TALKING TO GAYMERS: QUESTIONING IDENTITY, COMMUNITY AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION

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With few exceptions, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) individuals are generally ignored in the realm of digital games. This ethnography of members of an online gay gamer, or gaymer, community allowed me to better understand their thoughts on LGBTQ representation in games, as well as the construction of the gaymer community. How gaymer identities are constructed, how this community is formed, and how its members discuss the representation of LGBTQ individuals in video games are discussed here. Gaymer identity was found to be more complex than the simple 'homosexual gamer' definition often used implies. Finding a space to express this identity was much more important to members than the invisibility of LGBTQ individuals in video game texts. The relative importance of in-game representation was tied to the context of play. The political implications of these findings are discussed in the conclusion of this article.

KEYWORDS

bisexual, gay, identity, lesbian, queer, transgender, video games

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In 2006, *World of Warcraft (WoW)* player Sara Andrews advertised her lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ)-friendly guild in a public chat. An administrator from Blizzard, the company that owns the game, sent her a warning and suspended her account for violating WoW's sexual harassment policy, arguing that an LGBTQ-friendly guild would invite harassment from homophobic players and create a negative game environment. Public outrage and support from Lambda Legal, a gay and lesbian advocacy organization, forced the company to overturn Andrews's suspension. Press articles announced it demonstrated that homophobia and heterosexism are real concerns in virtual worlds, disproving assumptions that they disappear in fantasy environments (Chonin, 2006; Sliwinski, 2006a; 2006b; Vargas, 2006).

Several months later, amid a flurry of press attention on LGBTQ-identifying gamers, players discovered that in the game *Bully* (Rockstar Games, 2006) their male avatar could kiss both male and female characters (Lumpkin, 2007; Ochalla, 2006).This was unusual as LGBTQ characters are rare in video games. In light of homophobia in online gaming and LGBTQ exclusion from game texts, how do members of 'gay gamer'('gaymer') communities negotiate their sexual identities in an unwelcoming fan environment? Furthermore are 'LGBTQ' and 'gaymer' even useful constructs in approaching the dual issues of symbolic annihilation from texts and exclusionary practices by gaming communities? Or do they, as this research suggests, conflate community formations with identities and representation in politically problematic ways?

This article is based on ethnographic research in one 'gaymer' internet community during spring 2006.[1] Although there have been unpublished studies of 'who gaymers are' and 'what gaymers want' by Jason Rockwood in 2006 and Paul Nowak in 2009, as described in Fahey (2009) and Sliwinski (2006c), this article provides a more nuanced understanding of the construction of 'gaymer' as a category, including self-identified gaymers' thoughts on in-game representation and their relationship to broader gamer culture. For example, defining a 'gaymer' as a homosexual male who plays video games belies the diversity of those who identified as gaymers. Although sexuality was an important identifier for participants, gaymer identity was tied less to a queer sexuality than to a queer sensibility (building on the notion of gay sensibility from Bronski, 1984).[2] That is, gaymers privileged an appreciation of and attentiveness to the artifice (and humor) of gender and sexual norms, even if they did not all share a preference for non-normative sexual practices. Finding a space to express this identity was more important to members of this community than the existence LGBTQ video game characters. The gaymers I interviewed expressed ambivalence towards in-game representation that reflected: an understanding of inadequate LGBTQ representation in other media; the importance of play experience, over game representation; and diversity among gaymers.

This ambivalence, I argue, demonstrates that identity politics-based representation arguments are ultimately flawed. Identity politics builds upon a notion of liberal

democracy (Brown, 1995), and presumes an internal coherence to identity groups that is at best problematic and at worst violent (Butler, 2006). While gaymer identity may serve as a form of 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak, 1987), the way it is deployed in popular (and academic) discourse reinforces structures of power. Identity politics arguments for representation conflate, but fail to recognize the co-constitution of, game content and homophobia in gaming. It is worth noting, for example, that Sara Andrews was a transsexual woman looking for an open-minded group of people with whom to play. Content-based calls for LGBTQ representation in games typically focus on sexuality, not gender; and they do not address the policing of gender and sexuality in online (and offline) gaming spaces via hate speech. Moreover, the hegemonic construction of the gaymer label (a homosexual male player, often white) by marketers, journalists and researchers excludes Andrews and many others. Calls to increase LGBTQ representation in games presumes a coherence of, and attempts to normalize, identity within and across those who identify as members of LGBTQ communities. Such an approach ignores critiques of how certain groups are excluded from game spaces and game texts, something I return to in the conclusion. Though this research was conducted in 2006, arguably the beginning of public awareness of 'gaymer' communities, in the conclusion I address how the academic and popular awareness of this identification category has since resulted in a narrowing of the category, reflecting identity politics. Thus, I argue that the critique of identity politics raised by this project has become even more urgent.

