulator genre, given what they had come to expect from Game Grumps media content. These fans thus felt that the game's marketing was dishonest because it turned out to be about adult gay dads (JoyConGentleman, 2018). Fans of *Dream Daddy*, on the other hand, debated whether the game was primarily meant to be a voyeuristic window into queer experience for straight people or a sincere take on queer subjects for LGBTQ players (Mulkerin, 2017). Lead creators Leighton Gray, a queer woman, and Vernon Shaw, a straight man, have also received criticism for

crafting a queer male narrative somehow devoid of actual references to gay sexual identity and for leaning on tropes of "traditional straight masculinity" in creating their characters' different personalities (Grayson, 2017). These controversies illustrate how the very notion of authorship can produce divergent readings among different fandom communities of a single queer game. As part of the LGBTQ Game Archive, we document all of these controversies if we can find evidence of them. However, we are careful to only reference authors' sexualities and genders if they have published statements about them in relation to the game (*i.e.*, via interviews, artist statements, or within the game).

Queer fandom

Doty (1993) largely talked around the question of fandom. Instead, he pointed to how queer fandoms around specific female stars help us see the gay sensibility in films that are ostensibly not about queers but are identified as queer via knowledge of the director's sexuality. However, he argued, queer audiences were able to sense the queerness of these films before knowing anything about the directors. Similarly, many of the texts he identified as open to queer reception are also those texts with queer fan bases. Although he argued that separating these three factors is messy, what becomes clear here that the use of authors' sexualities and audience reception practices to identify the queer possibilities of texts, such scholars often rely on their pre-existing knowledge of queer fandoms surrounding these texts. This is true of the texts Benshoff and Griffin (2006) identified as well.

The difficulty for us, then, is that historically the gay and lesbian press has largely ignored digital game culture (Shaw, 2019; 2009). There are few ways to identify "historically specific cultural readings and uses of texts by self-identified gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and queers" [13] when it comes to games. Although there are points in history where there have been dedicated LGBTQ gaming community spaces (from guilds in MMORPGS to online message boards), many of those are no longer in existence (Rudolph, *et al.*, 2019). As Shaw's (2012) research has shown, however, when they did exist, these online LGBTQ gamer spaces did engage in queer readings of games and other media texts. Although others have emerged, sometimes with the same members, these have little documented connection to their community ancestors. Increasingly, as game fandoms are dispersed across online platforms and fans themselves spread their interest across game franchises, it becomes difficult to identify the "best" or "obvious" starting point for locating LGBTQ fans of a particular games or series. Fans, queer or not, spread across gaming spaces to discuss the sexualities of various game characters. Furthermore, and related to the difficulty of identifying the sexuality of game creators, identifying the sexuality of fans who post queer readings of game texts online is difficult as they do not always disclose their sexuality or gender when posting. Thus, while queer readings as a reception practice can be done from any subject position (straight or queer), identifying queer fandoms is more challenging.

Although Doty (1993) did not provide much clarity on finding queer fandom, in contemporary media studies, identifying queer fans' queer readings typically requires taking one of two approaches: identifying queer fans within a specific fan community (*e.g.*, Jenkins, 2006) or identifying queer fan spaces (*e.g.*, Maris, 2016). For the former, some franchises have successfully courted queer fans with queer characters and storylines. Blizzard Entertainment made headlines in early 2019 by announcing a second queer main character for their immensely popular multiplayer game *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016). Previously the main character Tracer was revealed to be a lesbian via a comic book that is separate from the game. The similar quiet coming out of macho man Soldier: 76 via an *Overwatch* ancillary short story has been described by some fans and game critics alike as a critical example of gay representation for a presumed cisgender, heterosexual male gaming community that otherwise may not have wanted to play as or identify with a gay character (Zachary, 2019). Yet, this framing does not quite capture the vibrant queer fandom of *Overwatch* players, who have long been deploying their own queer readings through creative fan art and writing, speculating on future reveals by Blizzard, and building alternative community spaces (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019).

Of course, queer game content is not necessarily required for queer fandoms to develop. Kelley (2013), for instance, analyzed the predominately homosexual fan community GayGamer.net and the predominately heterosexual fan community *Age of Conan* forums to compare their interpretations of the game's representation of male bodies. This is a game with a character that appears on none of the

lists used in constructing the LGBTQ Game Archive. If it were not for Kelley's writings, there would not be any documentation of the queer reading of Conan in the GayGamer.net forums. Unfortunately, that site, as well as numerous other LGBTQ game fan sites and forums, went off-line for various reasons, and thus we can no longer look to these specific spaces for early 2000s to mid-2010s queer readings of games. Although the pages, largely the front pages, of those sites have been saved via the Internet Archive and similar initiatives, the forums in which those conversations took place are not archived. Moving forward site owners, queer media scholars, and digital archivists might consider how best to document and archive similar forums that appear on new platforms.

