**Queer Game Theory**

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Gaming culture, which started as a niche corner of computer enthusiasts, has expanded into every layer of our society. The average technology user is just a few gestures – clicks or pokes on their mobile screens, away from engaging in a gaming experience. Whether you’re interested in honing your skills against the myriad of glory seeking opponents, or simply trying to find that sweet 5-match pattern to complete the next puzzle, there’s a gaming experience waiting for you. This dichotomy of experiences, however, has become a system of gendering for video games as a whole, as casual games are viewed as feminine and “irrelevant” by most gamers. (Vanderhoef) These experiences share a huge stake in our society, making up an industry that is currently scaling at $93 billion annually; yet only a select few govern the creation of video games. The most influential powers involved with video game creation are those of hegemonic, capitalist corporations that create very strict conditions for their workers. (Anthropy) This makes the creation of video games very exclusive and difficult to be a part of; troubling when one considers the representations available in current games. If the goal is to create more meaningful and inclusive games, there needs to be more diverse and inclusive bodies involved in the creation of gaming software, especially when we consider gaming to be an art form. Queer Game Design aims to radically challenge these problems facing the design of video games by addressing alternatives to the current systems, and by also speculating about the “ghostly” ramifications of these radical changes. It aims to address these issues by utilizing Queer Theory to critique and offer alternatives to video game creation, the gendering of software, storytelling in video games, gameplay mechanics and axioms, and addressing audiences of games.

Trying to break into the video game industry is similar to trying to break into the entertainment industry. There’s a myriad of specialty schools that you can attend, which become your life, just as Anthropy describes her experience at Guildhall. The experience with trying to being a student at a gaming college left Anthropy extremely dissatisfied, watching as many aspiring students had to give up their lives to always be working in “crunch time”. (Anthropy) This creates an environment that pushes students really hard, limiting the success rate of students attending these classes; and the reason for it is because that’s the kind of employees that video game producers want to employ. These students who survive constant crunch time are often rewarded with their “dream job”, which often also takes up a rather large portion of the pay they should be receiving for their skills. (Anthroy) This happens primarily because publishers have such a tight grip on how much money goes into video games and where that money goes – often not to video game programmers or designers. In a sense, the placement in a job pertaining to the gaming industry is a privilege that should “pay for itself”, rather than the employee being paid for their time accordingly.

There are a good number of success stories outside mainstream publishers, including one of the most impressive being that of *Cave Story* by Studio Pixel. Daisuke Amaya, who for the sake of *Cave Story* will refer to himself as Studio Pixel, created *Cave Story* in his spare time over 5 years. The game features side scrolling action with a unique weapon upgrade system, extremely charming storyline, and completely original game art and music by Studio Pixel himself. If nobody knew any better, the game looked just as good as something created by a professional team, so much so that Nintendo syndicated the game onto its Nintendo 3DS and Wii consoles as *Cave Story+*, featuring even more content from Amaya. This whole example may seem to invalidate the claims that video game creation isn’t inclusive, but it must be noted that Studio Pixel exhibited a profound set of skills that the average person may not be able to learn, even in five years.

One of the biggest issues as well is that most people with the technical savvy to engage in creating software are usually not the same who engage in the Humanities. The values of engaging in material critically from both an engineering point of view and a social point of view can create more impactful and inclusive experiences for video games. This is true for all engineering fields, according to McPherson, because without the expansion of these ideas, we risk undervaluing broader contexts of our work. (McPherson, 35) When it comes to video game design, designers with more integrated humanities study could potentially see the normative systems that embody the experiences represented by video games today and take a stance to change them for the better.