Entering the Field

LGBTQ video game players are not easily studied using traditional ethnographic methods. Though research on queer communities often focuses on physical spaces (Ingram et al., 1997; McCourt, 2004), more recent research examines online queer communities (Bryson, 2004; Campbell, 2004; McLelland and Gottlieb, 2003). In this project, web discussion forums provided a more readily accessible field site than physical spaces. Through an internet search I found only two sites specifically directed towards LGBTQ gamers, and selected the one with a more active message board.

Upon my first visit, most content was quite stale; the news section had not been updated since the summer of 2005 and contest announcements were out of date. Strikingly, the majority of the first page offered a justification for the site's existence, specifically a declaration that 'we' deserve to be here. Clicking on links I was drawn to the forums, the only consistently active part of the site. After receiving permission from the site administrator, I posted a message to the 'Off Topic' forum, telling members that I was observing the site and giving them the opportunity to opt out of my research. In the spirit of overtness, my member profile and posted questions also stated that I was conducting research.

I conducted a textual analysis on posts in the 'Off Topic' and 'Homophobia' forums from 1 February to 1 April 2006.I selectively read other forums, but only delved into postings that informed my research, such as discussions about gay video game characters. I also posed questions to the forum. This resulted in a focus group atmosphere, as members built on each other's answers. For example, when I asked about the absence of women on the site and if members felt the dichotomous gender labels in the profile tool were a problem, there was a rich discussion of the purposes of the site for what they described as 'the gay male community', the place of intersex and transgendered individuals in society, and social constructions of gender. After a month on the site I began interviewing individual members. The themes I found while analyzing the discussion boards and the answers to my posted questions informed my interview questions. In turn, my interviews informed questions I later posted to the discussion boards. Additionally, I read a variety of mainstream gaming forums (such as 1up.com, gamesforum.com, etc.) and digital game magazines and websites to inform my questions.

Holding interviews raised interesting methodological questions. Many internet-based ethnographies employ face-to-face interviews (Carter, 2005; McLelland, 2002; Miller and Slater, 2000; Sade-Beck, 2004). Other researchers conduct their interviews in cyberspace (Campbell, 2004; Hine, 2000; Ward, 1999). As the interactions I was concerned with occurred online, I conducted my interviews in that venue. Interviewees had the option of talking to me over an Instant Messaging Service or answering questions via email.

Who one selects to interview depends on what type of knowledge and categories one is trying to develop (Glaser and Strauss, 2006 [1967]; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). I chose using a 3-by-3 matrix of characteristics to sample from the site's membership (see Appendix). As those with different levels of involvement in the site might have different perspectives, I contacted equal numbers of low, medium and high posters (15 each).[3] Within these groups I selected sub-groups (five each) of female-identifying members,[4] male-identifying members outside the U.S. and male-identifying members within the U.S.[5] Nationality and gender were used for two reasons. First, they represent two locatable (via profiles) minorities on the website. Second, I was curious as to how people who were not the majority (female, and non-U.S.-based) experienced the predominantly male, U.S. space.

To correct for a lack of response, I requested interviews from additional members. In some cases I specifically sought out certain interviewees (such as the only 'out' active heterosexual member of the site). Of the 57 members contacted, 18 participated in interviews. To protect anonymity,I use pseudonyms for interviewees and do not quote directly from the discussion boards, as statements could easily be traced back to individuals.

Identities Online

Despite popular rhetoric to the contrary, analyses of how people use the internet find that offline identities are emphasized in online worlds (Campbell, 2004; Miller and Slater, 2000). Perhaps nobody *knows* you are a dog on the internet, as one *New Yorker* cartoon claims (Steiner, 1993), but if you are the only dog you know and you want to find others like you, proclaiming your 'dog-ness' becomes an important part of how you present yourself online. This is particularly true for marginalized groups. As Larry Gross says, the 'potential for friendship and group formation provided by the Internet is particularly valuable for members of self-identified minorities who are scattered and often besieged in their home surroundings' (2001, 227). The problem, however, is that attention to online groups often reproduces a simplistic version of identity politics. Certainly, some argue that glossing over differences is politically advantageous (Bernstein, 1997). However, it also defines community members in relation to a specific norm of gaymer identity.