It is also important to note that these conversations are taking place in increasingly diverse forms across many different platforms, as seen in the *Assassin's Creed* example from our introduction. All-purpose forums such as Reddit's /r/gaymers and /r/transgamers encourage discussion on topics like game content, queer lifestyle topics, queer readings, and rumors and speculation, and even have NSFW spinoff subgroups. These large general queer fandoms also splinter into Facebook groups, Discord servers, Steam parties, weekly podcasts, cosplay markets, Twitch streams, YouTube channels, Twitter subcultures, Instagram meme accounts, and email listservs (*e.g.*, http://queersplaygames.com/). Wherever there is a platform that allows for user-generated content and community building, it is likely there is a queer games fandom using it. In our work documenting queer readings of games, as exemplified in the introduction, it has become clear that these queer fandoms are decentralized and yet still highly interconnected, given the patterns of queer game content circulation. As De Kosnik (2016) has well documented, fans themselves often archive their own reception and creation practices. Our own research process allows us to trace fan activity across sites and platforms in order to document this history.

Queer reception

Of course, queer reception practices are not the sole domain of queer audiences, as Doty reiterated throughout his book. However, tracking down evidence of queer readings of games is almost as hard as identifying, across historical eras, where queer fans congregated. The process of pulling together a master list of LGBTQ video game content, including those available for queer readings or showing implicit forms of queer representation, means that at times it feels like we are tracking down mirages of queer game content.

One example of this problem is a game we found on the main Wikipedia list of LGBTQ game characters in video games called *It Came from the Desert* (Cinemaware, 1989) [14]. The Wikipedia page previously stated that "the player encounters Jackie, a lesbian girl who crashed her car with her girlfriend," though the entry has since been edited to remove the example. In our search for more information, we found the game listed on a Tumblr post of "Lesbians in video games." By searching for reviews and walkthroughs of the game we were finally able to find a list of characters. Jackie is identified as "the daughter of Billy Bob and girlfriend of Max 'The Enforcer' Cobb, whose affair was commented by tabloids. She was feared to testify against him, so she took her friend Suzie and went to Lizard Breath" [15]. If the player helps her, she may eventually have sex with the male player-character. To help corroborate the two accounts of Jackie's relationship with the woman in her car, we were able to find a recording of the entire playtime of the game on YouTube. Watching this, we see Jackie explain this back story and throughout, she calls Suzie her girlfriend.

To us, it seemed clear that the inclusion of Jackie on Wikipedia and Tumblr was the result of someone seeing her use the phrase "girlfriend" and not knowing any other contextual clues from the game. Girlfriend has been used by women of all sexualities at different points in modern American history in reference to their platonic friendships with other women. Yet, when we have used this example in presentations of this work, there seem to be both generational and linguistic differences in how people interpret the use of the term girlfriend. Younger audiences and people for whom English is not their primary language tend to presume the word indicates a romantic rather than platonic relationship. These reactions are based simply on seeing how Jackie describes how she ended up in the desert, and so in part these are incomplete interpretations of the text. In addition, however, audiences have also

suggested Jackie might be bisexual. This game character, and many other examples like her, remain documented in our archive in large part to ensure that these various interpretations can be remembered.

Although our *It Came from the Desert* example suggests that the queer readings we document might stem from misunderstandings, it is also important to point out that much of what our work has revealed are the various processes by which fans debate a character's gender and sexuality. Again, as Doty (1993) emphasized, this is not work just done by LGBTQ audiences. Yet one of the more interesting things we are able to map in developing this project holistically is the number of factors players are using in assessing characters' sexualities.