As Queer Game Design aims to create a more inclusive and considerate field of game design by radically uprooting the structures that create mainstream games, we have to wonder the kinds of ramifications come with doing away with these structures. One way a non-professional designer may make a game is through game tools, such as Twine or by creating a simple hack of a current video game. (Anthropy) While its great amateurs are trying to cut into the gaming scene, their possibly profound and unique experience offered through these tools may by general gaming audiences be dismissed as poor quality. It’s not the aim of Queer Game Design to dismiss products that aren’t professional grade, but we have to also consider the response an amateur may receive on such a game, and how discouraging it will be for them to attempt to create another. Another aspect that creeps over amateurs using tools to create games is that these tools require a learning curve of their own; and often can leave a new user confused or frustrated at what they’re actually able to produce with said tools. These tools set up a system of their own that dictate the expressions possible through their use, which can skew the expectations of what a user is expected to be able to create. If a hacker manages to create an interesting alteration of a famous video game, it also haunts us by reminding us of the hacked game’s prior success. While the hack may replace plenty of the game’s attributes, a player will still be expecting some semblance of the game’s original modes, leaving the normative footprint of that famous game’s success as a pre-requisite to providing the queer gaming experience of the hack.

Beyond the aspects of where games come from and how they’re produced, there’s an underlying issue with software in general that resonates with video games today. In their creation, computer hardware emerged from mostly male practices, while early software came from mostly female practices. While men continued working to advance the “hard” science of making hardware more robust and responsive, women worked to advance the “soft” science of inputting commands into those machines to have them produce results. Chun describes this gender dichotomy, in the ways which women were often deployed as computing “clerks” used to make sure the machines were ready for operation. (Chun, 30) As time progressed, and the importance of programming became more and more evident to the power of automation, programming seized to be clerical feminine work and shifted into become heavily theorized, masculine work. These aspects of programming also require practitioners to follow heavy codes of normativity for the sake of modular code. These systems dictate what kinds of programming code is acceptable, very much like gender norms and racial expectations of the time. (McPherson, 29) Many of these principals stick with us today in software engineering, often cited as paradigms to good software creation.

Upon the release of the Nintendo Wii, most gamers began to dismiss Nintendo as a legitimate gaming company; often through the use of harsh gender stereotyping and through expression the threat the console had on their gaming lives. (Vanderhoef) The catalyst behind all of this was the Wii’s emphasis on creating a more “family friendly” experience for its gamers through its change in controls, emphasis on causal gaming and overall marketing strategy called “Blue Ocean”. The main issue comes back to the gendering dichotomy expressed by Chun and McPherson, in that these different modes of gameplay are seen by gaming enthusiasts as “feminine”, “irrelevant”, and in most cases “threatening gaming as we know it”. (Vanderhoef) Games as we know it are often categorized by either being core, meaning designed to produce strenuous challenge and be played for extensive periods of time, or casual, which often means games that are designed to be easily picked up and played in small sessions. The reason this is important is because of the reaction the community of gamers expressed when the Wii decided to focus more on its casual player base; often met with very offensive language on popular forms such as *Kotaku* and *Joystiq* which depicted the causal and “feminine” games to be the “death of gaming”. (Vanderhoef) The ironic thing about these claims is that core games still dominate the market as far as revenue and participation; but the mere coexistence of such “inferior” games within a game industry leader such as Nintendo is enough to warrant the desire to route them out of the culture entirely.

Queer Game Design attempts to diminish the notion of gendering of software by removing all expectations that exist in genres of video games. The goal is to exemplify that the experiences for each genre, or an envisioning of these genres, shouldn’t be seen as casual or core, but rather an approachable experience for anybody invested in the game. Queer Game Design explores the option of making games poly-genre, encompassing several kinds of experiences into the gameplay of a game; or to try to abstain from genre altogether, which lends itself to more “gameart” applications of video games. (Bogost, 11) If we argue that gender is a performance based on societal systems, then video games too can be seen as engaging in a gendering process through iterations of their own genres. Queer Game Design speculates that deviating from these performances can offer an “un-gendering” of gameplay experiences.