Interviewees repeatedly emphasized the importance of gaymer identity as a primary reason for joining the site.

AS:[6] Why did you join the site?
AJ: To be with others who are into games and are gay or identify as such. It's great to just be yourself and know that you have the support of others.

As I discuss in the next section, this online community was seen as a safe haven from the gay-bashing in many online gaming spaces. The desire to 'fit in' should not be overemphasized, however, as individual identities played a role in the community. Gaymers frequently asserted an individual identity within the group context, although certain identities were emphasized over others.

Nationality was more a salient concern for individuals than for the community as a whole. I asked members directly about their interactions with members from other countries. Many reported not knowing other members' nationality, or not having different sorts of conversations with those from other countries. However, nationality was still discussed. Some interviewees made comparisons between their country and others, or reported gaining an outside perspective on their own country from the site. Geography and language also heavily shaped the site's composition. The U.S., the U.K. and Canada were more heavily represented than other countries, indicating the shortcomings of presumptions about online gaming communities' global interconnectivity. The language barrier was one cause of under-representation of some regions; some non-English-speaking members noted language as a reason for not often participating in the site. Additionally, large portions of the world have less internet penetration than others, and some interviewees mentioned state-imposed internet regulation and restrictions on homosexuality being a possible reason for some regions' under-representation.

I also observed the suppression of individual identities in the silences of the many members who never post. For example, of the approximately 35 female-identifying members, only 2 were in the top 150 posters. Perhaps their less active membership was a response to the ways gender was made to matter in the community. This is not to say that the female interviewees felt actively excluded from the site, but rather that gender was a notable form of difference. When they joined the site, female-identifying members made a point of welcoming them because they were 'glad to see another lesbian on the site'. Moreover, on occasion the female-identifying members of the site were appealed to for their opinion 'as lesbians'. In a site that was created around the felt need for a space in which one's sexual identity did not define the entirety of one's being, it is disturbing that, for women on the site, their gender was presumed to be a primary (and solitary) identifier. In addition, such requests also reinforced assumptions about sexual identities. They were being called upon to represent all 'lesbians' and 'women', and the sexual identity politics of the site were reinforced.

The way in which difference and identity functioned on the site was exceptionally interesting in an interview with a heterosexual member of the site. Gaymer identity was based on intersections of sexuality and video game fandom, even for this straight man. In both his email agreeing to be interviewed and in the interview itself he asked 'You know I'm the straight guy right?' In this environment, where sexuality is openly discussed, his identity as a heterosexual was particularly salient. His gamer identity drew him to the site, but his sexuality defined his interactions. He reported not feeling that it was odd that he was a member of a predominantly gay site as the site reflected his own interests and social network.

WS: Not sure if "mature" is the right word … the people just seemed more my style is all. Lord knows I can be a 3 year old sometimes.

AS: Outside of [the site] do you have a lot of GLBTQ friends?

WS: Actually, since I moved […] last June, I don't have any straight male friends. A few girls, some lesbians, but not straight guys I consider friends.

It is easy to assert the unusualness of a heterosexual man choosing to identify with a gay male-centric site. However, perhaps the oddity is that many cannot conceive of a straight man choosing to identify with a group of gay men, something that is made odd via identity politics.

This is the crux of the problem of defining this group as simply gay gamers; there is more to gaymer identity and community than that it would seem. Indeed, it harks back to the problems of assuming that gay, GLBTQ and queer communities (or any social group for that matter) are internally coherent. Reflecting such an over-

simplification, attempts to 'correct' representation in game texts often presume that gay male (usually white and American) representation can appeal to 'gaymers' (and no one else), and that queer representation can be reduced to an expansion of romantic pairing options. Moreover, identifying the gaymer subject solely in relation to 'mainstream gaming culture' marginalizes gaymers and obscures the exclusionary identity politics at work in gaymer and LGBTQ communities.

Creating Community Online

Gaming is stereotypically described as antisocial, but as this interviewee describes, it can be a communal activity:

MA: I think you'll probably come across a lot of gamers who will tell you gaming is a personal experience to take you out of yourself, like a book or a film. But for me, it's nothing if not social. Sure a game can be fun on its own, but there's nothing like getting four close friends online at 1am, to help you kill some alien-terrorist-zombie-scum.