We see some of those factors in the conversations around the Gabriel Knight series (1993) of games by Sierra Studios. In *The Beast Within* (Sierra Studios, 1995), for instance, being a werewolf is both a metaphor for homosexuality and a signal that certain characters are meant to be interpreted as homosexual within the game's narrative (though in the game, there is reference to the queerness of werewolves being a matter of scholarly debate). Fans point to a historian character identifying with the fictional historical king who was suspected of being a gay werewolf as evidence of the historian's homosexuality. Moreover, and like with many games from the 1990s in particular, Baron von Glower's European qualities, identified via his vaguely German/French accent, taste for wine, ornate decor, and well-groomed appearance — along with his seeming effeminacy and the fact that he runs a men's social club — are pointed to as evidence of his never-stated homosexuality. In *Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned* (Sierra Studios, 1999), fans read the characters Lady Howard and Estelle Stiles as potentially a lesbian couple because their room only has one bed. There is also a scene in which Estelle rides a motorcycle with Lady Howard in the sidecar, which is pointed to as further evidence of their sexuality. In none of these games are the characters' sexualities explicitly stated, though in the novelization of some of the games, characters who were queerly read by players are explicitly named as queer (Jensen, 1997).

There is a long history of villains having personality traits and aesthetic signifiers associated with queerness in popular culture, which is known as queercoding. Some examples of this include Scar from Disney's *The Lion King* or Cheryl Blossom from The CW's *Riverdale* (Ennis, 2018). This trope is pervasive in games as well, where the most pervasive pattern involves queercoded villains who are positioned in contrast to wholesome and just cisheterosexual player-character protagonists. Fabulous and sexy villains like *Bayonetta's* Father Balder (Platinum Games, 2009), *Chrono Trigger's* Flea (Square, 1995), *Resident Evil: Dead Aim's* Morpheus Duvall (Capcom, 2003), and *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword's* Lord Ghirahim (Nintendo, 2011) draw on longstanding tropes about queer people's hypersexuality, assumed predatory desires, and gender fluidity as deviance. Fans, whether LGBTQ or not, take up these instances of queer villains as points of entry into "good or bad representation" debates and touch on the ever-changing position of queerness in game content itself.

Finally, it is important to note that some fans of Japanese games read characters as queer without clarity as to how their sexualities are described in the original Japanese text. They debate these queer readings in ways that are largely reflections around translation as well as cultural differences in sexuality and gender norms. For instance, discussing the *Tales Of* and *Fire Emblem* series, Joshua Savage (2018) noted that the Japanese versions of the game text are much more overt about romantic relationships between characters than their English translations. Related to this, English-language fan communities debated whether or not characters in these series are gay, whereas Japanese-language fan communities did not (though they sometimes debated the particularities of the characters relationships). Finally, although there are some queerly read characters in the Final Fantasy series whose sexuality seems *more* hinted at in the games themselves, fans continue to offer up queer readings of many other major characters in the series. The close relationship of Fang and Vanille in *Final Fantasy XIII* (Square, 2009), for example, is pointed to as evidence of their lesbianism, whereas fans have read the antagonism between Cloud and Sephiroth from *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997) as hinting at their true passion for one another. As noted earlier, our goal as researchers is to document all of these readings, and in particular note where fans debate them, to better understand the process by which queer game readings *vis-à-vis* canon are negotiated.

Valuing fan labor

By collecting bodies of information about LGBTQ content, rather than focusing on the games themselves, we are able to offer a richer understanding of how specific games or moments within games become legible as queer for fans. Fan interpretations of content as queer are included alongside information from official game lore. We account for explicit LGBTQ representation; fan interpretation, remixing, and textual poaching; and what the game developers' intentions may have been from a holistic perspective. Our approach is not simply to collect instances of queer game content, but also to offer analytical frameworks that will allow us to understand various aspects of them. The goal is to document this communal activity rather than produce a singular queer narrative or identify the queer canon around a particular game and its content. That is, only by piecing together evidence across materials about the game can we begin to map where specifically queer representations become salient for different stakeholders. Moreover, we assert that queer readings are as much a part of queer game history as are explicitly labeled LGBTQ characters, we have found that our multifaceted approach helps address the theoretical and practical limitations of identifying queer readings. The weighing of fan material as a source of information about where queerness is located in games was also an ethical decision on our part, as we explain later. We view our methodological intervention as expanding upon rather than challenging existing approaches.