Traditional Game Design elements have a lot of influence over the way Queer Game Design genres could be interpreted. Even trying to shape new genres from old ones, they may be predisposed to the gendering the revision worked hard to counter based on association. It heavily depends as well the way a game’s gameplay is worked into these genre revisions; having your game gendered is completely possible no matter the efforts to disassociate from it. Tweaking known formulas can also leave players feeling confused or disappointed; if a game attempts to develop a platformer without jumping, a player may find themselves spamming that jump button they’re used to in frustration. Implementing elements of poly-genre into a game has its own challenges as well, for several games do have elements of poly-genre, but the “additional” mini-games are often seen as a subset separated from the “main” part of the game; or often times pointless or “bad”. In developing a game that shares its parts equal with genres, it poses a very challenging design question, “How much of each genre do I create to keep them balanced?” Ultimately, it shouldn’t be a question of balance, but without substantial experiences from the multiple genres in a game, the game’s identity could become skewed to be that dominant genre.

Temporal storytelling is something video games already do very well, especially those with technological limitations. Classic arcade games often immediately present the player with challenge, pitting them against the game rules without much of a prompt or word. Despite this, as Wesp describes with *Donkey Kong*, the story emerges from the experience of the gameplay without the game actually explaining itself. (Wesp) In the example with *Donkey Kong*, we’re presented with other stories from non-gaming sources that describe similar loop holes, and how the experience doesn’t concern itself with explaining every detail of its world; it’s instead for the audience to fulfill themselves. Modern games often have very plot-heavy gameplay, setting up entire universes and telling a very specific story. The consistency of story interpretations leads the players to have very scripted and inflexible experiences due to the expectations the story and game guide the player to achieve; which can often be successful but set up a normative system of what storytelling should be in games anymore. It’s rare to see a new published game that has a truly imaginative story anymore; let alone one with the queer temporality of incompleteness that the arcade ancestors possessed. In a sense, storytelling in games used to be queer, and Queer Game Design is calling to bring that queerness back!

With the heavy hand of a story driven game, there comes a very linear structure for a player to engage in; often times, if queer potentiality exists in these experiences, normativity offers erasure without any possible chance of survival. In *Persona 4*, two main characters experience sexual and gender queerness; Kanji’s effeminacy and Naoto’s crossdressing. (Youngblood) The game includes moments where each of these characters must face their queer identities they’re repressing as boss battles, and especially in the case of Naoto, the game tempts her with “giving in” to her desire to become a real man. These queer themes, however, get squelched by the game’s linear storyline; where if we attempt to let the game “win” and have Naoto accept her queer fate, we’re given a Game Over screen with no other possibility. This sets up a narrative that these queer tendencies in *Persona 4*’s cast are things to be defeated for the sake of normativity. It also enforces the expectations of that genre, the JRPG (Japanese Role Playing Game) that all battles must be won in order to progress, and that failure only sets you back in time to attempt the fights over and over again. No matter how much the player would like to see the potentiality of granting Naoto her wish to genderbend permanently, it simply cannot happen in games as we know them now.

Queer Game Design discusses the ideas of Queer Failure by presenting ideas of non-linear progression based on gaming outcomes. Traditionally, losing in a game means the loss of a life or the dreaded Game Over screen. Instead, Queer Failure can branch off from losses to brand new experiences that could not exist from victory, building a much more genuine and interesting experience. Using these techniques, it can also provide the player with more opportunities to have a progressive gameplay experience, where failure can branch to a different kind of challenge rather than forcing them to hit the same kink in their linear path. These alternative paths could also open up new experiences that otherwise could not exist when the player ultimately only succeeds. The biggest challenge of this is deciding how to branch off every possible failure, how to make a storyline that can seem organic and non-systematic.

Specters of linear storytelling could present themselves in Queer Game Design due to the need for linear paths for certain experiences and through software and design limitations. While using Queer Failure to draw paths for every possible outcome in a game can expand its experience, it could also render it completely lost. Considering Youngblood’s example of *Persona 4*, if we had a game where success led to a form of queer temporality, but failed into normativity, we could completely miss the narrative the game is trying to achieve as a whole. Another glaring ghost of non-linear storylines is often discussed even in normal game design is the limitations of software or design to implement these kinds of stories. Calculating all possible outcomes to create a more organic and freeing experience would require much more work than the average linear story, and may even lead to games becoming too large in size for consumers to install and play easily. Given these limitations in today’s hardware, producers would never green light such an endeavor for the same reasons that an amateur may have troubles implementing nonlinear storylines – it’s a difficult problem to solve.