The spread of online gaming (via PCs and consoles) has added a new dimension to collective gaming, which previously was only found in physical spaces like arcades or internet cafes. In addition to playing together, fans form internet communities to discuss gaming and other topics. As online gaming research has maintained, these gaming environments fulfill important social needs.

In mychat-based interviews, I pressed interviewees on their definition of community. One female-identified medium poster discussed her shift from defining communities as physical spaces to defining them as nodes of connection:

QK: I would say my definition of community has changed since I was younger. I use[d] to think it was just the area you lived. But now it's definitely more about involvement of interests and common ground.

[…] I feel like I can be myself with queer community … where I really have to watch my footing sometimes with some of the players that I come into contact with. Not that I'm not myself … just that I might not be shouting to the rooftops. Playing first person shooters as a female is hard enough … without having to tell the boys that I have a girlfriend too.

Most members joined this site to escape homophobia in online gaming and gaming forums. Members wanted a community that valued them as gay video game players, where they didn't have to censor their gaymer identities. It would seem that the lack of global representation, as well as the lack of representation of non-gay, non-male-identified members, would make this gaymer identity very narrow. The overarching appeal of the gaymer identity, however, was a queer sensibility centered on video games, and made even those who are not gay males feel included. This freedom of expression existed in part because they were around others who were 'like' them, a likeness that was tied to characteristics beyond sexual identity. This notion of 'like-ness', calls into question the utility of identity politics to narrowly define marginalized gamer communities around sexual orientation, in research as well as marketing. It is, moreover, politically problematic to assume that only homosexual gamers are the targets of, or bothered by, homophobia in online gaming (or elsewhere) or desire queer game content.

That said, homophobia in gaming communities was actually mentioned as a reason for joining the site to a lesser extent than I expected. Certainly some interviewees mentioned as a motivating factor the use of 'gay' as a derogative term in other gaming forums and online gaming. This was often tied to an assertion that the gaymer site had an older, more mature membership.

AS: Why did you join the site?
TK: I wanted some adult gamers to talk with who were not going to constantly be calling anyone who disagreed with them in the forum a "faggot." The gaming community, in the online forums at least, seems to be dominated by young boys who use the Internet as a forum to spout off their ignorance to prove their masculinity.

Such sentiments recall the mission statement of the site, which claims to be a place where gaymers could talk about gaming without dealing with homophobic remarks. It also gave members a place to discuss homophobia.

PT: It's somewhere nice where many people are around that have shared the same experiences in homophobia in the same environment, in this case, gaming.

Homophobia in gaming was an experience that cut across other forms of difference, though this logic presumes homophobia is experienced similarly by everyone and does not intersect with gender, race, nationality, and class.

Another form of bigotry also made the site an attractive respite: the 'geek-phobia' interviewees saw in LGBTQ communities.

SG: There is a big stigma in the gay community about video games – they think you are some kind of social retard because you play video games instead of going to the bar and hooking up. So it's nice to be around other gays who like games as much as I do. I don't really mind the homophobia in the str8 [straight] gaming community 'cause it's illogical and immature – but I DO hate the game-ophobia (or whatever you'd call it) in the gay community.

In this way, gaymer functions as a kind of intersectional identity. Yet, though the site was meant as a safe space, the deployment of the gaymer community here involved a critique of a particular form of urban, gay male culture as well as an unacknowledged

able-ism (e.g. 'social retard'). The reasons for becoming a member of this site were tied to a desire for recognition as gay and as a gamer. However, members created community boundaries around specific notions of gay, male and gamer identities. This occurred at the same time, perhaps paradoxically, as people who did not fulfill this narrow definition of 'gaymer' felt included in that closed definition.

In many ways, online community formation is analogous to queer community formation. Individuals need safe spaces, particularly when they do not conform to norms. Historically, heteronormativity has led to the creation of physical queer communities (Bronski, 1984, 193) and internet ones (Bryson, 2004, 251). Similarly: 'Internet communities, like place-based communities, do not just happen. They develop in response to particular circumstances and to the needs of a particular set of individuals' (Bird, 2003, 74).Gaymer marginalization in LGBTQ and gaming communities led to this site's creation. At the same time, however, the construction of communities around identity politics is exclusionary.

The assertion of a particular identity, in this case gaymer identity, results in boundaries; as Seidman describes: '[E]very assertion of a social identity no matter how much it strains to be inclusive, produces boundaries of inside/outside and functions as a normalizing, disciplinary force' (1997, 137). I asked interviewees how representative of gaming LGBTQ communities they thought the site was, and why they thought certain groups were under-represented. Some noted the under-representation of women and transgendered individuals, and the ways marginalization on the site mirrored broader cultural marginalization.