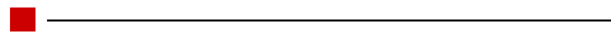
We are cognizant, however, of the ethical considerations we must make when building a project that is so reliant upon fan labor. Most ethical discussions of fan research center on the act of studying, quoting, and scraping data from fans without permission (Bore and Hickman, 2013; Dym and Fiesler, 2020) or on thinking about the positionality of researchers *vis-à-vis* the fan archives they work with (Jansen, 2020). However, in the context of this study, we are not studying the fans themselves. Our only interest is where and if anyone has identified specific games as having queer content. At the same time, much like the ethnographic researcher, we are responsible for articulating the game, creator, and fan perspectives on their own terms. The internet spaces we navigate are field sites that contain online data, but this data is informed by the social and cultural practices of these users across the games ecosystem and assemblage of play (Taylor, 2009). We want to be sure we are honoring the unpaid labor that is supporting our efforts. Hughes (2018), for instance, detailed the labor that goes into the making of game walkthroughs and FAQs. His interviewees expressed that they did this work in large part out of feelings of altruism, of giving back to their community. At the same time, they felt it was important to get recognition, and in some cases compensation, for their work (though most minimized the importance of the latter). He concluded, "Whatever the nature of their labor, walkthrough authors are fans first" [16]. We see it as our ethical role to value their interpretations of content that may or may not be canon by showcasing them in the first place.

Importantly, we do not see ourselves as the arbiters of truth in declaring these characters' sexes, genders, or sexualities. Rather, as Shani Orgad (2009) wrote, we have "a commitment to an interpretive understanding of people's experiences of the Internet and of the texts they create online and off-line" [17]. Or, as Scott (2019) outlined, the industry shift toward the valuing of fan labor has largely resulted in the attempt to contain specific manifestations of that labor. This has resulted in the move from legal censure (*i.e.*, enforcement of the intellectual property rights) to creative censure: companies determining some fan work and interpretations as more valid than others. Some fans, as Milner (2009) has shown, understand that their labor will inevitably go uncompensated, and view their work as for the sake of texts they value rather than the companies that produce them. In contrast, as scholars, we find it important to value fan work as "shared readings" as Willis called them [18]. In this way, locating fan interpretations as part of the historical record of these games makes fan labor visible and acknowledges the central role of interpretation in all media reception.

Willis (2006) argued that while queer readings may come from readers, this is not, importantly, because queerness is inherent to the reader or the text itself. Rather, queer readings retold via fan fiction are, for her, more specifically about reorienting a text around a specific desire and making that reading

available to other readers. There is a version of queer readings that is not about uncovering latent properties in a text, but rather “taking pleasure in scandalously acting *as if* it were natural to do so, *as if all readings* ... were equally possible” [19]. Although our project is not focused on fan fiction, we apply Jones’ (2002) and Willis’ more open relationship with the value of queer readings as we approach LGBTQ game content.

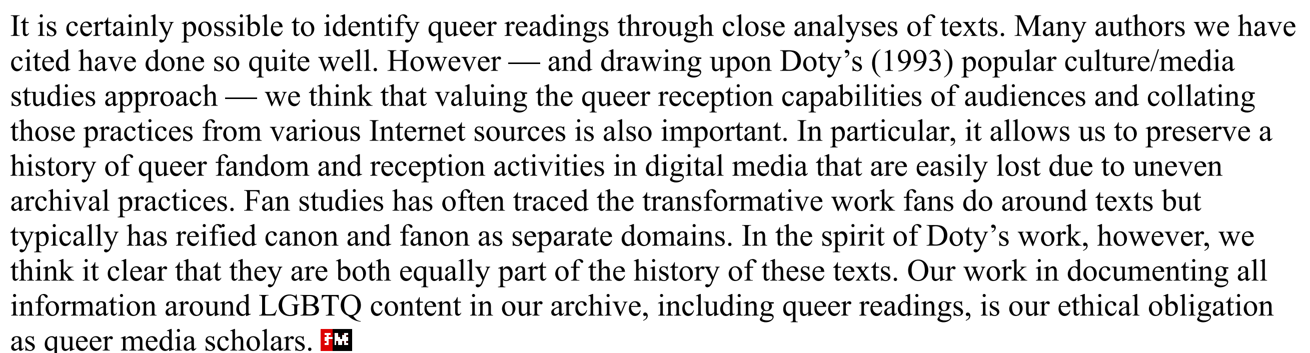
We put fan readings in conversation with one another as an act of interpretation toward mutual contextualization (Orgad, 2009). That is, we are doing interpretive work as we decide what queer readings count as evidence of possible LGBTQ content. Moreover, we are neither doing our own queer reading work (though we are informed by our own senses of what content signifies queer potentiality) nor relying on single instances of queer readings as proof. Rather, we are looking across fan interpretation as well as our evaluations of those interpretations to produce a sort of triangulated queer reading. Each queer reading of game content acts as a potential waypoint toward another, highlighting the mutually constitutive power of fan labor. In the process, our work serves to show that these readings are more than “reading too much into things” (Doty, 1993). These claims to a medium and fan space typically viewed as heteronormative and masculine are as political as they are playful.