Any jaded gamer will tell you, most games that are released these days are “cookie cutter” games, following a lot of similar tropes and formulas under a different label or branding. When somebody buys a new *Call of Duty* game, they’re predisposed to the gameplay elements of that game before it even loads; we’re going to have warfare, there’s going to be guns, and there’s going to be rewards for killing players without being killed. Queer Game Design aims to queer these concepts about gameplay, bringing back more agency for new kinds of controls and expectations for gaming experiences by challenging the kinds of schemes certain storylines or genres can impose. In gameplay, we are also presented with systems that reverberate throughout many different games from existing fantasy or normal settings which also dictate the way gameplay is crafted. Beyond telling more complex and intricate stories, Queer Game Design also calls to either cease use of these systems or reinvent them in ways beyond the expected.

Many games require you to create your own character to represent yourself in a game, especially in MMORPGs. These characters are limited to their expression based on preset races, genders, and classes, which inhibit the player from creating a truly unique and personable experience in that game world. (Galloway, 117) Many of these “races” are taken from existing successfully models, such as Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* or from Science Fiction, and are intrinsically attributed to certain character traits based on these existing models. This leads to certain races having certain methods to achieve their goals, whether it be through strategies of warfare or being more skillful at a craft or magic. Asking a player to create a representation of themselves that’s preset by these attributes systemizes them into pre-ordained roles based on both their choices made and by the game’s current “meta”; meaning the current most effective configuration of game elements to ensure success. This makes players choose certain character traits based off of what kinds of goals they want to achieve in the game, rather than choosing a character that represents what they want to become in the digital realm; which can lead to some players feeling misrepresented if they do not conform to the optimal selections for these games.

Gameplay often is an agency of empowerment, providing the player tools to overcome obstacles through power or skill. Queer Game Design explores some elements of Queer Failure by exploring what kinds of abilities those not empowered can express to overcome their experiences. Bogost discusses this idea of gameplay giving power, in his comparison of *Darfur is Dying* and *Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker*. (Bogost, 19) In this comparison, both games discuss elements of stealth the player must use to overcome areas of the games, but with one major difference. In *Darfur,* the player is sneaking around to avoid death because the character has no power over their realm, where as in *Zelda*, Link’s inability to face his challenge face-on at first is supplemented with power later in the game. In both cases, the characters embrace their limitations and succeed in their own way, despite both situations causing the overarching problems to persist. Offering players alternative methods of confrontation and gameplay is not a new concept, but is usually found in independent games that may or may not receive a substantial audience. These disempowering mechanics can really help game designers develop experiences that otherwise could not be expressed through giving a player full agency over the game itself.

Queer Game Design also explores various other ways to create gameplay experiences by using alternative sources of data, such as #’s use of social media to generate random outcomes. This kind of design queers the purpose of social media data mining by repurposing the many micro-transactions average users make into a form of entertainment, rather than to power advertisement. (Galloway, 120) Repurposing data that is traditionally used against us empowers game designers to take back web traffic for the users who generated them, and can create specialized gameplay decisions for a game designed this way. Repurposing these micro-transactions can be used to either provide specific data to a game or to be used as a “seed” for procedurally driven worlds that can utilize the data to make game spaces per instance. These temporal worlds created by data on the fly would immerse a player in an unpredictable world, giving a unique experience every time the game is played.

Similar to ghosts of traditional storytelling, queering gameplay mechanics can alienate players from the familiar schemes of games, even beyond genre. Most players expect games to have specific goals, based on the context of what they’re experiencing, and also expect to have certain powers to overcome obstacles in certain ways. Without careful design, a player may find themselves trying to use normative gameplay methods when the game is trying to invoke a different experience. These unique controlling schemes may also prevent certain players from appreciating the game if these games end up having a high learning curve; to say requires the player a lot of time and effort to play the game at a level they feel will allow them to progress. Some experiences that games aim to display may require these older gameplay patterns, and hence become disassociated from their queer identities through normative erasure.