SG: Well I would say that it mimics the LGBTQ community – meaning the groups who are underrepresented in life as a whole are proportionately misrepresented at [this site].

The limits of the community have also been discussed in the forums. Some discussion threads, for example, mention the 'sausage fest' quality of the membership (referring to the predominance of males on the site). Also, open and heated discussions of bisexuality and gender identity demonstrated that this community was in the process of active boundary creation. Some preferred more open definitions, others did not:

KI: Again, there is a problem in including TQ with GLB. The GLB community would be much better off without the TQ part tacked on. Until the GLB community dissociates itself from the TQ community, we won't have good representation because we represent too diversive a group. It's easy to understand a man that loves men compared to a man that wants to be a woman that loves women.

This type of exclusionary discourse, and the marginalization of members of LGBTQ communities that are gender non-conforming or non-homonormative,[7] is seen in LGBTQ communities generally. As KI's typo (diversive) indicates, it correlates diverse and divisive. The silencing of more radical and substantial queer politics in the assimilationist gay rights movement is critiqued at length by Michael Warner (1999) among others. It is this type of sentiment that demonstrates the failure of an identity politics approach to gaming representation: there is no coherent gaymer or LGBTQ identity or community to be represented. The experiences of homophobia noted so often in discussions of 'gaymers' intersect with experiences of sexism, transphobia, racism, classism and ethnocentrism in ways that cannot be properly accounted for by a focus on sexuality. Indeed, gaymer as described above is an intersectional identity that troubles a reductive identity politics approach. Interviewees' ambivalence about representation reflects this intersectionality and the failure of identity politics.

Questioning Media Representation

This project was initially motivated by a desire to understand gaymers' reactions to the lack of LGBTQ representation in digital games and to correct for the tendency in LGBTQ representation analyses to focus only on game content and not player experience (Consalvo, 2003a; 2003b). As Katie Ward points out, however, to 'allow the dialogic process to emerge it is necessary to employ research methods that enable the participants to drive and create the definitions of the concepts' (1999, 100). Entering into a dialogue with site members allowed me to better understand their thoughts on LGBTQ representation in games.

Through interviews, I found a great deal of diversity in answers and more ambivalence than I had originally presumed.

VR: It would be nice if there were [more LGBTQ representation], but it's not so much an actual requirement.

AS: Why not?

VR: I don't particularly mind, I'm not exactly militant with little things like that.

Before starting the project I assumed that members would want more queer representation in games and that the lack of queer characters would be a salient concern. I came to realize, however, that interviewees' ambivalence was not indifference. The nuances of responses and the contexts in which media representation is important are key to unpacking gaymers' positions on LGBTQ game representation.

One reason given in mainstream gaming forums for not making sexuality an issue in video games is that games are all fantasy and thus sexuality should not be important. When this discourse arose in my interviews, however, it was asserted that representation needed to 'matter' in games, or it ran the risk of being tokenistic.

KI: Once I'm in my fantasy environment, I want it to maintain that sense of fantasy. Let the debate roar outside the game. That being said, identity is an important factor in character development, which is important for storyline and plot, which is important to making a good game. If sexuality or gender identity adds to the character/story/plot, then add it! If it's just there for controversy, get it out of the game.

This comment reflects a couple of themes seen in this research. First, as is often raised in discussions of LGBTQ game representation, there is a presumption that non-normative gender and sexuality formations are 'real' issues that do not belong in 'fantasy' games. Second, it is often difficult for people to imagine representing LGBTQ communities without addressing political conflicts, including homophobia and transphobia. Finally, and somewhat contradictorily, the discussions assume that 'good' representation of LGBTQ communities would not be inherently political, as the representation of those identities should not 'matter' to how a character interacts with a game world. This de-politicization of sexual and gender identities is, I argue, highly problematic and, ironically, is closely tied to an identity politics argument for representation. For all KI's ambivalence, underlying many of his comments was the assertion that LGBTQ as a label, whether for gaming or physical communities, inevitably failed as a unifying term.

In one discussion thread I asked members if they actively sought queer game content and if they would buy a game if they heard it had a gay or queer character. The general response was that it would be a nice plus if it was a good game overall, but that it would not be a selling point for them. One member stated that the only instance in which 'gay content' influenced his purchasing was the release of *The Sims*. He qualified this, however, by privileging the game's good reviews. Moreover, members emphasized that gay or queer representation in games would only be good if it was not stereotypical.