Conclusion

Offering a full historical account of LGBTQ content in digital games, requires documenting obvious and non-obvious forms of representation. It necessitates dealing with the instability of and tensions around defining queer representation. To accomplish these goals, we have found that we must take what the text, producers, audiences, and scholars have said as equal sources in the construction of the game’s meaning. Indeed, this compiling of information across data points has always been central to queer media studies (Doty, 1993). This better allows us to acknowledge the distributed nature of queer readings in games and account for the liminality of queerness while avoiding essentializing gender, sex, and sexuality labels.

To do the kind of holistic and archival work required by this project, we are heavily indebted to fan labor practices. The walkthroughs, reviews, wikis, videos, screenshots, etc. are all vital to undertaking a project that seeks to understand the LGBTQ content of over 1,200 games. We have described above how we believe this is central to truly understanding the shape of LGBTQ content in this medium. Beyond that, however, we want to be sure we are honoring the unpaid fan labor supporting our efforts. We do this in two ways. First, we value their interpretations of content that may or may not be canon by showcasing them in the first place. As Doty asserted: “By publicly articulating our queer positions in and about mass culture, we reveal that capitalist cultural production need not exclusively and inevitably express straightness” [20]. Second, we have made our research process public. This means we have become source material for fans and scholars of the very games we have catalogued. By documenting, saving, citing, and hyperlinking to the various interpretations of these games, we serve as a resource for those who think it is important to mark that LGBTQ content has been present in games for nearly as long as the medium has existed and provide evidence of that content.



It is certainly possible to identify queer readings through close analyses of texts. Many authors we have cited have done so quite well. However — and drawing upon Doty’s (1993) popular culture/media studies approach — we think that valuing the queer reception capabilities of audiences and collating those practices from various Internet sources is also important. In particular, it allows us to preserve a history of queer fandom and reception activities in digital media that are easily lost due to uneven archival practices. Fan studies has often traced the transformative work fans do around texts but typically has reified canon and fanon as separate domains. In the spirit of Doty’s work, however, we think it clear that they are both equally part of the history of these texts. Our work in documenting all information around LGBTQ content in our archive, including queer readings, is our ethical obligation as queer media scholars.

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Notes

1. *Assassin's Creed* Tumblr, 2016, http://assassinscreed.tumblr.com/post/138683053677/solasthewolf-doumichan-rozunderpressure.

2. McCardle, 2003, p. 435.

3. Doty, 1993, p. 16.

4. *Op cit.*, p. xi.

5. *Op cit.*, p. xv.

6. *Op cit.*, p. xii.

7. *Op cit.*, p. 15.

8. Carr, 2019, p. 715.

9. Doty, 1993, p. xii.

10. Kahane, 2016, line 6.8.

11. Doty, 1993, p. xi.

12. "Interview: When Samus Was Naked," 1994, at https://www.metroid-database.com/old_site/sm/interview.php.

13. Doty, 1993, p. xi.

14. List of video games with LGBT characters, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_video_games_with_LGBT_characters.

15. *It Came from the Desert*/Characters, Strategy Wiki, at https://strategywiki.org/wiki/It_Came_from_the_Desert/Characters.

16. Hughes, 2018, conclusion.

17. Orgad, 2009, p. 34.

18. Willis, 2006, p. 15.

19. *Op cit.*, p. 168.

20. Doty, 1993, p. 104.

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- *The Warden Game* (Ed Mead, 1987), game
- *Caper in the Castro* (C.M. Ralph, 1989), game
- *GayBlade* (Ryan Best, 1993), game
- *Foobar vs. the DEA* (Tom Kluge and Dr. Dick, 1996), game
- *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1986), game series
- *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company, 2013), game
- *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (Game Grumps, 2017), game
- *Overwatch* (Blizzard, 2016), game
- *Gabriel Knight* (Sierra Studios, 1993), game series
- *The Beast Within* (Sierra Studios, 1995), game
- *The Blood of the Sacred/Blood of the Damned* (Sierra Studios, 1999), game
- *Bayonetta* (Platinum Games, 2009), game
- *Chrono Trigger* (Square, 1995), game
- *Resident Evil Dead Aim* (Capcom, 2003), game
- *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* (Nintendo, 2011), game
- *Tales of* (Bandi Namco, 1995), game series
- *Fire Emblem* (Nintendo/Intelligent Systems, 1990), game series
- *Final Fantasy XIII* (Square, 2009), game

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