Queer Game Design has discussed many different ways to deliver different experiences to a player base through means of disassociating the design aspects from what we know as games today. The typical goal of a video game is to be entertaining, provide an experience, and be readily available to those who wish to play it; after all, this is how games sell in the first place. But given the kinds of unrepresented experiences that could be made into video games, and what these experiences ask of the player to embark on their paths, do games designed with Queer Game Design have a specific audience? If the audience is defined, does the design of the game cease to be queer? Or maybe Queer Game Design is to create video games that aim to tailor to identities that are not “gamers”.

The market for video games is interesting, considering that to understand who games are made for, we have to understand the Gamer identity. What makes the Gamer identity interesting is that a lot of people who engage in video games would not consider themselves a Gamer. (Shaw) The typical Gamer has many different faces and values, most predominantly one thinks of a male near 20 years of age who has a lot of disposable time and plays the most difficult games with ease. If the advertising and normal experiences offered by the gaming industry say anything, then these assumptions hold some truth; but there are plenty of people, as Shaw found, that engage passionately in video games who do not share that title of Gamer – mainly because they do not preform that identity for themselves. If the Gamer identity is preformed, then using Butler, we could argue that it’s not essential; something more self-evident than proving one’s gender is preformed to a normal audience. However, despite this, people are seen as Gamers and will be given certain assumptions about their character; and conversely those performing Gamer identity are often the ones maintaining those norms of software gendering and normative gameplay.

Beyond the market, we also have to consider the identities of those involved in making video games as well. As McPherson points out, many of the people involved in machine software see history in a different way than those who don’t during the creation of UNIX in the 1960s. (McPherson, 30) Even today, most students in computer science courses tend to be white male; which in turn become the primary identity involved in creating video game experiences for everybody to engage in. The under representation of other identities in this field is mostly attributed to it being seen as either too difficult or out of their reach based on gender or race; and most who do engage in computer science know better than to involve themselves with the gaming industry due to its notoriously bad treatment to workers. The call for more Digital Humanities offers solutions by bridging the “gap” between fields of study that are often seen as incompatible with each other; which can offer the technical expertise to allow those aspiring to share experiences through video games. Involving more voices who can provide the rich experiences that games overshadow would create a more inclusive sphere for gaming in general, even if that route requires a lot of privilege and access to education that most people do not have.

When discussing the audience of a game, especially one that uses Queer Game Design elements, it’s important to consider the purpose of the game being created and if those audiences can be reached. If these games aren’t for general audiences, it may be difficult for the game to see success; and yet, we have to ask if success is the goal here or not? If these games are to be taken seriously and not cast aside by the Gamer identity, then a level of success would be required; but would somebody engaging in Queer Game Design care about that level of success? Beyond that, if these games are not easily accessible, does it defeat the purpose of creating the game if it can’t reach most of its intended audience? The typical audience for a game tends to be one who has the privilege of a computer or console to play the game on, and time to spend engaging in the experience; will the target audience even be able to engage in these games? Also, is the potential exposure of sensitive experiences to the normative realm potentially do more harm than good? Can these expressions inadvertently lead to more discrimination instead of trying to inspire those with shared experiences that are disenfranchised? All of these questions should be taken into account when creating a game detailing these experiences.

From the old Roguelikes to modern indie games on Steam, to the mainstream shooters and platformers that reiterate conventions based on *Super Mario Bros.* and *Doom*, all games offer us an experience in exchange for gameplay. While building iterations of old classics is not a bad thing, the current state of the gaming industry makes it very difficult to do anything but; considering either the skill sets required to make stunning gaming experiences to the market that calls for these iterations overpowering producer decisions, games are very much under the control of the dollar. Queer Game Design hopes to unlock all the potential games have in creating unique experiences that anybody can create, while also trying to rule out notions of software gendering. It aims to produce methods of creating experiences either through artistic expression or rigorous rules against data streams, all of which can create worlds that players can truly appreciate and engage in unlike anything currently on the market. Finally, it offers itself as an important social issue that revolves around Digital Humanities; whether games are fun or not they shape the ways we engage with our world by offering experiences we spend our free time with.