TK: I don't really care as long as the characters are not stereotypes and the game is fun.

Stereotyping has long been a concern of LGBTQ media representation. 'Stereotyping is one step beyond the initial stage of sheer invisibility that minorities have to move through on their way to even token representation' (Gross, 2001, 253). Gaymers did not want to be placated with token characters; they wanted good games. If those games happened to include non-binary, non-normative gender roles, and non-heterosexual relationships and references, all the better.

One argument given in mainstream gaming forums about the lack of diversity in video games is that the LGBTQ community does not make up a significant portion of the market (for example, see the reply posts to Barton, 2004). This justification was notably absent in my discussions with gaymers. Though members expressed surprise at finding other gaymers, some argued that game developers should pay attention:

AA: Firstly I think if a gay oriented game were to be released the gaming culture would see what potential there is for money with gaymers. For instance when the Xbox 360 was released more than half of my gay friends purchased it than my straight friends.We have the disposable income for gaming.

Such sentiments echo the conceptualization of (largely white, middle-class) gay men as ideal consumers described in Katherine Sender's (2004) research. Other members acknowledged that game developers run a great risk by putting queer characters in games.

SG: Even if you and your entire team are gay, why would you publish a gay content game? People will have an uproar and controversy and it can be potentially disastrous for your company.

Sender (2004, 5) similarly discusses the fear of offending mainstream markets that results in reduced LGBTQ media visibility. In either case, however, there is an assumption that equality in the marketplace is an indicator of social progress. That is to say, the identity politics' focus on media visibility promotes a neoliberal ideal of equality through consumption.

Asserting one's location and importance in the market is part of the discourse demanding media representation. This is the audience corollary to cultural production analyses demonstrating that industries shape and divide market segments based on the presumed value of those segments (Ohmann, 1996; Sender, 2004; Turow, 1997). Many of the reasons for not caring about or wanting gay characters in games reflected a critique of niche marketing. This makes sense considering the failings of the 'girl games' movement described by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (2000). As Nikki Douglas (2000), founder of RiotGrrl and grrlgamer, argues the failings of the 'girl games' movement of the 1990s demonstrated that gamers, regardless of their gender, want good content. Moreover, the focus on gender in isolation is problematic as it presumes a mutual exclusivity of gender and sexuality (not to mention race, class, etc.), and internal consistency among those who identify as with a particular gender or sexual identity label. This assumption about mutually exclusive demographics is also at work in identity politics approaches to representation. The 'girl games' movement did not result in the creation of a place for female gamers in the mainstream video game market, but rather in a 'ghettoizing' of content designed to be 'for girls' (Cassell and Jenkins, 2000; Kafai et al., 2008). Related to this, many of my interviewees' lack of desire for gay game characters reflected a critique of identity-based marketing. Both identity-based marketing and identity politics-based calls for representation essentialize identity and rely on the liberal democratic assumption that assimilation into structures of power leads to perfect equality (excluding a critique of those structures of power).

Why is representation in games even a goal? As Sender argues, it is problematic to look for tolerance in the 'consumer sphere' (2004, 242). It could be argued, as some interviewees did, that it is more beneficial for the LGBTQ community to be left out of media than to be only referenced through stereotypes.

MJ: People get all up in arms about the lack of gay characters out there but I think that's better than there being anti-gay characters. If there were loads of gay characters then that isn't really being accepted. […] Having loads of gay characters everywhere would just be like having a freakshow for gays or something.

Subverting sexuality norms without playing too much into stereotypes is difficult. A major issue in media representations, for example, is that sexualities are not defined by physical traits (Gross, 2001, 16; Sender, 2004, 123). Representation is always a balancing act; one must mobilize tropes of homosexuality and bisexuality without becoming too stereotypical, and make sexuality relevant but not exceptional. This may be why the genres in which sexuality is deemed relevant, such as role-playing and simulation games, are also the ones in which queer content has made inroads (e.g. *The Sims* and *Fable*).

Although members did not purchase games because of queer content, they did discuss content when it was present. One discussion thread, revived several times, asked if anyone knew of gay content in video games. Some of the posts discussed role-playing games where same-sex relationships are an option, or games with latent homosexuality. Others mentioned games with queer signifiers such as rainbows or characters in drag. Finding queer signifiers has been practiced by queer audiences of all media (Doty, 1993), and demonstrates that queerness in games means much more than the inclusion of gay characters.

This locating of queerness in games bears on the general ambivalence mentioned earlier. It is possible that members interpreted my question about whether they prefer games with queer content as a request to value their sexuality over all other aspects of their identity. When a single aspect of one's identity is used to define one's preferences, one is at risk of becoming a target niche instead of a fully acknowledged gamer. To assert too much desire for queer media representation could potentially essentialize one's identity and one's marginality. Finding a queer sensibility in games may occur in informal chats, but direct inquiries raised complicated questions about what queer representation should look like. Interviewees asserted that sexuality and gender should not be so central as to obscure all other aspects of a character. Ambivalence about content on the part of gaymers can be understood, I argue, as a rejection of a reductive, identity politics approach to representation.

Similarly, the demarcation of gaymers as a particular type of gaming audience necessarily makes these players 'other' to the normative gaming audience. Moreover, a focus on content presumes a static identity of those who identify as members of LGBTQ communities or as gaymers. Many attempts to 'find gaymers' focus on gay male gaming communities, ignoring gaymer and LGBTQ diversity. Indeed, that female and LGBTQ audiences are treated as different sub-groups in media coverage and academic studies alike exemplifies the violence of a myopic, identity politics approach to representation.

Conclusion

I began my ethnography with the presumption that LGBTQ representation would be a major concern of gaymers on this site. While the gaymers I interviewed were not indifferent to media representation, the issue was not prevalent. Rather, the search for a queer sensibility and a safe space from the gay-bashing of other gamer communities was much more central. As many of my interviewees played games online, bigotry was a more salient than the sexuality of characters in games.

At the heart of members' ambivalence, I argue, is the failure of most identity politics arguments for representation, as well as anxiety about exploitation. According to Ioan Davies, writers are 'conscious of the problems that any voice that was given would be appropriated by those who wished to traduce them for their own interests' (1995, 94). This constant tension between representation and exploitation, between giving a voice to versus pandering to, can be traced throughout media studies discussions. In the history of gay representation, for example, we see the struggle to have a 'voice', that is create representation, as well as the excavation of a historical texts for signs of queer identity in the past, which takes place within a persistent struggle over whose 'voice' counts. Along with this struggle there also exists the possibility of the 'gay voice' being appropriated for capitalist gains, which often results in only the most desirable (marketable) members of that community being represented (Sender, 2001; 2004), further underscoring the limits of identity politics approaches to representation.

As this research was conducted primarily in 2006, one might suspect that the implications of these findings are radically changed by the shifting social and political landscape we now inhabit. When this project was conducted there were only two sites directed towards gay gamers, one has since shut down and the other (studied here) has become a more gamenews-oriented site, though the forums are still active. There are now gaymer podcasts (gaymebar.com), gayme jams (Harper, 2012), and websites like lesbiangamers.com and gaygamer.net, and even the more inclusive borderhouseblog.com for 'feminist, queer, disabled, people of color, transgender, poor, gay, lesbian and others who belong to marginalized groups as well as allies'. Three years ago, Microsoft apologized for banning players from using gamer tags that expressed their sexuality (Totilo, 2009). Each year more and more games, particularly of the role-playing variety, include same-sex relationship

pairings (most recently *Dragon Age*, *Mass Effect 3* and *Skyrim*). Though these practices are still controversial, game makers are defending rather than avoiding them (Brightman, 2012; Kollar, 2011).

I argue, however, that looking at the changes in how gaymers are addressed within specific gaymer websites, popular press and video game industries actually suggests that the critique of identity politics presented here is as important as it was in 2006, if not more so. In many ways, the emergence of 'gaymer' as both identity and market resulted, unsurprisingly, in the narrowing down of the category. Gaygamer.net, for example, which started the summer after this project was concluded, claims it is 'for boys who like boys who like joysticks'. This is a big departure from the 'safe space' claimed in the original incarnation of the site analyzed here. Although the gaymer reddit community is 'an inclusive community for LGBT and straight alliance redditors', both Wikipedia and Urban Dictionary definitions of the term focus on sexuality as a defining factor, as did a 2007 MTV news segment on the rise of 'gaymers'. Research by Jason Rockwood in 2006 and Paul Nowak in 2009, and press on their results (Fahey, 2009; Sliwinski, 2006c), focus on producing and defining a 'gay gamer' audience in the hopes that they can then be appealed to by the video game industry. The complicated associations players have with the term, identified in an article by Blair Cooper (2007), seem to have been replaced with a definition of gaymer as a market niche. Game designer Brenda Braithwaite states that:

It took them a while, but developers eventually got hip to the fact that there are women out there who want to control female characters [in video games], and now they're getting hip to the fact that there are LGBT gamers out there who want to control LGBT characters. (Ochalla, 2009)

Sentiments like this permeate how in-game representation of sexuality continues to be discussed: it is treated as distinct from gender, race, class and nationality, and is treated as something that is only important to those who identify as homosexual (rarely are bisexuality or queerness actually addressed). Though there have been studies of how LGBTQ gamers engage with game spaces (Shaw, 2012; Suden, 2009), and research on how queer or gay content is expressed in digital games (Harper, 2011; Lauteria, 2011; Shaw, 2009; Sherlock, 2011), the broader questions this article raises remain pertinent.

As discovered in this study, the relative importance of in-game representation is tied to the context of play. Just as the relationship between producer encoding and audience decoding is uncertain (Hall, 1997 [1990]), the relationship between consumption context and textual interpretations is undetermined. Do those who play games in a solitary setting feel the same way about in-game representation as those who play in a communal environment? Is in-game representation more important for those who are not dealing with the interpersonal homophobia of online gaming? Those who play games communally seek the ability to belong to, and retain their individuality within, a gayming community. Maybe those who play solitarily seek the same thing within the game. That is, gaming alone one may want to play a character that makes one's sexuality visible but not marginal. I argue that even then, however, trying to appeal to those gaymers via limited notions of what identification means would inevitably fall short.

Appendix: Interviewee Data

Pseudonym	Poster-group	U.S./Non-U.S.	Gender ID	Interview
AA	Low	U.S.	Male	IM
AJ	Medium	U.S.	Male	Email
AJ	High	Non-U.S.	Male	IM
CR	Low	Non-U.S.	Male	Email
FR	High	Non-U.S.	Male	Email
IK	Medium	U.S.	Male	Email
KO	High	U.S.	Male	Email
MA	High	U.S.	Female	Email
MJ	High	Non-U.S.	Male	IM
PT	Medium	Non-U.S.	Female	Email
QK	Medium	U.S.	Female	IM
RJ	High	Non-U.S.	Male	IM
SG	High	U.S.	Male	IM
SI	Medium	Non-U.S.	Male	Email
TK	High	U.S.	Female	Email
VR	Medium	U.S.	Male	IM
WD	Low	U.S.	Female	Email
WS	Medium	Non-U.S.	Male	IM

Average age of interviewees: 25.61 (range: 17–38). Length of membership on the site: 3 months to 2+ years.

White/ Caucasian	Chinese	Filipino	Latino	Hispanic	Portuguese
12	1	1	1	1	1

Geographic Location

U.S.	Canada	U.K.	Austria	Puerto Rico
10	3	3	1	1

Gender Identity

Fellagirly	Female	FTM	Lesbian	Male	Male... I guess
1	2	1	1	11	2

Sexual Identity

Gay/Lesbian/ Homosexual	Ambiguous/Mostly Lean Toward Same-sex	Straight
12	4	2

1.
In the interest of participant anonymity I do not name the specific community.

2.
I use 'queer' here in the sense defined by Desert:'"Queer" can be defined elastically to include sensibilities other than the normative with a propensity toward, but not exclusive of, the homoerotic' (1997, 19). When referring specifically to the community hailed by the online community I use 'gay' or 'LGBTQ' depending on the context. Note: these terms are not used interchangeably.

3.
With the exception of female members, I only contacted posters who had posted in the last three months. For the low posters group I only selected from those who had posted at least once within the time period. For medium posters the range was 30–70 posts. Finally, I went to the top of the postings list to select my high posters.

4.
Due to the small number of women in general and the even smaller proportion of international women, I consolidated the women into one group even while separating out the non-U.S. group for males. Also, I relaxed the rules for my medium and high groups, and extended the limit to having posted in the last six months in order to get a total of five female-identifying interviewees for each post level.

5.
As there are members who do not list their location, I only selected those who listed their location or for whom I could ascertain a geographic location from their postings.

6.
AS refers to me, the interviewer. Interviewees' initials are not reflective of their legal name or online handle.

7.
'Homonormative' is defined by Lisa Duggan as a 'politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (2002, 179).

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